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"House on the Moon": Female Isolation and Sisterhood in Shirley Jackson's *We Have Always Lived in the Castle* (1962)

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Abstract

This article analyzes Shirley Jackson's last completed novel, *We Have Always Lived in the Castle* (1962), in the context of the genre of the "Female Gothic," a term coined by Ellen Moers in *Literary Women* (1976) to refer to literary works written by women in the Gothic mode since the eighteenth century. Incorporating fear and horror into the stories of alienated female characters in uncanny Gothic settings, "Female Gothic" has articulated women's struggles to move outside the constrictive domestic sphere and gender codes. The Gothic motifs and symbols in Shirley Jackson's novels blur the lines between the self and the Gothic landscape/setting, the past and the present, and the real and the fantastic, and can either bring about self-destruction or enable resistance to and subversion of socio-cultural limitations and undesirable outside realities. In Jackson's last novel, the home as a Gothic symbol has a paradoxical quality, since it appears both as a symbol of domestic confinement and imprisonment and as a sort of refuge (from socio-cultural violence), in which female characters, as haunting "witches," can disrupt patriarchy from within and establish a new order based on sisterhood.

Keywords: Gothic, Female Gothic, Shirley Jackson, Alienation, Gothic Setting

Shirley Jackson'ın *Biz Hep Şatoda Yaşadık* (1962) Adlı Romanında Kadın Karakterlerin Yabancılaşması ve Kız Kardeşlik

Öz

Bu çalışma Shirley Jackson'ın *Biz Hep Şatoda Yaşadık* (1962) adlı son romanını "Kadın Gotiği" edebi türü kapsamında inceleyecektir. Ellen Moers'ın *Literary Women* (1976) başlıklı çalışmasında geçen "Kadın Gotiği" terimi on sekizinci yüzyıldan beri kadın yazarlar tarafından kaleme alınan Gotik eserleri kapsamaktadır. Korku ögeleri ve tekinsiz Gotik mekânlardaki yabancılaşmış kadın karakterlerin hikâyeleri aracılığıyla, "Kadın Gotiği" edebi türü kadınların kısıtlayıcı toplumsal cinsiyet rollerine karşı verdikleri mücadeleyi dile getirmiştir. Shirley Jackson'ın romanlarındaki benlik ve Gotik mekân, geçmiş ve şimdiki zaman, gerçek ve hayali olan arasındaki ayrımı bulanıklaştıran Gotik semboller ve motifler bireyin kendine zarar vermesine neden olabildiği gibi aynı zamanda toplumsal kısıtlamaların ve olumsuz dış gerçekliklerin ötesine geçmeye de olanak sağlar. Bu nedenle son romanda, Gotik malikane sembolü hem domestik bir sembol olarak hem de kadın kahramanların ataerkil düzeni bozup kız kardeşliğe dayanan yeni bir düzen kurdukları fantastik bir sığınak olarak temsil edilmektedir.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Gotik, "Kadın Gotiği," Shirley Jackson, Yabancılaşma, Gotik Mekân

In her short stories and novels, the American author Shirley Jackson (1916-1965) explores fear and horror as an outlet from reality. In Jackson's fiction, fear is the means of confronting the unknown, one's own Self, and the traumas haunting the individual. Like her nineteenth-century Gothic predecessors, Jackson probes into the human heart and exposes the depravity within the individual and society as well as the alienating forces of the material, external world. Her protagonists are mostly isolated, ostracized, lonely young women on the verge of mental breakdown, haunted by past traumas or tragic memories. They embark on journeys into haunted Gothic settings in search of love and adventure, seeking shelter in fantastic, imaginary worlds.

In Jackson's second and third novels, the female protagonists eventually return to the outside reality and sanity, yet in her later novels, they completely withdraw from society.

This article will examine Jackson's last novel, *We Have Always Lived in the Castle* (1962), in light of the Female Gothic tradition—which is comprised of literary works classified as "Gothic" and written by women authors (Ann Radcliffe, Mary Shelley, and the Brontë sisters) since the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries—by focusing on Gothic landscapes and settings, "witchcraft" and folklore, and Jackson's deployment of Gothic tropes as vehicles for social criticism. Furthermore, in view of Julia Kristeva's terminology, this article will analyze the novel's depiction of the Gothic mansion and the two sisters, Merricat and Constance Blackwood, who hide within it as "the abject" or the cast-aside "other" of the rural community. In addition, this study will explore how patriarchal ideology, violence, hatred, materialism, hypocrisy, malignance, and bigoted social values of American dystopia in the mid-twentieth century are depicted as the sources of female isolation and discontent. In order to analyze the novel in-depth, it is, at first, necessary to examine the general characteristics of the genre of Female Gothic.

The Female Gothic

"The Female Gothic" is a term coined by Ellen Moers in *Literary Women* (1976). It describes "the work that women have done in the literary mode that, since the eighteenth century, we have called the gothic" (Moers 90). The Female Gothic was recognized as a literary category during the second wave of feminism; it focuses on issues central to women's experiences. The term refers to Gothic narratives that feature distressed female protagonists, domineering patriarchs, and monstrous (oppressive) mothers or absent mothers. It focuses on the issues of domestic confinement, gender roles, the cult of true womanhood and motherhood, and mental illness.

Moers argues that a definition of the Gothic, in which "fantasy predominates over reality, the strange over the commonplace, and the supernatural over the natural," "is not easily stated except that it has to do with fear" (90). Likewise, Rosemary Jackson defines the Gothic as a "literature of unreason and terror" (95); and argues that the Gothic

should be "seen as a reaction to historical events, particularly to the spread of industrialism and urbanization" (96) as well as to science and all it produces and/or represents. By incorporating elements of horror and madness; and situating characters within dark, haunted, gloomy, and uncanny places, the Gothic and the Female Gothic have articulated women's sense of confinement and the desire to counter societal pressures. In line with the genre of Female Gothic, in her novels, Shirley Jackson focuses on the conflict between the individual and society by depicting isolated female protagonists.

Ellen Moers's work on the Female Gothic is augmented by the contributions of feminist critic Elaine Showalter, who coined the term gynocriticism in the late 1970s. Showalter's work, "Towards a Feminist Poetics" (1979), focuses on the history of the female literary tradition and argues for the existence of women's language and a specifically feminine mode of experience, perception, and subjectivity. As Fitzgerald explains, Showalter "punned on Woolf's demand in her title for *A Literature of Their Own* (1977), which, along with Moers' *Literary Women* and Sandra M. Gilbert's and Susan Gubar's *The Madwoman in the Attic* (1979) formed the core of the second phase of feminist criticism in the US" (10).

In *The Madwoman in the Attic,* Gilbert and Gubar address the struggles women writers experienced while determining their identities as female writers outside the male-defined literary canon, which depicted female characters either as angels of the house (nurturing, gentle, and obedient) or as monsters (disobedient and witchlike). Countering such stereotypical images produced by male authors, Gilbert and Gubar shift their focus to examine the depiction of female characters in the works of nineteenth-century women writers and poets such as Jane Austen, Mary Shelley, Emily Brontë, Charlotte Brontë, George Eliot, Mary Elizabeth Coleridge, and Emily Dickinson.

Disrespecting "the borderlines of the appropriate, the healthy, or the politically desirable" (Bruhm 94), Female Gothic opens up a space in which genders and sexualities are called into question. Unlike conventional Gothic, Female Gothic depicts ghosts as "far less frequently sinister or horrific figures" as "men and oppressive gender codes turn out to be scarier than ghosts" (Weinstock 19). Susanne Becker uses the term "feminine gothic" to refer to "women-centered novels" (16) and argues that feminine gothic "foreground[s] the gothic

emphasis on [the] body," using "the metaphor of the house" which links "the women's sphere to her body" (19–20). The Female Gothic subverts the domestic ideology from within and calls into question the notion of "the ideal home" by "focusing on crumbling castles and sites of terror" (Ellis ix). Shirley Jackson's novels, particularly *The Haunting of Hill House* (1959) and the last novel *We Have Always Lived in the Castle* (1962), illustrate Ellis's argument that regards the home as a dangerous place of confinement. In *The Haunting of Hill House*, the haunted house is depicted as an unwelcoming, inherently malign Gothic monster that destroys the self of the female protagonist, Eleanor Vance, causing her to commit suicide. Likewise, in *We Have Always Lived in the Castle*, the female protagonist, Merricat Blackwood, struggles to purge the home, the private domain, yet, she ends up experiencing domestic confinement along with her older sister. However, unlike the former novel, in the last novel, the Gothic mansion is represented as a shelter from antagonistic forces. According to James Egan, "a substantial part of [Shirley Jackson's] work may be interpreted as either the expression of an idyllic domestic vision or the inversion of that vision into the fantastic and Gothic" (157). Thus, in Shirley Jackson's novels, the Gothic mansions appear not only as symbols of domestic entrapment but also as subversive hideouts and as representations of self and fantasy that contradict the outside socio-cultural order and its norms.

Shirley Jackson's *We Have Always Lived in the Castle* (1962)

Shirley Jackson's *We Have Always Lived in the Castle* focuses on the story of two sisters: the eighteen-year-old protagonist and first-person-narrator Merricat (Mary Katherine) Blackwood and her twenty-eight-year-old sister Constance. They live an isolated life in the Blackwood mansion with their wheelchair-bound Uncle Julian on the outskirts of a small, gloomy village. The sisters and their elderly uncle are the only survivors of a family tragedy caused by Merricat six years before the start of the novel. The sisters' parents, a brother, and Uncle Julian's wife died at the dinner table after eating arsenic-covered blackberries, which left Uncle Julian with a senile mind and as an invalid. Uncle Julian's disability is a symbolic reminder of the crippled patriarchy of the Blackwood family. Merricat discloses that since she knew her sister Constance never took sugar, she put the arsenic into a sugar

bowl before dinner. In spite of the fact that Merricat, who had been sent to her room without dinner for being a disobedient child at the time the tragedy occurred, is the actual culprit, Constance, who cooked the dinner, was accused of the crime. As Ruth Franklin explains, "Protective of her little sister, Constance took the blame, washing out the sugar bowl immediately to hide the evidence, and stood trial" (*Shirley Jackson: A Rather Haunted Life*, Ch. 16). Despite her exoneration, the villagers continue to believe that Constance is the murderer.

The Blackwood mansion, thus, appears as the "antiquated space" that Jerrold E. Hogle observes in Gothic tales (2). As Hogle explains, "Within this space, or a combination of such spaces [castles, palaces, old houses/buildings, abbeys, graveyards . . .], are hidden some secrets from the past (sometimes the recent past) that haunt the characters, psychologically, physically, or otherwise at the main time of the story" (2). Fred Botting notes that old houses or mansions are modern counterparts of the castle; they are the sites where the return of the repressed "fears and anxieties" of the past impinge on the present (Botting 2). In this respect, the secret of Merricat's childhood crime continues to haunt Merricat, Constance, and Uncle Julian within the Gothic space of the Blackwood house. Since the time Merricat poisoned the members of the Blackwood family, she, Constance, and Uncle Julian have lived secluded within the mansion, avoiding contact with the hateful villagers whose prejudice against the sisters is related not only to the crime but also to the Blackwoods' privileged upper-class status (Silver 666). Merricat tries to protect the matrilineal space she has established with her sister by minimizing contact with the hostile village; she only ventures out twice a week for supplies and library books. In spite of the intrusion of a deceitful, greedy cousin named Charles into their world, the Blackwood sisters are able to convert their mansion into a private, enclosed Gothic castle—the only place where they remain away from social judgment. Carpenter argues that "the poisoning has resulted in a transfer of power from Blackwood men to Blackwood women" (32). Thus, Merricat's crime is a symbolic act of subverting the oppressive/patriarchal familial and social order.

Merricat Blackwood appears as the alienated heroine of Shirley Jackson's Female Gothic. She is one of Jackson's isolated female characters whose haunted mental states are connected to a desire to retreat from a hostile world. Perceiving the disparity between expected roles and what they desire to become, Jackson's heroines resist the pre-

dominant order through Gothic fantasy. In the introductory paragraph at the beginning of Chapter One, Merricat articulates her wish to be a grotesque Gothic creature, a werewolf, indicating her non-conformism and her estrangement from the antagonistic rural community—which has ostracized her and her older sister—outside the borders of the Blackwood estate:

> My name is Mary Katherine Blackwood. I am eighteen years old, and I live with my sister Constance. I have often thought that with any luck at all I could have been born a werewolf, because the two middle fingers on both my hands are the same length, but I have had to be content with what I had. I dislike washing myself, and dogs, and noise. I like my sister Constance, and Richard Plantagenet, and *Amanita phalloides*, the death-cup mushroom. Everyone else in my family is dead. (1)

As the name "Merricat" suggests, Mary Katherine is a wild, unruly, witchlike girl who enjoys spending time in the wilderness, knows the names of poisonous plants, communicates with her black cat Jonas, and is fascinated by the idea of magic. By articulating her wish to be a werewolf, she reveals the fact that she is an outcast, a Gothic other, who enjoys the company of Jonas in times of crisis. According to Franklin, "(Merricat's witchiness is enhanced by her faithful black cat, Jonas, to whom she often speaks, just as Jackson conversed with her cats.) Witchcraft, in this context, is again best understood as a metaphor for female power and men's fear of it." (*Shirley Jackson: A Rather Haunted Life*, Ch. 16). Throughout the novel, Merricat not only seeks solace in the presence of her cat but also indulges in self-made "witchcraft" rituals by burying objects such as silver coins, a doll, and little blue stones around the estate, uttering magical incantations to protect the Blackwood home and ward off any outside threats. Thus, the enclosed mansion figures a symbol of alienation or isolation from the society represented by the hostile village.

The dull and grey village is marked by a sense of stifling, oppressive conformity, and decadence. Except for the Rochester house—the house where Merricat's mother was born, and interestingly named after a character in Charlotte Bronte's *Jane Eyre*—and a junkyard, the entire "village was of a piece, a time, and a style; . . . whatever planned to be colorful lost its heart quickly in the village" (8–9). According to Dara Downey, the village appears as an allegory of the crushing con-

formity of mid-twentieth-century suburban America; By depicting the village as a place of dull uniformity and hatred and violence, Jackson employs "Gothic tropes" and "otherworldly horror" to draw attention to "darker aspects of everyday life" (Downey 291–292). Downey's statement sheds light on the symbolism attached to the Blackwood mansion, which stands as a shelter and a marker of class (Bailey 8), broken family life, and domesticity. Despite the fact that the Gothic house stands as a symbol of domestic entrapment, Merricat and Constance eventually subvert the patriarchal, domestic ideology from within as witchlike female characters who exemplify powerful female bonding.

Hiding inside the isolated mansion, the Blackwood sisters reject being a part of the decay and gloom of the surrounding village. Merricat becomes the target of the villagers' hatred, rage, and ostracism. She faces the social stigma attached to her family since the poisoning incident. Each time she walks past the row of stores, Merricat thinks of rot, "burning black painful rot that [eats] away from inside" (9), destroying the village. Merricat's vision of Gothic decay is apocalyptic as she imagines the destruction of the world outside her home. She retreats into herself, trying to act as if the villagers do not exist. She fancies living on the moon until she arrives at the black rock marking the entrance to the path that leads to the Blackwood estate. While shopping, she always imagines that she is playing a board game and thinks of the whole village as the game board itself. In the course of her shopping excursion, she filters reality through her imagination or fantasy, which creates a space that is "without the outside cultural order" (Rosemary Jackson 320).

At the grocery store where Merricat is served by Mr. Elbert and his insipid greedy wife and at Stella's, where she reluctantly stops for a cup of coffee, she tries to disregard the malignant gaze and taunting to which she is subjected. As Metcalf notes, "As she walks through the streets, she experiences herself as objectified and is terrified by the covert hostility of the townspeople" (233). The people of the village conceal their own immorality and deliberately hate the Blackwood sisters, not only because of the poisoning incident but also because of their wealth. Honor McKitrick Wallace argues that the sisters are "littered by the remnants of patriarchal [Blackwood] wealth," which "does more harm than good," creating "hostility towards them" and attracting intruders like Cousin Charles, who plans the marry Constance and takes the

riches (179). Moreover, Merricat and Constance, as self-sufficient single women, are thought of as a threat. The children taunt Merricat on her way home by calling her names and reciting a made-up rhyming verse that refers to the poisoning of the Blackwood family: "'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!'" (23). The singing indicates that the villagers still believe Constance poisoned her family and that it is such common knowledge that the children have internalized it into their play. The children, who reflect the cruelty of the adults, are significantly named "the Harris boys" (22). In Jackson's fiction, the name Harris alludes to Francis James Child's Scottish ballad entitled "James Harris, The Daemon Lover (Ballad No 243)." In the ballad, James Harris appears as a disguised demon who lures a woman to set out a journey with him on a ship sailing towards hell. Thus, the presence of the surname "Harris" gothicizes the village, suggesting the presence of evil.

In contrast to the village, the Gothic Blackwood mansion provides the sisters with a sense of belonging and safety. Merricat feels at home when she opens the padlock of the gate on which there is a sign reading "PRIVATE NO TRESPASSING" (25). Merricat's recollections reveal how once the Blackwoods considered themselves as a "superior" class of people. As Merricat mentions, her father erected signs, gates, and locks to enclose the entire Blackwood estate; and closed off the path the villagers used as a shortcut to the bus stop on the highway four corners. Her mother also disliked the sight of anyone passing in front of their door. She said to Merricat, "'The highway is built for common people, and my front door is private'" (26). The classist attitude of Merricat's parents reveals that the villagers' hatred of the Blackwoods has its deeper roots in the past. Since the time of the enclosure, no one has used the path, which is now dark with overgrown trees, bushes, and flowers. Merricat is the only one who knows the secrets of the great meadow, the heavily wooded gardens that provide shelter. Her secluded hiding place by the creek is encased by tree branches, bushes, and leaves—a private place of her own where she feels secure. By focusing on the conflict between the Blackwood sisters and the villagers, the novel emphasizes the contrast between "the lovely, pastoral Blackwood" estate and "the hostile, resentful village wasteland" (Parks 142); and touches upon the issue of class in exploring the patriarchal fear of female self-sufficiency.

Like Hill House in Jackson's former novel *The Haunting of Hill House*, the Blackwood mansion has its own history. It represents a separate realm with its unmoved, firmly placed furniture and objects, and contains traces of generations of Blackwood wives, who brought their belongings into the house, "and so [the] house was built up with layers of Blackwood property weighting it, and keeping it steady against the world" (Jackson 2). Linda Trichter Metcalf argues that "The goal of the established order is protection against the encroachments of an alien world" and reflects "a tendency to favor stasis over change" (231). Recalling Hill House, the Gothic Blackwood mansion is a devouring house. It is like a Gothic monster that lives on frozen memories and years of accumulated items.

Throughout the novel, Merricat, Constance, and Uncle Julian spend most of their time in the back of the house, on the lawn, and in the garden where no one can see them. Constance enjoys tending the flowers and vegetables and preparing the food in the kitchen. As Stuart C. Woodruff explains, Constance "epitomizes the regenerative power of love and selfless devotion; . . . [She] is further defined through her love of cooking and gardening—her marvelous skill at making things grow and flourish" (154–155). In this respect, she is the opposite of Merricat in that she conforms to the "feminine" role of a nurturer, performing domestic chores. However, as Darryl Hattenhauer notes, she "is a passive-aggressive enabler" "who taught Merricat about poisons" (177). Merricat mentions that when she was young, she thought Constance was a fairy princess and used to draw her with long golden hair and blue eyes. Franklin observes that "Constance, as her name suggests, is the embodiment of peace and stability, angelic with her blond hair and rosy skin, even her harp. Merricat is un-tame, uncontrollable, her world governed by superstition rather than reason" (*Shirley Jackson: A Rather Haunted Life*, Ch. 16). Yet, even though they appear to be opposites to each other, the rebellious and childlike Merricat and the docile and mature Constance are the Gothic double of the novel, reflecting each other's unconscious wishes. Merricat incorporates Constance into her imaginary, fairytale world, and she is like a mother for her while Constance secretly delights in Merricat's dissident personality.

The fairytale-like, peaceful life Merricat envisions is occasionally disrupted when acquaintances come to visit. On Fridays, Helen Clarke takes her tea with the Blackwoods, and on Sundays, women

stop by after church to tell them about the sermon. Mr. and Mrs. Carrington drive to the front step of the house, asking about how the sisters are doing. However, Helen Clarke's and Mrs. Wright's visit has a chilling impact on Merricat, who is disturbed by Clarke's advice that Constance should "'Come back into the world'" (38). Merricat presumes that if Constance decides to leave behind her isolated life within the borders of the Blackwood estate to return to the community, their private female Gothic fortress will be destroyed. She asks Constance, "'Where could we go? What place would be better for us than this? Who wants us outside? The world is full of terrible people'" (78). Merricat is horrified at the possibility of the breaking of her secured boundaries between the inside and an antagonistic outside. Helen's visit, foreshadowing the arrival of other intruders, aims to disrupt the female bonding between the two sisters.

Like Helen, the inquisitive Mrs. Wright, to whom Uncle Julian explains the details of the murder in the dining room, arouses unfriendly feelings in Merricat. She dislikes Mrs. Wright's fearful, uneasy demeanor and her plain black dress, which contrasts with the shiny salon with chairs and mirrors, her mother's harp, Dresden figurines on the mantel, and her mother's portrait on the wall. When Constance later reprimands Merricat for teasing Mrs. Wright, Merricat says, "'I can't help it when people are frightened; I always want to frighten them more'" (55). Merricat's bravery, combined with her belief in magic, is a counter-force against the hypocrisy of the people outside. Merricat and Constance delight in cleaning this room, which is full of memories. They dust the figurines on the mantel and polish the floors. Merricat imagines herself as a witch as she cleans the salon with Constance, dusting with a cloth attached to the end of a broom and fantasizing that the ceiling is the sky. In the act of cleaning the house, she becomes a "witch," purifying the castle of evil influences. As Downey argues, "Merricat's figurative language associates housework with witchcraft" (300), allowing Jackson to mobilize it as an oppositional category" (294). Merricat believes the housework creates a protective barrier and ward off possible intruders, particularly the ruinous influence of Cousin Charles, who will arrive to dominate and steal.

Merricat senses the forthcoming arrival of Charles and the imminent destructive change that will alter the sisters' peaceful pattern of days in the mansion. Jonas engages in peculiar habits, and she warily checks the fence, the locks, and her magical safeguards—buried sil-

ver coins nearby the creek, a buried doll in the field, and a book that she has nailed to a tree—to ensure that her enchantments protecting the house are not broken. Selecting three words— "Melody, Gloucester, and Pegasus"—as a safety measure, Merricat tries to create a wall of protection and believes that so long as these words are not uttered aloud by anyone, no harmful change will come upon them (63). According to Carpenter, Merricat's charms are an attempt to empower herself first within her family and then within the society at large (34). Merricat ritualistically whispers the third word, Pegasus, into a glass she takes from the cabinet to seal her spells guarding the house. As Merricat whispers the word, Dr. Levy visits Uncle Julian, whose health is deteriorating day by day. Uncle Julian becomes increasingly senile and obsessed with his notes on the details of the arsenic poisoning. He notes down every detail and re-arranges his notes frequently to complete his book. Even though Uncle Julian seems to adhere to scientific scrutiny and details in his notes, he actually has a frail, insanely obsessive mind. He is one of the male academics who are represented either as domineering patriarchs or as mad scientists (or both) in the tradition of Victor Frankenstein in Jackson's novels.

When Charles arrives in the Blackwood estate, Merricat thinks of him as "a ghost" (89) and a demon that hides behind a human face. In this respect, Charles is reminiscent of the folkloric daemon lover named James Harris in Child's ballad. Contrary to the invisible, uncanny specters of Jackson's earlier novel *The Haunting of Hill House*, Charles is the incarnate phantom in human form, and Merricat contrives a number of rituals to exorcise him from the house to erase "every touch he made on the house" (99). Montague Summers explains that conventional Gothic-fantastic tropes (witches, giants, knights, castles, dragons, and ghosts) can appear in different guises in more realistic literary works (35). In Jackson's last novel, while Charles appears as a sinister ghostly being, Merricat is the "witch" who combats his presence. Unlike Constance, Merricat is able to discern the dishonesty of Charles, who tries to seduce Constance and make her leave behind her isolated life so that he can seize the family's fortune. Merricat also dislikes Charles's unkind attitude towards Uncle Julian, who sees through him. To threaten Charles, she mentions the names and properties of local poisonous plants: *Amanita phalloides* and other mushrooms within reach by the creek and in the fields. Like a witch, she depends on her knowledge of her herbs, which she can use to disempower the Gothic

intruder Charles, who threatens to reestablish the original Blackwood family by becoming the domineering father, reducing Constance to the role of the "submissive wife/mother," and punishing the child Merricat (Rubenstein 321). Thus, he appears as a womanizer, a thief, and a liar. Merricat struggles to maintain her own private world against the intrusion of both the villagers and Cousin Charles. Jonas is her sole companion with whom she communicates telepathically—she prefers the company of the cat to a human friend. The cat is almost similar to a fantastic creature in that it has extraordinary comprehension and intuition skills. Along with the Blackwood sisters, who eventually become the hiding "witches," Jonas, as a Gothic animal, haunts the Blackwood estate.

Ensuing Charles's departure for the village, Merricat notices Charles's possessions, his suitcase on a chair, his pipe and handkerchief, "dirtying [her] father's room" (110) upstairs, and, in line with the Female Gothic tradition, she resolves to purge the house. In addition, she realizes that the drawer containing her father's jewelry box—which holds a gold watch-chain, cuff links, and a signet ring—is left open, which reveals that Charles looked into her father's jewelry. At this point, she mentions her fear of rings as entrapping objects that signify the prospect of marriage as implied by Cousin Charles's presence. In order to drive Charles away, she nails the watch chain to the tree where the book, a symbol of their insular world, was hanging. Charles, who finds the chain on his way back, removes it from the tree and brings it back to the house. As he holds out the chain in his shaking hand, he cries out to Uncle Julian and Constance in amazement, saying that he has found it nailed to a tree, and exclaims, "What kind of a house is this?" (111–112). When Constance tries to assure him that it is not a significant matter, Charles says, "'Not important? Connie, this thing is made of gold. . .. One of the links is smashed. I could have worn it; what a hell of a way to treat a valuable thing. We could have sold it'" (112). While Merricat and Constance regard the watch chain either as a token or as a charm, Charles upholds its profit value. Neither Merricat nor Constance sees objects the way Charles does. Charles's greed and materialistic attitude clash with the Blackwood sisters' privatized ethereal world. Encroaching the closeted world of the Blackwood mansion, Charles threatens to exclude and dislodge Merricat from the house. In response, Merricat plans to force him to leave the house before he takes over the entire mansion and can never be removed.

Merricat begins implementing her "witchcraft" to drive Charles from the house. She twists the winding knob of her father's watch until it stops tickling to "release Charles' spell" and to break "through his tight skin of invulnerability" (126). Both Uncle Julian's name, which alludes to "the Julian calendar" (Hattenhauer 183), and John Blackwood's watch symbolize the desire to freeze or control time. Uncle Julian is stuck in the past and constantly rearranges his notes about the day the members of the Blackwood family were poisoned, whereas Merricat has the wish to do away with time altogether and eternally live on the moon. In the middle of the night, Merricat goes out into the darkness to gather pieces of wood, broken sticks, leaves, and scraps of glass and metal. She takes the books from her father's desk and the blankets from the bed and puts the glass, metal, wood, sticks, and leaves into the empty spots. She also pours a pitcher of water on the bed and tears down the curtains. In this way, Merricat tries to eliminate Charles's presence, dislocate him by making changes to the room and creating disorder in order to purge the room of his influence. She disrupts Charles's notion of civilized order with the wood, sticks, and leaves to re-create the wilderness from within. Merricat lives close to nature; she is a child of the forest as she makes use of nature's enchantments and shuns humans except for Constance and Uncle Julian.

On the way home, Charles finds Merricat's buried silver coins by the creek shouting, "'It's not her money, she has no right to hide it'" (128). He reveals once more his motive to rob the sisters. As Constance tries to explain to Charles that Merricat likes burying objects, an angry Merricat thinks of ways to destroy Charles. She goes to the spot where her box of silver coins has been buried and imagines turning Charles into a fly and dropping him into a spider's web. Spiders and spider webs are commonly used motifs in Gothic-fantastic literature. These motifs create an effect of horror and contribute to the dark undertone of a Gothic landscape or setting. Looking down at the hole poked by Charles on the ground, Merricat imagines burying Charles's head there. She picks up a stone, draws Charles's face on it, and buries it to say farewell to his ominous presence, performing a kind of "voodoo magic." Merricat's ruminations reveal her violent tendencies and the extent of her hatred of Charles or what he represents: fraudulence, deceit, the desire to dominate, and the search for wealth and power.

Having discovered the state of his room, Charles starts showing more hostility towards Merricat. He threatens Merricat when he says,

"'I haven't quite decided what I'm going to do with you. But whatever I do, you'll remember it'" (131). Meanwhile, Uncle Julian complains that he is unable to work as Charles talks all the time. He starts confusing Charles with his deceased brother John Blackwood and slams his hand down on the desk, scattering his papers. Charles exclaims, "'It's a crazy house, Constance, this is a crazy house'" (134). For Charles, the Blackwood house is insane; it does not fit into his notion of order. Blurring time and reality, the house becomes a stage where Merricat acts out her subversive "witchery."

Charles endangers Merricat's visibility and dignity when he asks Constance, "'Aren't you even going to punish her?'" (137). Charles's inquiry reminds Merricat of her punishment by her parents: "Shivering against the door frame," Merricat inquiries, "'Punish me? You mean send me to bed without my dinner?'" (137). Charles threatens to revive Merricat's life with her oppressive, restrictive parents and her imprisonment inside her room. Merricat runs outside and, followed by Jonas, takes the path leading to the dark, possibly haunted summerhouse where no one dares to go. Even Jonas stops following her as Merricat turns on to the ominous path. As Merricat recounts, their father had planned to build the summerhouse near the creek, but the house was "born bad," having taken in a malignant quality from the local environment and the materials out of which it was made. The summerhouse, reminiscent of the haunted Hill House in Jackson's previous novel *The Haunting of Hill House* (1959), is one of the Gothic motifs in the novel that mirrors the haunted, distressed mind of the protagonist.

Sitting on the stone floor where there once was a low table with chairs, Merricat relives the memory of her family. She imagines them all sitting in a circle around the dining room table, talking to each other. Hattenhauer argues that "Looking back on the night she killed her parents; brother and aunt, she imagines not that they resist her but that they obey her" (178). She imagines her mother telling her father that Merricat can have anything she wants. In her reverie, when the father says, "'Lucy, you are to see to it that our most loved daughter Mary Katherine is never punished,'" the mother answers, "'Mary Katherine would never allow herself to do anything wrong; there is never any need to punish her'" (139). She compensates for the lack of love and affection in her childhood by reinventing the conversation between her mother and father. Once again, she makes a promise to herself to cleanse her world, which Charles has darkened.

Raymond Russell Miller, Jr. argues that the novel is "analogous in rhythm to the siege of a castle, the 'castle' being the Blackwood mansion" (235). Merricat causes a fire by brushing Charles's burning pipe off the table and into a wastebasket full of newspapers. In this scene, Merricat is reminiscent of Bertha, the insane wife of Mr. Rochester, who sets Thornfield manor on fire in Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre* (1847), representing a world of rebellion and sexual freedom (Andrew Smith 78). In this context, the reference to the Rochester House at the beginning of the novel makes sense. Both Bertha, who is kept imprisoned on the third floor of the Rochester house, and Merricat challenge oppression by causing fires. Bertha is described as the "madwoman," who represents repressed rage as the Gothic double of the main character Jane Eyre in Gilbert and Gubar's *Madwoman in the Attic* (1979). In Female Gothic, the concept of "madness" is used not only to refer to mental turmoil but also to signify female resistance. Therefore, Merricat's act resonates with Bertha's and exemplifies Donna Heiland's argument in *Gothic and Gender* regarding the transgressive quality of the Gothic genre:

> The transgressive acts at the heart of gothic fiction generally focus on corruption in, or resistance to, the patriarchal structures . . .. Further, and importantly, these acts are often violent, and always frightening. For gothic novels are above all about the creation of fear—fear in the characters represented, fear in the reader. (5)

Merricat's transgressive "witchcraft" rituals eventually culminate in the horrific scene of the fire, which is suggestive of an apocalypse. The flames from Charles's pipe engulf the room of Merricat's father, and the subsequent fire, caused by the burning pipe, destroys the second floor and the attic of the house. When he notices the fire, Charles hurries to the village to ask for help and wants the sisters to put the money kept in the safe into a bag. The fire violently disrupts the order of the house and reveals Charles's motives more clearly. As the villagers begin to arrive to observe the fire, Merricat and Constance "watch the great feet of the men stepping across [the] doorsill, dragging their hoses, bringing filth and confusion and danger into [the] house" (149). Merricat's spells are broken completely, and the villagers begin to invade the castle. The scene represents a symbolic battle between the Blackwood sisters and the hostile community who gather around the burning house. Merricat constantly hears Charles telling the men to "'Get the safe in the study'" (150). It is evident that Charles does not

care about the lives of the Blackwood sisters and Uncle Julian. The villagers watch the top of the house burning with frightened yet mocking faces. A woman among them calls out, "'Why not let it burn?'" (152). The hatred and violence of the villagers illustrate Jackson's criticism of mob mentality and the rottenness and malice of hypocritical, bigoted, callous crowds.

After the fire is put out, Jim Donell (the fire chief) takes a rock from the fire-engine, and throws it through a window. Having found an "outlet" to display "their dislike and fear" (Downey 299), the villagers move "like a wave at [the] house" (Jackson 154) to destroy and plunder it. They shatter the windows, smash the harp and the chairs and furniture, and throw the kitchen utensils, silverware, china, teacups, and plates on the floor. As the villagers ruin and plunder the Blackwood mansion, they chant, "'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!'" (157–159). It becomes clear that the daemonic Charles has been the harbinger of all this destruction and chaos. He is the one who initiates the invasion, which reaches its climax with the arrival of the hateful villagers. Charles is, thus, the embodiment of all the evil within the society, and the fire scene is a symbolic scene of hell. Charles and the mocking villagers victimize the women, the Blackwood sisters.

In the midst of the confusion, Merricat takes Constance, who covers her eyes out of fear all the time, by the arm. During the fire scene in which the villagers try to purge the village of the two "witches" through violence, a sort of role-change occurs: "The usually dependent Merricat becomes the guide and protector of Constance" (Parks 146). As the sisters run stumbling towards the woods, the townspeople block their way, encircling them and still chanting. The vicious crowd of people and the song about the poisoning generate a ritualistic effect, alluding to the bigoted, cruel ritual of stoning in Jackson's prominent short story "The Lottery" (1949). According to Michael L. Nardacci, "Oddly enough, in this novel, as in the short story 'The Lottery,' it is the mob that is the real antagonist" (215). In "The Lottery," as part of a fertility ritual, the rural community stones to death the person who chooses a marked slip of paper from a black box each year in June. The black box symbolizes the community's bigotry and reluctance to give up harmful and meaningless traditions. As Helen E. Nebeker explains, this black box signifies "the dead hand of the past codified in

religion, mores, government, and the rest of the culture." (172). At the end of the story, Tessie Hutchinson, whose last name evokes the story of Anne Hutchinson (1591– 1643), the Puritan female preacher who was banished from Massachusetts Bay Colony for her unorthodox beliefs, selects the slip with the black dot and is stoned to death. Like Hutchinson, Merricat and Constance are similarly ostracized. As Richard Pascal observes, in Jackson's fiction, "the small town or neighborhood is depicted as a nexus of sanctioned intrigue against whatever is individual, different, or alien" (163). In line with "The Lottery," which emphasizes the danger of blind adherence to bigoted conventions, the novel examines socio-cultural violence against Merricat and Constance Blackwood. The sisters finally escape from the violent crowd and reach Merricat's hiding place in the woods, which represents a new Eden. At night, before falling asleep, Merricat watches the stars, signs of hope, innocence, and renewal "shining from far away between the leaves and the branches and down onto [her] head" (161). Merricat confesses her guilt, and the readers learn that it was not Constance but Merricat who poisoned the family when she was twelve.

The next morning, Merricat and Constance discover that only the bottom floor of their home is intact but in ruins with broken objects, furniture, and food scattered all over the place. Merricat imagines they "have somehow not found [their] way back correctly in the night," that they have "lost themselves and come back through the wrong gap in time, or the wrong door or the wrong fairy tale" (167–168). She returns to her usual method of denying reality and looking through the lens of fantasy. 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" (Carpenter 36). The untouched preserved food indicates that the sisters will be able to recreate a loving atmosphere outside the boundaries of the hostile village and achieve spiritual fulfillment or rebirth out of the remnants of the past. Yet, it is also significant to note that most of the food preserves are possibly inedible and stale, as they have been kept for centuries. In the course of the novel, Constance contributes to this Gothic food storage, which Merricat compares to her buried objects when she says to Constance, "'You bury food the way I bury treasures'" (Jackson

61). As Honor McKitrick Wallace observes, just as food is stripped of its mere nurturing function and thought of as an aesthetic composition that is not for consumption, Merricat strips treasures like the coins and the gold watch chain of their economic value and thinks of them as her "talisman" (180). Merricat and Constance create their own value system that counters the corrupt values of Cousin Charles and the villagers. Within the Blackwood mansion, the sisters invent their unique verse composition, which contrasts with the inimical chants of the community.

In addition to the food preserves, Merricat realizes the library books are untouched, too. The books symbolize both the sisters' private world and Merricat's gift of imagination. Together they re-arrange and clean the house and take everything—including two unbroken teacups—they can use from the mess. The sisters' entrapment within the Blackwood castle paradoxically provides them with the bliss they seek. Thus, "It takes burning down most of the house and withdrawing into it for good to achieve what Merricat identifies as perfect happiness" (Shotwell 132). Merricat finds her mother's Dresden figurine, which was thrown out of the window, on the lawn. Constance returns it to the mantel, putting it beneath their mother's portrait. They close the door of the salon behind them, never to open it again, and "To keep time at bay, they agree never to mention the murder again" (Hattenhauer 183), reinforcing their commitment to a fresh start. Moreover, Merricat believes that she has made Uncle Julian—who dies during the fire—immortal when she buries his gold pencil by the creek so that the creek will "always speak his name" (201). She kills a nest of baby snakes she finds nearby and notes that she killed them because she does not like snakes, associating them with the evil represented by Charles and the villagers. With its Biblical associations, the snake is another Gothic motif that Jackson employs. By killing the snake-nest, Merricat completes her spell-working to defend her world against the threat of intruding darkness and destruction.

Merricat barricades the house to protect it from the outside intruders: she closes the shutters and locks the front door. The Clarkes unsuccessfully try to persuade the sisters to come out of hiding, and Merricat reacts by covering the kitchen windows and the tiny glass window in the kitchen door with cardboard and later with wooden planks. The barricaded house represents Merricat's attempt to re-secure the boundaries of her private space away from the hostile, external

world. In other words, it is similar to her imaginary house on the moon. Standing at the foot of the stairs, she looks up and wonders "where [the top of] the house has gone" (177). She feels "a breath of air on her cheek coming from the sky" and realizes that their house is now "a castle turreted and open to the sky" (177). As Downey argues, the novel brings together "the home's dual status as fairy tale refuge and Gothic prison," and "far from dispelling the Gothic gloom of earlier work," the novel claims the Gothic house "as a site of independence and empowerment" (291). The fact that the top of the house is now gone and open to the sky indicates the fulfillment of Merricat's desire for flight symbolized by her magic word "Pegasus." The fire permanently transforms the Blackwood mansion, destroying its previous physical structure and providing the sisters with isolated freedom.

Ultimately, Merricat and Constance adjust to living like Robinson Crusoe stranded on a deserted island. They are restored to Edenic bliss through "regeneration" after Merricat destroys their corrupt Eden (ruined by Charles) with her apocalyptic fire in order to save it (Hattenhauer 185–186). They spend their time in the kitchen, where they eat and sleep, along with Jonas. Since their clothes were destroyed in the fire, Constance decides to wear Uncle Julian's clothes and uses tablecloths to make dresses for Merricat. Not only does this suggest a gender role reversal, Constance is now the masculine half of the couple, whereas Merricat is literally domesticated through tablecloths, but it also signals the rebuilding of a new way of life out of mere scraps. Out of guilt for the pain and destruction they have caused, some of the villagers begin leaving food in baskets on their doorstep. Carpenter explains that "the offerings of food" is reminiscent of the offerings to mythological deities in ancient times (36). In addition, "food becomes a means of communication" between the inside and the world outside (Carpenter 36), and a means of connection between the past and the present symbolized by the preserves, prepared by their ancestors, in the cellar.

The sisters' reclusiveness in the Blackwood castle, which now looks like a tomb or a deserted haunted house covered with vines from the outside, reinforces the villagers' belief that they are "witches." As Downey argues, the sisters transform the devastated mansion into a protected fortress and turn themselves into supernatural specters that scare conventional heroines (291). One day, a group of people consisting of two women, a man, and two children come on bicycle. They sit in front of the ruined house, and the two children—a little boy and a little girl—

begin to play, running around. Sitting on each side of the front door, Merricat and Constance watch the people through the narrow glass panels that Merricat has covered with cardboards with small peepholes. One of the women with the mouth of a snake frightens the children by making up stories about Merricat and Constance, saying that the ladies who hide within the ruined house hate little boys and girls, make the boys eat poisonous candy, devour the little girls, and haunt and abduct the children at night. The reclusive Blackwood sisters become a part of the folklore generated by the villagers who invent songs and stories about them.

In accordance with Julia Kristeva's theory of abjection, explored in *Powers of Horror* (1982)—which deals with the loss of the distinction between the self and a Gothic m/other, and a breakdown in meaning (a breakdown of the boundaries of one's self) that causes the human reaction of "horror" (1)—the Blackwood Castle and the sisters hiding within it are depicted as the abject of the small town; in other words, they are discarded and not wanted. The meaning of the word "abjection" is "throwing off"—expunging conflicting feelings that result from a condition of being in-between, occupying a liminal space of existence, or the contradictory sense of being same with, yet different from the m/other. As Kristeva argues, "there looms within abjection, one of those violent, dark revolts of being, directed against a threat that seems to emanate from an exorbitant outside or inside" (1). The individual desires to have a separate identity or existence "in order to be" (Kristeva 10), but at the same time, s/he is both repulsed and lured by the thought of being engulfed by the m/other and returning back to his or her origins of being. According to Kristeva, the abject is neither a subject nor an object, but a non-object or "pseudo-object" within one's psyche, the result of what she calls "primal repression" (*Powers* 12) before the entrance into the symbolic order of language. In most of Jackson's novels, "the abject" appears both as an uncanny character and self that haunts the female protagonist and as Gothic mansions that not only mirror the protagonists' confused minds but also are the abject of small-town America. The abject is thus not only a psychological concept but also a sociological one: it is that which threatens the boundaries of both one's self and the society—its dominant norms, traditions, and moral values. Since Merricat, through her acts of resistance, threatens the prevalent order of society and its power structure, she becomes an outcast along with her sister Constance. In short, they become the Gothic other of small-town, suburban America and its values and are thought of as monstrous, witchlike beings.

According to Angela Hague, the novel depicts the home as a vulnerable place, on both the physical and psychological levels (85). At the end of the novel, the castle is threatened once more when Cousin Charles returns with a stranger—who wants to take photos for his magazine—trying to capitalize on the trauma. He even tells the stranger about the money that the sisters keep in the safe. As Charles drives away in final defeat, Merricat and Constance start laughing in the dark hall. When Constance proclaims that "'she is so happy,'" Merricat answers, "'I told you that you would like it on the moon'" (211). As Rubenstein explains, in the end, Merricat "succeeds in sustaining her regressive fantasy incorporating Constance into her emotionally primitive magical world" (325). For Merricat, the ruin of Blackwood castle eventually becomes her imaginary blue house where she lives alone with her sister on the moon. According to John G. Parks, this ruin "symbolizes not only [the sisters'] crime, but also the crime of dark retribution perpetrated against them in anarchic passion by the maddened villagers" ("Chambers of Yearning," 27). Parks cites Devendra P. Varma, who comments on the symbolic meanings attached to Gothic ruins. Varma notes that "a ruin is not only a thing of loveliness but also an expression of Nature's power over the creations of man": "Ruins are proud effigies of sinking greatness, the visual and static representations of tragic mystery" (20). In line with Varma's argument, the ruined castle stands as a symbol of the tragedy the Blackwood sisters have gone through. At the same time, it represents their strength to rise out of tragedy and reclaim their house and selves. The Gothic house, thus, appears as an icon of the self, a female-defined space that the Blackwood sisters create out of remnants.

Conclusion

Shirley Jackson's *We Have Always Lived in the Castle* depicts the Gothic house both as a site of domestic confinement and as a site of empowerment and hideaway (from society) in which the two sisters Merricat and Constance Blackwood live in isolation with their disabled Uncle Julian, since the time the eighteen-year-old protagonist Merricat Blackwood poisoned her domineering family members—(her father, mother, brother, and Uncle Julian's wife) who punished her disobedience—with arsenic mixed with sugar when she was twelve. In spite of the fact that she is a murderer, she is not portrayed as the villain. On the contrary, the author depicts Merricat as a childish yet strong and independent protagonist the readers can identify with as she struggles against

dishonesty, greed, prejudice, violence, and domination, and rejects the social roles imposed upon her.

Merricat and her older sister Constance are represented as the Gothic double in this novel: While Constance is depicted as a domestic woman who does the housework, prepares the food, and looks after Merricat and Uncle Julian, Merricat is portrayed as the rebellious "witch," who invents her own "witchcraft" like burying objects (a doll, little stones, and coins) around the house, nailing a book and a gold watch chain to a tree, and uttering spells to protect their home from outside intruders. When Cousin Charles arrives with the intention to dominate the household and take over the sisters' fortune, Merricat struggles to remove his patriarchal influence on the house. Reminiscent of a dragon, she guards her charmed treasures; she causes the fire to secure her house on the moon. After the fire in which Uncle Julian dies and the looting of the house by the townspeople, Merricat and Constance convert the ruined Blackwood mansion into a private, enclosed, and barricaded Gothic fortress, a castle sustained by sisterhood and away from the gaze of the hostile villagers. Thus, in the end, the Blackwood castle becomes the abject of the small-town. For the Blackwood sisters, the outside world ceases to exist as they shut themselves inside the house where they create a surrogate reality. In this respect, the novel shares similarities with Shirley Jackson's previous Gothic apocalyptic fiction.

Contrary to Jackson's earlier novels, *We Have Always Lived in the Castle* presents a more optimistic vision of the Gothic house as a private sanctuary. The sisterhood between Merricat and Constance Blackwood proves to be permanent and inspiring. The Blackwood mansion stands as a ruined castle, fortified and covered with vines. However, Jackson's point is that the real decadence or horror is not within the Gothic mansion but within the community surrounding the sisters' barricaded domain. In the end, Merricat succeeds in dispelling Cousin Charles from the Blackwood mansion. Along with Constance, she saves a ruined house from the attack of the hateful mob. Therefore, in her last novel, Jackson conveys the message that powerful bonds between women are crucial factors in the struggle against oppression and violence.

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