“A Solid Foundation of Stable Possessions”: Gendered Genealogies in Shirley Jackson’s We Have Always Lived in the Castle

Andi Waddell
“A SOLID FOUNDATION OF STABLE POSSESSIONS”: GENDERED GENEALOGIES IN SHIRLEY JACKSON’S WE HAVE ALWAYS LIVED IN THE CASTLE

by

Andi Waddell

Bachelor of Arts
Furman University, 2012

Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements
For the Degree of Master of Arts in
English
College of Arts and Sciences
University of South Carolina
2019

Accepted by:
Catherine Keyser, Director of Thesis
Greg Forter, Reader
Cheryl L. Addy, Vice Provost and Dean of the Graduate School
DEDICATION

To the extraordinary women who comprise my own matrilineal legacy, whose tenacity, humor, intelligence, compassion, and courage animate my life even in their absence, and especially to my mother, who has given me this inheritance and so much more.
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I owe an enormous debt of gratitude to all my professors at the University of South Carolina, particularly to Greg Forter for his advice on this project. I would especially like to thank Cat Keyser, who believed in my voice as a scholar long before I did and who has been extraordinarily generous with her time and energy as I caught up to what she saw. My parents have made this degree possible in every conceivable way, from bringing me food and texting me cat pictures to serving as sounding boards and complying with my request that they read We Have Always Lived in the Castle so we could have real conversations about this paper. Above all, they have been patient through every detour I’ve taken as I’ve stumbled toward this goal. Mom and Dad, it is a blessing beyond measure to be your daughter.
ABSTRACT

Shirley Jackson’s odd and unsettling novel, *We Have Always Lived in the Castle*, explores the relationship between family, gender roles, and property through the murdered and murderous Blackwood family. Throughout the novel, Jackson associates objects with either male or female legacies within the family. Constance, Julian, and Merricat Blackwood engage in repetitive, formalized handling of objects, and these ritualized interactions create family history. Even as items associated with the women constitute narratives of female history and thereby subvert the family’s patriarchal structure, objects in the text reveal the way patriarchy reproduces itself in the mundane and the personal. Merricat increasingly assumes patriarchal power, taking on masculine tasks, adopting objects that previously belonged to male family members, and asserting authority in various situations. The novel’s ending reveals that Merricat is not merely working within an oppressive system with the goal of overthrowing that system or liberating herself or others from it. Merricat’s ultimate goal, which she achieves by the end of the novel, is to claim and exercise the power that has previously oppressed her. The closing line of the novel makes clear the kind of power Merricat has sought: control over others within the family. Instead of being a feminist, filial utopia, this carefully crafted world at the end of the novel demonstrates that both Merricat and Constance are engaged in replicating the mechanisms of their own oppression.
TABLE OF CONTENTS

Dedication.......................................................................................................................... iii
Acknowledgements ............................................................................................................... iv
Abstract............................................................................................................................... v
Introduction .......................................................................................................................... 1
Chapter 1: Patriarchal Palimpsest: Gender and Competing Histories................. 10
Chapter 2: Merricat, the Happy Misogynist?............................................................... 18
Chapter 3: Women’s Complicity in Patriarchal Power............................................. 25
Conclusion............................................................................................................................. 33
Bibliography ....................................................................................................................... 36
INTRODUCTION

_We Have Always Lived in the Castle_ is among Shirley Jackson’s more under-studied novels, but this lack of critical attention is unsurprising given the novel’s unsettling and often violent plot. This story of a young woman who murders members of her own family, dominates her sister, and eventually sequesters them in their decimated family home defies typical frameworks of feminist interpretation. In spite of the ways this novel complicates traditional narratives of women’s virtue and victimization, critics who do write about the novel still tend to characterize it as a manifesto of feminist liberation or an expression of Jackson’s personal rage or agoraphobia. These readings, however, neglect the complexity and disquiet that make her work (and Jackson herself) so compelling. Given her examination of the dark, paradoxical dimensions of womanhood, Jackson’s power as a theorist demands recognition. In this novel, she reveals how those at the margins take up the cause or methods of the patriarchy and provide the blueprints to their own prison. Jackson not only explores how people take up objects to perform history, but also demonstrates that this performance does not naturally involve overthrowing history. Our particular cultural moment— one in which we are taking stock of the true extent of feminism’s progress and our place within this movement and debating feminism’s next forms and goals – is an especially fitting and fruitful time to do this work as contemporary feminist theorists like Kate Manne and Sara Ahmed offer the tools to understand and explore this complicity.
We Have Always Lived in the Castle presents an eerie, twisted exploration of family, gender roles, and property. Six years after their parents, aunt, and younger brother died of poisoning at the dinner table, sisters Merricat and Constance Blackwood maintain their family home and care for their Uncle Julian, who is disabled due to the same mass poisoning. When their cousin Charles arrives unexpectedly and disrupts their status quo, tension escalates as the murderous Merricat increasingly exerts and consolidates control over their domestic space and, by extension, her older sister. Merricat’s efforts to resist and sabotage Charles’ encroachment culminate in a fire that destroys most of the home. In one act of defiance, Merricat knocks Charles’ lit pipe into a trash can, inadvertently starting a fire that consumes the upper floors of the house. People from the nearby village, with whom the Blackwoods have long had a tense relationship, come to fight the fire and to observe the disaster. However, after they put out the fire, the villagers ransack the home, smashing dishes and decorations, dumping out and destroying food, and throwing furniture out of windows. Julian dies in the fire, and Charles flees after the incident, leaving Constance and Merricat alone. The sisters clean the remaining rooms, erect barricades outside the house, and then enclose themselves in the kitchen, dining room, and front hall, remaining locked in the home and establishing new routines and rituals for their altered home.

Throughout the novel, the family’s property is a crucial site for the articulation and negotiation of gendered power structures within the family. The Blackwood family’s possessions both represent and narrate the family’s history, and the objects’ associations

---

1 It is not unequivocally clear that Merricat does not intend to start the fire. However, there is little textual evidence supporting a claim that the fire – at least as it eventually plays out – is intentional. Despite the first-person narration, Merricat’s interior thoughts and motives are delightfully and maddeningly elusive in this passage.
with gender shape these historical narratives. The Blackwoods’ history is not merely inscribed on their possessions; it is also inscribed with and through these objects. Possessions function as both symbols and tools. They may represent a family member or a moment in time, but they are also used to interpret existing historical narratives and to construct historical narratives that extend forward into the future. For example, Julian’s obsession with his papers is not merely an attachment to a favored possession. These papers are the notes and drafts of his account of his relatives’ deaths, and as such, they give him authorial control of the Blackwood history. Similarly, Constance’s food preparation and preservation are not just activities mirroring those of previous generations; she also generates a tangible product that will connect future generations to family history (and specifically to a matrilineal legacy). Merricat expresses and constitutes her own power through her ritualized treatment of property, like nailing her father’s diary to a tree in order to protect their property. Her fantastical belief in the power she gains from her rituals and possessions reveals power as her primary goal and value, and her obsession with power aligns her with the patriarchal control she overthrew.

In this novel, domestic objects serve as mechanisms for articulating or tracing family history, and Merricat’s willful appropriation of these objects enacts the female subversion of patriarchal power and misogynistic violence. However, the novel’s denouement and close undermine this subversion by revealing the deep rootedness of patriarchal power and women’s complicity in such structures. Ritualized engagement with domestic objects constructs the Blackwood family’s history as a palimpsest in which male historical narratives obscure female legacies. Ultimately, Merricat invests in this masculinist version of history, placing herself at its center and relegating Constance to
feminine subservience through her deliberate adoption and deployment of masculine objects. This seizure of the historical narrative is especially ironic given Merricat’s own experiences of elision and erasure as the second daughter in the family. An analysis of domestic objects as both historical records and ritual props to continually recreate patriarchal forms points to a less optimistic or triumphant reading of the novel’s end than many critics have offered; it reveals instead the permeable boundaries between female subversion of the patriarchy and women’s efforts to make (or take) a place for themselves within the patriarchal order.

Merricat’s violence and controlling behavior reflects a desire for power rather than a desire for freedom from oppression, as many feminist critics claim. In a critical scene right before the family manse burns, Merricat sits in the family’s now-empty summerhouse and imagines a dinner with her family—Constance, Julian, and her dead parents, brother, and aunt. In her fantasy, she treats her family members like the objects that occupy their home, stating that she “placed all of them correctly in my mind, in the circle around the dining-room table.”  

2 Merricat begins by stating that, like the rest of the family, she is in “my rightful, my own and proper, place at the table.”  

3 She imagines her parents showering her with praise and affection and requiring other family members to do so as well. The family repeatedly expresses their love for Merricat, and her parents identify her as their “most loved” child.  

4 As the fantasy continues, these statements of love escalate into expressions of deference; Merricat’s parents command Julian and his wife, “Rise when our beloved daughter rises,” and instruct the family to “bow all your
heads to our beloved Mary Katherine.” In a reversal of the situation the night of the family’s murder, when Merricat was sent to bed without dinner, the Blackwoods require her brother to give his own dinner to Merricat; this command is especially telling because it positions the traditional familial heir as ceding power to Merricat. In her fantasy, Merricat casts herself as a regal patriarch, a figure of power and authority who is blameless and beloved, worshipped and protected, never held accountable and never denied. Instead of overthrowing the patriarchy, she aims to become part of it and claim its power as her own.

Despite her extensive body of work, criticism of Shirley Jackson’s fiction focuses disproportionately on just a few texts and on Jackson herself. As Bernice Murphy notes in her introduction to *Shirley Jackson: Essays on the Literary Legacy*, the majority of scholarly attention to Jackson is focused on “The Lottery” and *The Haunting of Hill House*. *We Have Always Lived in the Castle*, Jackson’s final novel, appears infrequently as the sole topic of analysis and is often mentioned only in passing (if at all) in multi-work studies examining a particular theme in Jackson’s work. For example, in her analysis of the constitution of gender through women’s housekeeping in Jackson’s fiction, Alexis Shotwell devotes only a portion of a single paragraph to discussing *We Have Always Lived in the Castle*, a novel in which two female characters engage in obsessive housekeeping throughout the narrative.

---

5 Jackson, 139.
Critics also seem deeply invested in Jackson herself. Even projects that do not announce themselves as biographical draw heavily on Jackson’s life for their textual analyses. In studies of *We Have Always Lived in the Castle*, critics often invoke Jackson’s increasing agoraphobia in their discussions of the novel’s insularity and emphasis on the home, citing Constance’s fear of being seen outside the house and the novel’s ending, which feels eerily like a live burial or entombment of the two sisters, as expressions of Jackson’s psychological condition in her final years.\(^8\) Other critics connect the subversive, spiteful quality of female characters like Merricat Blackwood to Jackson’s resentment of her husband,\(^9\) who was employed as a university professor while she stayed at home with their children and worked as both a writer and a housewife.\(^10\) Though such biographical critiques are valuable, my particular concern is not how this text expresses Jackson’s own psychological conditions, her attitudes toward her husband and children, or her view of being a housewife. Furthermore, as I outline concerns about feminist interpretations of *We Have Always Lived in the Castle* in this paper, I echo Rita Felski’s assertion that for feminist critics, “the author is often a projection. She can easily become a receptacle for the reader’s fantasies and desires.”\(^11\) As a result, I want to maintain some distance from authorial biography in my analysis.

Many analyses of the novel use gender as their critical lens, examining the novel’s female characters, historical constructions of gender roles (particularly in the context of


\(^{10}\) Joshi, “Shirley Jackson: Domestic Horror.”

the 1950s and 1960s), and even Jackson’s own relationship to feminism. These feminist readings often directly depend on whether or not a critic views the sisters, especially Merricat, as victims. For example, Carpenter calls the novel Jackson’s “most radical statement of the causes and consequences of female victimization and alienation,” and her conclusion that the novel ends with the establishment of a supportive female community resistant to the inherent violence of patriarchal society is predicated on this assumption that Merricat, regardless of her own acts of violence, is exclusively a victim of patriarchal oppression. Similarly, John G. Parks describes the villagers’ attack on the house as a “mindless outbreak of violence and rage against the helpless Blackwood sisters.” His phrasing implies a zero-sum attribution of blame in which the villagers’ cruelty necessarily absolves the sisters of all guilt, even of murder. His reading is emblematic of the overdetermined interpretation of Merricat as a wholly innocent victim.

I am by no means the first critic to identify links between property and gender in the novel. However, questions of the home and domestic life in Jackson criticism are largely subsumed by the broader themes of gender and genre identified above, and few

13 Honor McKittrick Wallace, “‘The Hero Is Married and Ascends the Throne’: The Economics of Narrative End in Shirley Jackson’s ‘We Have Always Lived in the Castle,’” *Tulsa Studies in Women’s Literature* 22, no. 1 (2003): 173. Roberta Rubenstein and Andrew Smith characterize the novel as drawing on the Female Gothic, and Rubenstein pays particular attention to mother-daughter relationships in her discussion of Jackson’s relationship to this genre. Wallace and Carpenter focus on the circulation of power and its relationship to gender in *We Have Always Lived in the Castle*.
14 I have not yet found a reading of the novel that does not view Constance as a victim to some degree.
16 Rubenstein and Smith emphasize the relationship between women and domestic space and activities in their claims situating Jackson’s work within the tradition of the Female Gothic. Alexis Shotwell focuses on domestic activity rather than property, examining the meanings of housekeeping in relation to gender and race. She cites *We Have Always Lived in the Castle* as an example of an “improper relationship” with a house but, as I noted above, does not provide any extended analysis of the novel.
critics have directly attended to the connections between the significance of domestic property or the role of gender and patriarchal power in *We Have Always Lived in the Castle*. Two exceptions are Honor McKitrick Wallace and Lynette Carpenter. Wallace grounds her analysis in Marxist theory, reading property as tied to patriarchal power and women as commodities circulated within a marriage market.\(^{17}\) In my reading of the novel, the family grounds its understanding of its own history in objects. Although the relationship between gender, power, property, and class is a fruitful avenue for analysis, I want to distinguish between property – which necessarily carries strong associations with economics and thus with Marxist theory – and objects, which can (and, in this text, do) manifest wealth but also play a symbolic role in constructing power and identity.

Carpenter claims that the Blackwood women use various domestic activities as a means of subverting patriarchal control and establishing and maintaining their own power.\(^{18}\) In this paper, I aim to add to these examinations of property, gender, and domestic life by examining how the ritualized interaction with domestic objects both reflects and reinforces patriarchal power structures. Furthermore, the decoupling of patriarchal power from masculine embodiment exposes the transferability of those rituals and props – and, by extension, the power they represent – from the male authorities who “naturally” possess them to Merricat, who serves simultaneously as their usurper and protector. Even as they operate as means of feminist subversion, the objects reveal the way patriarchy reproduces itself in the mundane and the personal.

\(^{17}\) Wallace, “The Hero Is Married and Ascends the Throne” 173.

\(^{18}\) Carpenter is more interested in domestic activities rather than domestic objects, but her emphasis on activity overlaps with the question of ritualized housekeeping. She reads the Blackwood men and the family’s overall patriarchal structure as an existential threat to Merricat’s visibility within the family.
Drawing on Sara Ahmed’s theory of happiness in relation to feminism and Kate Manne’s definition of misogyny, I view *We Have Always Lived in the Castle*, not as an expression of feminist rebellion, but rather as a dissection of women’s affective and material investments in patriarchal forms. The prevailing interpretation of the novel’s ending rests in large part on the novel’s closing line, in which Merricat asserts, “Oh Constance, we are so happy.” Many critics use this claim of happiness to argue that after Merricat overthrows the patriarchal power structures of their family and the village, Constance and Merricat exist in a women-only utopia of their own making. Critics read this world-making ability as a reflection of the women’s agency, and their ostensible freedom from patriarchal power and violence is deemed sufficient to produce happiness or a good life. This critical consensus perhaps reflects the understandable, though overdetermined, desire of feminist readers to uncover affirming plots and subversive characterizations. Equally important, however, is Jackson’s recognition that women can also guard the patriarchal castle through the stories they tell, the heirlooms they keep, the perimeters they patrol. Merricat’s ascension to power is not the kind of subversion it has been labeled, nor is the happiness asserted at the end of the novel a triumphant outcome for the female characters. As Ahmed observes in *The Promise of Happiness*, “the happiness duty for women is about the narrowing of horizons, about giving up an interest in what lies beyond the familiar.”

19 Jackson, *We Have Always Lived in the Castle*, 214.
20 See Rubenstein, “House Mothers and Haunted Daughters,” 324-325; Carpenter, “Establishment and Preservation of Female Power.” Wallace also discusses this subject but also expresses some caveats.
CHAPTER 1

Patriarchal Palimpsest: Gender and Competing Histories

The Blackwoods embody Sara Ahmed’s assertion that “the gestures or tasks of
the everyday become forms of inheritance.”22 The Blackwoods connect their history to
certain objects, and their ritualized interactions with these possessions lend the objects a
transcendent quality beyond their monetary or instrumental value. Merricat does not
merely bury various objects; she accords them power through magical thinking, investing
the process itself with meaning by believing that her rituals will protect her and her sister
or expel unwanted guests from their home. Essential to the power generated by these
burials is the additional ritual of checking and maintaining them. Similarly, Constance
and Merricat have a schedule for cleaning various rooms, and they keep every object
exactly in its proper place. Merricat’s habitual examination of their property fence is a
task previously managed by her father. Her unsettling habit of dressing in her dead
relatives’ clothing on Thursdays keeps these family members present by incorporating
them into the routine of home life. These rituals are acts of preservation; they
acknowledge and maintain a memory of ancestors and significant events.

This family history, recorded and articulated in possessions, generates a
palimpsest, by which I mean a layered history which obscures without erasing previous
contributions. In describing her family’s home, Merricat asserts that “as soon as a new

22 Ahmed, The Promise of Happiness, 76.
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. 23 The narrative embedded in the family’s accumulated possessions is actually a series of narratives that have collected over time. The palimpsest of Blackwood property reflects successive generations, and the various objects within this palimpsest tend to fall into gendered categories, reflecting distinct yet intertwined masculine and feminine legacies within the family.

Uncle Julian constructs a patriarchal narrative that dominates (or at least attempts to dominate) the family’s history. The two objects with which Julian is most associated are monuments to the family’s history; his wheelchair serves as a constant reminder of Merricat’s murders (both attempted and successful), and his papers contain his historical narrative about and for the family. He views the history of his family’s deaths as his “life work.” 24 Julian emphasizes the narrative component of the papers; he repeats portions of the story to Constance, checking facts with her and working through his memories aloud. However, his relationship to his papers is also deeply grounded in their thingness. Julian repeatedly refers to the history he is writing as “my papers” rather than “my history,” “my account,” “my records,” or “my story.” In doing so, he draws attention to the conveyance mechanism; the papers become a mode of narration or a narrator themselves, demonstrating that objects are not only a means of accessing an existing narrative, but also a mechanism for constructing and performing historical narratives.

In addition to appointing himself as family historian through writing, rewriting, and reading his papers, Julian also serves as a tour guide, using household objects to

---

23 Jackson, *We Have Always Lived in the Castle*, 2.
24 Jackson, 43.
explain the family’s history to curious outsiders. Early in the novel, he recounts the story of the “the most sensational poisoning case of the century” to two women visiting for tea with Constance.\textsuperscript{25} He gives them a tour of the dining room where the deaths occurred, describing the family’s seating positions, the table settings, and the fateful sugar bowl in great detail and pointing out that the table “is overlarge now for the pitiful remnant of our family, but we have been reluctant to disturb what is, after all, a monument of sorts.”\textsuperscript{26} One guest’s discomfort quickly escalates into outright horror, while the other is openly titillated and desperate for more details about the deaths. Throughout the scene, Julian uses objects to evoke and substantiate the Blackwood family’s history.

Despite the fact that he is an elderly and disabled uncle and thus appears not to possess significant power in the family, Julian’s favored objects allow him to control the narrative of the family’s history. Like Merricat, Julian resists Charles’ efforts to become the new family patriarch. He repeatedly insists to Constance that Charles be prohibited access to his papers, even requesting a box in which he can store his papers safely in his room. His demands are increasingly frantic and adamant as Charles becomes more entrenched in the home and exposes the tenuous nature of Julian’s authority. Julian views the erasure of his own history by a competing narrative as an urgent existential threat, and his obsession with these particular possessions reflects his desire to consolidate and maintain his own patriarchal authority.

Julian’s role as family historian demonstrates the dominance of male narratives over female ones in the novel. Furthermore, he is more concerned with his own authority over the narrative than the accuracy of the narrative’s content. Although he frequently

\textsuperscript{25} Jackson, 45.
\textsuperscript{26} Jackson, 47.
looks to Constance to confirm information in his notes, Julian displays little real regard for facts. He asks Constance to give his notes to “some worthy cynic who will not be too concerned with the truth”\textsuperscript{27} if he is unable to complete his book, and when Charles refuses to discuss his memories of Constance’s trial, Julian says he “will be forced to invent, to fictionalize, to imagine.”\textsuperscript{28} He also plans to begin the next chapter of his book “with a slight exaggeration and go on from there into an outright lie.”\textsuperscript{29} It is worth noting that the first victim of his lie will be his wife, whom he will say is beautiful.

If we see Julian as both author and archivist of patriarchal Blackwood history, it seems particularly consequential that Julian erases Merricat from the family’s recent history. At one point, he appears to forget that Merricat is still alive, telling Charles that she died in an orphanage while Constance was on trial. Julian’s grasp of reality is tenuous throughout the novel, so such a lapse is not noteworthy in itself. However, Julian follows his explanation of Merricat’s fate by saying, “She is of very little consequence to my book, and so we will have done with her.”\textsuperscript{30} Julian’s comments reflect a very real threat Merricat faces throughout the novel: erasure. As the murderer, Merricat initiated the events that gave Julian a story to tell, yet his efforts to narrate that story with her absent denies her status as subject. This potential erasure is not merely a threat to presence or identity; it threatens Merricat’s agency and power, because her absence from any story of the family’s deaths is a denial of her role as the initiator of those events and thus as a person with control over others’ lives and deaths. The Blackwood men’s patriarchal authorship has the power to eliminate Merricat from the family by not only erasing her

\textsuperscript{27} Jackson, 62.
\textsuperscript{28} Jackson, 95.
\textsuperscript{29} Jackson, 90
\textsuperscript{30} Jackson, 135.
from their genealogy, but also obscuring her role as an active subject in the key moments of the family’s history.

Although masculine histories overwrite female ones in the novel, objects and rituals still contribute to a female archive that preserves and expresses matrilineal legacies. Throughout the text, objects associated with women, including linens, furniture, numerous sets of dishes, and Lucy Blackwood’s portrait, Dresden figurines, and jewelry, are incorporated into daily or weekly routines, treated with reverence, and engaged as connections to female histories. Constance and Merricat meticulously maintain their mother’s drawing room, keeping it “shining and silky” by dusting the intricate molding, polishing the floors, and repairing tears in the upholstery.\(^{31}\) Although they regularly dust and sweep every surface in the home, they “always put things back where they belong;” as Merricat notes, “the tortoise-shell toilet set on our mother’s dressing table was never off place by so much as a fraction of an inch.”\(^{32}\)

The defining characteristic of the Blackwood women – at least in Merricat’s narration – is their contribution of property to the Blackwood family. Each new wife’s belongings are immediately absorbed into her husband’s property upon their marriage. The china and furniture they bring to the home constitutes a link to their pre-Blackwood existence, but that connection is quickly severed and replaced as that property becomes a possession of the Blackwood family. Like their possessions, the women are consumed by the Blackwood patriarchy. No family name or history is provided for any of the women with the exception of Merricat’s mother.\(^{33}\) They become “Blackwood women,” and this

---

\(^{31}\) Jackson, 34.

\(^{32}\) Jackson, 2.

\(^{33}\) Merricat describes the house where their mother was born and claims that it should rightfully belong to Constance. Ironically, it is now a junkyard.
transition renders their previous history immaterial. Their only lineage is the one that exists within the confines of the Blackwood family, the matrilineal legacy to which Constance and Merricat are heirs. The absorption of women’s property into the Blackwood patriarchal structure thus effects an erasure of female history and identity; as their belongings become underlying layers of the Blackwood’s property, their legacies become obscured layers of the family’s historical palimpsest.

The primary example of matrilineal legacy in the Blackwood family is the preserved food, the only items in the house that remain both the exclusive contribution and domain of women. Merricat explains that “all the Blackwood women had made food and had taken pride in adding to the great supply of food in our cellar.”34 Using produce grown in their garden, each generation of women has added jams, pickles, and preserved fruits and vegetables to the Blackwood cellar. To some extent, this food might seem separate from the other possessions that are prized throughout the text; according to Wallace, it lacks monetary value and utility, for, as Constance asserts, the food would prove lethal if eaten. However, Jackson challenges that notion when Merricat claims Constance “bur[ies] food the way I bury treasure.”35 This situates the preserves in a network of objects that have value, at least within the Blackwood family’s unique calculus, and that function as bastions of feminine history. Additionally, Merricat describes the perfect rows and rich colors of the preserves as if they are art, and in doing so, she places the preserves in the same category as the carefully maintained Dresden figurines, portrait, and furniture that belonged to her mother.

34 Jackson, We Have Always Lived in the Castle, 60.
35 Jackson, 61.
Much like the figurines and jewelry, the food has an air of permanence. Merricat states that the food “stood side by side in our cellar and would stand there forever,” and Constance’s assertion that eating these preserves would prove deadly underscores this permanence by linking them to death and placing them in limbo – forever shelved and never used. The preserves are also closely tied with the preservation of property Blackwood women bring into their marriages. They are meticulously stored in the cellar, much like the remaining china pieces from previous Blackwood women’s dowries are stored in the pantry. They display an ongoing link to a maternal genealogy and foster a feminine narrative in themselves.

Both the preserves and the dishes serve as a visual and tangible archive of the Blackwood women. Like a curator, Constance is able to identify the original contributor of a dish and to situate both the dish and the woman within the family’s history. Similarly, Merricat and Constance need only look at the rows of preserved food on the pantry shelves to trace their own lineage. However, Constance and Merricat’s preservation of these items does not merely maintain their own connection to the women of previous generations, but contributes to a historical narrative that extends into the future as they replicate the patriarchal family form into which they were born. Sara Ahmed claims, “The promise of the family is preserved through the inheritance of objects, which allow the family to be assembled.” Crucially, Ahmed does not refer to the family here; instead, it is the promise of family that is preserved, implying that what is preserved is an idea or ideology or form or some other intangible structure. The preserves and other possessions associated with the Blackwood women function

---

36 Jackson, 61.
37 Ahmed, The Promise of Happiness, 46
similarly. Through these inherited objects, Constance and Merricat both identify and enact their respective positions within the family’s gendered hierarchy.

Women’s ritualized engagement with objects, especially those associated with other women, challenges the male-authored and male-dominated history of the family by creating or preserving a counternarrative. Merricat underscores the textual potential of the preserves when she calls them “a poem by the Blackwood women,” a characterization that confers authorship on women. When viewed as a narrative, the preserves are noteworthy because they originate within the Blackwood family and home rather than being brought in from an external source and then consumed. They are part of a generative act – creation rather than mere preservation. As a result, the preserves hint that the Blackwood women possess some power within the confines of the family. This power, combined with the preserves’ permanence, lethality, and narrative authority, suggests that female legacies might remain separate from patriarchal control and offers the possibility of subversion through a weaponization of women’s domestic labor. However, Merricat’s engagement with domestic objects and rituals demonstrates that women can use this authorial power in the same ways and for the same suppressive purposes the men have practiced.

---

38 Jackson, *We Have Always Lived in the Castle*, 61.
CHAPTER 2

MERRICAT, THE HAPPY MISOGYNIST?

Although Merricat’s magical thinking distinguishes her obsessive relationship to objects from her family members’ attitudes, her bizarre rituals highlight how ubiquitous the reverence toward inherited objects is in the novel. There is a sinister whimsy in the way she attributes magical properties to her possessions. Merricat feels that she derives power from her belongings, at least as long as she interacts with them in certain self-prescribed ways. Burying objects is a particular favorite: she buries a doll, a box of silver dollars, and her baby teeth in locations around the property in order to protect her home and family. She believes that “so long as they were where I had put them nothing could get in to harm us.”39 For example, on the day Charles arrives at the house, Merricat discovers that her father’s notebook which she had nailed to a tree has fallen down and thus is “useless now as protection;”40 she later asserts that “Charles had only gotten in because the magic was broken; if I could re-seal the protection around Constance and shut Charles out he would have to leave the house.”41 Merricat also adheres to routines and rituals that direct her engagement with objects. She outlines a weekly schedule of tasks to maintain the property. She checks her buried “safeguards”42 every Sunday morning and walks around the property fence every Wednesday. She states that “on

39 Jackson, We Have Always Lived in the Castle, 59.
40 Jackson, 77.
41 Jackson, 99.
42 Jackson, 59.
Thursday, which [is] my most powerful day,”\textsuperscript{43} she goes to the attic and puts on her dead relatives’ clothing; it is unclear if she does this on Thursdays because she is already powerful on that particular day or if it is this ritual that makes her especially powerful on Thursdays. Her life revolves around objects and is defined by the meanings with which she has imbued them, meanings which she adapts from inherited histories and rituals.

Merricat preserves objects like her father’s watch and chain as a link to familial history but shows less interest than Constance does in matrilineal inheritances like dishes and pearls. In fact, she destroys several items associated with matrilineal legacy, including a pitcher and a glass. When Constance appears to be considering the possibility of leaving the house and “com[ing] back into the world” during tea with women from the village,\textsuperscript{44} Merricat responds by smashing a pitcher of milk. According to Merricat, “it had been our mother’s, and I left the pieces on the floor so Constance would see them.”\textsuperscript{45} Later, angry about Charles’ presence in the house, she smashes a glass on the floor in front of Constance and then “watched her while she swept up the glass.”\textsuperscript{46} Merricat uses these objects to communicate displeasure with Constance’s actions and to police Constance’s compliance with her wishes. Her efforts to control her sister reflect the patriarchal power that permeates the Blackwood home, and the way she targets women’s inherited objects to convey and exercise this control intensifies her alignment with this power structure.

\textsuperscript{43} Jackson, 60
\textsuperscript{44} Jackson, 38. Interestingly, Merricat applies magical thinking similar to the rationales that govern her engagement with objects to assess the threat posed by Constance’s possible departure from their home: “This was the third time in one day that the subject had been touched, and three times makes it real” (39).
\textsuperscript{45} Jackson, \textit{We Have Always Lived in the Castle}, 39.
\textsuperscript{46} Jackson, 89.
Jackson’s novel elucidates a gap between wielding patriarchal power and being sexed male, a space in which the patriarchy is supported and perpetuated by individuals who are not sexed male. Although she is sexed female throughout the text, Merricat’s ties to patriarchal behaviors, objects, and histories throughout the novel situate her within this gap between patriarchy and maleness. Merricat goes beyond merely identifying with or as the patriarch; she acts as a foot soldier of patriarchy by adopting the Blackwood men’s tasks and behaviors. By patrolling the fence like her father used to and using her “magic” for protective purposes, Merricat takes on the masculine role of protector of home and family. She is the only family member who can leave the property. She is not restricted to domestic spaces as the seemingly-agoraphobic Constance is, and she acts as the public face and emissary of the family to their community for much of the novel. Additionally, Merricat does not merely stumble into a position of power that would otherwise be occupied by a man; her methods of pursuing that power reflect patriarchal norms. She murders people who obstruct her path to power, and her frequent fantasies in which she imagines people who have slighted her dying or writhing in pain underscore her affinity for violence. This link between Merricat’s violence, both real and imagined, and her expectations for how she should be treated echoes the misogynistic mindset Kate Manne defines. For example, after Julian’s death, Merricat states, “Uncle Julian had believed that I was dead, and now he was dead himself; bow your heads to our beloved Mary Katherine, I thought, or you will be dead.”47 In the same language used at her imagined family dinner, Merricat demonstrates two features of Manne’s definition of misogyny: a

47 Jackson, 164.
“deprivation mindset” in which a patriarch is owed care, love, and attention⁴⁸ and the deployment of “hostile or adverse...consequences” to police behavior.⁴⁹

Furthermore, Merricat is cut off from performing many female functions in contact with their property. She claims she is prohibited from handling prepared food and cannot engage in the food preservation that is the legacy of Blackwood women. Even in the garden, she does not plant vegetables with Constance and instead only holds Constance’s gardening tools. The origins of these prohibitions are initially ambiguous. It becomes clear, however, that these bans are self-imposed.⁵⁰ After the fire, Merricat states that she has “decided that from now on I would not be allowed to hand tea cups.”⁵¹ When Constance suggests that Merricat can wear Uncle Julian’s clothes now that her own have been destroyed, Merricat refuses on the grounds that she is “not allowed to touch Uncle Julian’s things.”⁵² Constance replies, “But you are allowed. I tell you that you are allowed,” but Merricat emphatically overrules her.⁵³ It is especially significant, then, that Merricat is cut off from the preserves; she cannot handle them, as she is forbidden to handle food, nor does she participate in their preparation. Even her consumption of the preserves is limited based on Constance’s assertion that most of them are poisonous (an ironic limitation given Merricat’s history). This prohibition distances Merricat from the female narratives and legacies in the novel, further aligning her with patriarchal fiat. Merricat cannot or will not access the power the other women claim (minimal as it may

⁵⁰ Even after Merricat is established as the creator and enforcer of these rules, her motives for these prohibitions remains unclear.
⁵¹ Jackson, *We Have Always Lived in the Castle*, 165.
⁵² Jackson, 199.
⁵³ Jackson, 199.
be) because she is distanced from both the objects and the rituals that constitute women’s power.

When Charles arrives, Merricat recognizes his attempts to replace the absent patriarch by his territorial co-optation of objects. Charles sits in their father’s chair at the table, sleeps in his room, and wears his clothes. Merricat observes, “I saw that he was wearing our father’s gold watch chain, even with the crooked link, and I knew without seeing that our father’s watch was in his pocket. I thought that tomorrow he would be wearing our father’s signet ring, and I wondered if he would make Constance put on our mother’s pearls.”54 Charles begins to act as the family patriarch as he increasingly adopts John Blackwood’s possessions. Soon after he arrives, he also begins to take over the masculine tasks and roles Merricat has previously controlled. He offers to get their supplies from the village, saying, “I’m taking little Cousin Mary’s job away from her…You’ll have to find something else for her to do, Connie.”55 Charles threatens a reversal or erasure of Merricat’s place within her family. As he takes over Merricat’s role as protector of the home and of Constance, Merricat’s distance from the women’s rituals leaves her without an alternative role in the family. Furthermore, much like Merricat’s father often banished her from the dinner table as punishment for misbehavior, Charles threatens to remove her from the family home: “‘come about a month from now, I wonder who will still be here? You,’ he said, ‘or me?’”56 In light of Merricat’s affiliation with the objects Charles increasingly claims rather than those connected to the Blackwood women, Charles’ suggestion that he will remove her from the home threatens

54 Jackson, 116.
55 Jackson, 104.
56 Jackson, 116.
to erase her from the family’s history. She has no objects that anchor her within the family’s narrative, and without access to the rituals that constitute history through objects, she cannot create a counternarrative of her own. Thus by adopting John Blackwood’s possessions – many of which Merricat uses or covets – Charles threatens to perpetuate the male-dominated structure that controlled the Blackwood women and thereby to extend the dominant narrative of the family’s history.

Lynette Carpenter reads Merricat’s burning of the house as liberatory violence against the patriarchy, but the fire narrows Constance and Merricat’s entire world in a way that makes such a reading suspect. Carpenter writes that Merricat “could hardly wish to destroy the house that she and Constance love so dearly...unless she believes the sacrifice necessary to repudiate the material heritage of the Blackwood men.” However, when Merricat starts a fire by sweeping Charles’ lit pipe into a trashcan, she also knocks her great-grandmother’s saucer into the trash with it. She simultaneously destroys a male and a female object, and this dual damage undermines a reading of the fire as a rejection of masculine history. Furthermore, although Merricat repeatedly refers to “the Blackwood women” of previous generations, none of these women are Blackwoods by birth or blood. Constance and Merricat are the only women in the novel who were born into the Blackwood family. Their status as offspring rather than additions to the Blackwood family destabilizes Constance and Merricat’s identity as “Blackwood women;” instead, it strengthens their connection to patrilineal legacies and weakens their ties to matrilineal ones. Despite the perverse triumph of murdering her father and brother (and later bringing about the death of Julian and the ouster of Charles), Merricat cannot

---

57 Carpenter, “Establishment and Preservation of Female Power.”
58 Carpenter, 35.
and does not fully renounce a masculine legacy. Rather, she increasingly erases her feminine affiliations by assuming a patriarchal role in their downsized household.
CHAPTER 3

WOMEN’S COMPLICITY IN PATRIARCHAL POWER

Julian, Constance, and Merricat’s relationships to objects and history demonstrate that even people marginalized by and within a patriarchal structure perpetuate that structure and actively choose to take part in it. Many critics interpret the sisters’ new life alone in their family home as a female utopia produced by a successful overthrow of the patriarchy; for example, Carpenter asserts that the novel’s ending depicts “a self-contained community of women…that shuts out the violence of the surrounding patriarchal society but accepts the support of its women” as a solution to the threat of masculine control.\(^{59}\) However, a close reading of the novel’s end gestures toward a less triumphant – and perhaps more disturbing – outcome in relation to gender and power. Because the fire and looting would seem to create a blank slate by destroying the objects and order essential to both male and female histories, the sisters’ actions after the fire clarify their relationship to the patriarchal structure under which they previously lived. Constance and Merricat’s engagement with objects after the fire reveals/demonstrates women’s complicity in replicating and upholding the patriarchy.\(^ {60}\)

Merricat and Constance establish new routines to govern their lives, and these rituals help anchor and preserve the patriarchal power structure. Immediately after the

\(^{59}\) Carpenter, “Establishment and Preservation of Female Power,” 38.

\(^{60}\) Carpenter discusses women’s complicity in patriarchal oppression, asserting that the fact that a woman initiates the villagers’ use of violence against the Blackwood home is evidence that women collude with men in their oppression of women.
fire, Merricat recognizes that “the rules [are] going to be different”\textsuperscript{61} and that the sisters have “a whole new pattern of days to arrange.”\textsuperscript{62} Constance announces the first change to their routine, stating that Helen Clarke will no longer come to tea once a week.\textsuperscript{63} In keeping with Ahmed’s view of happiness as established through “doing the right things over and over and over again,”\textsuperscript{64} Merricat claims that “slowly the pattern of our days grew, and shaped itself into a happy life.”\textsuperscript{65} They complete most of their work in the morning in order to avoid villagers who come to their property, and Merricat checks that the front door is locked at designated times throughout the day. In keeping with Ahmed’s claim that the repetition of daily gestures replicates the family and patriarchal power structures,\textsuperscript{66} Merricat increasingly assumes a patriarchal role as they establish this new pattern, and through their efforts to repair their home, she consolidates her power in their new reality. Merricat considers repairing the broken step, a task that was part of her territorial tug-of-war with Charles. Most significantly, she builds a barricade at the side of the house, using “broken boards and furniture” to block the path.\textsuperscript{67} Merricat thus extends her patriarchal role of establishing and enforcing boundaries. Furthermore, by using objects from the home in her barricade, Merricat enlists more of the family property in her performance of patriarchy.

Merricat’s assumption of patriarchal power is most evident in her increasing control over the family’s history after the fire. In her definition of misogyny, Kate Manne asserts that “part of male dominance…seems to be seizing control of the narrative—and

\textsuperscript{61} Jackson, \textit{We Have Always Lived in the Castle}, 166.
\textsuperscript{62} Jackson, 183.
\textsuperscript{63} Jackson, 172.
\textsuperscript{64} Ahmed, \textit{The Promise of Happiness}, 36.
\textsuperscript{65} Jackson, \textit{We Have Always Lived in the Castle}, 193.
\textsuperscript{66} Ahmed, \textit{The Promise of Happiness}.
\textsuperscript{67} Jackson, \textit{We Have Always Lived in the Castle}, 195.
with it, controlling [a woman], enforcing her concurrence” with his narrative so that “she may not only believe, but take up and tell, his story.” Such coercive authorship extends “a general modus operandi of such powerful and domineering agents: issuing pronouncements that simply stipulate what will be believed, and then treated as the official version of events going forward.” Manne characterizes these overwriting statements, or “world-directing claims,” as “beliefs on the surface, commands underneath.” Merricat enacts such misogynistic authorship as she jettisons various archives that challenge her own vision of their family and her place within it, and she conscripts Constance in this patriarchal mode of storytelling.

Merricat and Constance sequester objects and spaces that have previously contributed to the various histories within the family as they “neaten the house.” They methodically close off most of the remaining archival spaces in the home. They clean up several rooms central to the family’s history, placing a surviving Dresden figurine “back where it belongs” on the mantel in their mother’s drawing room and sweeping excess rubble into the dining room; then they shut the doors to these rooms and “never opened them again.” This process appears to be situated between erasure and preservation; the sisters do not destroy the objects that constitute these various histories, but they cease all interaction with them. The most significant result of creating this distance is not that they can no longer see these objects, but that they cease their previous

68 Manne, Down Girl, 11.
69 Manne, 11.
70 Manne, 11.
71 Jackson, We Have Always Lived in the Castle, 172.
72 The fire destroyed the upper floors of the house, so many of the spaces that housed familial archives are inaccessible or nonexistent and items like the family’s old clothes have been burned.
73 Jackson, We Have Always Lived in the Castle, 174.
74 Jackson, 178.
ritual engagements with those objects. They preserve the legacy contained by the rooms, but by ceasing the rituals that once mobilized objects to narrate history, they suspend or deactivate those histories.

The women’s treatment of the two objects associated with Julian underscore the new power structure. Julian’s papers are relegated to the cellar, buried like (and with) the Blackwood women’s preserves. The history he has written is thus placed alongside the very archive he and other Blackwood men had long written over. Like Lucy Blackwood’s drawing room and the dining room, Julian’s history – his “life work” – is marginalized by being placed out of sight and excluded from daily rituals. Like his papers, Julian’s wheelchair is also displaced from its proper place when Merricat uses it as part of her barricade. Merricat conscripts this object for her own purposes, adopting it as her own through her characteristic magical thinking; she claims that “the chair would be powerful in my barricade.” Though this monument to history is still visible (at least to “intruders”), it is exiled from the domestic space of the house and excluded from the sisters’ rituals. Furthermore, although the wheelchair is conscripted for the masculine task of protection, it is enlisted in this task due to Merricat’s continued performance of patriarchal authority. In a particularly telling moment, Merricat ties these removals to historical erasure, saying, “I was troubled to think that Uncle Julian might vanish altogether, with his papers in a box and his chair on the barricade and his toothbrush thrown away and even the smell of Uncle Julian gone from his room.”\footnote{Jackson, 201.} Julian’s objects
had anchored his relevance and power in the family, but the new world Merricat and Constance are making is free of his authority.

Manne asserts that misogyny “thrives” on “pernicious ignorance,”\(^79\) and she ties this ignorance to silence.\(^80\) Constance’s silence contributes to Merricat’s hold on patriarchal power. After they flee the villagers the night of the fire, Constance acknowledges aloud that Merricat poisoned their family; this is the first time she has revealed to Merricat that she knows what happened and the first time Merricat has admitted her guilt. The next day, Constance apologizes for mentioning the murders, but she frames her apology as though she has transgressed by reminding Merricat of the grief of losing their family, saying, “I was very wicked…I never should have reminded you of why they all died.”\(^81\) Constance also wishes the truth about the poisoning were erased from Merricat’s own memory; she tells Merricat, “I wanted you to forget about it. I never wanted to speak about it, ever.”\(^82\) Merricat barely participates in this conversation and seems unwilling to discuss her role in the murders or even the reality that the deaths took place at all. Constance goes on to assert that “we’ll never talk about it again. Never.”\(^83\) This declaration constitutes an agreement between the sisters to excise the truth of certain events not only from the family’s history, but specifically from their own internal and external narratives of that history.

When Constance and Merricat agree never to speak of Merricat’s guilt for the murder of their family, they effect an erasure of the family’s true history. Although

\(^79\) Manne, *Down Girl*, 4.
\(^80\) Manne, 18.
\(^81\) Jackson, *We Have Always Lived in the Castle*, 190.
\(^82\) Jackson, 191.
\(^83\) Jackson, 191.
Constance often appears to be the victim of patriarchal oppression – including oppression by Merricat – this moment reveals her complicity in sustaining the structures within which she is oppressed. It is significant that Merricat speaks very little in this exchange; Constance largely propels the conversation, and although she may fear a similar end as her family’s if she challenges Merricat, she seems to make the decision to remain silent about Merricat’s guilt of her own accord. As Manne notes, “Silence…enables misogyny.”\textsuperscript{84} Constance’s silence until that moment (a telling choice given that she admits she has known of Merricat’s role since the murders occurred six years earlier) and her choice to remain silent in the future erases Merricat’s responsibility for an event that has dramatically shaped the trajectory of the family’s history.\textsuperscript{85} Constance’s silence enables Merricat to claim a position of power in their small family unit; she simultaneously erases any narrative that might hold Merricat accountable for her path to power and relinquishes any potential challenge she might make to Merricat’s grasp of the patriarchal position. She allows Merricat to assume the authorial position rather than intervening by offering an alternative (and, notably, true) narrative of the family’s history.

Read together as part of the process of rebuilding the home – both in a physical sense and as an idea or form – Merricat’s object-barricade and the women’s methodical entombment of various archives demonstrate the continued dominance of patriarchal narrative and power through domestic objects. This leads into a new, but not improved, era with Merricat as author. After the fire, Merricat’s frequent assertions of happiness as

\textsuperscript{84} Manne, \textit{Down Girl}, 18.
\textsuperscript{85} Constance’s silence on the subject of Merricat’s guilt is made all the more significant by her admission that she knew of Merricat’s involvement all along: Constance maintained her silence when she was on trial for the murders even though she knew who the real perpetrator was.
a goal or state of being display her authorial power. She states, “we were going to be very happy” as they begin to clean the house, and after their new routine has taken shape, she claims, “We were very happy, although Constance was always in terror lest one of our two cups should break.” Merrill also vocalizes these assertions to her sister, saying, “Listen to me, Constance. We are going to be very happy.” The novel closes with an eerily similar declaration: Merrill vows to protect Constance forever and then says, “Oh, Constance...we are so happy.” This is a statement of fact rather than an emotional exclamation, and Merrill’s use of the collective pronoun in these statements emphasizes the fact that she is speaking not just to, but for Constance. She establishes an affective reality for Constance rather than leaving room for Constance’s emotions or opinions. Merrill’s assertion that the sisters are “so happy” exemplifies Manne’s description of misogynistic authorship: “beliefs on the surface, commands underneath.” Merrill expresses the patriarchal control many critics claim the sisters have overcome or escaped by the novel’s end.

It is striking, then, that the affect ostensibly expressed here is the very one which Sara Ahmed characterizes as a means of patriarchal oppression. Like Manne, Ahmed links expectations produced and policed by patriarchal power to the ability to shape the world, calling happiness “a form of world making.” She claims that happiness is constructed by and within a system of dominance that uses happiness “to redescribe social norms as social goods” and “to justify oppression” by prescribing certain life paths

86 Jackson, *We Have Always Lived in the Castle*, 183.
87 Jackson, 212.
88 Jackson, 200.
89 Jackson, 214.
90 Manne, *Down Girl*, 11.
or behaviors. Ahmed identifies the family as a means by which women’s happiness is constructed, a “myth of happiness…and a powerful legislative device.” She writes, “to inherit the family is to inherit the demand to reproduce its form,” and Merricat hews to this form, as long as she can occupy a privileged position within it. When Merricat and Constance inherit the family after their parents’ deaths, they are compelled to reproduce its patriarchal power structure. In the almost apocalyptic landscape of their burned-out house, instead of reinventing the family, they reanimate it: they rearrange objects in the home, and in doing so, they reshape and redistribute narratives of the family’s history. Despite the destruction of the family home as patriarchal museum, they replicate patriarchal modes of narrating and preserving history; they continue to privilege certain histories while eliding or silencing others. In much the same way Manne describes, the Blackwoods’ patriarchal power structure dictates its own reproduction and thereby enlists women in its ongoing dominance. Merricat’s actions demonstrate her complicity in the patriarchal structure against which she once rebelled. Rather than building a feminist, filial utopia, Merricat and Constance replicate the mechanisms of their own oppression, even when there is no longer an external inducement to do so.

93 Ahmed, 45.
94 Ahmed, 46.
CONCLUSION

In addition to filling some gaps in Shirley Jackson scholarship, a wider array of interpretations of *We Have Always Lived in the Castle* has implications for feminist literary criticism more broadly. The prevailing reading in which Merricat and Constance establish a utopia insulated from patriarchal oppression and violence reflect a desire held by many feminist critics: a wish for stories to involve triumph or subversion by female characters or authors. Rita Felski identifies this as “feminism’s own desire for tidy schemas for consoling narratives of male villainy and female virtue.”95 It is an overdetermined reading (albeit one to which I am deeply sympathetic and of which I am often guilty). As Felski points out, “the meanings of gender are always more messy, ambiguous, and contradictory than this particular story will allow.”96

This desire for a female hero seems to lead critics to misrecognize Merricat as a hero because she is a woman who is clearly oppressed by her family’s and society’s patriarchal structures and attitudes. Merricat often uses masculinity or masculine proxies to get what she wants, which is ostensibly an escape from patriarchal control. However, critics valorize this behavior simply because it involves a woman transgressing gender boundaries. The status of hero is not inherent in the role of protagonist or narrator, nor is it inherent in gender; in fact, this is a core tenet of much of feminist theory. Merricat presents an opportunity for feminist analysis that uses the “both/and” orientation Felski

95 Felski, *Literature after Feminism*, 78.
96 Felski, 78.
advocates.\textsuperscript{97} Classifying Merricat’s behavior as subversive or as misogynistic need not be mutually exclusive; Manne’s definition of misogyny allows space for just such multiplicity. Ahmed’s view of happiness and Manne’s definition of misogyny replace the binary of victimhood and subversion with a range of potential motives, affects, experiences, and outcomes. The weirdness of Jackson’s novel – the sense of unease provoked by Merricat’s first-person narration, her fantasies of life on the moon and her bizarre “magical” rituals (both of which Constance deems merely “silly”\textsuperscript{98}), Julian’s morbid humor, and the juxtaposition of an almost idyllic lifestyle with the home’s sinister history of family annihilation\textsuperscript{99} – eludes easy categorization and explanation. As a result, Jackson’s novel demands a more nuanced, multivalent reading of femininity and patriarchal power.

The subversive woman we like to imagine is fundamentally agential; she takes action and exerts or affirms her subjectivity in defiance of systems that oppress her. The idea that such a plot could or would end with a woman’s triumph is predicated on not only an assumption of women’s victimhood, but on a very specific, binary vision of that victimhood. More alarming, we read as if a woman’s acquisition of power will and must lead to a way of exercising that power that is entirely distinct from the way her predecessors exercised it. In doing so, we neglect an essential attribute of patriarchy, overlooking its deep, systemic roots. We read as if women can use masculinity as a proxy by which to effect change (including their own liberation) and then easily shed or abandon these methods as soon as they achieve their desired outcome. But defeating a

\textsuperscript{97} Felski, 12.
\textsuperscript{98} Jackson, \textit{We Have Always Lived in the Castle}, 62, 77, 86, 105. Constance calls Merricat silly throughout the novel.
\textsuperscript{99} Of course, this is hardly a comprehensive list of the novel’s strange or unsettling elements.
single patriarch or patriarchal unit (i.e. a family) hardly remakes an entire political, cultural, economic, and social system in a new, non-patriarchal form. As Audre Lorde famously proclaimed, “the master’s tools will never dismantle the master’s house. They may allow us temporarily to beat him at his own game, but they will never enable us to bring about genuine change.\textsuperscript{100} Accounts of women’s complicity, guilt, and oppression of others are just as significant and just as ripe for feminist analysis as stories of revolution and subversion are. Studying female characters and authors who have failed to be who we want them to be (or who we ourselves want to be) is a project feminist critics can – and must – undertake. In fact, this task may be more urgent and timely than ever.

\textsuperscript{100} Audre Lorde, \textit{Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches} (Berkeley: Crossing Press, 2007), 112.
BIBLIOGRAPHY


