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**Machine Made of Wood and Women: House as System and Symbol
in Shirley Jackson's *We Have Always Lived in the Castle***

Senior Paper

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In her 1988 biography *Shirley Jackson*, Judy Oppenheimer characterizes Stanley Edgar Hyman, Shirley Jackson's husband, using a quote from his brother: "Stanley lived in his own world. The house is the woman's responsibility. If the furnace went out, he'd do something. But no kids, no house, no dogs, no cats – that was someone else's responsibility" (178). Certainly the theme of a male headed household kept running smoothly by a woman or women, often to the women's detriment, is not foreign to Jackson's work. In *We Have Always Lived in the Castle*, a pair of sisters take care of their family mansion, following a rigorous schedule of cleaning, cooking, and for Mary Katherine Blackwood, the narrator and younger of the two, running errands. The sisters live with their crippled Uncle Julian, the last surviving members of the Blackwood family after an arsenic poisoning incident six years prior. Together, the three live a life of troubled tranquility, of scheduled serenity, marked by a tension between themselves and the people of the dirty, lower class village nearby. Their lives are marked not only by the aforementioned murders of the rest of their family, the circumstances of which generate unending hostility and gossip among the village people, but also by their social status, as the inheritors of an upper class wealth and name, and by the faithful format the sisters follow in keeping the house clean, entertaining sympathetic upper class guests, and preparing food like clockwork every day. While the murders were committed by Mary Katherine at the age of twelve, perhaps to purge her life of the oppressive control of her father and the cold rigidity of her mother, six years later, when the novel begins, at age eighteen, Mary Katherine still finds herself perpetuating a schedule already in practice at the time of her father's death.

In her article "The Establishment and Preservation of Female Power in Shirley Jackson's *We Have Always Lived in the Castle*," Lynette Carpenter argues that the Blackwood mansion and by extension, houses in general, are fully "female" spaces, environments in which females can

exert power and influence, suggesting that while female power is derived from physical objects such as a kitchen or food, male, and thus patriarchal, power is derived from abstract ideas or objects possessing abstract meaning or value, such as money, titles, and the system of patriarchy itself. While Carpenter's argument is cogent and relevant, it is possible instead to read the Blackwood mansion not as a fully female space but as a male vehicle, built from privilege and haunted with generations of traditional heteropatriarchal upkeep, serving the oppression of women, and acting as a symbol of the Blackwood women as controlled by the heads of household, the Blackwood men. For when Mary Katherine "Merricat" Blackwood's cousin Charles arrives, Mary Katherine is horrified to discover that far from having destroyed the control that men forced on her life, she had merely rendered it dormant, as evidenced by the ease with which Charles, a nasty, greedy character, situates himself in the lives of the Blackwood trio, acting more and more as a surrogate father and head of household. It is Mary Katherine's decision then, in setting fire to and destroying the Blackwood mansion, whether accidentally or intentionally, in driving Charles away, but more broadly in restructuring the schedule of her life and of her sister Constance's, to destroy the system of oppression which she failed to fully vanquish six years ago, this being represented by the Blackwood mansion.

A notable difference from the houses which might generally fit Carpenter's argument, the Blackwood mansion, endowed with upper class inhabitants and history, likely plays into a more persistently patriarchal design, one flipped when Mary Katherine divests the house of its patriarch and its proxy patriarchs. Nevertheless, despite the lack of a male head of household, the overt classism of the remaining Blackwoods perpetuates a space haunted by schedules and tradition, thus keeping the patriarchal vehicle well oiled, if inactive. In *We Have Always Lived in*

the Castle, it is the sleeping specter of patriarchy that informs the Blackwood mansion as well as the problematic and tense daily lives of its inhabitants.

Almost immediately in the introductory chapter, Mary Katherine speaks about her family, specifically her father's family, and her family home:

[...] the Blackwoods were never much of a family for restlessness and stirring.
[...] We always put things back where they belonged. [...] Blackwoods had always lived in our house, and kept their things in order; as soon as a new Blackwood wife moved in, a place was found for her belongings, and so our house was built up with layers of Blackwood property weighting it, and keeping it steady against the world (Jackson, 2).

The Blackwood mansion couldn't get much more patriarchal. Mary Katherine describes the house as a place where Blackwoods "had always lived," built from layers and layers of property, thus combining in one family a long history of patriarchs with the accumulation of wealth, specifically the wealth gained from marriages and absorbing of the wife's property, as well as the wife herself. It is notable that from Mary Katherine's description the house's very composition seems to be of accumulated property, which could be read as accumulated women, and that it is the property or the class it represents that maintains the steadiness, or fixed internal structure of feminine domesticity, of the dwelling. Additionally, the property is said to keep the house and thus the Blackwood family "steady against the world." The "against" implies class boundaries even more heavily and a reserved hostility, fear, or suspicion that exists in the Blackwood family against those they consider lower than themselves.

Classism appears to be an explicit part of the Blackwood inheritance, from a family very conscious of place, of the places where things and people belong. This is elaborated on later in

the chapter when, internally defending her family against the putrescence of the village, Mary Katherine explains, “The blight on the village never came from the Blackwoods; the villagers belonged here and the village was the only proper place for them” (Jackson, 9). As if Mary Katherine’s opinion was not enough, she also quotes her father later on in the chapter, “[...]the villagers had not openly disliked us then although our father said they were trash” (Jackson, 15). Even Constance, the most benevolent character in the book, while in general pitying the people of the village, also reserves her most biting criticism for others ostensibly of her own class.

Helen Clarke, a nosy upper-class busy-body who takes it upon herself to pay tea-time visits to the sisters every Tuesday, arrives in chapter two with an uninvited guest (“She knows better than this,” Mary Katherine said when seeing the timid woman Clarke had brought along (34).). Clarke spends the entire time discussing how well she knew the sisters’ dead father, how Constance is young and should “come back into the world,” and how absolutely nobody thinks of that awful tragedy anymore. After she leaves abruptly when her friend embarrasses them both, Constance, finally comfortable again, says “That *impossible* woman. [...] Ill bred, pretentious, stupid. Why she keeps coming I’ll never know” (55). Constance’s major criticism of Helen Clarke is that she is “ill-bred” and thus doesn’t act her own class, or perhaps that Constance views Helen Clarke as being of a lesser class because of her lack of refinement. For the Blackwood sisters, unsophistication appears to be identical to a lack of class, even more so than pretentiousness, which they themselves bear an amount of. Earlier, before Helen Clarke arrives, Constance describes the forthcoming visit by saying, “I’m getting better all the time, I think. And today I’m going to make little rum cakes” (30). Mary Katherine replies, “And Helen Clarke will scream and gobble them” (30). The way the sisters characterize Helen Clarke both as childish and unsophisticated betrays not only their own classism but what befits those of a lower class.

Certainly the rigor with which the sisters regularly clean and order their household suggests the polar opposite to the filth and lack of refinement that designates the village people and all others who, according to the sisters, belong there. Mary Katherine describes their cleaning habits regarding the tea-time Tuesdays:

“Constance and I only used the room when Helen Clarke came to tea, but we kept it perfectly. Constance stood on a stepladder to wash the tops of the windows, and we dusted the Dresden figurines on the mantel, and with a cloth on the end of a broom I went around the wedding-cake trim at the tops of the walls, brushing away at cupids and ribbon knots. [...] We polished the floors and mended tiny tears in the rose brocade on the sofas and chairs. [...] “I cannot bear to see my lovely room untidy,” our mother used to say, and so Constance and I had never been allowed in here, but now we kept it shining and silky” (33-34).

The depth of cleaning Mary Katherine describes goes beyond routine and into ritual, one that suggests Helen Clarke’s patronage acts not only as an almost neurotic way of proving the sisters’ class status to Helen Clarke but also to themselves. It is also suggestive that the sisters’ mother would not allow her children to enter her drawing room, again creating a parallel to the description the sisters used for Helen Clarke, portraying her as childish, lower class, or not refined or mature enough to accept the mantle that upper class dictates. Additionally, the fact that the sisters choose to repeatedly enter their mother’s drawing room and to keep it clean suggests that in accepting the inheritance of class, the sisters also accept the cleanliness associated with it, and the domestic burden required for its upkeep. In so doing, the sisters perpetuate a feminine domesticity dictated by the patriarchal structure of their parents, as well as one dictated by the

class they come from, yet one that, when abided by, also confers the benefits of that class, and thus an integral part of the sisters' identities, upon them.

Compare the sterile cleanliness of the Blackwood household to Mary Katherine's description of the Rochester house in the village "with the piles of rusted tin and the broken automobiles and the empty gas tins and the old mattresses and plumbing fixtures and wash tubs that the Harler family brought home and – I genuinely believe – loved" (4). Later, Mary Katherine repeats her description, this time equating the Harlers to the garbage on their front lawn. "[...] Perhaps the Harlers lived inside the way they did outside, sitting in old bathtubs and eating their dinner off broken plates set on the skeleton of an old Ford car, rattling cans as they ate, and talking in bellows. A spray of dirt always lay across the sidewalk where the Harlers lived" (7-8). Mary Katherine here connects broken dishware with filth while in the following chapter, she hurls a milk pot to the floor by herself in her home kitchen, knowing that when Constance would see it she would understand that Mary Katherine was waging a sign of protest to Helen Clarke's suggestions for Constance to "come back into the world." In the clean, upper-class Blackwood mansion, a broken vessel is out of place, jarring, a signal of something wrong. As Mary Katherine describes the Harlers, a broken vessel is part and parcel to the filth that defines their entire existence.

This combined consciousness with place coalesces into an attitude in Mary Katherine both classist and rebellious. While it is true that her opinions towards the people of the village follow the same path as her parents', admittedly in the face of constant bullying and provocation, it is more than possible that Mary Katherine is also conscious of her own place, not just as part of the upper-class, but as a woman also, designated to certain roles and realms of her rigid society. Yet, as a Blackwood, it was a familial trait to "put things back where they belonged." While

Mary Katherine was speaking of silverware, the phrase holds a threatening connotation given that she felt no compunction punishing her family, in her mind, for neglect, putting them in their place.

Mary Katherine's concern with the place for women is not conjecture. Her relating of the history of the Blackwood family, that of the accumulation of new wives, much like furniture to build up the "weighted" family mansion, betrays an awareness of her specific place in the Blackwood family, not as a wife, but as a daughter. It is important to note that along with "a place" being found for the "belongings" of each new Blackwood wife, it is implied that a place was also found for each new Blackwood wife and that once sworn in, they were never to deviate from the social order they were inducted into.

This informs the paradox of Mary Katherine's character. At once, she is fully within the lineage of her family, proud, classist, used to freedom. Yet she is also a distinct departure from its traditions, rebelling as a woman against her supposed and assumed place, and as a person, whose interests lie in the occult and in her world of imagination and fantasy, filled with "bright fruits and berries and water in a leaf cup," a world she creates and alters at her whim (Jackson, 160). Mary Katherine then offers a unified conflict between the social order she inhabits and enjoys the benefits of and the vigorous resistance she creates to the limitations said social order places on her, or attempts to place on her. As such, Mary Katherine Blackwood finds herself continually haunted by the tradition of her family cemented in her character, built up as the belongings of the Blackwood wives had; at the same time she struggles to extricate herself from the strictures it imposes on her freedom, her struggles manifesting in her eloquent and brutal depictions of murder, madness, and magic.

As daughters, both sisters, even while representative of their family's classism, are and were particularly vulnerable to the patriarchal machine of their household. Constance, as Lynette Carpenter describes her, "was the unpaid, unrecognized family servant" (Carpenter, 33). Julian notes, while histrionically giving a tour to Helen Clarke's friend around the fated dining room table, that "You will see at once how dinner revolves around my niece. [...] We relied upon Constance for various small delicacies which only she could provide" (Jackson, 49). Julian's rather flattering appraisal of Constance's domestic handiwork suggests instead a much darker understanding of her role in the house given his comment a moment later that, given the choice between Constance's mother's cooking and the arsenic which paralyzed him, "I personally preferred to chance the arsenic" (50). The Blackwood wife who, by tradition, should have been the domestic servant of the dinner table, in Carpenter's words, broke from tradition in that "she was a bad cook" (33). The shift in feminine responsibility then or deviation from tradition allowed Constance's mother to allocate not only the cooking, but the gardening and much of the housework to her. Constance then cleaned, fed, and placated the rest of her family, complying with a sister that took grievous advantage of her position as eldest and unmarried daughter.

Mary Katherine too was not immune to the effects of being a daughter in a patriarchal household, though her role, assigned or not, differed considerably from Constance's. The middle child and second daughter, Mary Katherine was neither her older sister Constance, the benevolent and self-sacrificing sibling who slaved away for her family, nor her younger brother Thomas, the male child, the youngest, and the heir to the Blackwood family tradition, who by the time of his death at ten years old, "possessed many of his father's more forceful traits of character" (Jackson, 48). With a legitimate heir and a domestic servant already in place, Mary Katherine had little to no place at all in a hostile household in which she rebelled constantly and

which sought to control her. Constance, speaking to Helen Clarke, relates affectionately that “Merricat was always in disgrace. [...] She was a wicked, disobedient child” (48-49). With her typical obliviousness to irony, or apparently to Mary Katherine sitting in the same room, Helen Clarke responds briskly about “An unhealthy environment. [...] A child should be punished for wrongdoing, but she should be made to feel that she is still loved. *I would never have tolerated the child’s wildness*” (49). Given Julian’s descriptions of the autocratic John Blackwood, Mary Katherine’s father, and the frigid Lucy Blackwood, her mother, it is difficult to imagine the couple as capable of reminding their daughter they loved her, especially given her implicit relegation to a void space as unnecessary. As Carpenter writes, “Mary Katherine [...] had no appropriate function in the family and was frequently dismissed from its presence for her rebellion against its laws” (33). Helen Clarke nevertheless unknowingly pinpoints the problem; while her point of view communicates her privileged position of critiquing a family that barely tolerates her, she also suggests the cause of Mary Katherine’s behavior is “an unhealthy environment.” While Helen Clarke doubtless meant “bad parents,” itself an ironic connotation given how fawningly Clarke uses her former relationship with the Blackwood couple, particularly John Blackwood, to legitimize her intrusions into the household, her statement still stands as accurate, describing not merely “bad parents” but a “bad system,” one the parents reflected unabashedly.

The “unhealthy environment,” that is, the house and its patriarchal leanings, also plays to Charles’ strengths, or rather, his only strengths. Son of Arthur Blackwood, the brother of John and Julian Blackwood, and the only brother of the three to surpass John Blackwood in terms of avarice or parsimony, Charles Blackwood apparently inherited his father’s greed and calculated ruthlessness. Throughout his time spent in the Blackwood mansion, Charles portrays two

attributes most strongly, a genteel perniciousness and an obsession with money, that often rooted in reinstating patriarchal control, ergo his own control, over the Blackwood household, and by extension, its fortune. The house and its occupants' patriarchal aptitudes are more than ready to facilitate and advantage Charles' skills in gaining access to the house and its benefits. Beginning with his introduction via the kitchen door into the household, Charles maintains a polite and well-mannered façade, one that wins over Constance and Julian, with Julian going so far as to call him "a chivalrous young man" (93). Returning to the earlier example of Helen Clarke's demotion among the family for lacking refinement, Charles' eminent politeness wins him immediate acceptance, not only as a family member and member of the same class, but also into the extremely tight-knit group of the remaining Blackwood trio. It is notable however that the first signs of Charles' show of politeness being false occur when he is alone with Mary Katherine, the only household member he has not succeeded and does not succeed in winning over. Her own impoliteness an affront to Charles' calculated, upper-class, winning ways, in a very clear parallel to Mary Katherine's own rebellion against the sordid patriarchal power-hunger Charles represents, Charles, speaking to Mary Katherine's black cat Jonas with Mary Katherine sitting nearby, says "I wonder if Cousin Mary knows how I get even with people who don't like me?" (101). Indeed, Charles' threats grow more ominous and perhaps more ironic as he gains steadier footing in controlling the household, specifically regarding his influence over Constance, convincing her to slip further and further back into the patriarchal domestic servitude, and the conventional assumptions imposed on the female that requires (marriage, complicity, normativity, acquiescence to Charles' decisions, etc), that marked her daily life six years prior. Shortly after Mary Katherine nails her father's solid gold watch chain to a tree in an attempt to magically induce Charles' departure, and after Charles discovers Mary Katherine as the culprit

and thus as a potential threat to his intended dominance, he, alone again with Mary Katherine, asks Jonas, “Where would poor Cousin Mary go if her sister turned her out? [...] What would poor Cousin Mary do if Constance and Charles didn’t love her?” (113). In so threatening, Charles situates himself as a person necessary to love, and thus serve or cede control to, if Mary Katherine is to survive in a household he is rapidly gaining control of, dictating the terms of Mary Katherine’s minimized and trivialized role in the Charles Blackwood household, firmly foregrounding a reinstated patriarchal design that not only divests Mary Katherine of her hard-won power but also demands her compliance lest she lose her entire context of identity, her house, and by extension, her history and her sister Constance.

Yet Charles’ overbearing dominance would not have taken root so eagerly without the Blackwood mansion having first been such a perfect environment for patriarchy to reassert its threatening figurehead. It is noted over and over again that Charles bears a strong resemblance to John Blackwood, the dead patriarch of the Blackwood mansion, and he shows no hesitation in assuming the role, even the person, of John Blackwood, taking ownership of his pocket watch, gold watch chain, and signet ring. The morning after Charles arrives at the house, Constance tells Mary Katherine, explaining that Charles’ presence in the house is not actually a dream Mary Katherine had, Charles “is sleeping in Father’s bed” (88). Shortly after, when Julian is formally introduced to Charles, he immediately says, “Charles. You are Arthur’s son, but you resemble my brother John, who is dead” (91). In little to no time, Charles makes himself at home, going through John Blackwood’s belongings, locating John Blackwood’s jewelry, and sleeping in John Blackwood’s bed. The third intrusion, sleeping in her father’s bed, draws a curious comment from Mary Katherine: “Charles had made his bed, I noticed; his mother must have taught him” (110). Mary Katherine’s understanding of Charles as a person and of the role men play in the

households both of them came from in turn reinforces her perception of him as a patriarch, or a nascent patriarch, that he came from a household where women remained dominant in the domestic sphere, and that he was, as she surmised from first seeing him, “one of the bad ones” (79). This comment of Mary Katherine’s suggests both her perception and her bias, that the way she views men, at least those in her family, are people that require the assistance of women to exist in a system that pampers their dominance; and that Mary Katherine, biased as she may be, is immediately and even presciently aware of a patriarchal threat, one that would endanger not only her way of life but also her very existence. Finally, after seeing Charles for the first time and hearing the continual comparisons of him to John Blackwood, Mary Katherine repeatedly calls Charles “a ghost,” very possibly also engaging her perception that Charles is not only not what he styles himself to be, a classy and concerned family member, but that she sees him as being a proxy or double, a ghost of her father, in looks and patriarchal interests. Her continually repeating “Charles is a ghost” also underlies her disbelief in Charles’ existence as a potential threat to her lifestyle, despite her obvious warnings of the kind, suggesting a real horror at facing the same problem she thought she had solved when she murdered her father six years ago. It is not difficult to suggest then that the Blackwood mansion is haunted by the patriarchy, when a relative male stranger can step into the household and assume control, not only duplicating the dead John Blackwood as his supposed “ghost,” but that the house itself is never free of its patriarchal spirits so long as the system which supports them allows them to return and regain their dominance unchecked.

Charles is not the only male figure the Blackwood mansion helped in maintaining its patriarchal upkeep. Living under his brother’s roof, Julian Blackwood confesses he is “the only brother with no knack for money” (91). From his rambling throughout the book it becomes more

apparent that while John Blackwood offered his home to his brother and his brother's wife out of respect for family, the real tension between the two couples returned to money, and in a family in which men so highly prized it as the guiding factor of their importance and esteem, there is no question that Julian was belittled for his lack of business sense. Carpenter discusses in depth Julian's relationship to the family, and continued relationship to the sisters, in both roles lacking the capacity for exerting patriarchal power. In the first instance, prior to the murders, Julian was subordinate to his brother who made him feel his inadequacy most every day. "My brother sometimes remarked upon what we ate, my wife and I;" Julian said, "he was a just man, and never stinted his food, so long as we did not take too much" (69). John Blackwood's charitable intentions, after all, had their limits. Carpenter echoes this:

"In a society that values masculine authority and the accumulation of private wealth and defines the 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" (Carpenter, 33).

Julian lacks the society-endorsed supports for his acquiring or maintaining any sort of patriarchal power, and his post-murder status only confirms this, his role as a somewhat "feeble-minded," wheel-chair bound invalid only further consolidating his status as harmless. Nevertheless, Julian, in his attitudes and opinions on the women of the Blackwood family, particularly of his wife, still shows clearly the dormant patriarchal notions still at work in the house and a generous reminder

of what Merricat attempted to dispense with. Describing his wife doing some simple house chores, like washing dishes, the morning of the poisoning, Julian said “our wives always did as they were told” (68). A moment later he remarks “my wife—although I did not encourage her to eat heavily, since we were living with my brother—took largely of sausage. [...] I think if I had known it was her last breakfast I would have permitted her more sausage” (68). From these statements, a picture consistent with Mary Katherine’s own depiction of the Blackwood wives under the control of the Blackwood men emerges, where the upper class husbands could decide what chores their wives would perform and even how much food they would be allowed to eat. Julian’s appraisal of his wife is in no way obscure. When he, with the typical finesse of a decrepit misanthrope, describes a passage from “his life’s work,” that being an exhaustive retelling of the tragedy that removed over half the Blackwood family, he says, “I really think I shall commence chapter forty-four. [...] I shall commence, I think, with a slight exaggeration and go on from there into an outright lie. [...] I am going to say that my wife was beautiful” (90). When Julian describes Charles as “chivalrous,” the reader can assume it is high praise indeed.

In addition to his degrading commentary about his wife, Julian offers another interesting parallel when describing John Blackwood. Julian claims that John Blackwood was “a man very fond of his person. [...] Given to adorning himself, and not overly clean” (113). In a house as ritualistically spotless as the Blackwood mansion was, it is significant that the head of that household was essentially described as being dirty or unkempt. The comparisons continue when Charles, the accepted double of John Blackwood, “shook his finger at Uncle Julian; he had been holding his chicken in his hands to eat it, and his finger sparkled with grease” (103). Additionally, since Julian himself is crippled, he can barely feed himself, naturally making a mess of himself at every meal. The fact that three of the prominent Blackwood men are

described as being dirty suggests a direct parallel to the filthiness of the village. While the worlds of the village and the Blackwood mansion are separated by class and wealth, they both share a pervasive patriarchy that appears to breed dirtiness wherever its men exist. This is corroborated early in the book when Mary Katherine, on her last trip to run errands in the village, is antagonized by a local carpenter.

”Constance had sent me out to tell him that we wouldn’t pay carpenter’s prices for a raw board nailed crookedly across the step when what he was supposed to do was built it trim and new. When I went out and told him we wouldn’t pay he grinned at me and spat, and picked up his hammer and pried the board loose and threw it on the ground. ‘Do it yourself,’ he said to me, and got into his truck and drove away. ‘Never did get paid for it,’ he said now” (20).

Rather than producing or creating new things, the people of the village seem incapable of anything but filthiness, and returning to the sisters’ class distinction, unsophistication, destroying things in their wake, culminating most significantly at the climax of the book when the villagers storm the burned Blackwood mansion after having watched gleefully as the upper level and roof burned away. “A wall of laughter rose and grew behind [Jim Donnel] and then, first the boys on the steps and then the other men and at last the women and the smaller children, they moved like a wave at our house” (154). The village, as a patriarchal system, works throughout the book to demean the Blackwood sisters and, in this collaboratively destructive effort, wrench their home and protection from them, rendering them vulnerable to the village. The village people are stopped from terrorizing the sisters only by the announcement of the death of Uncle Julian, which turns the villagers away, one by one, out of respect for the dead patriarch and out of respect, and perhaps fear, of death itself. Given that the men of the village and the men of the

upper class had at least the patriarchal system and dirtiness connecting them, the Blackwood women are continually alienated in their attempts to preserve their privacy and their security outside of a domineering system seeking to wrest their wealth, freedom, service, and agency from them. The cleanliness, to the point of obsession or ritual, defines the Blackwood women, both as a measure of their domestic service and in their distinction from the Blackwood men. For Mary Katherine and Constance, cleanliness defines their class and their identities, an inheritance from their mother whose drawing room was spotless and is the best evocation of her cold and divisive person.

In her article “House Mothers and Haunted Daughters: Shirley Jackson and the Female Gothic,” Roberta Rubenstein examines a similar premise that Carpenter does, that the house is a female space. Rubenstein uses a psychoanalytic lens compared to Carpenter’s feminist analysis, stating “In female gothic narratives, houses and mansions function figuratively as maternal spaces: ‘the maternal blackness to which every Gothic heroine is fatefully drawn [which encompasses] the mysteries of identity and the temptation to lose it by merging with a mother image who threatens all boundaries between self and other’” (Rubenstein, 320). In this case, at least within the scope of the Female Gothic, Rubenstein suggests that houses are not only female spaces, but maternal spaces, places where children form connections to their mothers and to “home,” colluding the two. Rubenstein also suggests that reading works of the Female Gothic through the binaries of “mother/self” and “home/lost,” one can more efficiently appreciate the familial relationships Jackson employs and explores in *We Have Always Lived in the Castle*. Again, it is possible to posit that rather than reading the Blackwood mansion and houses in general as female spaces or even maternal spaces, these structures, suffused with patriarchal traditions and history are instead readable as male spaces or even paternal spaces. Additionally,

regarding Rubenstein's conclusion that the home, connected to the mother, for Mary Katherine, is a nurturing space and that to separate from it, from the home, is to gamble on becoming lost, and thus to separate from the mother is to find and lose one's identity, it seems more than likely that Mary Katherine's concern in murdering her mother was with full awareness of her mother's complicity not only in the patriarchal schema (even without fully understanding how) had harmed Mary Katherine but that her mother, like her father, was intensely neglectful. The Blackwood mansion then formed for Mary Katherine an "unsafe" space, one that, until the murders, consistently sought to mold her identity rather than nurture it. When considering the house after its destruction in the second half of the novel, the sisters remain at their home, isolated, yet also at home in isolation, defying the simplistic binaries that do little to complicate the rich subtext Jackson creates with regards to the Blackwood family. The Blackwood mansion itself remains a stolidly and stagnantly patriarchal structure until the combination effort of Mary Katherine's pointed destruction of it and the ironic complicity of the villagers.

Mary Katherine's major concern by the middle of the book is erasing Charles from her house entirely. Her attempts begin with cleaning, admitting, "I dusted our father's chair thoroughly, although it was small use if Charles was to sit there again tonight. I would have to clean all the silverware" (100). Later, she places hope in the house itself, not yet aware that the house, or its system, is supporting Charles: "A spark from his pipe had left a tiny burn on the rose brocade of a chair in the drawing room; Constance not yet noticed it and I thought not to tell her because I hoped that the house, injured, would reject him by itself" (114). After a week has passed, Mary Katherine realizes Charles' control of the household is tightening and her measures grow more drastic and supernatural. Winding her father's pocket watch, which had been co-opted by Charles, until it breaks, Mary Katherine says, "When I was sure that he could never

start it ticking again I put it back gently where I had found it; one thing, at least, had been released from Charles' spell and I thought that I had at last broken through his tight skin of invulnerability" (126). Mary Katherine has resorted to destroying objects to reject Charles, a considerable change from her usual practice of investing objects with magical meaning or creating images for her world "on the moon;" at the same time, Mary Katherine's choice to destroy things once and for all when she knew of no other way to get rid of them eerily echoes her own destroying of her family. Her aim in her project, she claimed was that "if I altered our father's room, and perhaps later the kitchen and the drawing room and the study, and even finally the garden, Charles would be lost, shut off from what he recognized, and would have to concede that this was not the house he had come to visit and so would go away" (127). In a figurative sense, this is precisely what Mary Katherine succeeded in doing, by knocking Charles' lit pipe onto a pile of newspapers (as Carpenter notes, two very patriarchal items), and damaging her house beyond recognition and beyond its lauded prestige as a wealthy, upper class dwelling. By the time the sisters return to it the morning after it burns, Mary Katherine, looking up and finding the roof gone, says, "Our house was a castle, turreted and open to the sky" (177). The Blackwood mansion has finally become, by this point, a safe dwelling again, purged of Charles, Julian, and all other Blackwood men. In addition to the actual men finally gone from the house, Mary Katherine notes as the fire is consuming the upper floor, "Fire burns upward, I thought; it will burn their things in the attic" (148). In this, she realizes that the fire will also destroy the possessions of her father, mother, and all the rest of those she murdered, shearing the house free from yet more of the literal patriarchal baggage "weighting the house down" and keeping it "safe against the world." What is left, after the fire and the angry mob storm into the house, is the sisters' kitchen, their pantry, two rooms they will never use again (the drawing and dining

rooms), and the cellar which stores generations of the Blackwood women's foods and preserves, the true items the Blackwood women treasured, far more than the money their husbands hoarded.

As John G. Parks notes in his article "Chambers of Yearning: Shirley Jackson's Use of the Gothic," "the novel closes with the image of a ruin nearly completely covered with vines with two sisters huddled in fragile happiness within it. In old gothic literature, as Devandra P. Varma reminds us, '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'" (Parks, 27). Far from Constance and Mary Katherine clustered together, terrified, as "huddled" suggests, the end of the novel celebrates the establishment of something new and the ending of something old. As Mary Katherine mentions the morning after the fire, eating breakfast with Constance at their kitchen table, "Although I did not perceive it then, time and the orderly pattern of our old days had ended" (171). Time itself, or the ability to tell time, has been suspended and Mary Katherine welcomes a new world and a new order, one that reconnects femininity to nature, something explicit about Constance, the gardener, and Mary Katherine, the wanderer, all along. That the sisters grow closer to nature as they grow farther away from the city, where their upper-class "friends" reside, is no coincidence as the abolishing of the house and its order also abolishes the sisters' former identities. They no longer see the Clarkes or the Carringtons, the "sympathetic upper class guests" that safeguarded their privilege with their visits. Instead, the sisters have emerged on the other side of another tragedy with a new start. "I am thinking that we are on the moon, but it is not quite as I supposed it would be," Mary Katherine says, noting that the sisters have finally arrived to the place of Merricat's fantasy after all this time (195). "It is a very happy place, though," Constance replies (195). It is suggestive also that Mary Katherine's fantastic world takes place on the moon, a traditionally female symbol (even a female deity), and a place

so far removed from Earth and the conventional strictures the patriarchal societies that people it impose. And as Judy Oppenheimer, discussing Jackson's female protagonists, states, "Merricat in *We Have Always Lived in the Castle*—the boldest heroine Shirley ever created—erects her own new world. True, it is a fortress, with only one other beloved person in it, but it is an act of triumph nonetheless" (Oppenheimer, 165). The Blackwood mansion, now burnt out and disheveled and reclaimed by nature, has ceased to be the patriarchal vehicle it once was, serving generations of Blackwood men, and instead has transmuted from a structure seeking to oppress women into one that defends them, barricading its two inhabitants against the patriarchal world. The ritual cleaning continues and the sisters barely venture beyond their back garden, contenting themselves with orderly days in the kitchen and watching trespassers lounge and picnic on their front lawn, contributing, as the village people do, in mythologizing the Blackwood sisters, transforming them from Constance and Mary Katherine into "the ladies," two sisters that "eat little girls" and "hate little boys" (206). In doing so, the villagers and passers-by afford the sisters tremendous mythic power and reinforce their privacy. For when the villagers rushed the burnt Blackwood mansion in a patriarchal frenzy, they sealed their own fears of retribution, thus also fulfilling the Blackwood sisters' desires for privacy, and from that point forward, gifts and offerings of food are left on the Blackwood mansion's front porch. As Carpenter notes, the sisters form a new relationship with the women of the village through the medium that really mattered, food (Carpenter, 36). By the end of the novel, it is fitting that, while sitting in the burned-out shell of her family mansion, her sister by her side, and a new life to do whatever she wants within her self-imposed rules, Merricat says, "Oh Constance, [...] we are so happy" (214). It was what she wanted all along.

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