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## **Cracking a Nut: Jackson's Critique of Society and the Pressures on the Mentally III**

*Lucas Johnson*

In Shirley Jackson's *We Have Always Lived in the Castle*, two sisters named Constance and Merricat Blackwood live in isolation along with their Uncle Julian. Having lost their parents at a young age, Merricat and Constance grow up learning to fend for themselves, withdrawing fully from society and maintaining a reclusive lifestyle in their family manor. After living alone for so long, the girls each develop distinctly unique personalities and struggle to maintain sound mental health, especially when the outside forces they try so hard to keep out start trickling in. Merricat's constant fear of the outside world, in contrast with Constance's detached and distant personality, shows the mental rift that was created when the family was poisoned by arsenic, six years previously. This rift demonstrates how isolation shapes human nature and unveils Jackson's commentary on how different societal burdens, especially on young children suffering from traumatic events, can lead to mental disorders and other disastrous results.

Jackson's chief example of how a traumatic event in tandem with societal pressures can cause mental issues is shown through Merricat. First and foremost, Merricat is distrustful of outsiders and believes most of them to be agents of evil working against her and her family. A prime example of this is found when Merricat thinks to herself. "I wanted to be at home, but I knew, too, that Stella would see me pass if I did not go in, and perhaps think I was afraid, and that thought I could not endure" (Jackson 422). Even though Merricat has not yet interacted with Stella, she already has an idea in her head of what Stella might be thinking of her, of how Stella might be watching her, or deviously waiting for her to trip up. In clinical terms, this is called a "perception without a stimulus" and is one of the telltale signs of some level of schizophrenia (Picchioni and Murray, Box 1). Another telltale sign of schizophrenia is the experience of delusions, or "a fixedly held false belief that is not shared by others" (Picchioni and Murray, Box 1). This sign manifests in Merricat's belief in magic items and magical powers, specifically

her belief that she can alter real life events using small, representative objects, a process called “Sympathetic Magic” (Frazer). Merricat states, “On Sunday morning I examined my safeguards, the silver dollars buried by the creek, and the doll buried in the field” (Jackson 459). In addition to the plain fact that belief in Sympathetic Magic on its own is delusional, Merricat’s belief that she needs to safeguard herself from imaginary foes (the townspeople, i.e. society) falls under the medical term, “delusion of persecution” (Picchioni and Murray, Box 1), and is yet another symptom of schizophrenia. Under delusions of persecution, the victim believes they are under threat from some vast, centralized conspiracy. In Merricat’s case, that threat is the entire outside world.

Jackson uses Constance’s character, on the other hand, to portray another side of mental illness, one where the main aggressor isn’t society, but rather isolation and mistrust of others. According to Drs. J. Bisson, S. Cosgrove, C. Lewis, and N. Roberts, one of the significant symptoms of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder can be “negative alterations in cognitions and mood” (Bisson, Box 2). One particular facet of that is “noticeably diminished interest or participation in important activities” (Bisson, Box 2). In the very first page of the book, Jackson writes, “Someone had to go to the library, and the grocery; Constance never went past her own garden” (Jackson 421). Constance has almost no interest in the outside world or the responsibilities and expected behavior of a girl her age. She doesn’t shop, she doesn’t socialize, and she only cooks for her immediate family, never leaving the manor’s grounds for over six years straight. Constance’s desire for isolation and all-around aloofness is even further compounded after Merricat tells her, “If I had a winged horse, I could fly [Uncle Julian] to the moon; he would be more comfortable there (Jackson 462). Constance, instead of giving a reasonable response, goes on to, “[look] at [Merricat] distantly. ‘Dandelion greens,’ she [says]. ‘And radishes... I hope that the carrots ...’ She [taps] her fingers on the table, thinking. ‘Rhubarb,’ she [says]” (Jackson 462). Much like in the previous excerpt, Constance would rather distance herself from conflict and distract herself from the problems before her, no matter how serious. At the time (the early 60s), mankind didn’t know if safely landing on the moon was even possible, so Merricat’s desire to suddenly jet off to the moon with a sick family member is all the more concerning. Instead of consoling her sister and confronting her delusions, Constance would rather go off on a tangent on the food she is about to prepare, ignoring the obvious mental issues Merricat is dealing with. Rather than being a good sibling, Constance would prefer to live in her own world, where the only pressing issue would be whether or not to bake a rhubarb pie for dinner tonight. Once again, this is a proven sign of PTSD, clinically defined as “Feelings of detachment or estrangement from others” (Bisson, Box 2).

Through the portrayal of Merricat as schizophrenic and of Constance as having PTSD, Jackson's critique of society finally becomes clear. Both the sisters' mental illnesses started, as most mental issues do (Satcher), as a result of a traumatic event. In both cases, however, this event is only the seed of the terrible disease that is to come. According to Satcher, "cultural and social factors have the most direct role in the causation of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD)... These traumatic experiences are associated with the later development of a longstanding pattern of symptoms accompanied by biological changes" (Satcher). Essentially, the majority of the time, society is at fault for exacerbating an already traumatic experience to the point where it transitions into something like PTSD or other mental diseases. Examples of society mistreating the sisters are common throughout the book, ranging from adults mocking them in public places (429) to people trashing their house after it had already mostly burned down (520). Society's blame for the sisters' mental disorders becomes even more evident when taking into account the fact that, "Mistrust was identified by the SGR [Surgeon General] as a major barrier to the receipt of mental health treatment... [additionally,] Stigma was portrayed by the SGR as the most formidable obstacle to future progress in the arena of mental illness and health ... [mistrust] refers to a cluster of negative attitudes and beliefs that motivate the general public to fear, reject, avoid, and discriminate against people with mental illness" (Satcher). Once again, society is to blame for compounding the sister's illnesses. In Merricat's case in particular, the stigma she carries every time she walks out in public, the stigma of having dead parents, the stigma of being sisters with an alleged murderer, and the stigma of just being weird, directly fuels her mistrust of society, and, as mentioned above, mistrust is just as much a part of the equation as stigma. The sisters' mistrust of the outside world, justified as it may be, is the root cause of their mental problems, and, according to Jackson, the onus was on society to help re-incorporate the children, to not cast them out, and to make them feel welcome in the new world. Now that that opportunity has passed however it's too late, highlighting the very real consequences of not acting quickly when mental issues arise.

To put it all together, the very fact that these disorders, which both stem from a tragic event, were mishandled by society, and lead to all manner of negative consequences, including a death, a fire, and two mentally ill children, sums up the authors critique against society as a whole. Society does not treat it's mentally ill with proper enough care, and, while it may be easy to ignore the consequences in the short term, just as it was easy to ignore the children for a whole 6 years, the ramifications of these decisions can eventually come back to affect the community at large. Interestingly enough, even though *We Have Always Lived in the Castle* is nearly 60 years old, its message is just as relevant today as it was back then. In modern times, when

mentally ill people ask for help, especially veterans, they are usually unable to receive the degree of assistance they need and can sometimes then turn violent and commit acts of terror or other heinous crimes simply because their disorders have worsened, as was the case with the Parkland Shooter (Benner, Katie, et al.). Had society stepped up when the time was right and provided for these people that have done nothing wrong but have a mental illness, there might have been different outcomes.

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