

The Establishment and Preservation of Female Power in Shirley Jackson's "We Have Always Lived in the Castle"

Author(s): Lynette Carpenter

Source: *Frontiers: A Journal of Women Studies*, Vol. 8, No. 1 (1984), pp. 32-38

Published by: University of Nebraska Press

Stable URL: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/3346088>

Accessed: 03-06-2019 10:51 UTC

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of the Terms & Conditions of Use, available at <https://about.jstor.org/terms>



JSTOR

University of Nebraska Press is collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *Frontiers: A Journal of Women Studies*

The Establishment and Preservation of Female Power in Shirley Jackson's *We Have Always Lived in the Castle*

Lynette Carpenter

When Mary Katherine Blackwood, at the age of twelve, poisoned her family by putting arsenic in the sugar, she was careful not to endanger her sister Constance, whom she calls "the most precious person in my world, always."¹ Now, six years later, with everyone dead but the invalid and feeble-minded Uncle Julian, Constance has become head of the Blackwood family, which consists of Constance, Mary Katherine (affectionately called Merricat by her sister), Uncle Julian, and Jonas the cat. When the events at the beginning of Mary Katherine's narrative take place, they live in seclusion in the Blackwood house, surrounded by extensive Blackwood property, barricaded against the intrusion of the outside world. They might have continued to live contentedly enough, had their neighbors allowed it. But female self-sufficiency, Jackson suggests, specifically women's forceful establishment of power over their own lives, threatens a society in which men hold primary power and leads inevitably to confrontation.

Jackson's portrayal of the institution of patriarchy and its terrifying power over women predates by more than five years Kate Millett's introduction of the terminology of contemporary feminist criticism in *Sexual Politics*. Her rendering of a modern confrontation between witches and witchhunters anticipates by more than ten years the writings of Andrea Dworkin and Mary Daly on the gynocide of the witchhunt as one patriarchal response to female rebellion.² Jackson's last completed novel and a best seller, *We Have Always Lived in the Castle* is her most radical statement on the causes and consequences of female victimization and alienation, a theme that runs

throughout her work. The novel may represent a personal culmination for Jackson, who suffered a nervous breakdown shortly after its publication in 1962; her journal from that period records longings for "freedom and security," "self-control," and "refuge" that echo the novel's central concern with the self-determination of women in a safe environment.³

When the book opens, masculine authority has already suffered a decisive defeat at the hands of Mary Katherine Blackwood, its narrator (although the identity of the poisoner is not revealed or confirmed until the climactic scene much later): the poisoning has resulted in a transfer of power from Blackwood men to Blackwood women. The motive for the poisoning is not clear at first, but we are given clues in the characterizations of the victims throughout the narrative. Of the men, the most clearly drawn figure is John Blackwood, father of Merricat and Constance and head of the Blackwood family. A redoubtable patriarch, he was a man of property who, as Uncle Julian relates, "took pride in his table, his family, his position in the world" (p. 47). He gave sparingly and grudgingly of his wealth and viewed all such transactions as financial investments to be taken down in his notebook, where, according to Merricat, "he used to record the names of people who owed him money, and people who ought, he thought, to do favors for him" (p. 77). When he quarreled with his wife the night before their deaths, Uncle Julian assumed the quarrel was about money (p. 32). In short, John Blackwood's power in his family and his community derived not only from his gender but also from his material wealth. Six years after his death,

Lynette Carpenter is associate director of women's studies and assistant professor of English at the University of Cincinnati. Her essays on literature and film have appeared in Southern Review, Jump Cut, and Studies in Short Fiction. She and Wendy Kolmar of Drew University are currently editing a critical collection on women's ghost stories. Carpenter would like to thank Neil Nakadate for teaching We Have Always Lived in the Castle in an undergraduate literature course at the University of Texas in 1972 when she was his student assistant.

Merricat says of the villagers, "I knew they talked about the money hidden in our house, as though it were great heaps of golden coins" (p. 9).

A financial failure, John's brother Julian was dependent on his brother's charity and subject to his authority. In a society that values masculine authority and the accumulation of private wealth and defines that accumulation as a male responsibility and prerogative, Uncle Julian was twice victimized by expectations he could not fulfill. He is perhaps the Blackwood man who most deserved to survive the assault, yet his continuing denial of Merricat's existence serves as a reminder of her former status in the Blackwood family and of her especial invisibility to the Blackwood men. Both legally and symbolically he must be rendered powerless (in/valid) in order to ensure the empowerment of Constance and Merricat. His invalid state no doubt confirms the general belief that financial failure for men leads to powerlessness, dependency, emasculation. The heir to the Blackwood money and property was ten-year-old Thomas, Constance and Merricat's younger brother, who, according to Uncle Julian, "possessed many of his father's more forceful traits of character" (p. 48). It was no accident that Thomas used the most sugar.

Of Julian's wife very little is said; she may or may not have been an undeserving but unavoidable victim. Constance and Merricat's mother, on the other hand, emerges as the primary keeper of the Blackwood possessions, a woman obsessively tidy and aloof. Her snobbery, inherited by her daughters, later ensures their seclusion: "Our mother disliked the sight of anyone who wanted to walking past our front door, and when our father brought her to live in the Blackwood house, one of the first things he had to do was close off the path and fence in the entire Blackwood property" (p. 26). Like Blackwood wives before her, she added her share of material goods to the Blackwood family wealth. But in one important respect she broke with the tradition of the Blackwood women: she was a bad cook. Although she made her obligatory contribution to the cellar legacy of the Blackwood women—her six jars of apple jelly crowded by "jars of jam made by great-grandmothers, . . . and pickles made by great-aunts and vegetables put up by our grandmother" (p. 60)—she left the cooking and gardening to Constance. To the visiting Mrs. Wright's question about Mrs. Blackwood's cooking, Uncle Julian replies with a shudder, "I personally preferred to chance the arsenic" (p. 50). Mrs. Blackwood's indifference to the kitchen and garden not only sets her apart from her daughters but violates the creative tradition of the Blackwood women, whose accumulated preserves Merricat calls "a poem" (p. 54).

Functioning as the family preservers, the Blackwood women, cleaners and dusters of Blackwood property, lavished attention on a different kind of preserves, burying the fruits of their creative labor beneath the accumulated wealth of their dowries and other Blackwood acquisitions. What property they brought to the Blackwood house became Blackwood property, by law or tradition passed from father to son rather than from mother to daughter, as Merricat suggests by her comment on the Rochester house: "Our mother had been born there and by rights it should have belonged to Constance" (p. 4).

While her daughters appear to value objects as artifacts from the domestic history of the Blackwood women (a respect they do not afford masculine possessions), Mrs. Blackwood deviated from her female predecessors and from her daughters in valuing the objects over the foodstuffs, the teacups over the tea itself. This attitude aligns her with the Blackwood men, whose highest regard is reserved for money, a thing of no intrinsic value. Obsessed with the preservation of order in her drawing room, she had not allowed her daughters to enjoy its beauty (pp. 33-34), making it a monument to Blackwood physical wealth and spiritual dessication.

The Blackwood family exploited its women if they were docile and dismissed them if they were not. Mary Katherine, the middle child who was neither a useful daughter nor a male heir, had no appropriate function in the family and was frequently dismissed from its presence for her rebellion against its laws. On the day of the poisoning she had been sent to her room without supper, as Constance reports with a smile: "Merricat was always in disgrace. I used to go up the back stairs with a tray of dinner for her after my father had left the dining room. She was a wicked, disobedient child" (pp. 48-49). Constance's reminiscence suggests whom Merricat disobeyed, whose will she opposed. Six years after the fall of the Blackwood patriarch, she is still being dismissed by the surviving male member of her family, Uncle Julian, who insists that she is dead.

Merricat's raging rebellion, culminating in her overthrow of the Blackwood patriarchy, established Constance as the head of the Blackwood family and the sisters' mutual affection as its binding force. At first glance, theirs may appear to be a relationship between opposites—Constance, the domestic, traditional, even unimaginative one, and Merricat, the unrestrained, creative, imaginative one.⁴ Yet Merricat's self-imposed rules and her insistence on routine reveal an obsession with order, just as Constance's skill at growing and preparing food reveals her creativity. Although Merricat's rules do not allow her to prepare food, she helps Constance in the kitchen and garden. Merricat's knowledge of poisonous plants, upon which she bases much of her claim to magical power, comes from Constance.

This shared knowledge, passed from sister to sister, is only one manifestation of a deeper bond between the two women, a bond that has ultimately united them against the Blackwood patriarchal power structure. Constance herself had been a victim of that structure; as elder daughter, she was the unpaid, unrecognized family servant. The smile with which she reports her sister's disobedience suggests her sympathy. In revealing deadly secrets to Merricat, Constance empowered her sister to use them and therefore shares responsibility for the deaths that followed. Yet her complicity was more direct, according to the account Uncle Julian gives Mrs. Wright: "It was Constance who saw them dying around her like flies—I do beg your pardon—and never called a doctor until it was too late. She washed the sugar bowl" (pp. 52-53). Constance herself purchased the arsenic—"to kill rats," she explains, with another smile for Merricat (p. 52). The general belief that Constance was the poisoner both

underscores Merricat's invisibility to a society that has no place for her and points to Constance's actual guilt. She not only protected her sister by destroying evidence; she aided her by waiting to call the doctor. Uncle Julian adds, "She told the police those people deserved to die" (p. 53), a comment suggesting that, whatever her ambivalence later, the docile, constant Constance shared her sister's rage and outrage.

Having vanquished one patriarchy, the women are confronted with another in the form of a village controlled by men, by other fathers. Although Constance has been acquitted of murder, the two women must remain vigilant against the encroachment of hostile villagers. Merricat explains, "The people of the village have always hated us" (p. 6), but the sisters are more vulnerable now that they no longer have the protection of the Blackwood men; the town's hostility has become overt, expressed, active. The original source of that hostility was the Blackwood economic and social self-sufficiency, a self-sufficiency underscored by the Blackwood sisters' survival. Villager Jim Donell complains of "the way they live up in their fine old private estate, with their fences and their private path and their stylish way of living" (p. 19). That this conflict can now be viewed in terms of sexual politics is suggested by Merricat's description of the village power structure: "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. 4). In such a society, the Blackwood wealth might be an affront, but Blackwood wealth in the hands of women is a travesty. Initially, the village women in general are silent, weary noncombatants in the struggle between the male villagers and the Blackwood sisters. When Merricat imagines the village children learning the rhyme with which they taunt her, she thinks not of their mothers but of their fathers, "Jim Donell and Dunham and dirty Harris leading regular drills of their children" (p. 22).

The parallel between a witchhunt and the attempt to purge the village of the Blackwood sisters is suggested first by Merricat's own experiments with magic. When she tells us in the third sentence of her narrative, "I have often thought that with any luck at all I could have been born a werewolf" (p. 1), she expresses a longing for power that is one of her chief characteristics. Her magic words and charms constitute attempts to gain power over a world in which, first as the second girl child in a patriarchal family and then as a grown woman in a patriarchal society, she is essentially powerless. Elizabeth Janeway has written, "The witch role permits the woman to imagine that she can exercise some sort of power, even if it is evil power."⁵ With any luck at all, Merricat could have been a "real" witch, but her magic is largely ineffectual. What power she has derives from the knowledge she has gained from Constance about plants and their properties. This knowledge links Constance with the countless women healers of the past who were persecuted and executed as witches.

The familiarity of those women with the curative properties of plants presupposes other deadlier knowledge. In her 1921 classic, *The Witch-Cult in Western Europe*,

Margaret Alice Murray asserts, "The society of witches had a very creditable knowledge of the art of poisoning."⁶ It is also interesting to note that at least one writer, William Dufty, has argued that the Church persecuted witches as healers for speaking out against sugar at a time when the Church had an economic interest in the prosperity of the new sugar industry—a further link to Constance, on whose habit of refusing sugar Merricat depends to save her life at the time of the poisoning.⁷

Jackson, whose works include *The Witchcraft of Salem Village* (1956), owned an extensive collection on witchcraft and demonology. She would certainly have known the major sources, including the now infamous *Malleus Maleficarum* (1486), or Hammer of Witches, used for over 200 years as a guide to the identification and punishment of witches.⁸ Its authors' fear of female power is particularly evident in their attention to the threat of actual or perceived castration. These anxieties about male sexual impotence suggest anxieties about male political impotence as well. The Church fathers were threatened by female indomitability and by the followers attracted by women who lived outside the regime of the Church and the familial social unit it controlled.

Thus, significantly, Merricat and Constance are seen as witches because they choose to live outside the boundaries of patriarchal society, because they choose to live with women rather than with men, and because they have challenged masculine power directly by the poisoning. The invalid Uncle Julian survives as a reminder to the patriarchal village of the two women's choice and of their ability to act on that choice. Their only other male companion, the black cat Jonas, completes the popular image of two witch sisters with their feline consort, the Devil in disguise.

If the primary source of the village's hostility is not simply Blackwood self-sufficiency but female self-sufficiency, then the most logical attack would be an undermining of the relationship between the two women. In fact, the beginning of the final assault on the Blackwood women is marked by a visit from Helen Clarke, who, as self-proclaimed friend of Constance, bears a revealing message to her, "It's spring, you're young, you're lovely, you have a right to be happy. Come back into the world" (p. 38). Several unspoken premises lie behind this piece of advice, not the least ludicrous of which is the assumption that the world, or in this case the village, could make Constance happy. Of course, Helen Clarke also assumes that Constance is not happy living with her sister, indeed could not be happy living with a woman when she is young and lovely enough to attract a man. Ultimately, she tempts Constance with the illusion of romantic happiness upon which the continuation of masculine dominance so heavily depends, and Constance is tempted because she forgets or discounts her own past experience. Her choice and Merricat's of celibacy or homosexuality (the latter an option made less explicit here than in other Jackson novels), their replacement of heterosexual romance with sisterhood as their central emotional bond, makes them less vulnerable to sexual coercion by men and keeps their fortunes out of men's hands. Constance's marriage would not only disrupt the relation-

ship between the sisters but would also bring them and their wealth back into the realm of masculine control and restore patrilineal inheritance. That a woman initiates the assault suggests the degree to which village women have come to collude with men in the perpetuation of women's oppression.

Helen Clarke's visit prepares the way for the arrival of Cousin Charles Blackwood, Merricat's archrival, who aspires to be the new Blackwood patriarch, a pretender both to family position and to the family fortune. Appropriately, as Constance tells Merricat, "he looks like Father" (p. 82); his face exposes him to Merricat as "one of the bad ones" (p. 79). Charles is the son of Arthur, the only Blackwood to be more acquisitive and less generous than Constance and Merricat's father. And he immediately begins to acquire things: Father's room, Father's place at the table, Father's gold watch chain, Father's clothes. If, as Merricat tells Constance, "Charles is a ghost" (p. 99), she recognizes immediately whose ghost he is. His presence causes a series of confrontations between the values of the Blackwood women and the values of the Blackwood men. He cannot understand, for example, Constance and Merricat's disregard for gold and money, the legacy of the Blackwood men; what Constance and Merricat value most is the legacy of the Blackwood women—Dresden figurines, dishes brought to the house by generations of Blackwood brides, preserves made lovingly by generations of Blackwood wives. Charles reintroduces the notions of punishment and competition into a house where they have not been invoked for years. He accords Uncle Julian no respect. Having dismissed Uncle Julian as inconsequential, he attempts to enlist the sympathies of the only other male member of the household, Jonas.

The village men, who have always hated Blackwoods before, form an alliance with Charles because he embodies their means of destroying the Blackwood women. Following him to the village one day, Merricat watches him sit down on the benches with the men who are her worst tormentors: "If I went into the village shopping again Charles would be one of the men who watched me going past" (p. 118). The men's acceptance of Charles is a recognition that his family name is not as important as his gender. Their friendship signals approval of his plan to restore Blackwood wealth to masculine control.

To Merricat's horror, Charles' campaign begins to succeed, and the relationship between the two sisters changes:

She [Constance] was increasingly cross with me when I wanted Charles to leave; always before Constance had listened and smiled and only been angry when Jonas and I had been wicked but now she frowned at me often, as though I somehow looked different to her (p. 114).

To masculine eyes, Merricat does look different—not imaginative, independent, and interesting, but eccentric, rebellious, and dangerous. Under Charles' influence, Constance experiences shifts in vision and begins to talk and act strangely:

"We should have been living like other people. You

should . . ." She stopped and waved her hands helplessly. "You should have boy friends," she said finally, and then began to laugh because she sounded funny even to herself (pp. 118-19).

Besieged by Charles, Constance takes on maternal guilt for depriving her sister of a "normal" life, while recognizing that her sister would find, indeed has found, a "normal" life intolerable. For her part, Merricat clearly perceives the source of the threat to their relationship and does not allow herself to be used against her sister, saying, "Constance needed guarding more than ever before and if I became angry and looked aside she might very well be lost" (p. 115).

Merricat's stubborn resistance to Charles leads to a cataclysmic confrontation between the forces of the male power structure and the forces of female self-sufficiency. The scene is richly symbolic. Still seething because of Charles' attempt to assert a fatherly authority over her, Merricat discovers a family heirloom, a saucer from her great-grandmother's dowry, being used as an ashtray in her father's bedroom, now Charles' room. She says, "I brushed the saucer and the pipe off the table into the wastebasket and they fell softly onto the newspapers he had brought into the house" (p. 145). Her act literally sparks a conflagration as two symbols of masculinity, the pipe and the newspaper, begin to burn.

That Merricat herself starts the fire complicates the symbolic reading of this scene as a witch burning. It is the only point in Jackson's novel when the reader is asked to believe that Merricat's perceptions are limited, inadequate. She does not seem to be aware of what she has done. From her perspective, she has disposed of Charles' pipe and newspapers, which in turn have started a fire; they are to blame, not she. The sentence following her description of her actions reads, "I was wondering about my eyes; one of my eyes—the left—saw everything golden and yellow and orange, and the other saw shades of blue and grey and green" (p. 145). Although the reader might suspect that Merricat is intelligent enough to know a fire when she sees one, she does not clarify the passage by identifying what she saw. When Charles and Constance later smell smoke and Constance remembers Charles' pipe, Merricat responds, "Would it start a fire?" (p. 147), suggesting that she is not aware of the situation, unless her true motive is to disrupt Charles' relationship with Constance by blaming him. Yet, although she might wish to destroy Charles' (and her father's) room, she could hardly wish to destroy the house that she and Constance love so dearly, again unless she believes the sacrifice necessary to repudiate the material heritage of the Blackwood men and to exorcise her father's ghost.

The fire brings the villagers and the fire fighters; Jim Donell, the village spokesman and Merricat's greatest enemy next to Charles, is their chief. The firemen put out the fire, despite one woman's exhortations to "let it burn" (p. 152). His duty done, however, Jim Donell carefully removes his fire hat and leads an assault on the house:

While everyone watched, he took up a rock. In complete silence he turned slowly and then raised his arm and smashed the rock through one of the great tall windows

of our mother's drawing room. A wall of laughter rose and grew behind him and then, first the boys on the steps and then the other men and at last the children, they moved like a wave at our house (pp. 153-54).

The mob stones the house as an extension of the two women who live in it and strongly identify with it. The scene recalls other stonings, including the ancient practice of stoning witches and the fictional stoning in Jackson's own fable about a sacrifice ritual, "The Lottery." The villagers attempt to destroy the women by destroying the house, focusing their energies on the drawing room and the kitchen, special domains of the Blackwood women; they leave Charles to struggle with the family safe, protector of the monetary legacy of the Blackwood men. Their rage is directed at those objects most precious to Constance and Merricat, the dishes and silverware contributed by Blackwood grandmothers, great-grandmothers, aunts, and great-aunts, and at the foodstuffs that Constance holds sacred. Adding insult to injury, they leave the house a mess when it has only just been tidied, a severe blow to Constance. They verbally abuse and physically threaten the two sisters, who are saved, ironically, by Uncle Julian's death. The crowd leaves not out of respect for the sisters but out of respect for Uncle Julian, whom they perceive to have been the sisters' last surviving victim. Defeated, Charles leaves as well.

The confrontation of the fire scene is necessary to prove to Constance what Merricat has always believed—that heterosexual romance is a dangerous illusion, that patriarchy is an inherently destructive institution, and that no compromise is possible. Just as Constance has always felt a responsibility to take care of Merricat, to be a kind of mother to her, so Merricat has always felt a responsibility to protect Constance from an outside world her sister has not clearly understood, a world of hatred and violence. To Merricat, the overthrow of the Blackwood patriarchy six years before had been an act not merely of vengeance but of self-preservation; banished from the family's presence one too many times, she was in very real danger of disappearing altogether. Now, with renewed conviction, Constance and Merricat turn their backs on the outside world, barricading themselves inside the ruined house. There are no more compromises: they do not answer the voices that call to them; they do not allow Helen Clarke in for tea. Dishes and silverware have been broken or bent in the onslaught, sugar has been spilt, but the preserves of the Blackwood women stand undisturbed in the cellar, emblems of the sisters' survival. Ironically, they also retain possession of the safe, a bitter reminder to Charles and the villagers that their survival constitutes a victory not only in their own terms but also in those of the village men.

When the offerings of food begin to arrive from the villagers, the accompanying notes express regret and shame for individual acts of destruction, but the scene evokes other scenes of ritualistic food offerings to ancient deities. Fear seems a more likely motive than genuine regret, especially as tales about the house and its two invisible occupants spread throughout the village. Women speak in hushed voices on the front lawn and frighten their children with stories of the sisters' penchant for eating

little girls and boys. The sisters' perceived power has grown since the fire: after all, they are two witches who have survived a burning and a stoning.

At the same time, 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. 204). 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. 203).

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 more than fear toward the rebellious Blackwood sisters.

Readers and critics have struggled to explain the effect that *We Have Always Lived in the Castle* has on them. The *Time* 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."⁹ Many readers express discomfort at being made to identify with a madwoman, but is Merricat mad? If paranoia depends upon delusion, Merricat is not paranoid because the hostility she perceives in the villagers is real. Like most of Jackson's protagonists, she seems young for her age, but immaturity is not madness.

Perhaps the aspect of Merricat's character that is most difficult to accept, however, is the violence. Early in the book, the violence of Merricat's fantasies is horrifying; while confronting hostile villagers in the grocery store, she says, "I would have liked to come into the grocery some morning and see them all, even the Elberts and the children, lying there crying with the pain and dying" (p. 12). The villagers' hostility, although misdirected if they believe the poisoner to be Constance and not Merricat, might at first seem a justifiable response to a daughter's particularly cruel murder of four members of her family. Readers' sympathy with Merricat remains uneasy, even though they may feel, as Stuart Woodruff has suggested, that "parricide on such a scale is certainly regrettable, but the real horror in Miss Jackson's novel originates elsewhere."¹⁰ Yet the villagers' own violence invalidates once and for all their moral judgment of the sisters and indicates that the poisoning is only one violent action in a world where violence threatens to erupt at any moment, a world familiar to readers of Jackson's fiction. Thus Merricat's belief that she is literally embattled is confirmed, and her rage against the villagers is justified. Within the context of feminist psychology, rage is the most appropriate response to oppression. In Jackson's time as now, it was also the most dangerous, the most likely to be labeled madness and treated by institutionalization.

Merricat's rage against her family and the murders that resulted from it are less justifiable on the basis of the scant information her narrative provides; apart from sketchy descriptions of the victims and their treatment of Merricat, the reader has only Constance's word that "those people deserved to die" (p. 53). Because the danger to Merricat in this case seems to be one of psychological or emotional violence rather than physical violence, many readers feel uncomfortable with her response. Ihab Hassan has written that the novel addresses "the human ambivalences of guilt and atonement, love and hate, health and psychosis."¹¹ By identifying Charles with Father and with the villagers, Jackson relates physical and psychological violence; both can destroy human beings.

Jackson died in 1965 before the current resurgence of feminism and its accompanying new body of feminist theory, including psychological theory. But she studied psychology in college and often wrote psychological studies of women in her fiction. The typical Jackson protagonist is a social misfit, a young woman not beautiful enough, charming enough, or articulate enough to get along with other people—like Merricat, a woman with no recognized place in society. In the early sixties, Jackson herself fell victim to attacks of severe anxiety and depression. Shortly after publication of *We Have Always Lived in the Castle*, the woman known to neighbors and friends as a tireless family chauffeur, an energetic cook and hostess, an active PTA mother, and a model faculty wife retreated into seclusion and underwent psychiatric treatment.¹² A letter from family friend Howard Nemerov during this period suggests that Jackson's illness was publicly attributed to the strain of success when *Castle* was nominated for a National Book Award. To her parents, Jackson wrote that her illness had been building for eight years.¹³

From the perspective of current feminist criticism, it is difficult to read biographer Lenemaja Friedman's account of Jackson's numerous domestic and literary achievements without wondering how she sustained her sanity as long as she did. Many of her literary predecessors have recorded the special difficulties faced by women who aspire to be great writers. Jackson's own journal from the period of her illness is revealing. She writes of insecurity and anxiety, but also often of her status as a professional writer. Not a journal keeper by nature, she kept it at her psychoanalyst's suggestion, even though she "always hated stream of consciousness" (Dec. 2). Yet she finds her journal therapeutic and hopes that it will help her with her fiction, once commenting, "writing is the way out writing is the way out writing is the way out" (Dec. 3), and "there is a calm which begins to come" (Dec. 3). She claims that she writes surreptitiously, fearful of censure from her husband, the distinguished literary critic Stanley Edgar Hyman: "there is literally no telling him what i am doing. i think he would regard me as a criminal waster of time, and self-indulgent besides" (Dec. 3). A few sentences later, she observes more succinctly, "i feel i am cheating stanley because i should be writing stories for money" (Dec. 3). Still further on, she comments, "this is the most satisfying writing i have ever done" (Dec. 3). The picture of

Jackson that emerges from these lines is one of a dedicated writer who is concerned because the writing she now enjoys most is not sufficiently remunerative to fulfill her husband's expectations and to remove the stigma of "criminality" from her act of "self-indulgence." Whether or not this concern represented a fair assessment of Hyman's views, the anxiety was real to Jackson.

Like her female protagonists before Constance and Merricat, Jackson expresses a strong sense of inferiority, asking, "why am i less, why am i inferior, why am i put down?" (Dec. 18). Although the terminology suggests that some person or persons are acting against her, she often represents her "problem" or "obsession" as "imaginary" (Dec. 2): "it isn't real. it is a huge cloud of looming nothingness triggered off by small events" (Feb. 7). Earlier she writes, "the troubles i dwell on are closer to fiction than to real life" (Dec. 2), but later in the same entry she reflects on the vital connection between her life and her fiction:

insecure, uncontrolled, i wrote of neuroses and fear and i think all my books laid end to end would be one long documentation of anxiety. if i am cured and well and oh glorious alive then my books should be different. who wants to write about anxiety from a place of safety? although [sic] i suppose i would never be entirely safe since i cannot completely reconstruct my mind (Dec. 2).

Jackson is implying either that she projects her own unrealistic fears in her fiction as if they were real, or that all of her female protagonists are neurotics whose problems can be cured by reconstructing their own minds. The latter contradicts her own fictional accounts of female victimization, often by men—from the psychological oppression of domineering fathers (portrayed in *Hangsamen* [1951] and *The Sundial* [1958]) to the sexual abuse by a mother's boyfriend that helps to precipitate Elizabeth's multiple personalities in *The Bird's Nest* (1954). And surely none of these portrayals of female oppression is unrealistic, whatever fantastic or fabulistic qualities the narrative itself may demonstrate. The attack on the Blackwood house is the most dramatic example of male violence against women in the Jackson canon since the stoning of Jessie Hutchinson in "The Lottery" (1948).¹⁴ In the earlier story, the victim is female presumably by chance; the implications of *We Have Always Lived in the Castle* are darker, surely more unsettling personally for a woman writer sensitive to oppression, one known to call herself "the only practicing witch in New England."¹⁵

The journal reiterates a longing for safety and security in the context of personal liberation, and it emphasizes Jackson's desire to be alone: "i look forward every now and then to freedom and security (and i do mean security by myself)" (Dec. 2). She describes "the glorious world of the future" when she will be "alone. safe" (Dec. 3), and her aspirations:

to be separate, to be alone, to *stand* and *walk* alone, not to be different and weak and helpless and degraded (now that word again; if there has been a refrain that word is part of it) and shut out. not shut out, shutting out (Dec. 3).

The correction in the last line again suggests a conflict between her own perception that she is being victimized and the belief, perhaps supported by her psychological studies and her psychoanalyst, that her fears are unfounded.¹⁶ Contemporary feminists might well question whether a male psychoanalyst in the early 1960's could have understood the kind of psychological danger Jackson perceived (not only to herself, but to all her female characters) in masculine control over women's lives.

The solution Jackson proposes in *We Have Always Lived in the Castle* is a self-contained community of women, however small—one that shuts out the violence of the surrounding patriarchal society but accepts the support of its women. Jackson must have known that such a fantasy was more permissible in fiction than in reality.

Jackson's mental health improved in the final years of her life. At the time of her fatal heart attack in 1965, she was working on a new book. From the surviving fragment, it appears to be the "happy book" she looked forward to in her journal, but it was not about "husbands and wives" as she had speculated (Dec. 2). In it, a middle-aged woman buries her husband, picks a city at random, and sets off alone to make a new life for herself, with a new name of her own invention.

NOTES

1. Shirley Jackson, *We Have Always Lived in the Castle* (New York: Viking, 1962), p. 28. All further references are to this edition of the text.

2. See Kate Millett, *Sexual Politics* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday,

1970); Andrea Dworkin, *Woman Hating* (New York: E. P. Dutton, 1974); and Mary Daly, *Gyn/Ecology: The Metaethics of Radical Feminism* (Boston: Beacon, 1978).

3. All journal quotations are from undated journal pages (in the Library of Congress) headed only by the month and day, by which I will subsequently refer to them. This one is headed "Dec. 2." From internal evidence, I would date the journal from 1963.

4. I am indebted to a student, James Bradbury, for his discussion in a paper of the differences between the two sisters.

5. Elizabeth Janeway, *Man's World, Woman's Place: A Study in Social Mythology* (New York: William Morrow, 1971), p. 129.

6. Margaret Alice Murray, *The Witch-Cult of Western Europe* (1921; rpt. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1971), p. 279.

7. William Dufty, *Sugar Blues* (New York: Warner Books, 1975), p. 31.

8. Henricus Institoris, *Malleus Maleficarum*, trans. and ed. Montague Summers (London: Pushkin, 1948).

9. *Time*, September 21, 1962, p. 94.

10. S. C. Woodruff, "The Real Horror Elsewhere," *Southwest Review*, 52 (Spring 1967), 152.

11. Ihab Hassan, *New York Herald Tribune Book Review*, September 23, 1962, p. 5.

12. See Lenemaja Friedman's account in *Shirley Jackson* (Boston: Twayne, 1975), pp. 26-43.

13. All manuscripts referred to here are in the Jackson and Hyman collections, Library of Congress. The letter from Nemerov is in the Hyman collection (uncatalogued), dated January 23, 1963; Jackson's letter to her parents (in the Jackson collection) is only dated 1963 (I would place it around April).

14. Although women participate in the stoning, the authority who presides over the lottery is Mr. Summers.

15. Friedman, p. 33.

16. My colleague Ellen Peel has suggested that these lines may instead record a desire for solitude and the power to enforce it, to shut others out. She read this essay in draft and made a number of helpful suggestions, as did Heather Arden.