

We Have Always
Lived in the Castle
by Shirley Jackson

Teaching notes prepared
by Karen Lynch



VICTORIAN ASSOCIATION
FOR THE TEACHING OF ENGLISH



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Introduction

The mid-20th century author Shirley Jackson was popular during her time, and most known for ‘The Lottery’, a gruesome and dark short story that has managed to stay popular in high school anthologies since its publication. Jackson has made a comeback of late. Jackson’s truly eerie *The Haunting of Hill House* has recently been reprised in a Netflix mash-up, very loosely based on Jackson’s 1959 novel, but with the central elements of the Gothic and grotesque aspects of personal and familial terror running through the backbone of the story. *We Have Always Lived in the Castle* has also, recently, been more faithfully adapted in the 2018 film directed by Stacie Passon.

We Have Always Lived in the Castle is clearly aligned with the Gothic and ‘fractured’ fairy-tale genre, a tale where the Prince who comes to the ‘Castle’ to rescue the Princess, Constance, is exposed as a crude money-grubber. The interloper is thwarted, finally, by the Princess’ wilful, dangerous, and slightly deranged sister, Merricat. While no actual ghosts appear in this novel, this would-be Prince, Cousin Charles, is frequently called both a ghost and a demon by Merricat, as he clearly recalls the presence and the power of her dead father, John Blackwood.

What will be most interesting for teachers and students alike will be embarking upon an investigation of the veracity of Merricat’s account, the sole narrative voice of the novel. Very much akin to Henry James’ masterful *Turn of the Screw*, Jackson’s novel hinges on the question of the reliability of the narrator and garners much of its power in its deliberate ambiguity in relation to this question. This guide will explore two fundamental ways of reading the

text in detail in the **Perspective on the text** section. Merricat could well be viewed as a classic ‘unreliable narrator’ – a mad, bad and spoilt child who has murdered most of her family and obsessively covets the love of her surviving sister. Conversely, the narrative seemingly encourages readers to yield to the ‘sympathetic magic’ of Merricat’s narration, accepting that, at least in the essence of things, her world view is true and correct. A contemporary critic, Stuart Woodruff, put the case succinctly:

Since Merricat is the novel’s narrator, we see through her eyes only, and soon become accustomed to her point of view. Gradually we find ourselves sharing that point of view. In our growing preference for life at the castle, we discover the moral of Miss Jackson’s persuasive fable. For it is Miss Jackson’s purpose to convert us, to make us feel the moral superiority of life ‘on the moon’ to a drab and mean existence in the village ... If life at the castle is demented and ‘unrealistic,’ Miss Jackson implies, then by all means let us have more of it. (Woodruff, 1967, p. 155)

Merricat’s narrative is also masterful and persuasive because of its strong feminist sub-text. Jackson wrote *We Have Always lived in the Castle* before second wave feminism was in full swing, and yet harbours the sentiments of Kate Millet’s seminal breakthrough feminist text *Sexual Politics* – which portrayed the manifold ways in which the intertwined institutions of family and patriarchy wielded oppressive power over women. Merricat’s attempts to wield magic against these forces, and the villagers’ hostile treatment of both Merricat and Constance as potential witches, also predates, by some ten years, the work of Andrea Dworking and Mary Daly on the deadly patriarchal response to female rebellion and/or alternative forms of female power.

Jackson wryly portrayed her own domestic life in New England in *Life Among the Savages* (1953) and *Raising Demons* (1956). Students would be interested to know that Jackson wrote whilst raising four children with a largely absent and uninvolved husband who was a prominent literary critic and minor academic. Whilst emulating aspects of the bohemian life, the marriage was completely traditional; Stanley Hyman, Jackson's husband, left the daily child-rearing to Jackson, and also, somewhat indiscreetly, carried on extramarital affairs. Jackson's depictions in her non-fiction satire, and also her unpublished cartoons and letters, both obliquely and directly reference her own unhappiness in married life, whilst simultaneously trying to make light of the situation. In fact, Jackson's willingness to explore the complexities of domestic politics, along with the feminist notion that 'the personal is political' before such notions were truly abroad in the public sphere, place her as a pioneer of the second wave. Jackson herself was both bohemian, and a housewife; a chain-smoker, drinker and dabbler in witchcraft. The background article in the activities section below, written by biographer Ruth Franklin, more fully explores how Jackson's domestic life both contributed to and stymied her writing career.

Suggested classroom activities

- Students could read the short story 'The Lottery' or have it read to them by the author herself (see below). At the beginning of her literary career, Shirley Jackson achieved instant recognition with the publication of this now classic text. 'The Lottery' matter-of-factly describes a barbaric ritual of sacrifice conducted annually in a contemporary New England village; the deliberate absence of moral outrage or commentary is a distinctive feature of the text. The editors of *The New Yorker*, in which the story appeared in 1948, received more mail from its mostly outraged readers than for any fiction previously published in the magazine, and Jackson, then aged thirty-two, received puzzled and indignant letters regarding 'The Lottery' for the rest of her life. Indeed, she fretted that 'she might become known for that story and nothing else, which for many years after her death was indeed the case,' writes Ruth Franklin in her splendid biography, *Shirley Jackson: A Rather Haunted Life*. Shirley Jackson reads 'The Lottery': <https://cardiffbooktalk.wordpress.com/2020/11/04/shirley-jackson-reads-the-lottery/>
- Read the reactions to Jackson's 'The Lottery'. As explained above, the story was an instant hit, but was also hugely controversial due to its brutal subject matter and amoral stance. This article explores

the diverse reactions to 'The Lottery' – it upset, baffled and inspired: <https://earlybirdbooks.com/10-stages-of-reading-shirley-jacksons-the-lottery>

In response to these numerous letters, *The New Yorker* created a boiler-plate response which was as follows:

Miss Jackson's story can be interpreted in half a dozen different ways. It's just a fable ... She has chosen a nameless little village to show, in microcosm, how the forces of belligerence, persecution, and vindictiveness are, in mankind, endless and traditional and that their targets are chosen without reason.

Explore this explanation and the ways that this could be applied to *We Have Always Lived in the Castle*.

- Explore the notion of unreliable narrators. Put the term up on view for the class and begin a class discussion.
- Read a background article on the author by one of Jackson's biographers, Ruth Franklin. Underline key words or phrases that indicate Jackson's ideas in relation to family, motherhood and writing: <https://www.thecut.com/2016/09/shirley-jackson-rather-haunted-life-c-v-r.html>
- Read *The Guardian* book review and/or *The New York Times* review. Write a short paragraph that summarises the novel and some of its themes: <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2015/dec/21/we-have-always-lived-in-the-castle-by-shirley-jackson-a-house-of-ordinary-horror>
<https://www.nytimes.com/2016/10/02/books/review/shirley-jackson-ruth-franklin.html>
- What is a fractured fairy-tale? Brainstorm with the class the difference between traditional fairy-tales and fractured fairy-tales. Teachers and students will note that one of the fundamental elements of the deconstructed fairy-tale is the questioning of gender norms – from Angela Carter's *The Bloody Chamber*, through to *Shrek* and *Frozen*.
- Explore some excerpts highlighting Jackson's attitude to domestic life as wittily and wryly portrayed in *Life among the Savages* and *Raising Demons*. What sorts of attitudes do these 1950s portrayals exhibit? In what ways would these conflict with the 'white picket fence' notions of nuclear families in (white, suburban, middle-class) America? <https://www.thecut.com/2016/09/shirley-jackson-rather-haunted-life-c-v-r.html>

Ways into the text

One way into the text would be to begin with a detailed comparison of Chapter One with the beginning of Chapter Two. In this way, teachers can introduce the voice of Merricat, the notion of the unreliable narrator, and the manifold ways in which the hostility of the village entices readers to align themselves with the bullied narrator. Chapter One and the beginning of Chapter Two also prime the readers with a strong preference for life 'inside' the castle as opposed to life outside the castle.

Students could also be asked to explore the notion of family and the family dynamic at play in the Blackwood house. This is also quickly derived from the beginning of Chapter Two.

Finally, students could explore the idea of 'sympathetic magic' and look at the language that references Merricat's use of 'sympathetic magic' throughout Chapters Two and Three.

Suggested classroom activities

- Underline all the imagery that describes the village compared to the Blackwood mansion. Create a table. What is the cumulative effect? See the beginning of such an activity below.

Outside	Inside
<p>Chapter One quotes</p> <p>'In this village the men stayed young and did the gossiping and the women aged with grey evil weariness and stood silently waiting for the men to get up and come home.' (p. 3)</p> <p>'I could tell a local car by the quick ugly glance from the driver and I wondered, always, what would happen if I stepped down from the curb onto the road; would there be a quick, almost unintended swerve toward me ...' (pp. 5-6)</p> <p>'The row of stores along Main Street was unchangingly grey ... whatever planned to be colourful lost its heart quickly in the village.' (p. 6)</p> <p>'I always thought about rot when I came towards the stores; I thought about burning black painful rot that ate from inside, hurting dreadfully.' (p. 6)</p> <p>'There won't be any peace around here until you go.' (p. 15)</p>	<p>Chapter One quotes</p> <p>'... our house was built up with layers of Blackwood property weighting it, and keeping it steady against the world.' (p. 1)</p> <p>Chapter Two quotes</p> <p>'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.' (p. 20)</p> <p>'She took the groceries carefully from the bags; food of any kind was precious to Constance, and she always touched foodstuffs with quiet respect.' (p. 20)</p> <p>'Our mother had brought golden-legged chairs from the Rochester house, and her harp was here, and the room shone in reflections from mirrors and sparkling glass.' (p. 23)</p> <p>'There was a golden valance over each high window, and golden scrollwork around the fireplace, and our mother's portrait hung in the drawing room;' (p. 23)</p>

Use the above table to create a paragraph describing how readers are positioned to view the inside of the Blackwood house versus the outside.

- Brainstorm notions of 'family' with students. Introduce, if required, the concept of the 'nuclear family.' In what ways does Constance, Merricat and Uncle Julian resemble a nuclear family? In what ways are they different to this traditional family construct?

- In Chapter Two, Merricat notes that Constance mentions returning outside three times. Note each instance and Merricat's reaction. Why does Merricat react so strongly to the 'third time' this idea is raised?
- Class discussion. Read the beginning of Chapter 3 which begins with 'A change was coming, and nobody knew it but me.' (p. 40). What practical and 'magical' elements does Merricat utilise in order to try to prevent this change? What are the reader's responses to Merricat's endeavours? What exactly is 'sympathetic magic'?

Structure of the text

The structure of the plot follows a familiar tripartite Gothic pattern: the text first 'admits' or 'invites' a monster; the long middle section 'entertains' and is entertained by 'monstrosity'; and the final section expels or repudiates the monster and attempts to close off the disruption that has been caused (Craft, 1984, p. 107). Jackson's novel has two possible monsters: Charles and Merricat. The 'invitation' section of the text occurs with Merricat's alarm that the 'real world' is waiting for her and her sister and, even more alarmingly, that Constance is beginning to want to join this world. The middle section is the occupation and attempted takeover by Cousin Charles, who endures a series of covert and overt attacks from Merricat. As with many Gothic stories, the struggle takes place over the fate of the principal 'virgin', Constance. Will she capitulate into marriage and the 'real world' or will she stay within the Castle, the eternal mother to Merricat? The expulsion section begins with the fire, and is sealed with the sisters' joint rejection of Cousin Charles. Merricat's own monstrosity is diminished in that she now finds herself limited to the immediate grounds, and her sympathetic magic, which often harboured violent thoughts, is transformed into practical ideas for fortification. Gothic/horror texts are infamous for their brief and unconvincing endings. After a long series of shocks, disruption and irruptions, where the texts 'entertain monstrosity' (Craft, 1984, p. 107), narrative closure in such a genre is usually problematic. When authors attempt closure with 'happy endings', the audience is left with the reverberations of the powerful middle section and the happy ending becomes difficult to believe. This accounts for the now common Gothic/horror trope of the 'happy ending' being violated – the horror movie equivalent of the monster's return in the final frames – a trope that does justice to the audience's feelings of dis-ease. However, *We Have Always Lived in the Castle* is different in this regard and departs from the Gothic in its end sequence. Traditional Gothic narratives are heavily weighted at the middle section – these are usually the longest. However, in *We Have Always Lived in the Castle*, each section of admission, entertainment and expulsion is almost equally weighted. The expulsion section is as long as the middle section, and carries with it a separate narrative arc. With this structure in place, Jackson has convinced us that the ending – as improbable as it is – is convincing. Let's look at each section in more detail.

The 'invitation' section occurs in the stages where Merricat encounters the dangerous outside world. We are taken into the village, we witness the attacks that Merricat is subjected to from Jim Donell, Joe Dunham and the village children, and we return with Merricat into her cordoned-off world with the distinct impression that the sisters have good reason to barricade themselves in their home. If we trust Merricat, then we share her concern that Constance is taking tentative steps out of her six years of self-imposed isolation back to this 'real world.' When Merricat returns from the village, she notes that Constance has moved as far as the end of her garden, and is 'chilled' by her sister's half-serious quip that she'll soon be going 'into the village' (p. 19). In fairy-tale like fashion, this suggestion, and Merricat's 'chilled' reaction, happen three times. The third, and most potent time, is in response to Constance's positive reaction to Helen Clarke's appeal to 'Come back to the world.' (p. 27).

Constance had looked as though suddenly, after all this time of refusing and denying, she had come to see that it might be possible, after all, to go outside. I realised now that this was the third time in one day that the subject had been touched, and three times makes it real. (p. 27)

Merricat sees this, probably quite rightly, as a direct threat to her own well-being, and reacts with alarm and a tantrum. She also recognises that there was 'a change coming' (p. 43) which will soon manifest itself in the form of the arrival of Cousin Charles, and so arms herself with three words of 'strong protection ... so long as these words were never spoken aloud no change would come.' (p. 44).

This invitation section also 'invites' the reader to speculate on the murders that had taken place in the six years prior. Most of the clues are provided by Uncle Julian and through this, we gather enough to understand that Merricat was the poisoner, but that Constance protected her sister because 'those people deserved to die' (p. 37). The murders are also a potential site of monstrosity, however, this potential is neutralised by the narrative point of view which is exclusively Merricat's. Through Merricat's narration, the reader quickly adopts an unconcerned attitude towards the murders; the amorality of Merricat's world pervades the novel. It is further joined by Uncle Julian's flippant remarks to the visitors (even though he has dedicated his life to a fruitless examination of the case) and Constance's bland explanations. Despite this, the narrative does drop in some tantalising clues

of Merricat's monstrosity. We are told, for example, that Thursday was her 'most powerful day' (p. 41); a day when Merricat would dress herself up in the clothes of those that she has murdered. There is no explanation why Merricat does this, just as there is very little explanation as to the murder itself. Nevertheless, there are enough clues for the reader to understand that Cousin Charles will be well-matched, if not outstripped, as a source of danger in the text.

The middle section 'entertains' monstrosity. Cousin Charles' entrance is given consideration in the **Close study** analysis on pages 26–27 of this guide. It is the entrance of a Gothic villain, dressed up as would-be saviour. In fact, reading against the text, one could argue that it is Merricat who is the real monster, and if that is so, then Cousin Charles is the plot device to oust her from the narrative in the third section of repudiation. Reading with the text, however, while it is true that Merricat may be a monster, she is one that readers are siding with for reasons that sometimes go beyond logic, and somewhat resemble Constance's almost unshakable faith in her sister. Merricat is, after all, genuinely interesting and definitely enigmatic and charismatic – qualities most certainly lacking in the transparent Cousin Charles. We are drawn in by Merricat's own narrative, to accord her (ironically perhaps) the respect given to genuinely dangerous creatures. In contrast, Cousin Charles' monstrosity is treated with the contempt it deserves. He represents the evils of patriarchy, and the ignominy of a common money-grubber. The lowness of Charles' motives means that we cheer Merricat on in her attempts to oust him and we share her alarm at the clues which point to Constance's 'new way of thinking.' Still, he provides a threat in winning over Constance, potentially transforming her from loving carer of Julian and Merricat into dutiful wife of Charles. Constance begins to use the plural 'we' – that once belonged to her and her sister – to reference herself and Charles. She begins to speak and think like him:

'... we are going to have to forbid your wandering. It's time you quieted down a little ... I never realised until lately how wrong I was to let you and Uncle Julian hide here with me. We should have faced the world and tried to live normal lives; Uncle Julian should have been in a hospital all these years, with good care and nurses to watch him. We should have been living like other people. You should...' She stopped, and waved her hands helplessly. 'You should have boy friends.' (pp. 81–82)

The antipathy between Merricat and Cousin Charles quickly escalates to a contest of who will expel whom. Merricat initially refuses to believe in his existence, he is a mere ghost and she 'dreamed him away.' (p. 61) and later she uses various 'magical' devices, all of which prove fruitless. She even decides to ask Cousin Charles politely 'to please go away' (p. 80), resorting to conventional language when her sympathetic magic fails. Cousin Charles, recognising (but underestimating) his antagonist, begins with direct and escalating threats:

Where would Cousin Mary go if her sister turned her out. (p. 78)

'... come a month from now I wonder who will still be here? You' he said, 'or me?' (p. 80)

'I haven't quite decided what I'm going to do with you,' he said. 'But whatever I do, you'll remember it.' (p. 90)

The third section of repudiation/expulsion begins with the fire and the mob violence enacted by the villagers. Throughout the scene, Cousin Charles' repeated calls to save the safe, despite the fact that he hasn't sighted any of the three occupants, underlines his greed and callousness. By this stage, Charles as 'monster' has become completely aligned with the monstrosity of the villagers who ransack the Blackwood house and are on the verge of physically assaulting the two sisters. Both monsters, however, are dispatched as the sisters simply hide it out, firstly in the woods, and later, in their boarded-up house. This final section of repudiation is unusually lengthy and detailed and provides more convincing closure than many Gothic tales. The narrative restarts almost anew as the sisters adjust to their drastically altered home, and slowly begin a rhythm of life that revolves around the garden and food preparation. Crucially, Cousin Charles leaves the scene, and the villagers now transform their relationship with the sisters by offering food parcels initially, perhaps, as a symbolic means of asking for forgiveness. Monstrosity has now moved from Charles, the villagers and even Merricat solely and transformed into a mythology, cultivated by the villagers, but approved of by the sisters. The Blackwood women are re-created as fable-like witches: so dangerous that they are to be left alone; so dangerous that it is clear that the food parcels, prepared by the women and conveyed by the men, are also a form of tribute, to a potent, potentially dangerous force.

Suggested classroom activities

Get students to chart the beginning, middle and end sections using the following diagram.

	Beginning	Middle	End
Page reference			
Major plot event			
Narrative arc			
Key quotes			

Characters

Inside the Castle

Mary Katherine Blackwood/Merricat

An eighteen-year-old force of nature, Merricat's sole loves are her sister Constance and cat Jonas. Her faith in sympathetic magic as forms of protection point to two sides of her personality that are both realised in the narrative; however, which side is dominant is ambiguous. On the one hand, Merricat could be viewed as a young, dangerous, murderous 'witch'; on the other, a powerless child who takes refuge in a naïve belief system of the protective entities of buried treasure and ritualistic symbolism. She is kept, by her sister Constance, like a potentially dangerous familiar. She is always asking for food, and being fed, coddled and cared for by her loving sister; she is not allowed to handle food, knives, matches – a sensible precaution that belies Merricat's violent tendencies. Merricat hovers protectively around her sister, jealous of any other's attention; she is particularly frightened by the prospect of Constance leaving the home (and her) for the wider world, a prospect which is evidently beckoning at the beginning of the narrative. Merricat's own world views are incredibly skewed, but she seemingly sees through to the truth of things to the point that we, the readers, are persuaded to completely side with her point of view. As Claire Kahane puts it: 'The brilliance of Jackson's narrative arises from her success at presenting the story from Merricat Blackwood's skewed perspective as the guiltless murderer who neither accepts responsibility nor feels remorse for her extreme action in the past.' (Kahane, 1985, p. 319). Merricat's inability to negotiate the terrain of the hostile outside world opens the narrative, and the first chapter is strewn with her violent thoughts that she engages with as a form of psychological protection: '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 pain and dying.' (pp. 8-9). A similar, and far more sympathetic tendency, is Merricat's imaginative invocation of 'living on the moon' (p. 15); a domestic, protected, maternal space that she shares only with Constance and Jonas, far away from the predators.

Constance Blackwood

The twenty-eight year old Constance is the complete contrast to her younger sister and has become, possibly through Merricat's murderous actions, the 'chosen' mother-substitute for Merricat, a role she accepts and cherishes. As Judy Oppenheimer has observed, the sisters could very well represent the 'yin and yang of (Jackson's) own inner self ... one, an explorer, a challenger, the other a contented, domestic homebody' (as cited in Barnett, 2015). Accused of murdering her mother, father, brother and aunt six years prior, Constance has become a virtual shut-in; she will only venture as far as her bountiful garden which provides so much of the food for the Blackwood table. Constance's inability to connect with the outside world has made her the perfect domestic slave for both Merricat and the only other surviving member of the family, the befuddled and frail Uncle Julian. From Merricat's perspective, Constance appears to be completely content, patiently ministering to the needs of her young and old charges and relishing in her domestic tasks of gardening, baking, cooking, preserving and housekeeping. She repeatedly waves away Merricat's bizarre idiosyncrasies with the affectionate chide 'Silly Merricat' (p. 45). Despite her reclusive life, Constance does represent the respectable remnant of the once prominent Blackwood family. It is primarily for Constance's sake that the social elite continues to visit the Blackwoods; and it is Constance's conventional niceties that allow such visits to continue.

Julian Blackwood

Uncle to the girls and brother to the murdered patriarch John Blackwood, Julian escaped (albeit scathed in mind and body) the mass poisoning that dispatched the rest of the family. Primarily, it appears that Julian was allowed to live because, like Merricat and perhaps Constance, he lacked power within the family, and was very much living off his brother's good graces within the Blackwood home. The tensions created by this are unwittingly betrayed in fragments of Julian's monologues: 'My brother sometimes remarked upon what we ate, my wife and I; he was a just man, and never stinted his food, so long as we did not take too much.' (p. 48). Increasingly senile and frail, Julian has been embarking on a seemingly hopeless project of documenting the murder – but his weak mind is simply not up to the task, and he preoccupies himself in fruitless shuffling of papers, seeking out remnants of historical facts about who was doing what and when, only to wonder if the whole thing had indeed happened. Despite his increasingly fogged mind, Uncle Julian is prone to lapses of acute and instinctive insight. He takes delight in scandalising a nosy neighbour

with salacious details of the poisoning, and he has reason enough to understand Constance's complicity in the murders: 'You have been a good niece to me, although there are some grounds for supposing you an undutiful daughter.' (p. 47). Julian, along with Merricat, instinctively detests Cousin Charles, the dangerous interloper and the force of change that threatens the entire household. Merricat is positively gleeful when Julian repeatedly calls Charles a 'young bastard' (p. 92).

Jonas: Merricat's cat who fulfills the role of witch's familiar. Merricat is devoted to Jonas and speaks to him as a sentient creature. She also believes that Jonas tells her stories, which all begin with the same line: 'My mother, who was the first cat, told me this.' (p. 53). Given that so many of the Blackwood women's stories have been subsumed by their marital status, it is significant that Jonas only passes on stories of the mother.

(Off stage/murdered)

John Blackwood

The family patriarch and potential source of all the ill-will in the family. As previously mentioned, he bullied Uncle Julian, but also frequently punished Merricat, often sending her to bed without her supper. According to Merricat, her father kept a book 'where he used to record the names of people who owed him money, and people who ought, he thought, to do favours for him.' (p. 53). There is a vague clue that he may have wanted to send Merricat away. Uncle Julian recalls a fight between John and Mrs Blackwood the night before the poisoning:

'They quarrelled hatefully that last night,' Uncle Julian said. "I won't have it," she said, "I won't stand for it, John Blackwood," and "We have no choice," he said. I listened at the door, of course, but I came too late to hear what they quarrelled about; I suppose it was money.' (p. 22)

Mrs Blackwood

Whilst seemingly loved by her daughters, Mrs Blackwood (notably not given a first name) appears to have been a compliant wife, one of many of the Blackwood women whose identities have become subsumed in marriage. Possibly, the mother was complicit in the behaviour that drove Merricat to poison her family. Notably, Mrs Blackwood does no cooking; this is significant in a text where food cooking is synonymous with loving and nurturing. Presumably, she is included in Constance's statement 'those people deserved to die.' (p. 37). According to Uncle Julian, Mrs Blackwood 'was a delicate woman ... born for tragedy perhaps, although inclined to be a little silly.' (p. 34).

Dorothy Blackwood

Uncle Julian's rather hapless wife. There is little mention of her traits; potentially an innocent casualty of the mass murder.

Thomas Blackwood

Seemingly his father's son who, according to Uncle Julian, even at ten years old 'possessed many of his father's more forceful traits of character.' (p. 34). As the investigation revealed that the sugar contained the arsenic, Thomas was most certainly targeted as the future male heir of the Blackwood family, as according to Mrs Wright 'He used the most sugar.' (p. 34).

Outside the Castle

Helen Clarke

Helen Clarke represents the staid society matron, full of seemingly good intentions; she seems determined to reintroduce Constance to the real world. We are told that Fridays are 'Helen Clarke's day' (to visit) and that she represented a small society of 'visiting acquaintances' who 'believed their visits brought us pleasure.' (pp. 21-22). Helen Clarke is one of the few visitors who dares enter the house and eat from the plates of an accused poisoner. In Chapter Two, which documents the entirety of her visit, she has dared to bring, uninvited, another guest, Mrs Wright. For Merricat, this is a gross incursion, but for Constance, it represents a 'small step' into re-joining the world:

'It's spring, you're young, you're lovely, you have a right to be happy. Come back into the world.' (p. 27)

Merricat sees, with alarm, that Constance is yielding to this suggestion, paving the way for a more significant intrusion in the form of 'Cousin Charles.'

Mrs Wright

Lucille Wright accompanies Helen Clarke, ostensibly, as a kindness, but in reality she is both frightened and thrilled to be in the house where mass murder has occurred. As the visit progresses, Merricat vents her anger on the frightened Mrs Wright, bullying her into more portions of food prepared by Constance, still under suspicion of the poisoning, despite her acquittal. Mrs Wright survives this onslaught, however, with the help of Uncle Julian, who courteously recounts the day of the poisoning to the obviously thrilled Mrs Wright who, 'carried away, hopelessly lost to all decorum' (p. 31), embarks on a tour of the scene of the crime offered by Uncle Julian. This becomes the narrative impetus to disclose the first set of information about the poisonings; where Uncle Julian gleefully shares the fact that Merricat, 'a great child

of twelve' and 'always in disgrace' (p. 34), had been sent to bed without her supper, and the arsenic that was added to the sugar bowl had been purchased by Constance, ostensibly to kill off a rat infestation.

Cousin Charles

Helen Clarke's visit and her overtures to Constance to 'return to the world' prepares the way for the arrival of Cousin Charles Blackwood. Charles is the nephew of John and Julian Blackwood. His own father refused any support to Constance or Merricat during the trial, and has since died, impoverished. Cousin Charles visits with the pretence of making amends for his father's behaviour, but it soon becomes clear that he is seeking Constance's hand in marriage, along with her fortune. For Merricat, he is simply 'one of the bad ones' (p. 55), a tormentor from the outside world. But alarmingly for Merricat, Constance allows him in, and he soon takes up residence. Appropriately, Constance tells Merricat 'he looks like Father' (p. 57) and he very soon makes it clear that he intends to take over as the new Patriarch. Merricat, too, recognises the similarity of the men and their controlling behaviours, naming Charles both a 'ghost' (p. 61) and later a 'demon-ghost' (p. 87). But Charles is all too real – a representative of the patriarchal order that the girls have managed to do without for six years. If the previous father was dispatched because of his abuse of authority and, additionally, his lack of care for his daughters, Charles is unwittingly placing himself in exactly the same position. The reader soon recognises Charles' perfidy with his interest in the family safe and his acquisition of the Father's room, the gold watch chain and even his clothes. His cruelty, too, is quickly on display in his disrespectful treatment of Uncle Julian and his threats to Merricat. The battle between Merricat and Charles, for both Constance's love and for the possession of the 'Castle', comprises the middle section of the narrative.

Jim Clarke

A more benevolent form of patriarchy, in the form of paternalism, Jim Clarke is the authoritative male, husband of Helen, who breaks up the villagers' ransacking of the Blackwood house. Like Helen, he is a representative of the conventional order and like other members of this group, he is completely puzzled that young women may choose to live without any form of male protection, either in the form of husband or father. Later he returns to the sisters' house with Dr Levy to take the girls home with him to place them under the Clarkes' protection, but soon realises that his offers of assistance are unwanted.

Doctor Levy

While a relatively minor character, the Doctor is one of the few men who are initially allowed access to the 'castle' to tend to Julian's needs. Later in the novel, the doctor joins forces with Jim Clarke to coax and then threaten the sisters from the stronghold:

'Listen,' the doctor said, and I thought he had his mouth against the door, 'one of these days you are going to *need* help. You'll be sick, or hurt. You'll *need* help. *Then* you'll be quick enough to—' (p. 129)

Jim Donnell

We are first introduced to Jim Donnell, one of the villagers who persistently and mercilessly bullies and threatens the Blackwoods, primarily Merricat, as it is she alone who braves the shopping trips to the village. Whilst the entire village represents a threat to the women, and Merricat responds with her own private viciousness (she imagines walking over the dead bodies of 'the ugly people with their evil faces' [p. 11]), Jim is the personal face of that threat:

Some of the people in the village had real faces that I knew I could hate individually; Jim Donnell and his wife were among these, because they were deliberate instead of hating dully and from habit like the others. (pp. 11-12)

Jim's threatening behaviour is sickening and frightening. Written on the cusp of second wave feminism, and certainly before endemic male violence had reached public consciousness, the novel portrays his behaviour in ways that immediately bring to mind the term 'toxic masculinity.' He is joined by another male tormentor, Joe Dunham. Later we learn that Jim Donnell is the captain of the Fire Brigade. While he dutifully leads the firemen to put out the fire of the Blackwood house, he is the first to cast a stone at the house, leading the villagers on a wild rampage through the house; a violation of property that certainly stands to represent a direct violation on the bodies of the women. The mob violence led by Jim is reminiscent of the murderous attacks on women as suspected witches; a subject that Jackson herself had explored in her children's book *The Witchcraft of Salem Village* which, like Miller's *The Crucible*, takes a sympathetic stance on the plight of the accused 'witches', as well as casting a psychological lens across the dynamics of mob violence.

Mrs Donnell

Jim's wife, like the other women in the village, is initially complicit in the bullying of the Blackwood sisters.

Stella

The owner of a coffee-shop, Stella represents the fact that women, like Mrs Donnell, were complicit in the tormenting of the Blackwood sisters. While she makes vague protestations, 'Leave her alone, Jim' (p. 12), Merricat can hear Stella laughing along with the others when she is out of ear-shot.

The villagers

Collectively, these people represent the tormentors of the sisters, culminating in the ransacking mob that comes dangerously close to enacting physical violence on the sisters.

Suggested classroom activities

- Draw a mind map that shows the relationships between each of the characters.
- Create a flip card game which matches characters to quotes.
- Students prepare a quick one sentence description of characters; other students guess who the character is.
- Students draw or select props to suggest a character; other student to guess who the character is.
- Students discuss which characters change throughout the story, and which ones remain the same. Why is this significant?

Issues and themes

Killing patriarchy

In fairy-tales, princesses are rescued from castles by heroic princes. They are figuratively or literally 'awoken' and the 'happily ever after' entails marriage, and presumably, family; all elements designed to ensure a reproduction of the existing social order. Second wave feminism recognised the utter passivity of the female roles in this narrative genre, and in the late twentieth and early twenty-first century, writers have been busy re-writing or 'fracturing' these tales to give women more agency; ranging from the work of Angela Carter in *Bluebeard's Daughter* to mainstream productions of *Shrek* and *Frozen*. In *this* fractured fairy-tale by Shirley Jackson, the would-be rescuer is recognised as a 'demon-ghost', a clear stand-in for the dead father. While Constance initially plays the part of the princess, and is hovering on compliance with her would-be rescuer, Merricat is there to remind us that both women will forgo their self-sufficiency, and their 'happy-ever after' in the new family they have built.

The Blackwood mansion has become, or is in the process of becoming at the beginning of the narrative, a space of feminine power (see overleaf the theme of **Alternative economies**); a power that was violently wrested from the father in an act of mass poisoning, ostensibly the work of Merricat, but seemingly completely condoned, if not abetted, by Constance. As Lynette Carpenter (1984, p. 33) notes in her reading of *We Have Always Lived in the Castle*, 'within the context of feminist psychology, rage is the most appropriate response to oppression.' Those who have died are complicit and therefore guilty in the perpetuation of patriarchy. John Blackwood, the father, was proud of his wealth, created the grand house the girls now live in, but the essential clues to the essence of his character are kept in a book that Merricat has wrested and nailed to a tree as if its vile contents could ward off intruders – it was a 'little notebook of our father's, where he used to record the names of people who owed him money, and people who ought, he thought, to do favours for him ...' (p. 53). Wealth for the Blackwoods, as with most families in the mid-twentieth century, followed the male line; hence, little Thomas, who stood to inherit above his older sisters, had to go. Furthermore, according to Uncle Julian, the little boy already 'possessed many of his father's more forceful traits of character' (p. 34) and, tellingly, as the inheriting male, it was possibly no accident that it was little Thomas who used most of the arsenic-laced sugar (p. 34).

The other victims are more puzzling; Dorothy, Uncle Julian's wife, might have been an accidental casualty. The mother herself, who remains, significantly, nameless, occupies a strong, benign presence in the household. Her portrait looks over the gracious drawing room which the girls continue to carefully tend to in an act of homage; the mother had once said, 'I cannot bear to see my lovely room untidy.' (p. 24). However, tellingly, the mother is unable and uninterested in cooking – this task was left to Constance. In a novel where food symbolises both feminine nurturing but also sacrificial offering, this detail is significant. Ultimately, it would seem, Merricat and possibly Constance, too, did not feel loved enough by their mother who has become, like her precious Dresden figurines, a beautiful thing to look at, a sort of trophy wife, who is also, through her apparent passivity, both a victim of, and complicit in, the patriarchal order. She was, according to Uncle Julian 'a delicate woman ... born for tragedy, ... although inclined to be a little silly.' (p. 34). The only member who survived is no longer a threat to the girls. Uncle Julian, an economic dependent of his brother, has been rendered even more powerless, perhaps symbolically emasculated, through both his loss of physical health and strength, and his intellectual capacity. His powerlessness and dependency render him an acceptable member of the new female order, although interestingly, Merricat repeatedly reminds herself that she was 'to be kinder to Uncle Julian' (pp. 12, 20, 26, 43, 49, 52, 80, 91, 111). Of course, with a mind as deranged and dangerous as Merricat's, this series of constant reminders to herself is more than a little alarming. However, ultimately, the uncle and niece bond in their shared hatred of the new pretender to the Blackwood patriarchal chair; Uncle Julian adds the insult of 'bastard' to Merricat's pointed talk of poisonous mushrooms to goad Charles.

Merricat and Constance have established their new order; however, its very existence threatens the patriarchal-capitalist power structures that it was built on, and which it attempts to subvert. The events leading to the climax of the novel show how tentative is their hold on their new arrangements. Firstly, there is the open hostility from the villagers, and then the incursions from representatives of the old order: firstly, Helen Clarke, working on the authority of her friendship with the dead mother, and then Cousin Charles, with claims of family and his transparent desire to repair the patrilineal flow of money in the Blackwood family. Merricat instantly recognises the threat. In the very first chapter, she pointedly notes that the Rochester house 'should have belonged to Constance.'

Merricat is deliberately casting conventional laws aside here; because their mother was born in the Rochester house, Merricat thinks that it should, by rights, belong to her oldest daughter. The subtext is clear; marriage for women equates to economic oblivion or conjunction with patriarchal structures – property is passed from father to son rather than from mother to daughter, and, consequently, the women are left without names or money.

In fact, all of the action of the narrative arc, leading up to the fire and the near destruction of the Blackwood home, works to confirm the problematic nature of the women's new order. Its lengthy denouement, in classic fairy-tale-like fashion, works to ensure that the temporary refuge of the women will become a permanent fortress – of a distinctly feminine, maternal cast. In fact, the Blackwood home becomes completely transformed due to fire and the ransacking of the villagers, which combine to obliterate all of the symbols of its former association with masculine power (and feminine complicity). The father's bedroom, the source of the fire, is completely demolished (see **Close study** section on pages 26–27) and so is the elaborate Italian staircase, 'one of the wonders of the county' (p. 25) according to Helen Clarke, installed by John Blackwood to show off the family's status and wealth. All that remains is appropriated into the sisters' new space and serves as a reminder of the diminishment of the father:

The crooked, broken-off fragment which was all that was left of our lovely stairway was something we passed every day and came to know as intimately as we had once known the stairs themselves. (p. 145)

The beautiful drawing-room, the realm of the mother, is not burned, but is nonetheless completely ransacked and remains uninhabitable. The sisters visit it one final time in the aftermath to see 'our mother's portrait looking down on us graciously while her drawing room lay destroyed around her.' (p. 118). Constance replaces a Dresden figurine that was found, remarkably, unbroken and lying outside, in a farewell tribute. Because the long drawing-room windows are smashed, Merricat secures the property by closing the outdoor shutters and the room stands now 'in dimness ... without the sunlight.' (p. 119). If the father had been excoriated, the mother is respectfully buried, or perhaps entombed; a symbolic representation of the older social order that is being rejected, or surpassed:

Constance went to the mantel and set the Dresden figurine in its place below the portrait of our mother and for one quick minute the great shadowy room came back together again, as it should be, and then fell apart forever ... Constance and I closed the drawing-room door behind us and never opened it afterwards. (pp. 119-120)

It is shortly after this that Merricat first realises how dramatically their house has shifted into a space that will redefine her and her sister's lives, into a fairy-tale-like fortress. This is the only time the Blackwood house is called (and remains) the 'castle' of the title.

I stood at the foot of the stairs, looking up, wondering where our house had gone, the walls and the floors and the beds and the boxes of things in the attic; our father's watch was burned away, and our mother's tortoise-shell dressing set. I could feel a breath of air on my cheek; it came from the sky I could see, but it smelled of smoke and ruin. Our house was a castle, turreted and open to the sky. (p. 120)

The spaces that remain relatively unscathed, which are those that the sisters come to occupy, are the places where genuine nurturing occurred in the house prior to its destruction; the kitchen and Uncle Julian's room are salvageable and become the home and hearth of the transformed home. Significantly, the secret heart of the house, the cellar, where generations of Blackwood women stored their preserves, has remained completely untouched. In the immediate aftermath of the fire and the ransacking, it doubles as a bunker for the sisters that can protect them from the unwelcome attention of the men, coming to offer 'help'.

Alternative economies / power

Jackson's narrative continually ascribes problems to dominant, masculine forms of power. The novel showcases the perversions of (hyper) masculine power in the dangerous bullying of the men, the money-centred Cousin Charles, and the dysfunction of families with a controlling patriarch. It shows how women, such as Helen Clarke, but also the women of the village, are complicit in these power structures. Merricat and Constance undermine these structures with overtly violent acts of poisoning and fire, but also by employing the 'soft power' that has been the province of women for centuries; cooking, kitchen gardening, nurturing, and for Merricat, witchcraft. There is, additionally, the power of maternal love (that has been assumed by Constance) and alongside this, the power that women can wield collectively. Constance and Merricat can be viewed as a coven in microcosm and, more importantly, a 'sisterhood' of two.

Constance's source of power is undeniably problematic; she is the self-effacing maternal figure, living a life entirely within her domestic space, willingly providing, feeding and caring for her charges. Her very name epitomises loyalty and the regenerative power of love and selflessness. However, if we trust our narrator (see **Perspective on the text** below on

pages 24–25) then we have no real reason (at least after the poisoning event) to feel that Constance resents this; in fact, the narrator would have us believe that this is a genuine source of joy, strength and identity for Constance. When the text introduces Constance, she is ‘standing with the house behind her, in the sunlight.’ (p. 19). She sings and smiles when preparing food; she treats Merricat and Uncle Julian, both difficult charges, with patient, ceaseless devotion that she appears to relish, as a mother doting on her infants. Clearly, Merricat is completely unaware of how problematic these portrayals are; Constance’s character embodies every aspect of the Victorian ‘angel’ of the house. Such characterisations had already been challenged by women writers, such as Charlotte Perkins Gilman. The question is, to what extent is Jackson aware of this problem? It is unlikely that Jackson, occupying the next generation of a very small niche of American, proto-feminist ‘female’ Gothic writers, could be completely ignorant of the stereotypes perpetuated in Constance. Perhaps Jackson wants to resurrect this aspect of female/feminine identity as a source of power, rather than oppression. The fact that Constance once cooked for the entire Blackwood family and then calmly watched them on the day of the poisoning ‘dying around her like flies ... and never called a doctor until it was too late.’ (p. 37) shows that the ‘angelic’ character has a darker cast. After all, patient Constance even ‘told the police those people deserved to die.’ (p. 37). In one of his witty flashes, Uncle Julian puts it well: ‘You have been a good niece to me, although there are some grounds for supposing you an undutiful daughter.’ (p. 47).

Constance’s care of Merricat and Julian makes her the effective head of the house after her father’s death, and this accords her all of the power assigned to mothers – especially mothers in the absence of fathers. Constance dictates what they buy, how to run the house, what Julian and Merricat will eat, and what Merricat can and cannot do. Food, rather than money, becomes the economy of the house; the making, providing, anticipation and ingesting of food preoccupies all three. Nurturance provided by food replaces the power-relations of money that previously governed the family. It was money which had accorded John Blackwood his previous status in the house, and rendered all other members of the family dependent on him. The fact that Charles becomes obsessed with the family’s money, rather than the subtleties of this alternative economy, instantly casts him out as an unsuitable addition; a throwback to the system that the sisters have almost cast aside at the beginning of the story – almost, but not quite. Merricat is the one who braves the town on the twice weekly shopping trips;

the old Blackwood money is, presumably, taken from the safe, and spent on groceries at Elbert’s grocery store and in a range of other small shops – the butcher, baker, the coffee shop. As parochial as this village is, this is representative of the economic order that the Blackwood family, with John at the head, once presided over. The resentment of the town towards the sisters derives not only from the mass-murder, but the ancient grudge of the villagers against those who would look down upon them as their betters. Stripped of the patriarchal protection of the father now, Merricat must run the gauntlet of hostile words and actions from the men, the children, and, more furtively, from the women on her Tuesday and Friday shopping rounds:

The people of the village disliked the fact that we always had plenty of money to pay for whatever we wanted; we had taken our money out of the bank of course, and I knew they talked about the money hidden in our house, as though it were great heaps of golden coins and Constance and Uncle Julian and I sat in the evenings, our library books forgotten, and played with it, running our hands through it and counting and stacking and tumbling it ... I imagine that there were plenty of rotting hearts in the village coveting our heaps of golden coins ... (p. 7)

The crisis of the fire establishes Cousin Charles as the most covetous of the villagers; it was Merricat who first named him ‘one of the bad ones.’ (p. 55) and he certainly reveals the truth in her label as he repeatedly, and comically, calls for the rescue of the safe during the fire. The fact that the safe remains both unsalvaged and abandoned in the wreck of the house at the end of the novel is emblematic of the sisters’ final, fantastical removal from the capitalist economy. Instead, they live off the plentiful food-offerings of the village; offerings of both repentance and fear, prepared by the village women.

The food offerings establish a new relationship between the Blackwood women and the women of the village, perhaps recalling that deities can be simultaneously loved and feared. In this matter, the village women seem able to assert themselves, as the sisters imagine: ‘We thought that the men came home from work and the women had the baskets ready for them to carry over.’ (p. 139). Constance handles the food lovingly and speculates on the circumstances of its preparation:

Everything’s still warm. ... She must have baked them right after dinner so he could bring them right over. I wonder if she made two pies, one for the house. She wrapped everything while it was still warm and told him to bring it over (p. 139).

The sisters come to know the village women by their distinctive culinary traits, and the food becomes a means of communication, its careful preparation a sign that the women feel some form of kinship with the rebellious Blackwood sisters.

As it turns out, this alternative economy of 'home economics' has always lived in the castle as well. Constance is the latest in a long line of Blackwood women who make 'jellies and pickles and bottled vegetable and fruit' (p. 42) as part of 'the great supply of food in our cellar.' (p. 42). Merricat insightfully calls these 'a poem by the Blackwood women' (p. 42) and remarks to her sister 'You bury food the way I bury treasure.' (p. 42). The life cycles of food provide the rhythms of daily life and the routines of work for the sisters, keeping them in touch and intuitive with the cycles of nature: 'We eat the year away. We eat the spring and the summer and the fall. We wait for something to grow and we eat it.' (p. 45). And it provides its own set of economic imperatives: 'The food comes from the ground and cannot be permitted to stay there and rot; something has to be done with it.' (p. 42). The fact that generations of women's work are literally 'preserved' in the cellar, remaining untouched by the fire, demonstrates the moral of Jackson's fable-like tale: the subterranean power of the feminine, and its associations with nurturance and nature, will win out in the end.

Witchcraft / sympathetic magic

Witchcraft is now solidly framed by many voices in the second wave feminist reappraisal as an alternative to patriarchal power structures and aligned to customs of traditional healing and female medicine, including midwifery. However, as Carpenter (1984) notes, Jackson's use of witchcraft as acts of rebellion and resistance, and the catastrophic confrontation between the women and the villagers, predates by a decade the works of Andrea Dworkin and Mary Daly. The second wave feminist reappraisal made important links between misogyny and 'the gynocide of the witchhunt' as a deadly patriarchal response to marginal women, who may have had skills, such as midwifery, that sat outside of traditional social establishments. (Carpenter, p. 32)

Jackson's novel is double-edged in that it invokes this feminist reading – these women are treated as dangerous witches because they have rejected the patriarchal order and live on its margins. However, the text also invites another 'pre-feminist' reading where witches are marginalised precisely because they are dangerous women to be reckoned with. Through the

sheer hostility of Merricat, and her deadly thoughts, the reader might well think that Constance is raising a demon/witch, one that is exceptionally jealous of her sister's affection and attention. However, one of the most interesting aspects of this text lies in the reader's eventual acceptance of Merricat's homicidal tendencies over and above the inane and sometimes dangerous villagers. As one early critic of Jackson put it, 'If life at the castle is demented and "unrealistic," ... then by all means let us have more of it.' (Woodruff, 1967, p. 155).

Jackson was, as alluded to earlier, interested in witchcraft. She had published a children's book on the Salem Witch Trials, *The Witchcraft of Salem Village*, in 1956. Almost identical in plot to the Arthur Miller play *The Crucible* (written three years prior), the book takes a very non-superstitious, matter-of-fact account of the trials, the young girls' paranoid accusations, the villagers' hysterical behaviour and the deaths of eighteen innocent people. In her research, Jackson would have been familiar with the infamous *Malleus Maleficarum* of 1486 – a guide to the identification and punishment of witches (Carpenter, 1984, p. 34) which is now infamous for its fear of female power and, in particular, the attention given to castration. However, the impetus of the entire Salem affair lies in the hands of powerless girls who try a bit of sorcery, handed down to them by the enslaved Tituba. As Ruth Franklin comments in her biography of Jackson, 'witchcraft [...] is a last resort for women who feel that they are powerless, the only way in which they can assert control over their surroundings. Even imaginary control is preferable to no control at all.' (Franklin, 2016, p. 441).

Despite Merricat's homicidal thoughts (and acts), she commits no acts of violence towards people during the events of the novel. Rather, it is possible to interpret her little rituals of sympathetic magic that we see at the beginning of the text as a little naïve and somewhat desperate. Merricat's weekly round of checking the fences to ensure 'we were safe for another week' (p. 41) is given further imaginary fortification though magical safeguards buried or hidden around the property; the doll, the silver dollars, the father's book: 'so long as they were where I had put them nothing could get in to harm us.' (p. 41). When sensing that 'a change was coming' (p. 40), Merricat chooses three taboo words, seemingly at random, which if left unspoken, were to keep them safe. Neither the words nor the buried talismans keep Cousin Charles at bay, who, like so many curious strangers before him, calls and pleads from outside the house, peering through windows, hovering, waiting until he is let in.

Once Cousin Charles has gained access, granted by Constance, Merricat immediately determines to ‘find something, a device, to use against him.’ (p. 62). She uses a range of practical obstructions and diabolical threats – her longest addresses to Cousin Charles are monologues about poisonous mushrooms and plants. She asks him, only once, and very politely to ‘Please will you go away.’ (p. 80), however, common language and plain speaking is not Merricat’s forte – she speaks, and thinks, symbolically and metaphorically. And so when Cousin Charles refuses, the series of ‘magical attacks’ that Merricat embarks on, are rich with symbolism. She starts with cracking his mirror so it will not reflect Charles; she figures he is a demon-ghost anyway, and it would be hard for this ghost to assume his authority, if this authority is not reflected back to him. She stops her father’s watch, an item emblematic of the power of the dead father, and nails her father’s gold chain to a tree. She destroys her father’s room, now Charles’ room, so that ‘a demon ghost would not easily find himself here.’ (p. 87). The bed is ruined with water so he cannot sleep there, and the curtains are torn down to show the ghost the way out: ‘now Charles would have to look outside and see the driveway going away and the road beyond.’ (p. 87). She imagines and enacts several other symbolic fantasies which are far more violent: she asks Constance to make her a gingerbread cookie that she could name ‘Charles’ and eat him (p.75); she imagines turning him into a fly and dropping him into a spider’s web (p. 89); she thinks she ‘could wish him dead until he died’ (p. 89); she drops a stone the size of his head into a hole, symbolically burying him (‘Goodbye, Charles’ [p. 89]); and she even imagines fastening him to a tree ‘until he grew into the trunk and bark grew out of his mouth.’ (p. 89). After all these efforts, Merricat gleefully imagines she sees Charles ‘clearly baffled ... the first twisting and turning of the demon caught.’ (p. 94). But it is only through the very unmagical act of arson, destroying the very property that Charles so actively covets, that Merricat can effectively rid the house of her nemesis. In this way, we imagine Merricat resorting to the sort of final measures, in a practical, not magical way, that dispatched her family. Before this final act, Charles does something that resonates with historical mob treatment of witches – he ‘pointed his fork at (her)’ (p. 98) – an act that foreshadows the mob scene where the villagers threaten the sisters.

The mob scene is resonant with references to witch-hunts. Disappointed that Jim Donnell won’t let the house burn down, an echo of ‘burn the witch,’ the mob follows Jim’s lead in an alternative and equally alarming punishment for witches – a ritual stoning. The mob stone the house as an extension of the women who they hate. The mob’s desecration of

the house focuses on the domains that have been cherished by the women of the house, primarily the kitchen and the drawing room. The girls run, possibly for their lives, and hide in Merricat’s den until the morning. After they have salvaged their house, shutting themselves up and off from the world for good, their reputation as witches grows, but in a way that empowers them. Both feared and revered by the end of the text, these two witches have survived the trials meted out to them and they are now treated like potent local deities; forces to be reckoned with.

Class

Merricat tells us that ‘The people of the village have always hated us.’ (p. 4). However, it is clear that this hatred is mutual and extends beyond the advent of the poisonings and is the result of a deep class divide between the upper classes – those who, like the Blackwoods, live in nice houses, from ‘good’ families of long lineage – and the lower classes, ostensibly the ‘villagers’. Reading the novel under a class lens, the ransacking of the Blackwood home is also a class revolution in miniature.

Merricat’s sneering derision for the village and the villagers stems from a deep-seated instinct that she is both ‘above’ the people of the town, but also, has something to fear from them. The impetus for these thoughts stems from a time before the poisoning and is clearly inherited from the parents. When he bought the property, John Blackwood ‘closed off the path’ (p. 18) and ‘put up signs and the gates and locks’ (p. 18), effectively blocking the locals’ previous use of the land as a ‘right of way’ to save them a long walk from the bus stop to the centre of the village. This unneighbourly act is condoned and in fact required by the mother who, in one of her few off-stage utterances in the novel, remarks that ‘The highway’s built for common people ... and my front door is private.’ (p. 18). The ‘Private No Trespassing’ sign remains hanging, after the poisonings, and sums up Merricat’s attitude when it comes to any visitors in the six years after the parents’ murder. Merricat also describes her childhood fears of the villagers as a kind of bogeyman, with a clear delineation between the desirable upper-class guests, and the sneaking, suspect locals:

When I was small I used to lie in my bedroom at the back of the house and imagine the driveway and the path as a crossroad meeting before our front door; and up and down the driveway went the good people, the clean and rich ones dressed in satin and lace, who came rightfully to visit, and back and forth along the path, sneaking and weaving and sidestepping servilely, went the people from

the village. They can't get in, I used to tell myself over and over; lying in my dark room with the trees patterned in shadow on the ceiling ... (p. 18)

The 'clean and rich ones' are still allowed some form of access; Helen Clarke being the first and foremost. However, early in her narration, Merricat is at pains to point out that the Blackwoods outstrip the other elite families in wealth and consequence. We are told that the Clarkes' house is newer but not finer than the Blackwood house.' (p. 4); that while the Carringtons might own the papermill, 'the Blackwoods own all the land between the highway and the river' (p. 4); and while 'The Shepherds of Old Mountain gave the village its town hall' (p. 4), the extensive Blackwood property is marked by a big black rock just beyond the hall.

Merricat demarcates her view of the social landscape in her descriptions of the consequential buildings and the beauty and aesthetic pleasantness available to the homes of the rich. As for the village, all of it 'was of a piece, a time, and a style; it was as though the people needed the ugliness of the village, and fed on it.' (p. 6):

The houses and the stores seemed to have been set up in contemptuous haste to provide shelter for the drab and the unpleasant, and the Rochester house and the Blackwood house and even the town hall had been brought here perhaps accidentally from some far lovely country where people lived with grace. Perhaps the fine houses had been captured – perhaps as punishment for the Rochesters and the Blackwoods and their secret bad hearts, (p. 6)

Merricat seems to be unaware that she is actively embodying this 'secret bad heart' as she enters the village, thinking of its rottenness, hoping that the 'black painful rot' would eat it from the insides, (p. 6) and wishing death on all she comes across. Of course, there are her own feelings of bravado and fear mixed up with this; but here, after all, is a member of the Blackwood family who is simply unable to see the villagers in any humane light. In the time-honoured custom of small village hierarchy, Merricat is paid the mark of respect of being always served 'at once'. Spreading the Blackwood money liberally, but seemingly only on themselves, it is little wonder that resentment is in the air. Mrs Donell's spiteful remark, 'The Blackwoods always did set a fine table' (p. 8), is completely forgivable in this context; why wouldn't poorer people resent 'the fact that [the Blackwoods] always had plenty of money to pay for whatever we wanted.' (p. 7). And besides, Merricat is imagining Mrs Donell, alongside the other villagers 'lying there crying with the pain and dying' (p. 9), and she gives Mrs Donell an extra spiteful kick in her revenge fantasy. The milder Constance has cautioned her sister that hating with such extremity

is not productive, that it 'only weakens you' (p. 9), but Merricat 'hated them anyway, and wondered why it had been worth while creating them in the first place.' (p. 9).

In radical opposition to the grubby village with its 'dirty little houses' (p. 4) and drab inhabitants, stands, at a safe and elevated distance, the Blackwood residence. Returning from the village, blighted by its own form of mundane evil and ugliness, Merricat enters her own house; a house that carries all the signifiers of its class privilege in its stature, beauty, elegance and cleanliness. The reader is drawn into the charming space that is introduced in warmth and sunshine. The elegant drawing room, that will receive 'some small society, visiting acquaintances' of their class, is described in loving detail. Flanked by floor to ceiling windows with 'blue silk drapes', furnished with golden-legged chairs, a harp, 'mirrors and sparkling glass' and ornate cornices of 'white fruit and leaves ... cupids and ribbon knots' (p. 23), it is this room where Constance continues to fulfill her function as a (somewhat diminished) society hostess, carrying on the work of being a 'lady' like the dead mother:

Our mother had always served tea to her friends from a low table at one side of the fireplace, so that was where Constance always set her table. She sat on the rose sofa with our mother's portrait looking down on her, and I sat in my small chair in the corner and watched. I was allowed to carry cups and saucers and pass sandwiches and cakes, but not to pour tea ... (p. 24)

Those who visit, watch, slightly agape, but also slightly thrilled at the quirks and eccentricities – and potential criminality – of the diminished family. However, the peculiarities of Constance, Merricat and Uncle Julian are given licence by their status. In fact, their characterisation sits within a trope of a certain genre of English Literature (embodied in the works of Edith Sitwell, Nancy Mitford and Winifred Holty) where aristocrats are affectionately ascribed a range of odd behaviours that set them apart from others; only the very rich have the luxury to eschew certain aspects of middle-class conformity.

With the crisis of the fire, and their destroyed home, the women face the problem of maintaining their status. While they eschew the social ties of people of their ilk and with it, the conventional marks of rank, there remains the loitering anxieties of maintaining appearances. Constance, for example, insists that they 'will take our meals like ladies ... using cups with handles.' (p. 121). This symbolically links them to their privileged past so much so that 'Constance was always in terror lest one of our two cups should break, and one of us have to use a cup without a handle.' (p. 145).

However, their new status, as discussed above, transforms the women into the stuff of folklore, formidable entities, possibly witches. Interestingly, however, the people of the village repeatedly refer to them, reverentially and somewhat fearfully, as 'ladies' (there are five references in total, that only occur at the end of the novel):

'... the ladies live in there, and they don't like it.' (p. 141)

'The ladies don't like little boys.' (p. 141)

'Are the ladies in there?' (p. 142)

'Don't; the ladies might be watching.' (p. 146)

"You can't go on those steps," the children warned each other; "if you do, the ladies will get you." (p. 146)

The term 'ladies', as applied to Merricat and Constance, only appears in this section of the book, securing a new source of privilege quite beyond their former allegiances with the upper class, but still in line with the trope of eccentricities afforded to members of that class. And regardless, their final position ensures Helen Clarkes' classist assurance: 'I don't recall that the Blackwoods ever mingled socially with the villagers.' (p. 29).

Suggested classroom activities

- Draw a mind map to show the ways in which the themes are interlinked.
- Assign Chapters Two through to Ten to small groups of students and ask them to underline moments where key themes emerge.
- Have students explore the concept of patriarchy. A good starting point is *Feminism for Beginners* by Susan Watkins, Marisa Rueda and Marta Rodriguez, Allen and Unwin, 1993. A good online explainer on patriarchy can be found here: <https://www.britannica.com/topic/patriarchy>
- Explore Jackson's own class position. How might this have influenced her characterisation of the Blackwoods?
- Class debate: 'Traditional family requires patriarchy to function.'

Language and style

Not far into the narrative, the reader not only becomes attuned to Merricat's world view, but also accustomed to her language which is at once bizarre, fantastic, naïve but also knowing and dangerous. Merricat's personality and personhood are inscribed in every sentence in this book including, significantly, the title, *We Have Always Lived in the Castle*, which is unmistakably the narrator's voice. The Blackwood home is only transformed into a Castle after the burning, a fairy-tale-like structure that is also, as castles were originally intended, a fortress for the sisters. However, the term 'castle' is also consistent with Merricat's fanciful world of signs and portents, buried treasure, fantasies of dragons grown from baby teeth (p. 41) and owning winged horses and griffins (p. 22). The 'we' of the title is also a familiar grammatical tic in the novel. Like a child who has yet to properly separate and differentiate self from the mother (in Freudian terms the pre-Oedipal stage where a baby is yet to understand that they are a distinct and different person from the mother), Merricat habitually uses the undifferentiated 'we' to include herself with Constance.

This is particularly the case in Merricat's self-soothing fantasy of living on the moon. We are introduced to this fantasy early; indeed, Merricat uses this imagery to escape the tormentors of the village. Long a symbol of the maternal in Western Literature (and famously utilised as a divine protector for heroines of the Gothic tradition – 'my daughter, flee temptation, mother I will' [from *Jane Eyre*]), the moon is Merricat's dream of uninterrupted love between herself and Constance. The moon is a deliberately empty, benign space that can be filled with any piece of whimsy that Merricat can dream of: 'on the moon we spoke a soft, liquid tongue, and sang in the starlight, looking down on the dead dried world.' (p. 16); 'Today my winged horse is coming and I am carrying you off to the moon and on the moon we will eat rose petals.' (p. 59); 'On the moon we wore feathers in our hair, and rubies on our hands. On the moon we had gold spoons.' (p. 60). Once the girls have finally barred themselves from the rest of the world in their castle, the threat of separation finally over, Merricat says, 'I told you that you would like it on the moon.' (p. 145) For Merricat, the castle/moon is a site of undisrupted mother-child bonding, a place where both can be 'very happy.'

The title, *We Have Always Lived in the Castle*, is also significant in its assertive present tense that extends back, fairy-tale-like, into an undetermined 'once upon a time.' For while the girls have not always lived in the Castle, Merricat has gone to extreme lengths to see that they will, once the home has been transformed by fire. The powerful insistence of 'have always' carries the familiar cadences of assertive wish-fulfillment and fantastical imagination that is a feature of Merricat's language and thinking. Its imperative declaration is similar to Merricat's blank assertions to Cousin Charles: 'You are a ghost and a demon' (p. 92) or her explanation that 'The people of the village have always hated us.' (p. 4) The insistence of 'have always' also links the girls' past, present and future together, so that narratively, the beginning, middle and end become undifferentiated; and their existence is mythologised – as it is at the end of the story. The girls are now the stuff of legends; mothers warn their children not to go too close to the house or 'if you do the ladies will get you.' (p. 146) Finally, the 'have always' also links the title, and Merricat's language, to the comfortable domestic habits that have measured out the sisters' lives, both before, and after the fire. Merricat describes their routines in **Chapter Three**:

Always on Wednesday mornings I went around the fence. It was necessary for me to check constantly to be sure that the wires were not broken and the gates were securely locked On Sunday mornings I examined my safeguards, the box of silver dollars I had buried by the creek, and the doll buried in the long field, and the book nailed to the tree in the pine woods; so long as they were where I had put them nothing could get in to harm us ... 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, Constance and I ... On Saturday mornings I helped Constance. I was not allowed to handle knives, but when she worked in the garden I cared for her tools ...' (pp. 41-42)

The comfort of these routines, the clear pleasure all three members of the household take in what would seem mundane lives, is given great importance in Merricat's narrative. Charles' disruption is also, alongside everything else, a huge upset to the comfort of routine. After this disruption, and the drastic measures taken to remove the cousin, their lives, while further curtailed, nevertheless return to familiar routines:

Slowly the pattern of our days grew, and shaped itself into a happy life. In the mornings when I awakened I would go at once down the hall to make sure the front door was locked. We were most active in the very early morning because no one was ever around. (p. 132)

Suggested classroom activities

- Assign each of the ten chapters to small groups of students. Students could use the online text to search for key motifs and symbols of the text: https://www.angelamorales.net/uploads/1/1/4/2/11424937/we_have_always_lived_in_the_ca_-_shirley_jackson_21985.pdf
- Suggested symbols/motifs include: moon, treasure, ghost/demon
- Ask students to explore the concept of 'sympathetic magic'. What are some examples in the text? What other examples can they find? What are some of the most common features of 'sympathetic magic'?
- Explore Shirley Jackson's own class position. What were her social and financial circumstances?
- Class debate: 'Merricat is an unreliable narrator.'

Perspective on the text

The ‘reliable’ unreliable narrator

A contemporary reviewer wrote: ‘The book manages the ironic miracle of convincing the reader that a house inhabited by a lunatic, a poisoner, and a pyromaniac is a world more rich in sympathy, love, and subtlety than the real world outside.’ (*Time*, 1962, p. 94).

Jackson has deliberately created a most definitely deranged, yet ultimately sympathetic character, who could be considered a reliable narrator, albeit with some caveats. In fact, this is the brilliance of this particular text and perhaps why some consider this to be her best work. Jackson’s narrative has only Merricat’s perspective, and despite the fact that Merricat has poisoned her family and guards her replacement maternal figure (Constance) like a dragon guards her gold, we have only very little cause to distrust her view of events. In the battle for Constance between Merricat and Cousin Charles, the latter is so repugnantly self-centred, so transparently a gold-digger, so convincingly a danger to the wellbeing of his Uncle and cousins, that we cheer on Merricat in her campaign to remove him.

There is, nonetheless, the possibility of reading against Merricat’s narrative point of view. This is explored quite fully in Kay Chronister’s essay (2020), “On the Moon at Last”: *We Have Always Lived in the Castle*, Female Gothic, and the Lacanian Imaginary’. Chronister argues that Jackson’s Gothic doesn’t centre on the patriarch as villain – in this reading, Cousin Charles’ villainy is a red herring. The real villains are the children, who are tyrants of their mothers in the ‘all consuming force of their dependence.’ In this reading, Constance has become Merricat’s chosen or enforced mother-figure, rather than sister.

Beneath the veil of Merricat’s imaginary, we see the quiet identification of Jackson with the mother who is buried in the recess or hidden in the attic while her daughter roams the wilderness. In reading the veil itself, we see the force and urgency of the impulses that convince Jackson’s Gothic heroines – and so many of their predecessors – to let the mother stay buried. (Chronister, 2020, p. 145)

Chronister argues that Jackson sometimes perceived ‘the mother child relationship as a site of terror and violence’ citing the fictionalised memoirs *Life Among the Savages* (1953) and *Raising Demons* (1957) as evidence. What she doesn’t fully consider is that these portrayals were hugely comical and mostly affectionate; Jackson aimed to show that she could be both a mother and a writer.

Honor McKittrick Wallace (2003, p. 187) also initially entertains the notion of Merricat’s unreliability:

Then too, although Merricat professes repeatedly that she is ‘very happy,’ her claim must be examined in light of the fact that she is a grossly unreliable narrator. That she evidently has a pathology that leads her to kill her family, that she is obsessed with her sister Constance, and that she believes in magic words and charms might lead the reader to doubt what she says, particularly her insistence that Constance too is ‘very happy.’

However, she ends up arguing that Merricat’s madness is ‘oddly empowering’ and:

Although the reader may not want to emulate Merricat’s quest, he or she can still see in it the successful subversion of many elements of traditional narrative and thus an alternative to conventionally happy endings.

The other concern in following the unreliable narrator route is that there is simply no story or plot, nor clues laid down by Jackson to ‘authorise’ this sort of reading. As Chronister (2020, p. 135) states, ‘By using the first person, Jackson forces us to engage with her narrator on that narrator’s own fantasy-laden terms.’ For Chronister, this does not stop reading Merricat’s narrative as a ‘veil’ dropped over an ‘actual story’, but this story, perhaps a story from Constance’s or even Uncle Julian’s point of view, is not written; we cannot and should not engage with a text that simply isn’t there. In my view, Chronister is taking literary analysis a bridge too far in suggesting otherwise.

Jackson wants to ensure that her readers are bound to Merricat’s point of view; we see through her eyes only, and gradually we become accustomed to, and champion, her point of view. As Woodruff comments:

We are further persuaded to see that Constance’s sacrificial act in her sister’s behalf is the right solution, the admirable solution, however impractical or farfetched it may seem to be by normal standards. (Woodruff, p. 155)

As Woodruff (1967, p. 155) rightly argues, ‘The purpose of the novel is not to shock us with Merricat’s bizarre crime, but to define the quality of new life that is its aftermath.’ But let us dwell for a moment, instead, on the motive behind the crime. It appears that Merricat has been previously powerless, presumably somewhat unloved or overlooked, and given this seems to be the case, the reader, like Constance, can assume an amoral stance on the killing of her family. We know that previously in the family Merricat was ‘always in disgrace’ (p. 34) often punished as a ‘wicked, disobedient child’ (p. 34) and sent to bed without supper. It is Constance who would sneak trays of food up to her sister on these occasions. At her lowest point, just prior to her burning down of the house, Merricat re-enacts a family dinner, one where she is not excluded, and where all those she has poisoned shower their daughter with the love and devotion that appeared to be lacking in her actual family life. Of course, the love is symbolically rendered through offerings of food. If we were tempted to put this character on the psychoanalytic couch to explain her actions, this fantasy episode is the most telling:

‘I have heard, Lucy, of disobedient children being sent to their beds without dinner as a punishment. This must not be permitted with our Mary Katherine.’

‘I quite agree, my dear. Mary Katherine must never be punished. Must never be sent to bed without dinner.’

‘Our beloved, our dearest Mary Katherine must be guarded and cherished. Thomas, give your sister your dinner; she would like more to eat.’

‘Dorothy – Julian. Rise when our beloved daughter rises.’

‘Bow all your heads to our adored Mary Katherine.’ (pp. 95-96)

Merricat’s fantasy suggests she was neglected, and Constance’s complicity in the crime appears to recognise this; it is she who provided the care (and food) that her sister was lacking, and she who fulfills the parental function of unconditionally loving and caring for a child. Merricat’s fantasy is infantile because it speaks to the heart of an infant’s wishes, which are instinctive and innate to survival – to be the centre of the parental world (or at least the mother’s world). For this reason, and without going into reams of psychoanalytic theory, Merricat’s wishes and actions strike a chord in all of us. Like Constance, we are joined to Merricat’s wishes and are actively encouraged, by the narrative’s unconcerned presentation of the murders, to likewise adopt an amoral stance. Or perhaps, even further, we like Merricat not only despite the fact that she poisoned her family, but because she poisoned them.

Close study

Passage 1

Merricat visits the village on errands (pp. 16-17)

From: ‘Merricat, said Connie, would you like a cup of tea?
Oh no, said Merricat you’ll poison me ...

To: ... Their tongues will burn, I thought, as though they had eaten fire. Their throats will burn when the words come out, and in their bellies they will feel a torment hotter than a thousand fires.’

The novel begins in the hostile ‘outside world’ where Merricat endures her twice weekly shopping visits to the local village. Jackson acutely renders the naked hostility of the villagers, whilst sympathetically introducing readers into Merricat’s powerful inner world.

On one level, particularly at this early point in the novel, readers might misconstrue murderous thoughts as a natural coping mechanism; and to a degree this is correct. Readers quickly bond with the struggling young woman as she battles her way through a series of threatening encounters with the men, women and children of the village. The taunting refrain is repeated at the climax of the novel when the villagers surround the sisters, menacing them during the house fire. Not long after, Merricat vows revenge: ‘I am going to put death in their food and watch them die.’ (p. 110) at which point, Constance prompts the confession: ‘The way you did before?’ (p. 110). It is only at this point in the novel that readers now know, for certain, that it was Merricat who murdered her family and is fully capable of carrying out her threats. The refrain, ‘Merricat, said Connie, would you like a cup of tea’ is sing-song, and fable-like. It connotes typical qualities of playground bullying but is also a growing aspect of the mythologisation of the Blackwood sisters as powerful, potential witches; a mythology that rebounds back on the villagers at the end of the novel, including those who offer tributes to the pair out of a combination of reparation and fear.

Passage 2

Cousin Charles comes to visit (pp. 55-56)

From: ‘I ran to the front door and leaned against it and heard his steps outside ...

To: ... “Constance, *can* you hear me?” he called outside. “Please listen for just a minute.”

Jackson dedicates nearly three pages to Cousin Charles’ entrance. The striking feature repeated in the passage is Cousin Charles’ constant calling and knocking, repeatedly calling Constance’s name until Constance, to Merricat’s horror, relents and allows him to step across the Blackwood threshold. Charles’ insistent circling of the house, unable to come in until invited, carries echoes of the requirements of a vampire; and later Merricat names him a ‘demon-ghost.’ However, throughout this passage, he is also aligned with the prying and crassly opportunistic locals and day-trippers, who hound and spy on the family, particularly on Constance, since she gained notoriety at the trial for the death of her family. Jackson has built the narrative carefully to this point to align us with Merricat’s fear that Constance will return to ‘the real world’, so drably and unsympathetically represented in the narrative by the village and then the society of Helen Clarke. Having already watched Merricat endure the nasty encounter with Jim Donell, we take it on face value that the stranger outside is ‘one of the bad ones’ and the slow narrative build-up to Charles’ entrance prepares us to feel, as Merricat feels, that Cousin Charles’ entrance is going to be monumental and life-changing; for Merricat, a violation, and for Constance, as Merricat fears, the ‘first step’ (p. 24) back to normalcy.

This passage is also significant as it is mirrored in the final chapter, where Charles attempts to coax himself back inside, in a last-ditch attempt to insinuate himself back into Constance’s life, or more accurately, to access the family wealth. This time he betrays his real interests immediately, as he ruefully accounts to the accompanying journalist that the burnt-out house still contains a ‘whole damn fortune’ (p. 142) and negotiates a fee if a photo opportunity with the sisters presents itself. The girls hear all of this and are now united in their contempt. Constance, to Merricat’s satisfaction, ‘had never seen Charles so truly before’ (p. 142) and ‘knows now that Charles was a demon and a ghost.’ (p. 143). Charles continues to operate on the assumptions that had worked for him previously; that he represents a precious last chance for an ‘old maid’ to marry and have children. Constance now sees this as clearly unpalatable as Merricat; Charles’ mock-pleas ‘If you let me go this time you’ll never see me again’ (p. 144) are met with the sisters’ derisive mirth:

We held each other in the dark hall and laughed, with the tears running down our cheeks and echoes of our laughter going up the ruined stairway to the sky.

‘I am so happy,’ Constance said at last gasping. ‘Merricat I am so happy.’

‘I told you that you would like it on the moon.’
(pp. 144-45)

Up until this point, Merricat had habitually stated to Merricat that ‘we are very happy’, a statement that became more of a tentative question at the point where Cousin Charles’ power is at its height. This is Constance’s first conclusive assertion that ‘she’ is in fact very happy. If Charles represents the limitations and degradations of the ‘real world’ (ruled by men, obsessed with money), then ‘the moon’ represents that feminine space of nurturance, untainted by the fallen world, that Merricat has long fantasised about. By finally banishing Charles, the sisters get an (albeit fantastical) happy-ever-after on ‘the moon’, which has become ‘the castle.’

Passage 3

Entering the ruined Castle (pp. 114-115)

From: ‘Constance put her hand against the door frame to steady herself, and said again, “My kitchen, Merricat.” ...

To: ... Once Constance went into the cellar and came back with her arms full. “Vegetable soup,” she said, almost singing, “and strawberry jam, and chicken soup, and pickled beef.”

Entering the burned and ransacked home, the sisters notice, with pain, that most of the villagers concentrated their violent energies on what is the real ‘wealth and hidden treasure’ of the house; not the money locked in the discarded safe, but the cherished domestic items of silverware, linen and crockery, that have been passed down through generations of Blackwood women. Crucially, however, the real legacy of these women, the cellar full of preserves, has remained untouched, as are all the recent stores from the garden that are also in the cellar. It is with this knowledge, and on this basis, that Constance and Merricat can rebuild their lives, literally, on the foundations of food.

As noted earlier in the themes section, food is the alternative economy of Constance and Merricat; it is also the arbiter of their relationship with Constance as provider and Merricat as the consumer. Even prior to entering their ruined house, emerging from the secret shelter that Merricat had provided, Merricat complains of hunger and Constance, as always, is solicitous of her charge: ‘Oh Merricat, poor baby.’ (p. 112); ‘Merricat, you’ll starve’ (p. 113); ‘First, your breakfast.’ (p. 115).

Whilst child-like and often demanding in her need to be fed, Merricat nevertheless continuously shows us that her sister’s love of food – the growing, the preparation, the cooking and preserving – is a fundamental aspect of her character. In the first part of the story, Merricat returns from her shopping trip and watches Constance in the kitchen:

She took the groceries carefully from the bags; food of any kind was precious to Constance, and she always touched foodstuffs with quiet respect. (p. 20)

Forbidden to help, Merricat watches her sister ‘moving beautifully in the sunlight, touching foods so softly.’ (p. 21). Towards the end, when the first baskets of food arrive for the sisters, Merricat again notes how her sister fondled each proffered item ‘lovingly and with gentleness.’ (p. 139), signalling a new relationship between the sisters and the women of the village who so carefully prepare food for forgiveness and tribute. And so, by the end of this passage we see Constance is ‘almost singing’ (p. 115) as she prepares the food, even before they had begun the task of cleaning and tidying the spaces, with the kitchen at the centre, that they will come to occupy. She is singing because the core of the house’s character, and therefore the core of herself, has escaped harm; and the first preparation of the first meal in the ‘castle’ will begin to recast the familiar but also renewed pattern for the sisters that promises to shape itself into a happy life.

Further activities

Having taught themes, style, structure and characterisation, teachers might want to try one or more of the following activities to reinforce and test students' knowledge leading up to the analytic response.

Class debates

Students love hearing from other students and obviously can engage in the text further by staging informal class debates. Some possible topics include:

- Constance is, in reality, trapped by Merricat.
- Merricat deserves to be punished for the crime she committed.
- Helen Clarke's concern for Constance is genuine and should be considered as kindness, not intrusion.
- Charles only wants to marry Constance for her money.
- Constance, not Merricat, is the head of the Blackwood household.
- Constance, not Merricat, has the most to lose if she marries Cousin Charles.

Group work

Setting and theme

Divide the class into small groups to represent the different settings of the novel: the garden, the kitchen/cellar, the drawing room, the dining room, the village, the ground, the father's room.

- Students to find a Google image they think best represent their setting. Why choose this image?
- Around this image students should insert relevant quotes from the novel.
- What key ideas are represented with the setting? For example, the father's room represents patriarchal authority.
- Each group presents their ideas and image to the class – ideally the images will be printed off. If that's not possible, have the image projected on a screen.

Setting and character

Use the same class groups as for the settings above. Across the white board, write characters' names. Students to stand in front of the character that their settings best represent and explain their choice.

In small groups create:

- A timeline of the events covered in the novel
- A relationship tree of the main characters using the principal houses.



Book cover activity

In pairs, students explore the many versions of book covers of *We Have Always Lived in the Castle*. Each pair to select two covers and paste them onto a Word document or Google doc to be shared with the class. There are stunning and amusing variations, so try to ensure that a fair sample is chosen. Students should answer the following questions when presenting their book covers to the class.

- Why do you think this cover was chosen by the publisher?
- What theme/characters/ideas are given prominence?
- Judging the book by the cover, what do you think the story would be about? And would you read it?
- Imagine you're a book cover designer for a publisher. What would you recommend to go on the cover of the novel? Justify your response.
- An extension activity: students create/design their own book covers and present their rationale for their choice in a short written explanation.

After the presentations, a general class reflection could consider questions concerning the most common theme of the various covers.

Think/Pair/Share

Creating a Google doc quotation resource

Distribute key characters to different students in class. At least two students should have the same character, but each should initially work alone. Ask students to find around five key quotes for that character and also, on the basis of this, think about five key adjectives to describe the character. They should work alone on a Word document as this will be later pasted onto one Google doc that the teacher has created. Students then come together in pairs to share their work, first together, and then onto the Google doc for the whole class.

Characters	Five quotes	Five adjectives
Merricat		
Constance		
Uncle Julian		
Cousin Charles, etc.		

Quote bank class exercise

Students should be encouraged to create and memorise their own quote bank on a Google doc or any form that can be accessed, edited and projected to the whole class. The class then discuss, either as a whole cohort,

in a group or individually, the following: the context of the quote (what, where, who); the theme/world view that could be paired with the quote; and the language of the quote (naïve, humourous, whimsical, threatening, ironic). A chart is supplied here with some examples.

Quote	Context	Theme/world view	Language
'You have been a good niece to me, although there are some grounds for supposing you an undutiful daughter.' (p. 47)	Uncle Julian talking to Constance, musing about the events of the poisoning that are the subject of his book.	Mystery, murder, guilt, punishment	Ironic, humourous, insightful
'Does he always eat with you?' (p. 71)	Cousin Charles is watching Uncle Julian eating with some disgust. Uncle Julian has been well cared for by Constance, but Cousin Charles clearly would like to get rid of him.	Power, domination, greed.	Derisive, sneering, cruel
'I wonder if I could eat a child if I had the chance.' (p. 146)	Merricat is playfully alluding to their new reputation of dangerous witches; however, for a young person completely preoccupied with food – this joke is deliberate in its menacing overtone.	Food, fear, witchcraft	Dark, ironic, child-like, ominous

Key quotes

‘I have often thought that with any luck at all I could have been born a werewolf’ (p. 1)

The second opening line of the novel speaks volumes about the narrator and the themes of empowerment and disempowerment. Carpenter has written extensively about the parallel between a witch-hunt and the attempt to purge the village of the Blackwood sisters. In this line, as Carpenter (1984, p. 34) suggests, Merricat expresses a longing for power; one of her chief characteristics. As discussed elsewhere, the magic Merricat does employ is largely ineffectual; she must resort to physical acts (poisoning, arson) to see her wishes borne out. Nevertheless, as Elizabeth Janeway has written of the role of witches under patriarchy, ‘The witch role permits the woman to imagine that she can exercise some sort of power, even if it is evil power.’ (quoted in Carpenter, 1984, p. 34). Similarly, as Ruth Franklin (2016, p. 441) has succinctly put it, it is a truism that for the powerless, ‘Even imaginary control is preferable to no control at all.’ It is, in fact, Constance’s knowledge of plants and their properties that will be a real alternative source of power for the women once they live outside of the formal economy at the end of the story. Of course, this knowledge of plants links Constance with the women healers of the past who were persecuted and executed as witches.

‘I wished he would put food on the fork and put it into his mouth and strangle himself.’ (p. 98)

This is just one of many graphic depictions of murderous harm that Merricat wishes upon Cousin Charles as ‘one of the bad ones.’ (p. 55). This imagery is all the more powerful as it reverses Charles’ own assertion of power:

Charles pointed his fork at me. ‘I may as well tell you, Mary, that your tricks are over for good. Your sister and I have decided that we have had just exactly enough of hiding and destroying and temper.’ (p. 98)

Merricat’s resistance to Charles leads to a cataclysmic confrontation between the forces of the male power structure and the forces of female rebellion. As previously discussed, Charles’ fork carries obvious connotations to pitchfork waving mobs – who later come for the sisters. Charles’ threatening behaviour, however, simply underestimates Merricat’s determination and the lengths she will go to in order to see him off the property. Like the villagers, Charles can only view Merricat’s behaviour as wayward and odd; he lacks the imagination and insight to see that it is his role as patriarchal heir that is being challenged.

‘Punish me? You mean send me to bed without my dinner?’ (p. 94)

The final showdown between Charles and Merricat replays the drama of the night before the poisoning, where Merricat, the ‘disobedient child’, had been sent to bed without her supper. As often mentioned throughout this guide, food in this text overtly represents love and nurturance, and the clear subtext, in terms of Merricat and her family, is that she was unloved and possibly even rejected by her family. The withholding of food represents this withholding of love. After this final insult, Merricat retreats to the desolate and eerie summer house, long abandoned by the Blackwoods – even when alive. Here, she perversely reconstructs the night of the poisoning in a fantasy narrative which replaces her banishment from the table with a scene where she is worshipped and adored, and, of course, fed – even at the expense of the favoured son: ‘Thomas, give your sister your dinner; she would like more to eat.’ (p. 96); ‘Mary Katherine, we love you.’ (p. 95).

‘I told you that you would like it on the moon.’
(p. 145)

In fairy-tales, the prince saves the princess, often from a form of entrapment of a spell, returning her, triumphantly, to a world where she will be married and participate, once again, in the social order from which she has been excluded. In this fractured fairy-tale, Merricat’s quest is to save Constance from this fate; the moon represents an alternative ending, and an alternative, self-sufficient economy. Symbolically feminine and maternal, Merricat periodically fantasises about the moon – with only Constance and Jonas as her companions. In order to get to the moon, Merricat has to raze the father’s economic legacy, symbolically represented in the grand house. After the fire, the house is transformed from a masculine space that signifies power (and yes, there is the inevitable phallic symbol with its ‘roof pointed firmly against the sky’ [p. 97]). The fire redefines the house. Its roof is now open against the sky, and every aspect that is associated with the older order is destroyed; the bedrooms, particularly the father’s bedroom, the expensive carved staircase, etc. The mother’s drawing room, a site of social exchange that is complicit with the older order, is in ruins and thus closed ‘and never opened afterwards.’ (p. 176). The ‘moon/castle’ is organised around the sisters’ more modest needs, with the kitchen, the cellar and the garden as the spaces of occupation that are explicitly tied to ideas of nurturance. Externally, the fire has radically transformed the symbolism of the house as well. Once a proud public symbol of Blackwood money and importance, the house is now, despite the many gawkers, mysterious, hidden behind growing vines and boarded-up windows; an enchanted space where rumours of the ‘witches’ thrill and scare the locals into respect. The ‘moon/castle’ is a fantastical wish fulfillment – it is difficult to think how happy Merricat and Constance will be in years beyond in such a socially limited sphere. Yet, fairy-tales do not require a logic beyond the ‘happy ever after’. The significance of the transformation of the Blackwood house is explored in the final quote.

‘Our house was a castle, turreted and open to the sky.’
(p. 120)

According to Gothic scholar, Devendra P. Varma, ‘a ruin is not only a thing of loveliness but also an expression of Nature’s power over the creations of man ... Ruins are proud effigies of sinking greatness, the visual and static representations of tragic mystery ...’ (Varma, quoted in Parks, 1981, p. 24). Later, the girls learn that creeping vines are covering the ravages of the burnt house and transforming it into the mythological ‘castle’ of the title – a place of rumour, tragic mystery, mythology and secrets:

We learned, from listening, that all the strangers could see from the outside, when they looked at all, was a great ruined structure overgrown with vines, barely recognizable as house. (p. 146)

Parks (1981, p. 27) sees this as ‘as nature covering and protecting her own against the assaults of a vengeful and violent world.’ For Merricat is a child of nature, and a force of nature, and she has successfully turned her sister away from the social world.

Analytical text response topics

On completion of this unit, the student should be able to produce an analytical interpretation in a sustained essay. Some of the key skills required are an understanding of the world of the text and the explicit and implied values it expresses and the way authors create meaning and build the world of the text through structure, conventions and language. Students also need to use textual evidence appropriately to justify their analytical responses. Below are some suggested essay topics. The **Further activities** section also outlines some strategies for teachers to use with students when working towards this Outcome.

1. 'Jackson gives us no choice but to trust the narrator Merricat, in spite of her extreme and often bizarre behavior.'
Do you agree?
2. In what ways does Cousin Charles represent a danger to Constance, Uncle Julian and Merricat?
3. Examine the role of the 'Castle' in the novel. In what ways does the transformation of the house also transform the lives of Merricat and Constance?
4. "I wished they were dead." (p. 8)
Is Merricat a dangerous and deranged person or just a vulnerable young woman?
5. 'Jackson takes a proto-feminist stance against the traditional family in the novel.'
Discuss.
6. 'Constance and Merricat have an unequal relationship.'
Discuss.
7. Why are the villagers so vicious towards the sisters? How does this attitude transform towards the end of the novel?
8. How do the dynamics of outsiders and insiders play out in the novel?
9. "Punish me? You mean send me to bed without my dinner?" (p. 94)
What role does punishment have in the Blackwood family?
10. Describe the function(s) of food in the novel and in particular its transactional power in Merricat and Constance's relationship.
11. 'The purpose of the novel is not to shock us with Merricat's bizarre crime, but to define the quality of new life that is its aftermath.' (Woodruff)
Discuss.
12. Is there any redemption in this novel?

Creative text response tasks

The Study Design allows the creative text response in Outcome 1 to be presented in written or oral form; it also requires a written explanation of the decisions involved in creating the response. On completion of this Unit, the student should be able to respond creatively to a text and comment on the connections between the text and the response. Students develop an understanding of the various ways in which authors craft texts. They reflect critically upon their own responses as they relate to the text and discuss the purpose and context of their creations. The suggested word length for written responses is 800-1000 words, although this is a guideline only. As the Statement of Intention is worth one quarter of the total of 30 marks, teacher guidelines as to word length (which is 300-500 words) and timing of this element of assessment should be developed accordingly. The following suggestions allow students to fulfil the Outcome within a manageable timeframe. These prompts have been arranged in order of difficulty. The last option in this list would best suit students looking for a challenge. The **Further Activities** section also outlines some strategies for teachers to use with students when working towards this Outcome.

1. **Write a key scene from another character's perspective.** For example, students may wish to explore one of the villagers bullying Merricat, or Cousin Charles' first impression of the sisters. In particular, the possibility of exploring Constance's point of view in a range of scenes presents an interesting opportunity to explore aspects of this other main character.
2. **Elaborate on or create a character and work into a selected scene from the text.** Possibilities include one of the village men who bring the meals over to the sisters after dark (see pp. 138-9); or a reformed and contrite Mrs Donnell and/or a child from the village.
3. **Create an additional scene or add to an existing one.** It would be tempting to recreate the crisis leading up to the poisoning. These events are only ever referred to, in disjointed bits of recall, by Uncle Julian. Similarly, the courtroom scene which is only ever alluded to 'off-stage' in which Constance has been tried and acquitted of murder. Teachers may want to show some selected scenes from the 2018 movie to show how directors can take liberties with texts in order to emphasise certain elements. Other potential scenes could be the ones that take place 'off-stage' – for example, Cousin Charles befriending the villagers, or arranging for the reporter to get paid for a story.
4. **Reframe a character**
 - Reading 'with the text' – Merricat, whilst potentially dangerous, is nevertheless sympathetically rendered. However, some readings take a darker view of Merricat. It is entirely plausible that Merricat, spoilt and deranged, drives away all outsiders to keep Constance to herself. Students could cast a darker light on the relationship between the sisters with Merricat as the manipulator and Constance as her victim.
 - Following the same logic, one could positively reframe the character of Helen Clarke, as Constance's champion: 'It's spring, you're young, you're lovely, you have a right to be happy. Come back to the world.' (p. 27).
5. **Create an original piece of writing, presented in a manner consistent with the style and context of the original text.** This is the most difficult option. Students may use their interest and understanding of fractured fairy-tales and/or sympathetic magic to create an entirely different story, whilst observing one of the central themes of the text.

Oral creative options

While the above options could be adapted to an oral form, here are four further options designed specifically for an oral creative. These options may well suit students who enjoy acting, drama and theatre studies.

1. **Merricat curses the village.** Students could create a soliloquy based on Merricat's hatred of the village and on sympathetic magic. Students could look to the range of 'magic' and magical thinking that Merricat employs, perhaps even adding in a spoken charm.
2. **Voices from the past**
 - 'All the Blackwood women had taken the food that came from the ground and preserved it, and the deeply coloured rows of jellies and pickles and bottled vegetables and fruit, maroon and amber and dark rich green, stood side by side in our wide cellar and would stand there forever, a poem by the Blackwood women.' (p. 42)
 - As discussed in the **Themes** section earlier, the subterranean feminine 'power' of the Blackwood family resides in the cellar. While their voices have been lost and their identities and property subsumed into the Blackwood estate, students could recreate one or several lost identities. This also may be in a form of a soliloquy or in epistolary form.
3. **Uncle Julian gives a frank character assessment.** Frail and forgetful as he is, Uncle Julian's observations provide the only glimmer of an objective account in the novel. Students could use this aspect of Uncle Julian's character in several ways. For example, Uncle Julian could perform the role of a Greek Chorus – announcing what will happen, why it happened, and provide a frank character assessment of his family.
4. **Cousin Charles has a whinge.** Students could have fun exploring the most unsavory aspects of this character and his motives in an imagined exchange in a village pub. Here Cousin Charles could talk openly about his intentions; what he intends to do with both Uncle Julian and Merricat, and the state of his own family's financial affairs that has brought him to seek his fortune in marrying Constance.
5. **A word from the Familiar.** This could be tempting for students who want to explore further motifs of witchcraft and sympathetic magic in the text. Creating a unique voice for Jonas will be challenging, but could present the opportunity for an outsider/objective or unique perspective on events within the text.

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Other online resources

- <https://content.time.com/time/subscriber/printout/0,8816,827583,00.html>
- https://www.angelamorales.net/uploads/1/1/4/2/11424937/we_have_always_lived_in_the_ca_-_shirley_jackson_21985.pdf
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