

**We Have Always Lived in the Freak Show: Alienating the Perverse  
and Seeking Out the Alien in Shirley Jackson's We Have Always  
Lived in the Castle**

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# **We Have Always Lived in the Freak Show: Alienating the Perverse and Seeking Out the Alien in Shirley Jackson's *We Have Always Lived in the Castle***

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## **Abstract**

*We Have Always Lived in the Castle tells the story of two sisters, Merricat and Constance Blackwood, who have been brought up by a wealthy family, most of whose members are now deceased. The family always isolated itself from the village, as evidenced by their gated mansion. In Shirley Jackson's gothic novel, the villagers' greed, jealousy, and patriarchal social structures cause Merricat and Constance to be perceived as a threat to the villagers' egos, as the sisters challenge their ideologies with their matriarchal structure, one that keeps their riches in the hands of women who live comfortably secluded from the villagers. After the mysterious deaths of Merricat and Constance's family, the villagers use their 'fear' of the Blackwoods to deem them monstrous and to justify their collective hatred; they also attempt to gain control over their independent family structure. Ultimately, though, the villagers are unable to assume power over the Blackwood girls as their matriarchy is not based on their material wealth but on their defiance of social norms. Their power lies in their self-isolation, rejection of conformity and male control, and self-sufficiency.*

*We Have Always Lived in the Castle* tells the story of two sisters, Merricat and Constance Blackwood, who have been brought up by a wealthy family, most of whose members are now deceased. The family always isolated itself from

the village, as evidenced by their gated mansion. In Shirley Jackson's gothic novel, the villagers' greed, jealousy, and patriarchal social structures cause Merricat and Constance to be perceived as a threat to the villagers' egos as they challenge their ideologies with their matriarchal structure, one that keeps their riches in the hands of women, who live comfortably secluded from the villagers. After the mysterious deaths of their family, the villagers use their "fear" of the Blackwoods to deem them monstrous and to justify their collective hatred; they also attempt to gain control over their independent family structure. Ultimately, though, the villagers are unable to assume power over the Blackwood girls as their matriarchy is not based on their material wealth but on their defiance of social norms. Their power lies in their self-isolation, rejection of conformity and male control, and self-sufficiency.

Merricat's first effort to defy the social structures that oppress her and her sister occurs when she poisons her family. Merricat and Constance were apparently mistreated by their parents. For example, Merricat was frequently forced to go to bed without supper, and Constance was forced to assume a protective role over her to ensure that her needs were met despite her frequent and harsh punishments from her parents. For example, Constance recounts bringing a tray of dinner upstairs to Merricat after her family would retire for the night, always being the one to ensure that Merri-

cat had eaten sufficiently for the day (14). Merricat responds to this abuse by killing her family, sparing her sister, and allowing her harmless Uncle Julian to live after he happens to survive the poisoning. However, she still finds herself dismissed by Blackwood men, since the crazed Uncle Julian is convinced that Merricat also died (Rattapanong 20). According to Natcha Rattapanong, author of *Female Companionships in Shirley Jackson's The Haunting of Hill House and We Have Always Lived in the Castle*, “the first patriarchal oppression against Merricat and Constance comes from maltreatment and alienation from their family” (20). Therefore, Merricat’s murder of her oppressive family is her first act of attempted liberation from forces that threaten to harm and control her. While Constance herself did not poison her family, she did conceal the crime and “confess” in order to protect her sister. This was only partially effective, however. Although Constance was ultimately acquitted, she and her sister alike continue to face incrimination by the townspeople.

While the villagers cannot prove that Merricat or her sister committed the murders, their suspicions add to their curiosity and their belief in the girls’ monstrosity. While Helen Clarke is an old friend of the Blackwoods who had not ostracized them, her friend Mrs. Wright cannot help but inquire about the fateful event upon joining the Blackwoods for tea. She is tempted to view the scene of the tragedy, and despite Helen Clarke’s warnings to her to avoid the subject, she asks, “Why did she do it? I mean, unless we agree that Constance was a homicidal maniac—” (16). Merricat knows that even Mrs. Wright, who is willing to sit at table with the Blackwoods, would likely avoid their gaze if she saw the girls in the town. Merricat even notices that the tea and rum cake the Blackwoods served to Mrs. Wright remained untouched (14). Even townspeople like Mrs. Wright, who interact with the Blackwoods without attacking them, clearly distrust the girls and often speculate about the monstrosity of their characters.

The villagers also seem to find the girls’ inde-

pendence and secretive lifestyle monstrous. They are intimidated by their self-sufficiency and jealous of the secret beauties of their private property. Merricat and Constance live in an isolated space, a gated mansion, that intimidates and evokes envy in the villagers. They only break their isolation to purchase groceries in town. The novel also highlights Merricat’s knowledge of secret places on the property which, despite being overgrown, are adorned with beautiful flowers. As she explains when she returns home from shopping, “Once the padlock was securely fastened behind me I was safe. The path was dark, because once our father had given up any idea of putting his land to profitable use he had let the trees and bushes and small flowers grow as they chose, and except for one great meadow and the gardens our land was heavily wooded, and no one knew its secret ways but me” (Jackson 8). The majesty of the secluded meadows about which only Merricat knows is in sharp contrast with “the hostile, resentful village wasteland” (Akçil 35). The privacy of the Blackwood estate causes the villagers’ jealousy to run as rampant as their imaginations, tortured by the mystery of the hidden beauties of the mansion and its surrounding property, which is exclusive to the Blackwood girls.

The villagers retaliate against the sisters’ isolation by further alienating them, making them feel particularly unwelcome on the rare occasions that either Merricat or Constance enter the village. Women gossip about the girls and even use outlandish tall tales to increase their children’s curiosity about the Blackwoods. To coerce her son away from the Blackwood mansion, a mother warns him, “[the girls would] hold you down and make you eat candy full of poison; I heard that dozens of bad little boys have gone too near that house and never been seen again. They catch little boys and they –” (Jackson 58). This results in the children also taunting the girls, saying: “‘Merricat,’ said Connie, ‘would you like a cup of tea?’ ‘Oh no,’ said Merricat, ‘you’ll poison me.’ ‘Merricat,’ said Connie; would you like to go to sleep? Down in

the boneyard ten feet deep!” (Jackson 7). Gizem Akçil states, “The singing indicates that the villagers still believe Constance poisoned her family and that it is such common knowledge that the children have introduced it into their play. The children . . . reflect the cruelty of the adults” (35). Thus, the children are influenced by their parents to regard the Blackwoods as if they are monsters from a local urban legend.

The villagers collectively seem determined to express their fear and hatred of the Blackwood girls, going out of their way to provoke them. The men in the town present a tangible, sexual threat towards Merricat in particular. Upon entering the village on an errand, Merricat recounts her feelings about a prying man’s physical proximity to her, observing, “I wished he would not sit so close to me; Stella came toward us on the inside of the counter and I wished she would ask him to move so I could get up and leave without having to struggle around him” (Jackson 5). Merricat feels trapped and uncomfortable due to the proximity of this man. In *Witches in Feminist Literature: A Study of the Male Gaze in Shirley Jackson’s We Have Always Lived in the Castle and Angela Carter’s The Bloody Chamber*, Daniel Amb Ropphaugen recognizes the male gaze as a “tool of oppression” within the novel (7). The men in the town use their power and their stature to assert themselves. Merricat claims, “The people of the village have always hated us” (2). Since Merricat felt the villagers’ hatred towards her family even before the deaths of her parents, their antagonistic behavior seems to be the product of a long-withstanding jealousy of the Blackwoods’ wealth and independence.

Before their cousin Charles arrives, the only male presence remaining in the Blackwood estate after the poisoning is Uncle Julian. In Merricat’s descriptions of him, Uncle Julian is an unthreatening and mostly inconsequential presence within the home. While walking through the village, Merricat mentally transports herself into the following scenario to calm herself: “...we are

having lunch in the garden and Uncle Julian is wearing his shawl” (Jackson 4). She seems to be comforted by the presence of Uncle Julian, who wears a shawl, a garment commonly associated with femininity. He has a non-threatening role in the girls’ life, never disturbing the current matriarchy of the Blackwood estate and even embracing a more submissive role in the household. Constance, in fact, fulfills the role of the matriarch and the head of the household. The text recounts how Uncle Julian relies upon Constance to prepare his meals, and he trusts her to be the executor of his notes and papers if he becomes too feeble to write a book of his life’s studies (18). While Uncle Julian is the man of the household, since Constance plays the role of his executor and main caretaker, she holds the most authority. His continued presence in the home is justified by his willingness to engage in non-threatening activities with the girls, his general embrace of his own femininity, and his feeble dependence on Constance. It may be that Merricat intentionally allows Uncle Julian to survive after her first attempted purge of her family because his feeble state does not prevent him from submitting to the new matriarchy within the Blackwood home.

While Uncle Julian is a male presence within the home whose passive nature does not disturb the independent matriarchy of the sisters, a more presumptuous and controlling male presence soon enters their lives, demonstrating the true dangers of introducing a strong patriarchal influence. Cousin Charles, upon his arrival at the Blackwood home, begins to invade the space and cause Merricat discomfort. She describes her feelings about him in her first encounter, stating,

He knocked, quietly at first and then firmly, and I leaned against the door, feeling the knocks hit at me, knowing how close he was. I knew already that he was one of the bad ones; I had seen his face briefly and he was one of the bad ones, who go around and around the house, trying to get in, looking in the windows, pulling and poking and stealing souvenirs. (23)

There is a consistent theme in the novel of men invading Merricat's physical space, causing her to feel threatened. The above quotation also refers to the male villagers' insatiable curiosity, their tendency to treat the Blackwoods and their house like a freaky attraction.

Although he is welcomed in by Constance, Charles is rejected by Merricat, and as a result he continues to try to assert his power over her, as in this instance: "'Well, Mary,' ... He stood up; he was taller now that he was inside, bigger and bigger as he came closer to me. 'Got a kiss for your cousin Charles?'" (24). The phrase "closer to me" is repeated often by Merricat in contexts involving the male villagers' interactions as well. Charles now also invades her personal space, but he simultaneously infantilizes Merricat, talking down to her to assert his dominance. The girls responded to the feelings of unease generated by the village men by removing themselves completely from the male gaze, only keeping harmless men like Uncle Julian in their nuclear circle. However, Constance's welcoming of Charles into the house creates an entry point for the threat of male violence in the Blackwood matriarchy.

Constance's willingness to welcome Charles into the house may originate from her actual dissatisfaction with the girls' isolation from the outside world. This is revealed in an exchange when Merricat asks Constance whether she believes they will always be together, and Constance responds, "Don't you ever want to leave here, Merricat?" (22). Merricat seems satisfied and comforted by their isolation, and she states, "Where could we go? ... What place would be better for us than this? Who wants us, outside? The world is full of terrible people" (23). This exchange hints at the reality that, while both girls isolate willingly, Constance does consider re-entering the world. Thus, to Constance, Charles' arrival may seem as an instance of fate bringing the outside world to her, giving her a taste of normalcy while also not abandoning her sister and breaking their isolation.

Charles's presence in the house spoils the har-

mony in which the sisters live, and his influence causes Constance to begin to conform to the patriarchal expectations typically imposed upon women. While Charles remains in the house, Constance's new affection towards him causes her to become attached to him. She begins to cook for him and awaits his arrival home. With this transition into traditional domestic conformity, Constance begins to reject the love of her sister, who is representative of complete and steadfast opposition to social norms. She seems to grow more distant from Merricat as her affection for Charles grows, and she even becomes annoyed with Merricat at times, which is uncharacteristic of her. For example, after Charles' arrival, when Merricat says "I love you" to Constance, Constance responds by stating, "You're a good child, Merricat" (Jackson 33), rather than saying a reciprocal "I love you." When Merricat jokes that she dreams of naming a gingerbread "Charles" and biting its head off, Constance seems irritated and brushes her off. Merricat then states, "I could tell that Constance was going to be irritable, partly because of me and partly because of the gingerbread, so I thought it wiser to run away" (31). Constance does not follow after Merricat, too preoccupied by her new duties of service to Charles.

Charles expects Merricat to be compliant and take well to him, and when she resists, he seems to speak for both himself and Constance in reprimanding her. He states, "So you decided to come back again, did you? And high time, too, young lady; your sister and I have been trying to decide how to teach you a lesson" (40). This form of reprimand causes turbulence within their patriarchal community by pinning Constance against Merricat, simultaneously robbing Constance of her voice by having Charles speak for her. Constance's new dynamic with Charles makes him seem even more invasive to Merricat, showing his male influence as a source of turmoil in the Blackwoods' female Eden.

Charles not only assumes a place in the Blackwood dynamic but he also indulges in the Black-

wood wealth. Outside the walls of the Blackwood estate, the villagers live in a patriarchal system governed by capitalism and greed. Almost anyone who comes into contact with the Blackwoods seems to do so with the intention of gaining something. Their own cousin, Charles, who was left with no inheritance after the death of his father, is no exception. Like the townspeople, he holds a materialistic view of the house and its contents, which sharply contrasts with Merricat's view of the house as an invaluable place of asylum. Akçil observes that "Charles's greed and materialistic attitude clash with the Blackwood sisters' privatized ethereal world" (39). He is clearly interested in the Blackwoods' wealth, as evidenced by his anger towards Merricat for burying silver coins. He states, "'It's not her money, . . . she has no right to hide it.'" (36). Merricat concludes that, for Charles to have found her buried treasure, he must have been digging around the property searching for riches. 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" (33). Charles continues to see the valuables within the house as his rightful possession, claiming the Blackwood riches he believes he deserved after his father left him without an inheritance. While taking from the Blackwood home might make Charles materially richer, it isolates him further from the Blackwood dynamic, as his prioritizing of wealth sharply contrasts with the girls' disregard for material luxuries.

Charles's presence in the Blackwood home is doubly disturbing to Merricat because he is reminiscent of her father, as seen in the following exchange between Merricat and Constance. Merricat asks "'Where did you let Charles sit last night at dinner?'" Constance replies, "'In Father's chair,' . . . 'He has a perfect right to sit there. He's a guest, and he even looks like Father'" (29). This is a traumatic comparison for Merricat, who killed her father to escape his abuse. Charles often alludes to punishing Merricat for her antics as well,

which further reminds her of her father's abusive punishments, causing her to respond with fear. She responds to one such threat by saying, "'Punish me?'" I was standing then, shivering against the door frame. 'Punish me? You mean send me to bed without my dinner?' And I ran. I ran until I was in the field of grass, in the very center where it was safe, and I sat there, the grass taller than my head and hiding me. Jonas found me, and we sat there together where no one could ever see us" (39). Merricat likely responds this way because she was often punished with hunger by her father. These comparisons accumulate to cause a traumatic response, which motivates her to defend both herself and her sister against Charles.

Merricat initially attempts to be cordial and polite when asking Charles to leave her space. When it is finally revealed to readers that she murdered most of her family due to their negligence and mistreatment of her and her sister, it becomes clear that Merricat is suppressing her violent urges towards Charles. Merricat is thus not inherently violent or monstrous; rather, she resorts to violence only when she and her loved ones are threatened. Her constant need to defend the safety of herself and her sister brings out her monstrosity. However, since she is in a constant state of defense due to others' cruelty, it is easy for others to ascribe her violence to a monstrous aspect of her character. Similar to her father's antagonistic behavior, Charles responds to Merricat's polite request by threatening her. The text recounts his response: "'No,'" he said. . . . 'As a matter of fact,' he said, 'come about a month from now, I wonder who will still be here? You,' he said, 'or me?'" (33). By indirectly threatening her, Charles transforms from a nuisance to a direct threat to Merricat's safety, activating her natural instinct to eliminate that which threatens her. When Merricat begins to feel like an outsider in her own home, after her cordial words fall short, she turns to violence and witchcraft to defend herself and her patriarchal family structure.

Merricat often suggests that a powerful force

governs the sisters and Charles: the energy of the house itself. For example, when she notices that “A spark from [Charles’s] pipe had left a tiny burn on the rose brocade of a chair in the drawing room” she decides not to tell Constance because she hopes “that the house, injured, would reject him by itself” (32). Charles also invades Merricat’s space by filling the room with a masculine air. By leaving his marks around the house, Charles essentially taints the sisters’ female space with his invasive maleness. However, Merricat regards the property as a sentient being that will protect itself from the injury of outsiders, especially men. Although the house is tainted by the physical stains Charles leaves behind, there is a prevailing force within the Blackwood property that exists metaphysically and is stronger than the material form of the house itself. Thus, while the house may experience injury, Merricat believes it will never fail to protect and sustain the girls. This supernatural quality that Merricat attributes to the property represents her faith in the prevailing matriarchy she and Constance have created, a force stronger than the patriarchy that Charles and the villagers attempt to impose upon them. With an unwavering faith in the metaphysical power of the Blackwood home, Merricat tips Charles’ smoldering cigar into the trash can, causing a rampant fire that destroys the top floor of the house.

As Charles and the Blackwoods evacuate their burning mansion, first responders from the town arrive to put out the fire. The girls protect themselves in the best way they knew how: by isolating themselves and hiding behind some vines. Some of the townspeople suggest that the house should have burned years ago, with the girls inside it. Some townspeople even call to the firemen, telling them to let the house burn. However, once the fire is put out, the firefighter Jim Donnel removes his fireman’s hat as if to signify the completion of his duty and the commencement of his willful desires. He throws a rock at the house, shattering a window, and the townspeople begin to follow suit, destroying and stealing everything they can from the

mansion (42-44). After the house burns and the fire is put out, the metaphorical fire of greed continues to blaze within the hearts of the villagers, engulfing the sisters and their only place of safety. Adults and children alike taunt the girls, chanting at them and blockading them. The villagers see opportunity in the girls’ misfortune, storming the house and stealing and destroying everything they can get their hands on. The villagers’ mercilessness and hostility towards the girls in their state of desperation and vulnerability also shows them to be cowardly and antagonistic. Through this display of the villagers’ true character, it becomes clear that their villainizing of the Blackwood girls is nothing but a pale attempt to mask their hateful jealousy and cruelty towards them. The villagers and Charles are thus proven to be the true monsters of this story.

The matriarchy established by the sisters ultimately endures despite the threat posed by Charles and the villagers. The girls completely abandon any social standards that might be imposed upon them and assume full autonomy over themselves and their lives. The burned house ultimately protects the girls by driving Charles away. While the estate itself is ravaged and has greatly decreased in value, the Blackwood matriarchy remains unharmed because it was never founded on wealth to begin with. Rather, the strong bond of the sisters transcends social conventions and material riches so it cannot be destroyed by external forces.

After the villagers leave and the fire is quenched, Merricat and Constance’s mother’s portrait remains hanging in the drawing room and the safe remains untouched within the house. Merricat states, “I was shocked when we came into the drawing room to see our mother’s portrait looking down on us graciously while her drawing room lay destroyed around her” (Jackson 49). This detail represents the unaffected matriarchy that continues to govern the Blackwood estate, proving that the current Blackwood family is intrinsically structured as a matriarchy rather than a capitalist patriarchal system. Although men attempted to

infiltrate and assume power, the most sacred elements of the sisters' independent social system exist separately from that which the villagers value. Their power exists in their refusal to conform. By doing this, the sisters are able to defend their territory against outsiders and emerge victorious, refusing to conform to the capitalist patriarchy that exists outside their charred walls.

Constance now fully re-embraces her role as the head of the household after the fire, this time with an even more complete lack of male influence, since Uncle Julian died of heart failure as a result of the fire (45). Constance and Merricat prove their self-sufficiency by restoring the spirit of their feminine Eden, now more separate than ever from male influence. Their complete abandonment of typical social structures is exemplified by the girls' unconventional choices of clothing: Constance wears Uncle Julian's old suit and Merricat wears a tablecloth. Their attire represents their abandonment of social norms. Constance wearing a suit is representative of her new position as the leader of the family, a role usually designated to the "man of the house" in a standard patriarchal family structure. Merricat wears a tablecloth, signifying her embrace and reclamation of "female spaces," such as the table and the hearth. The girls do not fight back against the villagers; instead, they accept their isolation and thrive within the circumstances thrust upon them by their oppression and antagonism.

The sisters sustain a matriarchy by taking shelter and comfort in retreat. The kitchen, one of the only spaces in the house that remains intact after the fire, becomes a safe haven. As Merricat had originally suspected, despite their mansion having sustained substantial injury, it protected and sustained the girls by preserving this space. That, along with the company of one another, allows the sisters to adjust despite their isolation and desperate circumstances. Gizem Akçil highlights this in her reading of the novel:

Miraculously, Constance discovers that the aged preserves of food—"colored

rows of jellies and pickles and bottled vegetables and fruit, maroon and amber and dark rich green [that] stood side by side. . . a poem by the Blackwood women' (Jackson 61)—prepared by generations of Blackwood women, in the cellar below the kitchen are undisturbed remaining as 'emblems of the sisters' survival.'" (Akçil 18)

In their kitchen, the sisters are comforted despite the isolation forced upon them because generations of women have united in their efforts to sustain the future Blackwood matriarchy, all within the kitchen. They simply need a space to feel secure and take up a stable lifestyle with reliable rituals. By rejecting the traditional standards Charles attempted to impose upon them and reclaiming their space, the sisters are able to retain their matriarchy, even through tragedy. The girls self-isolate as a means of protection, especially from men, to preserve both their safety and their unconventional lifestyle (Roppaugen 7). Merricat earlier describes feeling comforted by the "NO TRESPASSING" sign on the gate. The sign was initially hung by Merricat's father to keep common villagers off their property. Her mother once stated: "'The highway's built for common people, and my front door is private'" (8). While her family's compulsion towards isolation may have originated from a classist upbringing, Merricat's isolation is motivated by fear of the villagers and sustenance of the sisters' matriarchal space.

Merricat begins brainstorming ways to keep the villagers away shortly after the fire. She states, "'We can keep the door open,' . . . 'if we watch carefully all the time. We'll hear if any cars stop in front of the house. When I can,' . . . 'I will try to think of a way to build barricades along the sides of the house so no one will be able to come around here to the back'" (52). While the villagers are violent and exploit the Blackwoods as their riches burn, their sense of guilt afterwards seems to cause some townspeople to return later and make offerings to the sisters. Eventually, the villagers begin



to leave food on the sisters' doorstep, if only to absolve their own consciences. Daniel Roppaughen interprets the villagers' offerings differently. He states, "the village women also deserve to be credited for helping the girls to become fully independent from patriarchy as their gifts allow the girls to never have to leave Blackwood manor" (17). However, while the villagers' new generosity could inadvertently work to protect the Blackwood matriarchy, sustaining the girls in their self-isolation, it is more likely that the villagers are motivated more by guilt than by a compulsion to sustain female space. In the text, two of the villagers, Jim Clarke and a local physician, call to Merricat and Constance from outside the boarded-up windows, referring to themselves as "friends" of the girls. They beg for a response from inside the house, saying, "'Just one word,' the doctor said. 'All you have to do is say you're all right'" (53). The state of the house, burnt and ravaged by the very people that now extend an olive branch toward the girls, starkly contrasts with the sympathy they and the rest of the villagers seem to want to share with them. They clearly seek reassurance that the girls have not been killed, and they are tortured by the idea that the blood of these girls may stain their own hands. They also seem to think that Constance and Merricat owe them this closure, as evidenced by Jim Clarke's words, "'You can't just let people go on worrying and worrying about you'" (53). By begging for a mere confirmation of their wellbeing, it is clear that they have not come to make peace with the girls but rather with their own consciences.

The villagers' newfound generosity, both in this example and in their gifts of food, could also be a last attempt to control the Blackwood girls. If the girls begin to rely upon the villagers' generosity, they would also inadvertently be submitting to the village social system. This is suggested by the doctor: "'Listen,' the doctor said, and I thought he had his mouth against the door, 'one of these days you're going to need help. You'll be sick, or hurt. You'll need help. Then you'll be quick enough

to—'" (53). It seems that the villagers need the Blackwoods to need them, as their pride refuses to allow them to reconcile themselves to the Blackwoods' sustained self-sufficiency. This is one instance within the novel in which Jackson "touches upon the issue of class in exploring the patriarchal fear of female self-sufficiency" (Akçil 35). The villagers invade the house because they cannot accept the sisters' ability to self-sustain and their isolation. By later providing them with chicken and pies, the villagers can comfort themselves with the idea that they have inducted the Blackwoods into their patriarchal system by force, causing the women to submit and finally begin to rely upon them.

Though the sisters manage to physically isolate themselves from Charles and the villagers, their influence still reigns over Constance. Even after Charles has fled the mansion, Constance clearly struggles to shake the standards she had been conditioned by him to uphold. Merricat says "It would be safer to let the kitchen windows get dirty," to which Constance responds, shocked, "I wouldn't live in a house with dirty windows" (52). Constance shows herself to be so consumed by her responsibility to keep the house tidy that she will choose clean windows over the safety of herself and her sister. This shows that even the temporary influence of outsiders and their monstrous biases and customs had threatened to corrupt the purity of the Blackwood lifestyle.

Even weeks later, Charles and other self-seeking villagers continue to attempt to exploit the girls. This is demonstrated when Charles returns to the dilapidated mansion looking to score a photo opportunity with the girls. The text highlights the following conversation between Charles and a journalist, which takes place outside the Blackwood home with Merricat and Constance in earshot: "'You think there's any chance you might get one of them to talk to you? Maybe come to the window or something, so I could get a picture?'" Charles thought. He looked at the house and at the other man, and thought. 'If you sell this, to the

magazine or somewhere, do I get half?’” (Jackson 59). Even after stripping the women of their material possessions and watching their resources burn to the ground, Charles comes back to further exploit the sisters. This is representative of the insatiable greed of a capitalist society, which fuels monstrosity.

The villagers’ inclination to exploit and make “monsters” of Merricat and Constance robs them of their humanity and provokes within them the very monstrosity by which the villagers justify their hatred. Charles and the male villagers in particular are representative of an intrinsic craving for control and greed as they attempt to invade and impose male privilege in the matriarchal space that is the Blackwood mansion. By the end of the novel, it is clear that the true monstrosity lies in the jealousy and hatred of the villagers, which causes them to terrorize the girls in their most vulnerable moments. However, the sisters are steadfast and secure in their quiet opposition to social norms, and their self-isolation proves to be their best defense against the cruelty and monstrosity of the outside world in the end.

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