

We Have Always Lived in the Castle



INTRODUCTION

BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF SHIRLEY JACKSON

Shirley Jackson was born in 1916 in San Francisco to middle-class parents who soon moved the family to Rochester, New York. After briefly attending the University of Rochester, Jackson ultimately completed her degree in 1940 at Syracuse University. As a student, Jackson worked for the campus literary magazine, where she met her future husband, Stanley Edgar Hyman. Hyman was also a lover of literature and would go on to become a successful critic. After Hyman and Jackson married, the pair moved to North Bennington, Vermont, where Jackson spent the rest of her life. Hyman worked as a professor at Bennington College, and Jackson spent her time writing. Both husband and wife enjoyed socializing and hosting events, and they had a wide circle of literary friends, which included Ralph Ellison. However, Hyman was a controlling husband who had affairs with his students and forced Jackson to act as a conventional wife despite her literary successes. Furthermore, Jackson felt estranged from the people of North Bennington, and probably based some of her crueler depictions of village life on her experiences with them. Near the end of her life, Jackson struggled with severe agoraphobia and obesity and remained secluded in her room. She died in her sleep due to heart failure in 1965, when she was only 48 years old. Jackson is best known for her short story “The Lottery” (1948) and her ghost story [The Haunting of Hill House](#) (1959).

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

This novel, written just a few years before the radical social movements of the 1960s and '70s began, is a reaction to the return to traditionalism that occurred in the United States after World War II. During the 1950s, women were expected to stay at home to cook and clean and support their husbands in every possible way. The family was seen as the center of society and it was supposed to create peace and harmony. Just as one response to oppression is anger, Merricat's violent tendencies may be Jackson's reaction to finding herself in this stifling social climate. The book also references an earlier means of oppressing women: witch hunts. Between the fifteenth and eighteenth centuries, hundreds of thousands of women were tortured, hanged, or burned at the stake in North America and Europe on suspicion of practicing witchcraft. This phenomenon has been interpreted as a means of suppressing women who tried to gain some power in their society. Merricat can easily be read as a witch who escapes burning and the madness of a mob.

RELATED LITERARY WORKS

Jackson is best known for her short story “The Lottery,” concerning a ritual stoning in an imagined American town. This story's focus on an unthinking cruelty inherent in human nature shocked readers so deeply that the *New Yorker*, which had published the story, received a record number of letters about it, and South Africa banned its publication. *We Have Always Lived in the Castle* echoes some of the themes of “The Lottery,” particularly in its depiction of a hostile group of townspeople whose mob mentality allows them to commit horrible acts with a minimal sense of conscience. Additionally, the novel has served as inspiration to a number of writers whose works play around the edges of horror, speculative fiction, and yet also a level of realism, including Neil Gaiman and Joyce Carol Oates.

KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** We Have Always Lived in the Castle
- **Where Written:** North Bennington, Vermont
- **When Published:** 1962
- **Literary Period:** Postmodernism
- **Genre:** Gothic novel
- **Setting:** A small New England town and its surroundings
- **Climax:** the villagers tearing apart the sisters' house after it burns
- **Antagonist:** Charles Blackwood, the villagers
- **Point of View:** first person

EXTRA CREDIT

Extreme family tension. Jackson's husband was Jewish, and her parents were anti-Semitic. As a result, they didn't attend her wedding.

A practicing witch. Jackson had a large library of books on witchcraft, and she once spread a rumor that she had used witchcraft to make publisher Alfred A. Knopf break his leg while skiing.



PLOT SUMMARY

The narrator, Mary Katherine Blackwood (known as Merricat) introduces herself and reveals that all of her relatives are dead, except for her sister Constance. She then begins her story some time earlier, on the day she brought home the library books that still sit on her shelf, long overdue.

It's Merricat's job to go into town for groceries, but she doesn't like having to face the villagers, who are hostile towards her. The Blackwoods' land is closed off from the outside world with

a fence, and the villagers have always hated the Blackwood family. Merricat hates the villagers in return and often wishes them dead. When she enters the grocery store, everyone goes silent until the owners have helped her and she leaves.

On her way home, Merricat goes into Stella's café to show that she isn't afraid. Jim Donell follows her inside to pester her, insisting he's heard that she and her sister are moving away, which Merricat denies. Joe Dunham comes in, too, and Merricat has to endure their sly insults until Stella tells her to go home. On the way home, the Harris boys chant a rhyme at her about Constance poisoning her with a cup of tea.

Merricat returns home, where Constance welcomes her and begins making lunch while their Uncle Julian looks over his papers, which detail the death of the rest of the family six years earlier. Then they prepare for tea, as an old family friend named Helen Clarke is coming to visit. It becomes clear the Constance isn't used to interacting with people other than Merricat and Uncle Julian.

When Helen Clarke arrives, Merricat greets her and finds that she's brought her friend Mrs. Wright. Over tea, Helen Clarke urges Constance to reenter the world, and Constance's openness to this idea worries Merricat, so she smashes a pitcher in the kitchen.

Uncle Julian comes into the drawing room and begins to discuss the night that the rest of the family was poisoned with arsenic at their dinner. Julian himself also ate the arsenic, but in a small enough quantity that he survived, though it has affected his memory. Mrs. Wright can't help showing her fascination with this topic, despite Helen Clarke's disapproval. Julian details the reasons why Constance might have been guilty or might have been innocent. She was tried for murder but acquitted. Constance and Merricat enjoy his performance, and eventually Helen Clarke forces Mrs. Wright out the door.

The next day, Merricat senses that a change is coming in their lives, so she chooses three magic words that will prevent it coming until the words are said aloud. Uncle Julian's health seems bad that day, and after Dr. Levy comes to examine him, the sisters and Uncle Julian sit in the garden and talk about the day of the poisoning. Uncle Julian reveals that he and his wife felt that the sisters' father resented the financial burden of their presence in the household.

On Sunday, Merricat and her cat, Jonas, wander the property. Merricat checks on various items that she has buried as magical protection for the house. She finds that a book she nailed to a tree has fallen, and she takes it as a terrible omen. After lunch, Merricat sees a man coming up the steps of the house. She thinks he's one of the many people who come to try to gawk at Constance and take souvenirs from the house because they've heard about the poisoning. However, Constance lets the man into the kitchen and introduces him as their cousin, Charles Blackwood. Merricat is upset that she has let him in, so she

spends the night in her hiding place by the creek with Jonas.

The next morning, Merricat returns to the house. Though she says that Charles was a ghost, Constance insists that he spent the night in their father's bed, which is proved when Charles comes downstairs and meets Uncle Julian. He tries to make friends with Merricat, but she refuses to speak to him. Uncle Julian wants to write about Charles's perspective on the trial, but Charles doesn't want to talk about it.

While Merricat and Constance clean the house, Charles tries to get closer to Merricat through Jonas, and Merricat plots how to get rid of Charles. She eats dinner with the family because Constance wants her to. At dinner, Charles offers to take over the job of getting groceries in town, and Constance is grateful to him.

The next day when Charles goes into town, Merricat takes her father's gold watch chain out of Charles's room and nails it to a tree. When Charles finds it, he's enraged that she would damage something so valuable. He threatens Merricat while Constance is out of the room.

Under Charles's influence, Constance begins to think that she has done wrong by keeping the family isolated from the world. Merricat asks Charles to leave, but he refuses, so she breaks the mirror in his room. Uncle Julian has also begun to mistrust Charles, and he hides his papers in a box.

On Thursday, while Charles tries to fix the back step, Merricat tries to wipe out Charles's mark on the house. She breaks her father's watch, which Charles has claimed, and fills his room with wood and dirt. Meanwhile, Charles digs up the silver dollars she's buried in the woods. She cleans out her shelter by the stream to get rid of his influence, and when she returns home, Charles is furious about the state of his room. He wants to punish her and is exasperated by Uncle Julian's delusions—it becomes clear that Julian believes Merricat died during Constance's trial. Eventually Merricat runs away and goes to the deserted summerhouse, where she imagines her dead family showering her with words of praise and indulgence.

When Merricat returns to the house, Constance, Charles, and Uncle Julian are eating dinner. Merricat goes upstairs and tips Charles's burning pipe into the trash can, then joins them at the dinner table. Before long, Charles smells smoke and discovers that his room is on fire. He runs for help while Uncle Julian goes to collect his papers. Merricat and Constance shelter on the porch, hidden behind some vines. Firemen arrive along with a crowd of villagers, who would like to see the house burn down. Charles is most concerned about getting the **safe** out. Once the fire is out, Jim Donell, the chief fireman, throws a rock through the drawing room window, spurring the villagers to storm the house and begin destroying it from inside.

Merricat and Constance try to run to the woods, but the villagers surround them, taunting them. They only stop when Dr. Levy and Jim Clarke announce that Uncle Julian is dead.

Merricat takes Constance to her shelter by the stream, where they acknowledge for the first time that Merricat poisoned their family.

When Merricat wakes up the next morning, she knows that everything will be different from now on. She and Constance discover that only the ground floor of their house is left. The kitchen is littered with broken china, glass, and furniture, but Constance manages to make breakfast anyway. When they eventually get up the courage to look at the rest of the house, they find that the drawing room and the dining room are both a mess. Merricat shuts these rooms and they close the doors forever. They clean the kitchen and the front hall, and lock the front door.

Before long, Helen and Jim Clarke turn up at the door, calling for the sisters and claiming that they want to help. Merricat and Constance hide, and eventually the Clarkes leave. Merricat covers the kitchen windows with cardboard so no one can see in. Later, Jim Clarke returns with Dr. Levy, who wants to make sure they're not hurt. Merricat and Constance sit at the table behind the covered windows until the men leave. Constance apologizes for the night before when she reminded Merricat why their family died and she promises she'll never bring it up again.

Over time, the sisters create a new pattern for their life. Merricat always makes sure the front door is locked, and she barricades the sides of the house with junk to prevent people from getting into the garden. People use the path through their front yard now, and sometimes children play on the lawn. Constance wears Uncle Julian's old clothes, and Merricat wears tablecloths. They plant a rosebush on the spot where Uncle Julian used to sit in the garden.

The villagers begin to leave **food** on the porch in the evenings with notes apologizing for various items they broke the night of the fire. Merricat never strays past the garden anymore, and she and Constance often sit at the front door and watch the people outside. One day, Charles arrives with another man, who says he'll pay Charles for a picture of him with one of the sisters if he can get them to come out. Charles begs Constance to let him in, but she doesn't. The moment he leaves they both laugh uproariously at his foolishness.

The people who walk past the house always speculate about the sisters, and children are afraid of them. There's a rumor that the sisters eat children, and Merricat and Constance joke about it. They feel they have little to fear anymore, and they are happy.

describes, she often acts much younger, smashing things when she's upset and getting lost in her reveries of living on **the moon**. At the same time, she has a cold-blooded violent streak; she poisoned most of her family when she was twelve by putting arsenic in the sugar bowl one night when they sent her to bed without her supper. In an attempt to exercise her will over the world, Merricat practices what can best be described as witchcraft. She buries objects all over the Blackwood property as safeguards, and she tries to force Charles to leave by wiping out all signs of his presence in the house and smashing mirrors. Furthermore, Merricat follows a number of rules concerning what she can touch and where she can go. Though the reader might initially assume that Constance has set these rules, it later becomes clear that Merricat has set them herself. Though Merricat shows almost no outward remorse for murdering her family, the nature of these rules suggests that she might feel more guilt than she lets on.

Constance Blackwood – Constance is Merricat's sister, who is older by ten years. She more or less runs the household, as she does all of the cooking and takes care of Uncle Julian and the garden. She loves Merricat deeply and indulges her constantly. Six years before the novel begins, Constance was put on trial for poisoning her family. Though she was acquitted, the trial made her the object of much curiosity and anger, and most people seem to believe that she is, in fact, guilty. Though Merricat is actually the murderer, it seems that Constance isn't entirely innocent—at the very least, she knew that Merricat was guilty, but remained loyal to her rather than turning her in. Ever since the murders, Constance has been frightened of the outside world and has remained in the house, isolated from almost everyone except for Helen Clarke. Near the opening of the book, though, Constance begins to consider returning to the outside world, and Charles intensifies this possibility by making her see their life through the eyes of an outsider. After the fire, however, Constance commits herself fully to being cut off from the world, and she and Merricat live happily together in isolation.

Uncle Julian Blackwood – Uncle Julian is the brother of Merricat and Constance's father. He was present at the dinner when the rest of the family was poisoned, and though he did eat some of the poisoned sugar, it was a small enough quantity that he survived. However, the arsenic he ingested has made him an invalid and damaged his memory. He lives with Merricat and Constance, and Constance takes care of him. Even though he sees Merricat every day, he believes that she died in the orphanage where she was sent during Constance's trial. Ever since the poisoning, Uncle Julian has been obsessed with the story of it. Whenever he feels well enough, he cheerfully busies himself with his notes about the murders. He's writing a book concerning every detail of what happened. He feels very lucky to have been involved in such a sensational case, and loves nothing more than to talk about the poisoning. However,



CHARACTERS

MAJOR CHARACTERS

Mary Katherine "Merricat" Blackwood – Merricat narrates the novel. Though she is eighteen during the events she

Julian's faulty memory means that he sometimes doubts whether the murders even happened, throwing into doubt everything that he says about the family's backstory. In fact, he seems notably unconcerned with telling the truth about the poisoning, and he sometimes makes up what he can't find out for sure. Uncle Julian acts as the reader's main source of the backstory that so heavily influences the current action of the plot, but his account can never be entirely trusted. Eventually, Uncle Julian's heart fails when the house catches on fire, and he dies.

Charles Blackwood – Cousin to Merricat and Constance. Charles turns up at the house saying that he wants to help the sisters. Though Constance welcomes him, Merricat sees him as a stranger and an intruder and works tirelessly to get rid of him. He initially tries to befriend her, but quickly turns hostile, essentially threatening to steal Constance from her. He refuses to put up with Merricat's eccentricities as Constance does, and he wants to punish her. He also becomes irritated with Uncle Julian's physical illness and delusions, making an enemy of the sharp-tongued old man. Charles allies himself entirely with Constance and begins to turn her against Merricat. Though nothing is said explicitly, it is implied that he hopes to marry Constance and get access to the money that her father has left in the **safe** in his study. It certainly becomes clear that he cares about little other than money, making him into a sort of living copy of the sisters' dead father, John Blackwood. Charles represents the Blackwood masculinity against which Merricat and Constance rebel by entirely disregarding the value of money or social status.

Jonas – Merricat's cat. He seems to be the only being besides Constance that Merricat really loves, and he follows her everywhere. Merricat is (or at least believes herself to be) able to understand him speaking to her. Furthermore, if Merricat can be said to practice witchcraft, then Jonas acts as her familiar, an animal companion thought to increase witches' powers.

Helen Clarke – Helen Clarke is an old friend of the Blackwood family, and one of the few people who hasn't abandoned them since the murders. She still comes to tea periodically, and she eventually begins to urge Constance to reenter the world. While Helen Clarke is friendly to the sisters, she insists repeatedly that the villagers are no longer a danger to the Blackwoods, which proves not to be true. This shows that, while Helen Clarke's attempted kindness sets her apart, she is no less dangerous to the sisters than the rest of the villagers.

Stella – Stella runs a café in the village where Merricat always stops on her way home from doing the shopping. Merricat stops there not because she wants to, but because she feels the need to show that she isn't afraid of the villagers. Stella is polite to Merricat, unlike the other villagers, but she also doesn't defend Merricat against the hostilities of her other customers. Furthermore, she takes part in terrorizing the sisters after the

fire.

Jim Donell – One of the villagers. Jim particularly hates the Blackwoods and he represents the worst of the villagers' attitudes towards them. He's also the chief firefighter, and though he leads the effort to put out the fire at the Blackwood house, he also throws the first rock that spurs the villagers to storm the house and destroy it.

Jim Clarke – Jim Clarke is Helen Clarke's husband. She brings him to the Blackwood house after it burns to try to get Merricat and Constance to come live in the Clarkes' house. Later, she sends him back with Dr. Levy to try again, but both times the sisters hide. Jim seems to mostly want to help the Blackwoods to satisfy his wife, rather than because he genuinely cares about them.

MINOR CHARACTERS

Mrs. Lucille Wright – Mrs. Wright is friends with Helen Clarke and accompanies her to tea at the Blackwoods' house near the beginning of the novel. Mrs. Wright's curiosity about the poisoning and the trial gives Uncle Julian an audience while making Helen Clarke deeply uncomfortable.

Joe Dunham – One of the hostile villagers. Joe Dunham comes into Stella's café and joins in Jim Donell's harassment of Merricat. He's bitter that he once fixed the Blackwoods' broken step and never received payment for his work. In truth, Constance refused to pay him because he did a bad job.

Dr. Levy – Uncle Julian's doctor. He seems uneasy around Merricat, but he is kind to Uncle Julian. He finds Julian dead after the fire. Later, he returns with Jim Clarke to try to make sure the sisters are all right.

Mr. Elbert – The owner of the grocery store where Merricat goes. He tries to get her out the door as quickly as possible.

Mrs. Donell – Jim Donell's wife, and one of the cruelest villagers.

Mr. Harler – A junkman. While the villagers ruin the house, he makes a pile of the junk that they throw outside.



THEMES

In LitCharts literature guides, each theme gets its own color-coded icon. These icons make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. If you don't have a color printer, you can still use the icons to track themes in black and white.



FEMALE POWER

Throughout the novel, the actions of the female characters reveal a desire for revolt against the patriarchy. Due to family tragedy and social

isolation, Merricat and Constance have power over their day-to-day lives that is unusual for young women in the 1960s, and the book is concerned with the sisters' struggle to defend that power from men who would usurp it. The sisters' ultimate triumph is that they succeed in banishing these men from their lives. Jackson, then, presents a vision that could be seen as a kind of feminist utopia, in which the sisters reject many structures and icons of male power, such as money and the traditional nuclear family, and are able to make a woman-centered life for themselves that includes only the two of them.

In this book, male power is especially present in money, as men have traditionally been breadwinners and have used this position to control women. Blackwood men in particular base their identity and success largely on their ability to make money. By entirely disregarding the value of money, Merricat and Constance simply deny the power of men. Their money sits in their father's **safe**, and they use it only to buy necessities. When Charles arrives, he's scandalized by the sisters' indifference to their wealth, but they simply laugh at his attempts to get into the safe and put a price to all the objects in the house. Essentially, they shed much of the power that men may have over them by choosing not to rely on or value money.

Additionally, witchcraft has long been associated with women who transgress social expectations, and Merricat creates her own brand of witchcraft as she buries protective objects all over the property and decides on words that she believes are powerful. Her cat, Jonas, even acts like her familiar, an animal believed to aid witches in their work. The destruction of the house through fire and the villagers' throwing of objects mimics the execution of witches by burning or stoning—except in this instance, Merricat and Constance not only survive the symbolic execution, but find themselves happier than ever after it, as it leaves them entirely out of reach of the male-centric world, with only each other for company.

Merricat and Constance also rely on feminine power as vested in the traditional female connection to **food** preparation. In fact, their lives revolve almost entirely around food, and by the end of the book, they spend practically all of their time in the kitchen, with Constance preparing food and Merricat eating it. Though women have long been made responsible for preparing food for their husbands, the sisters subvert this patriarchal tradition by enjoying their food alone, without any men, after Uncle Julian's death. Despite the outside pressures of society, Merricat and Constance ultimately find happiness being alone together, to the exclusion of all male company besides their cat. In a world that largely believes that women need men, the sisters' preference to live without them amounts to a bold statement.



FAMILY AND GENDER

Family is an intensely fraught subject in this novel. On one hand, the only person in the world whom Merricat loves is her sister, Constance, and almost everything Merricat does is motivated by this love. On the other hand, Merricat has murdered her parents, her brother, and her aunt, and she lives with her uncle who survived the murders simply due to luck. While Merricat's attitude towards family might seem to be chaotic and illogical, Jackson's portrayal of the gendered nature of family life and the tendency for the traditional nuclear family to oppress women gives insight into Merricat's extreme actions and desires.

To understand Merricat's attitude towards family, one needs to consider more broadly the gendered history and structure of the family. Laws and social rules surrounding family structure have long been patrilineal, defining family power and identity solely based on men. For example, the family name is traditionally passed down through the male line, and sons have traditionally inherited family property instead of daughters. Women have been considered to be under the rule of their fathers until they marry, when they come under the rule of their husbands. It could be said that family is in itself an instrument of female oppression, and thus, through destroying her family, Merricat ends these oppressive traditions.

Jackson uses Charles Blackwood, the sisters' cousin, to represent the worst of masculinity. He is obsessed with money (a sphere traditionally considered masculine), and he comes to the house with the goal of wringing money out of the sisters under the guise of helping them. In order to do so, he seems to be plotting to marry Constance, which adds a strangely incestuous element to the family relations. Because of Charles's ambitions to marry Constance, he becomes the central danger to the relationship between Merricat and her sister—his striving to lure Constance into a relationship would not only pull her away from Merricat, but would also pull her out of the female-centric world that Merricat has created in their house. In this way, marriage is painted as an institution largely concerned with keeping women from owning property (a common and potent feminist critique of marriage) and an institution that keeps women from being in solidarity with one another. As such, Jackson portrays marriage as undermining female familial relations, rather than creating new family.

Adding to the complexity of this dynamic, Charles is *already* family. Because of this, he has license to enter the house, despite the sisters' efforts to keep out almost everyone else. Charles attempts to control Merricat more than anyone else does. He refuses to accept her behavior and he threatens her in the very house which she thought she had made entirely her own. In this way, he takes away the power she gained by killing her family and begins to treat her the way that they treated her, as shown when she asks whether he's going to punish her by sending her to bed without dinner. This was the punishment

that spurred her to put the arsenic in the sugar bowl, which bodes ill for Charles. Ultimately, Merricat's desire for control over the household trumps Charles's familial right to it, which underscores the triumph of women over oppressive familial structures.

Fittingly, Merricat is neither interested in her financial inheritance nor in the heritage of her male forebears. Instead, she focuses on the stories and objects related to generations of Blackwood women who have lived in the house before her and Constance. Many objects in the house, such as the china, have come to be there as part of these women's dowries, but the inheritance most important to Merricat and Constance is **food**. They treasure the shelves and shelves of canned food in the cellar, which represent the contributions of generations of Blackwood women to the household.

On the one hand, the food stores prove that Blackwood women have always fulfilled the traditionally female role of cook. However, the food is also a tangible reminder that women have an important history in the family, and it sets up food as a site of resistance and a link among Blackwood women. Just as food changes from oppressor to instrument of liberation when Merricat murders her family, the Blackwood family, over the course of the novel, turns from a source of gendered oppression to a source of power through its matrilineal inheritance and focus on sisterhood.



GUILT AND PUNISHMENT

This novel revolves around an unsolved crime: the murder of Merricat and Constance's family six years earlier. While Constance was initially blamed for the poisoning, she was acquitted at her trial, which left the public with no clear answer about who was actually to blame. Meanwhile, Merricat—the real murderer—is never publically suspected, though, privately, Constance knows Merricat was responsible. The extent to which Constance was complicit in the murder is never fully clear, and, as a result, issues of unresolved guilt and punishment permeate the story, leading to discord among the characters.

The villagers, who are intensely interested in the murders (seemingly because they remain unsolved), believe that Constance did, in fact, murder her family. The notion that Constance has evaded her due punishment seems to torment the villagers, causing them to taunt the sisters and exile them from the life of the town. The villagers' harassment of the sisters throughout the novel indicates that unresolved questions of guilt and the appearance of justice shirked are powerful motivators of violence.

This dynamic is more subtly apparent in the internal life of the Blackwood family. While Constance was not responsible for the murders directly, the extent to which she was complicit remains unclear. Constance bought the arsenic in the first place, and she

failed to call the doctor soon enough to save her family. She even told the police that the family deserved to die. All of this seems to contribute to Constance's consistent sense of guilt throughout the novel, indicating that perhaps she, like the villagers, feels that she has not been given her proper punishment. Constance repeatedly takes the blame for circumstances that are far more the result of Merricat's actions than her own, and she also feels guilty about the isolated, haphazard way in which she and Merricat live, even though Merricat clearly relishes it. Charles makes her see their life from an outside perspective, which leads her to think that Merricat deserves a better, more social way of life than what Constance provides.

Merricat, on the other hand, was directly responsible for the murders, and she expresses no clear feelings of guilt or remorse at her actions; she sometimes even laughs while Uncle Julian describes the night of her crime. Instead of feeling that she deserves punishment, Merricat seems to feel that she and Constance deserve more from life than they have been given. This is, perhaps, because Merricat has a clearer vision of the wrongs to which she and her sister have been subjected at the hands of their family, and thus she feels that the murders were justifiable punishment for the family and a way to establish a better life for herself and Constance.

The dynamics of guilt and punishment in this novel work to create an unsettled feeling, as almost nobody takes what would seem like proper responsibility for their actions. No one is brought to justice, and few characters really even seek out justice. Instead, the novel harbors murderers and rioters almost sympathetically, suggesting that humans are given to chaos far more than laws can account for. Since everyone has a different sense of what is just in any given situation, no one can ever be satisfied that justice has been served, causing perpetual guilt and violence as characters avenge and atone for perceived wrongs without the ability to obtain closure.



ISOLATION

Constance and Merricat have cut themselves off from the world almost entirely since the deaths of their family. Although Constance fears the outside world, the story takes place at a time of change, when she's beginning to wonder whether it's time to face society again. She is partially receptive to Helen Clarke's urging her to return to the world, though she's also frightened at the prospect. Merricat also fears the outside world, but she feels just as much hatred towards it as fear. In other words, even as she wants to escape from the villagers, she also wants to kill them all.

Since Merricat unabashedly cherishes her isolation from the world, Constance's ambivalence about isolation frightens Merricat. Merricat wants nothing more than to have complete possession of and control over Constance, and their continued

isolation is key to this goal. Merricat frequently imagines going to live on **the moon** and taking Constance with her. The moon comes to represent her ideal life, and its most prominent characteristic is its removal from the world. On the moon, no one would bother the sisters, and Merricat could do as she liked, keep Constance safe, and never have to share Constance's attention with anyone else.

The immediate conflict of the story centers on the threats to the isolation that Merricat cherishes—these threats consist specifically of Helen Clarke and Charles Blackwood. Both of these characters come to the house with the intention of removing the sisters from it. Helen Clarke argues that Constance should return to society, insisting that plenty of people still think of themselves as her friends. More to the point, she implies that it's time for Constance to find a husband.

Charles seems to present himself as a potential husband; though he never says so outright, he quickly begins to discipline Merricat under the authority of "Constance and I," and he undoubtedly seeks an honorable way to get his hands on the sisters' money. In his refusal to bend to the strange way in which the sisters live, particularly the license that Constance gives Merricat to behave in whatever way she likes, Charles represents the rational, masculine, capitalist outside world. In fact, Charles doesn't try to drag the sisters into the outside world so much as he tries to bring the outside world to their house and make them respect its rules and norms.

The sisters' isolation ultimately amounts to a defense against living by these rules and norms. The outside world is ruled by men like Jim Donell, who hate the Blackwoods. The attempts of Helen Clarke and Charles to reincorporate the sisters into normal society are linked to a desire to make them conform to patriarchal standards and rules, particularly the valuing of marriage and money. At the end of the book, the sisters cut themselves off from the world entirely. Although they observe the people who linger outside, no one can see into the house. The sisters can watch the workings of society, but they choose not to adhere to it themselves, instead living happily by the rules that Merricat makes up herself.



THE RELATIVITY OF TRUTH

Because the story revolves around a mysterious past event, much of the narrative prompts the reader to try to figure out exactly what happened on the fatal night of the poisoning. Throughout the novel, there is a sense that this truth lies just out of sight. For some characters (like the villagers and Uncle Julian), truth is the same as conjecture, and for the two characters that do know the truth (Merricat and Constance), their individual truths never quite line up.

Merricat's narration is never reliable. The fact that the murderer narrates the story means that the reader can't take

what she says at face value; instead, one must constantly work to infer what Merricat is leaving out in order to figure out the true story. For example, Merricat never says outright that she tips Charles's pipe onto the newspapers to start a fire, she only says that her eyes were seeing the light in strange ways. Furthermore, the reader quickly realizes that Merricat isn't entirely sane, meaning, for example, that she might laugh at something that is actually evidence of her own murderous tendencies.

Just like the reader, the characters who don't know the truth (everyone besides Merricat and Constance) are always working to find the truth or to fight for their version of it. The villagers refuse to believe the outcome of the trial, which found Constance innocent of the murder. Though they might not have the opportunity to accuse Constance to her face, their repetition of a rhyme about Constance poisoning Merricat shows that Constance's guilt has attained almost mythic proportions among them, regardless of the fact that she's innocent.

Uncle Julian's love of recounting the night of his own poisoning provides important exposition about the murders. However, the fact that Uncle Julian's storytelling is the most concrete account of that critical event adds to the impossibility of ever knowing what's true. Uncle Julian is even less reliable than Merricat, as the poison affected his memory. In fact, he often asks Constance whether the poisoning ever even happened, and he believes that Merricat is dead, despite the fact that he sees her every day. If he struggles with these simple facts, how can the reader trust his memory of the details of a day six years ago? Uncle Julian himself admits that he's not dedicated to providing others with the truth, saying that when he's dead, his papers are to be "entrusted to some worthy cynic who will not be too concerned with the truth" (43).

Merricat and Constance seem to be the only characters who don't obsess about the past, in part because they know exactly what happened. At the same time, however, this knowledge of the truth propels their lives as they fight to keep away from the characters who seek the truth (and the punishment that knowing this truth would invite). Shirley Jackson's willingness to keep both her reader and her characters more or less in the dark suggests that the truth itself isn't as important as what characters' perceptions of the truth will lead them to do. Merricat's goal is never so much to hide or reveal the truth as it is to protect herself and Constance from the ways in which other characters react to what they believe to be true, particularly the villagers' hatred of Constance as an unpunished murderess.



SYMBOLS

Symbols appear in **teal text** throughout the Summary and Analysis sections of this LitChart.



FOOD

Food acts as a symbol of power in this book. When Merricat felt ignored and disrespected by her family, she used food to destroy them. Now, even people who say they're the sisters' friends hesitate to eat their food, thus Merricat can manipulate Helen Clarke and Mrs. Wright by offering them food and making them show their fear. In contrast, it is a mark of power that the sisters can eat without fear, and a mark of trust in and love for each other that they eat with one another—after all, Constance knows what Merricat is capable of.

Furthermore, food preparation has traditionally fallen within a woman's household duties, making it an instrument of oppression that keeps women in the home. Generations of Blackwood women have fulfilled this duty, as evidenced by the shelves of canned preserves in the cellar. But it seems as though the sisters have finally taken this legacy of oppression through food to turn it against the oppressive Blackwood men. If men have been reassured of their power in society by the image of a woman in her "rightful place" in the kitchen, then the poisoning turns that image on its head.

As Constance is always tending her vegetable garden or cooking, and the other characters, especially Merricat, are always eating what Constance has prepared, it sometimes seems that the sisters have little to do other than eat. Considering the poisonous association with food in the Blackwood house, though, it seems likely that their constant eating is essentially a daily reenactment of the fatal dinner, a manifestation of their conscious or unconscious obsession with the trauma of the past.



THE MOON

The moon represents Merricat's ideal life. She often daydreams about flying to the moon on a winged horse to get away from the parts of her life that she doesn't like, such as her confrontations with the villagers. When Constance is unhappy, Merricat wishes she could fly her to the moon, and when Uncle Julian isn't well she thinks how healthy he would be on the moon. She imagines building a house there and growing all sorts of plants. When Merricat and Constance shut themselves up in their house and cut off all contact with the outside world, Merricat says that they are finally living on the moon like she's always wanted. Her attitude shows that the most important part of her vision of the moon is the isolation that it provides.

Furthermore, Merricat's moon, since it exists entirely in her own head, is a place where her strange worldview can be reality and she can decide how to order her life without fear of interference. The Blackwood house becomes the moon after the fire in this way, too, since Constance is open to seeing the

world through Merricat's eyes and no one else is around to question the way Merricat's mind shapes her surroundings.



THE SAFE

Constance and Merricat keep most of their money in their father's safe, which sits in his study. Their father was very good at managing money, and Charles, like their father, fixates on the safe as the ultimate object of his desire. In contrast to their male relatives, Merricat and Constance completely disregard the value of money, seeming confused by Charles's obsession with it. They generally use money only to buy groceries, and after the fire, they don't use money at all, since they depend entirely on their vegetable garden and the food that the villagers leave for them.

The safe can be said to represent the male Blackwood lineage of wealth and social status, as well as the broader capitalist patriarchy of America. By repudiating the need for money and happily removing themselves from participation in capitalism, Merricat and Constance deal a blow to this institution which is so often viewed as essential. Notably, the safe remains in their house despite the best efforts of Charles and the villagers to remove it. Thus, the sisters distance themselves from money not because they don't have access to it—they do—but because they simply see no need for it. Furthermore, if Blackwood masculinity depends largely on wealth and others' recognition of it, Merricat and Constance destroy the oppressive Blackwood men not only by killing or rejecting them, but also by ignoring the material riches they left behind and thus banishing them to irrelevance.



QUOTES

Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the Penguin Classics edition of *We Have Always Lived in the Castle* published in 2016.

Chapter 1 Quotes

☛ ...I wished they were dead. I would have liked to come into the grocery store some morning and see them all, even the Elberts and the children, lying there crying with the pain and dying. I would then help myself to groceries, I thought, stepping over their bodies, taking whatever I fancied from the shelves, and go home, with perhaps a kick for Mrs. Donell while she lay there. I was never sorry when I had thoughts like this; I only wished they would come true. "It's wrong to hate them," Constance said, "it only weakens you," but I hated them anyway...

Related Characters: Constance Blackwood, Mary Katherine “Merricat” Blackwood (speaker), Mr. Elbert, Mrs. Donell

Related Themes: 

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 8-9

Explanation and Analysis

Merricat is in the Elberts’ grocery store to buy food, and all the other shoppers have frozen to watch her for the duration of her visit. When one of the villagers makes a comment about the Blackwoods’ food, Merricat can’t help but wish that all the villagers were dead.

This passage is the reader’s first glimpse into the cruel, violent side of Merricat’s nature. Although the villagers are certainly awful to Merricat, the vividness with which she imagines their deaths shows a horrifying delight in violence and a comfort with harming those who have wronged her. Passages such as this one foreshadow the eventual revelation that Merricat poisoned her family. The parallel is especially strong, since Merricat’s rage is, in both the poisoning and the grocery store, directed towards those who stand between her and food, which is, symbolically, the source of her power.

Constance’s feeling that Merricat’s hatred weakens her becomes most significant at the end of the book, when Merricat no longer hates the villagers, but instead begins to pity them. Though Merricat might not seem particularly weakened by her hatred now, she certainly seems much stronger when she finds it in herself to pity them instead of hating them, because it means she no longer cares what they think of her.

☝ 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!

Related Characters: Constance Blackwood, Mary Katherine “Merricat” Blackwood

Related Themes:   

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 16

Explanation and Analysis

The Harris boys initially chant this rhyme at Merricat as she walks home through the village, and the villagers often use it against the sisters throughout the book. The rhyme indicates that the villagers believe that Constance is guilty of the poisoning. Perhaps they also believe that Merricat lives in danger of being poisoned, or perhaps they only like to imagine that the sisters might turn on each other because it would disintegrate the love and loyalty that gives Merricat and Constance strength against the villagers. Additionally, Constance’s questions in the rhyme are particularly innocuous; they are questions that any mother-figure might ask with the best intentions. In this context, however, the questions take on a dark significance, lending danger to the traditionally comforting image of the nurturing woman.

The fact that this rhyme even exists suggests that Merricat and Constance have become almost unreal to the villagers, more like storybook villains than like actual people with complex lives. Even before they shut themselves away for good, they already have contributed to the folklore of the village, and afterwards, they become more mythical than ever.

Chapter 2 Quotes

☝ She took the groceries carefully from the bags; food of any kind was precious to Constance, and she always touched foodstuffs with quiet respect. I was not allowed to help; I was not allowed to prepare food, nor was I allowed to gather mushrooms, although I sometimes carried vegetables in from the garden, or apples from the old trees.

Related Characters: Mary Katherine “Merricat” Blackwood (speaker), Constance Blackwood

Related Themes:  

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 20

Explanation and Analysis

This passage occurs when Merricat returns from her trip into the village with the groceries she has bought. Constance unpacks the food, but Merricat is not allowed to touch it. This rule is one of many that Merricat follows, and Merricat’s lack of explanation seems to imply that Constance makes these rules. This seems to serve the

purpose of leading the reader to suspect Merricat's role in the poisoning by hinting that Constance does not allow Merricat to prepare food or gather mushrooms because these tasks would give her opportunities to poison someone else.

In fact, however, it becomes clear later in the book that Merricat makes these rules for herself, which changes the passage's meaning entirely. Merricat seems almost to fear herself, and that she talks about these rules as though they were imposed by an external authority implies that she feels the need to prohibit herself from doing anything that could lead to her doing more harm than she already has. By this logic, it seems possible that she can't entirely control her impulses, and so she creates rules to help her do so.

●● I must have known what she was going to say, because I was chilled; all this day had been building up to what Helen Clarke was going to say right now. I sat low in my chair and looked hard at Constance, wanting her to get up and run away, wanting her not to hear what was just about to be said, but Helen Clarke went on, "It's spring, you're young, you're lovely, you have a right to be happy. Come back into the world."

Once, even a month ago when it was still winter, words like that would have made Constance draw back and run away; now, I saw that she was listening and smiling, although she shook her head.

Related Characters: Helen Clarke, Mary Katherine "Merricat" Blackwood (speaker), Constance Blackwood

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 27

Explanation and Analysis

When Helen Clarke comes to tea, she declares herself a close friend of Constance's and takes it upon herself to offer advice. Constance has hidden away in the house ever since her trial, never appearing in public and only entertaining a few visitors.

Helen Clarke's brief words to Constance betray a number of assumptions. First, she assumes that Constance isn't happy in her current life. Second, by mentioning Constance's appearance and the fact that it's spring, a time associated with mating in animals, she implies that if Constance returned to the outside world, she would want to pursue a romantic attachment. She also assumes that such an

attachment would make Constance happy. Essentially, then, Helen Clarke is suggesting that Constance should get married.

Helen Clarke's suggestion comes off as benign and conventional, and Merricat's horrified reaction shows how different Merricat's values are from the villagers'. However, Constance's receptivity to Helen Clarke's suggestion reveals that Constance's values and desires are not wholly aligned with Merricat's, which (since all Merricat wants is Constance's loyalty) propels the central conflict of the book. Merricat likely hates, in particular, the thought of Constance engaging in the patriarchal, heterosexual institution of marriage, as men and patriarchal institutions threaten the power of the sisters and the integrity of the world they have created.

●● "Another child, my niece Mary Katherine, was not at table."

"She was in her room," Mrs. Wright said.

"A great child of twelve, sent to bed without her supper. But she need not concern us."

I laughed, and Constance said to Helen Clarke, "Merricat was always in disgrace. I used to go up the back stairs with a tray of dinner for her after my father had left the dining room. She was a wicked, disobedient child," and she smiled at me.

"An unhealthy environment," Helen Clarke said. "A child should be punished for wrongdoing, but she should be made to feel that she is still loved."

Related Characters: Helen Clarke, Mrs. Lucille Wright, Constance Blackwood, Uncle Julian Blackwood (speaker), Mary Katherine "Merricat" Blackwood

Related Themes:   

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 34

Explanation and Analysis

When Helen Clarke and Mrs. Wright come for tea, Uncle Julian happily indulges Mrs. Wright's curiosity about the poisoning by giving her a complete account of the night it occurred.

Though the reader doesn't yet know it, Uncle Julian believes

that Merricat is dead. His attitude in this passage demonstrates that he thinks she is of no significance to the poisoning. She wasn't at the dinner and so was not affected, and the possibility that she was the murderer never even crosses his mind, probably because twelve-year-old girls are not expected to poison their families. Merricat finds his attitude funny, likely because of the irony that the only person he ignores is the one to whom he should pay the most attention.

The other characters' comments on Merricat's childhood give some insight into her potential motives for what she did. On the one hand, Constance calls her "wicked" and "disobedient," suggesting that she was naturally inclined to wrongdoing. On the other hand, it is suggested that her parents, particularly her father, treated her harshly and excluded her from the family. Additionally, Merricat is so fixated on food and eating that being sent to bed without dinner might have been a far worse punishment for her than anyone understood. Denying Merricat food means denying her power.

☛ "First," she said, "she bought the arsenic."

"To kill rats," Constance said to the teapot, and then turned and smiled at me.

... "She cooked the dinner, she set the table.... It was Constance who saw them dying around her like flies—I do beg your pardon—and never called a doctor until it was too late. She washed the sugar bowl."

"There was a spider in it," Constance said.

"She told the police those people deserved to die.... She told the police that it was all her fault."

Related Characters: Constance Blackwood, Mrs. Lucille Wright (speaker), Mary Katherine "Merricat" Blackwood, Uncle Julian Blackwood

Related Themes:   

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 37

Explanation and Analysis

While Mrs. Wright and Helen Clarke are having tea, Mrs. Wright engages with Uncle Julian in a detailed discussion of

the poisoning. Forgetting all of her manners, she feels it necessary to lay out all of the evidence against Constance that was presented at the trial.

One must admit, first of all, that the evidence is rather powerful. Even if Constance didn't actually put the arsenic in the sugar—which she didn't—she also didn't try particularly hard to save her family or find the culprit. In fact, it even seems that she may have actively colluded with Merricat to let her family die and cover up the evidence.

It's unclear, however, whether Constance really wanted her family to die or whether she simply loved Merricat enough to forgive her actions and take the blame. The one conclusion that can certainly be drawn is that Constance didn't want Merricat to face justice, and she was willing to sacrifice herself to save Merricat. Whether misguided or not, this is the sort of loyalty that makes Merricat love her sister so deeply and that enables the sisters to create their own isolated world.

Chapter 3 Quotes

☛ All the Blackwood women had taken the food that came from the ground and preserved it, and the deeply colored rows of jellies and pickles and bottled vegetables and fruit, maroon and amber and dark rich green, stood side by side in our cellar and would stand there forever, a poem by the Blackwood women. Each year Constance and Uncle Julian and I had jam or preserve or pickle that Constance had made, but we never touched what belonged to the others; Constance said it would kill us if we ate it.

Related Characters: Mary Katherine "Merricat" Blackwood (speaker), Uncle Julian Blackwood, Constance Blackwood

Related Themes:  

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 42

Explanation and Analysis

Merricat details her daily routines, including her work in the garden with Constance on Saturdays. Along with using the food from the garden for their meals, Constance also preserves some of it to add to the stores that generations of Blackwood women have established in the cellar.

These preserves symbolize the power of the female Blackwood lineage and the pride that Merricat and Constance take in it. As food preparation has long been

considered a traditionally female task, often contributing to the oppression of women in the household, the fact that the sisters find power within this task demonstrates a subversion of patriarchal control. In other words, the Blackwood women find strength in the very task that could be used to control them.

Along the same lines, Merricat turns food against the family—a bastion of the patriarchy—when she puts poison in it. Constance seems to think that the preserves of their forebears would kill them, as well, which suggests that Merricat was acting within a tradition of Blackwood women when she made the sugar poisonous.

“I ate tiny sweet raw carrots while Constance washed the vegetables and put them away. “We will have a spring salad,” she said.

“We eat the year away. We eat the spring and the summer and the fall. We wait for something to grow and then we eat it.”

Related Characters: Constance Blackwood, Mary Katherine “Merricat” Blackwood (speaker)

Related Themes: 

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 45

Explanation and Analysis

One morning while Uncle Julian is still sleeping, Constance picks some vegetables from the garden and brings them to the kitchen. Food and eating permeate this book, but this passage is one of the only times when the characters directly acknowledge how central it is to their lives.

Constance is always cooking, and Merricat is always eating. In fact, this process comes to feel almost sinister, as though they are consuming the entire world around them. Merricat’s insatiable hunger, in particular, suggests that she will consume the lives of anyone who comes near her. Furthermore, as the sisters do little other than eat, this passage acknowledges the way in which the passage of time is marked by what they eat. Not only do they eat food, but they also eat time, as though the seasons wouldn’t change if they didn’t eat one away to reveal the next. Later on the sisters even more explicitly reject a relationship with traditional ideas of time. This comes in the destruction of the watch chain, and, once the house burns, in the sisters’ inability to distinguish one day from another.

Chapter 4 Quotes

“Merricat,” Constance said; she turned and looked at me, smiling. “It’s our cousin, our cousin Charles Blackwood. I knew him at once; he looks like Father.”

“Well, Mary,” he said. 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?”

Behind him the kitchen door was open wide; he was the first one who had ever gotten inside and Constance had let him in.... I was held tight, wound round with wire, I couldn’t breathe, and I had to run.

Related Characters: Charles Blackwood, Mary Katherine “Merricat” Blackwood, Constance Blackwood (speaker)

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 57

Explanation and Analysis

Merricat sees a stranger trying to get into the house and assumes he’s just one of the gawkers who comes to try to see Constance. However, when she returns to the kitchen she finds that Constance has let him in, and she immediately sees him as her enemy.

This moment represents Constance’s first major betrayal of Merricat. On a basic level, Merricat and Constance live by rules of isolation that keep them safe, and for Constance to let a stranger in breaks all of those rules. On a more metaphorical level, Merricat has killed their family, particularly their father, to create a life of greater freedom for herself and Constance. Charles’s defining feature is that he looks like their father, so by letting him into their life, Constance is essentially undoing the gruesome work that Merricat has done. Charles will, indeed, act in ways similar to their father in order to subdue Merricat and her eccentricities and pull her apart from Constance.

Additionally, Merricat calls Charles “the first one” to get inside the house, indicating that his familial status makes no difference to her; she still categorizes him with all of the strangers who trespass on their land and take a rude interest in Constance. This take on him will prove perceptive. Constance thinks to trust him because he’s family, but in fact he will only hurt the sisters.

Chapter 5 Quotes

“I really think I shall commence chapter forty-four,” he said, patting his hands together. “I shall commence, I think, with a slight exaggeration and go on from there into an outright lie.”

Related Characters: Uncle Julian Blackwood (speaker)

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 62

Explanation and Analysis

The morning after Charles arrives, Uncle Julian is feeling quite well and he decides to begin writing chapter forty-four of his book chronicling the poisoning of which he was a victim. Although he spends much of his time recalling the poisoning or asking others to recall it, this passage makes it clear that he doesn't actually care about the facts of the matter. Furthermore, he has no delusions about his account of events—he readily admits that he's not telling the truth.

Considering that the reader learns most of the backstory of the murders from Uncle Julian's recounting of them, this passage casts doubt on the reader's ability to ever have the full story. If it's impossible to entirely trust Uncle Julian's version of events, the reader is effectively thrown off balance, experiencing the precariousness of truth in a way similar to what many of the characters experience. People like Helen Clarke, Mrs. Wright, and the villagers may have their suspicions about what happened that night, but they can never be sure, and so they are left worrying whether their tea might be spiked with arsenic or their hatred unwarranted.

Chapter 6 Quotes

“In a tree,” he said, and his voice was shaking too. “I found it nailed to a tree, for God's sake. What kind of a house is this?”

“It's not important,” Constance said. “Really, Charles, it's not important.”

“Not important? Connie, this thing's made of *gold*.”

“But no one wants it.”

“One of the links is smashed.... what a hell of a way to treat a valuable thing. We could have sold it,” he said to Constance.

“But why?”

Related Characters: Constance Blackwood, Charles Blackwood (speaker), Mary Katherine “Merricat” Blackwood

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 77

Explanation and Analysis

Because she wants to get rid of Charles, Merricat goes into his room and takes her father's gold watch chain that Charles has been looking at. She nails it to a tree as a safeguard, and Charles finds it. His discovery disturbs him, partly because it's an unusual use for a watch chain, but mostly because he values money so highly.

Throughout the book, Charles represents the patriarchal, capitalist emphasis on the importance of money. Scenes such as this one show that he has come more to seek his own financial gain than to help the sisters. The sisters, on the other hand, don't care in the least about money, and really don't see the point of it at all. This attitude is one of their rebellions against the outside world.

It's also notable that Charles is disturbed by the financial significance of finding the watch chain nailed to the tree, rather than what turns out to be its supernatural significance. The chain is part of Merricat's witchcraft, and its purpose—which will ultimately be successful—is to drive Charles out.

“We should have faced the world and tried to live normal lives; Uncle Julian should have been in a hospital all these years, with good care and nurses to watch him. We should have been living like other people. You should...” She stopped, and waved her hands helplessly. “You should have boy friends,” she said finally, and then began to laugh because she sounded funny even to herself.

Related Characters: Mary Katherine “Merricat” Blackwood, Constance Blackwood (speaker), Uncle Julian Blackwood, Charles Blackwood

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 82

Explanation and Analysis

After Charles has been at the house for a while, Constance says that Merricat isn't allowed to wander anymore, and that the sisters should have been living differently ever since the poisoning.

In this passage, Constance is essentially parroting Charles's words back to Merricat. Constance is somewhat susceptible to taking on the beliefs of those around her; before Charles arrives, she's happy enough to live as Merricat wants them to live, but when Helen Clarke suggests that Constance should rejoin the outside world she thinks it might be a good idea, too. Now she is falling prey to Charles's sense of how the sisters should live. The life she describes here is one that would be acceptable to the outside world, with the sick uncle in the hospital and Merricat subscribing to heterosexual norms.

Interestingly, Constance's suggestion that Merricat should have boyfriends is the final straw that makes her realize how absurd the idea is. Merricat never expresses any sexual attraction, but the idea that she would ever be in a relationship with a man, when she appears to hate them all, probably seems ridiculous to Constance, Merricat, and the reader. It also adds to the sense that Merricat seeks to create a sort of feminist utopia where men are unnecessary.

the poisoning—most of whom are dead, and so couldn't have been the culprit—yet he doesn't even think to consider Merricat. His belief that she's dead seems to proceed from this general sense that she is "of very little consequence"; her general unimportance makes her entirely fade from Julian's world.

Most surprising of all is Julian's ability to continue in his delusion despite living alongside Merricat every day, but the atmosphere of the house is such that it supports whatever reality its inhabitants want to believe in. Constance, though more connected to an objective reality than Merricat or Uncle Julian, never disrupts their fantasies, and part of Charles's crime is that he does.

Julian's lack of regard for Merricat also suggests that the rest of her family might have seen her the same way, simply dismissing her existence because she was of no particular use within the family. If this was the case, it likely contributed to her desire to kill them.

Chapter 7 Quotes

☝☝ "My niece Mary Katherine has been a long time dead, young man. She did not survive the loss of her family; I supposed you knew that."

"What?" Charles turned furiously to Constance.

"My niece Mary Katherine died in an orphanage, of neglect, during her sister's trial for murder. But she is of very little consequence to my book, and so we will have done with her."

Related Characters: Charles Blackwood, Uncle Julian Blackwood (speaker), Constance Blackwood, Mary Katherine "Merricat" Blackwood

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 93

Explanation and Analysis

A very angry Charles is preparing to punish Merricat for filling his room with dirt and rubbish, but Uncle Julian calls him names and then insists that Merricat is dead. This is the first time that the reader realizes that Julian holds this belief, though, in looking back, one can see that the two characters never interact.

Ironically, Uncle Julian wants to note every little detail about every other person who was in the house the night of

☝☝ "Mary Katherine should have anything she wants, my dear. Our most loved daughter must have anything she likes."

"Constance, your sister lacks butter. Pass it to her at once, please."

"Mary Katherine, we love you."

... "Mary Katherine must never be punished. Must never be sent to bed without her dinner. Mary Katherine will never allow herself to do anything inviting punishment."

"Our beloved, our dearest Mary Katherine must be guarded and cherished. Thomas, give your sister your dinner; she would like more to eat."

"Dorothy—Julian. Rise when our beloved daughter rises."

"Bow all your heads to our adored Mary Katherine."

Related Characters: Mary Katherine "Merricat" Blackwood (speaker), Uncle Julian Blackwood, Constance Blackwood

Related Themes:   

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 95-96

Explanation and Analysis

After Merricat fills Charles's room with dirt and sticks, he grows very angry with her and threatens to punish her. She runs out to the old, unused summerhouse, where she imagines this conversation among her dead family members.

This fantasy provides insight into Merricat's psyche and her potential motivations for killing her family. Considering that Merricat was often punished and ignored (and that she was sent to bed without her dinner on the night of the poisoning), it seems that the devotion her family gives her in her imagination is exactly the opposite of how they acted towards her in real life. While they may have been unnecessarily harsh and unloving towards her, her fantasy suggests that she desires a ridiculous degree of reverence, almost as though she imagines herself to be a queen or a goddess. If this is true, then her family's disregard for her may have caused her to react with the drastic step of killing them.

Also, Merricat's fantasy involves her family not only allowing her to eat her dinner at the table, but constantly giving her more food. If food symbolizes power in this book, then it makes sense that Merricat is demanding that her family acknowledge her power. Additionally, Constance keeps herself in Merricat's good graces in part by constantly providing her with food, as her family did not.

smoldering on one of her great-grandmother's saucers. By sweeping the pipe into the wastebasket, she sets the fire that burns the entire top floor of the house.

Merricat is very angry at Charles, and has long been looking for an effective way to get back at him. However, the fire that she is setting in this passage does not seem premeditated. On the contrary, she brushes the pipe into the trash entirely without thought, or at least without any thoughts that she reveals in her narration, but this action nonetheless causes one of the pivotal events of the book.

This scene suggests that Merricat's mind may block out her most wicked actions. Even when she sees the flames, she doesn't recognize them as such, but instead thinks that her eyes are doing something strange. If this is the case, then it's possible that she was in a similar state of mind when she poisoned her family, which would explain why she so rarely acknowledges that she did so. It would also explain why she sets so many rules for herself. If she does such things without really planning to, then her rules could keep her from having opportunities to kill people without realizing what she's doing.

Finally, Merricat's meditation on the different ways in which she thinks she's seeing light also references her unique way of seeing the world and life in general. She seems to suggest that if everyone saw the world in such unconventional ways as she does, everything might be much more interesting.

Chapter 8 Quotes

☛☛ I brushed the saucer and the pipe off the table into the wastebasket and they fell softly on to the newspapers he had brought into the house.

I was wondering about my eyes; one of my eyes—the left—saw everything golden and yellow and orange, and the other eye saw shades of blue and grey and green; perhaps one eye was for daylight and the other was for night. If everyone in the world saw different colors from different eyes there might be a great many colors still to be invented.

Related Characters: Mary Katherine "Merricat" Blackwood (speaker), Charles Blackwood

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 99-100

Explanation and Analysis

Merricat goes upstairs to tidy herself before joining the family at dinner, and, in Charles's room, she finds his pipe

☛☛ Very carefully he put up his hands and took off his hat saying CHIEF and while everyone watched he walked slowly down the steps and over to the fire engine and set his hat down on the front seat. Then he bent down, searching thoughtfully, and finally, while everyone watched, he took up a rock. In complete silence he turned slowly and then raised his arm and smashed the rock through one of the tall windows of our mother's drawing room. A wall of laughter rose and grew behind him and then, first the boys on the steps and then the other men and at last the women and the smaller children, they moved like a wave at our house.

Related Characters: Mary Katherine "Merricat" Blackwood (speaker), Jim Donell

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 106-106

Explanation and Analysis

Jim Donell is the chief fireman who leads the brigade to put

out the fire at the Blackwoods' house. He does his duty efficiently, even though the villagers tell him to let it burn. Once the fire is out, however, he no longer has to act as a fireman, but can instead do as he sees fit. In other words, he can express his hatred of the Blackwoods by inciting mob violence.

Jim Donell has always been one of the worst villagers, and now he leads the villagers in destroying the house. The fact that he puts the fire out before doing so actually makes it worse, as though he wants to personally be able to destroy the Blackwoods' lives, rather than letting the impartial fire do it. Additionally, his extremely purposeful throwing of a rock expresses a deep, calculated desire to cause damage.

The other villagers act less purposefully, instead submitting to a mob mentality in which they follow the lead of the group in mindlessly storming the house. They act out of a desire for revenge. Though the Blackwoods' offense remains vague, the villagers seem to want to punish the family for their long-standing sense of superiority as well as for living above the law. They seem to believe that Constance is guilty of murder, and should be punished.

☛ One of our mother's Dresden figurines is broken, I thought, and I said aloud to Constance, "I am going to put death in all their food and watch them die."

Constance stirred, and the leaves rustled. "The way you did before?" she asked.

It had never been spoken of between us, not once in six years.

"Yes," I said after a minute, "the way I did before."

Related Characters: Constance Blackwood, Mary Katherine "Merricat" Blackwood (speaker)

Related Themes:   

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 110

Explanation and Analysis

After the fire, Merricat takes Constance to her hiding place by the stream, where they settle down to sleep for the night. Though the reader probably already strongly suspects that Merricat poisoned the family, this is the first moment in which that suspicion is confirmed.

This passage also makes clear that the sisters have never

spoken of this fact before, though they both knew it. This is rather an incredible secret to carry between them, unspoken, for six years, when it has affected every aspect of their lives and brought so much hatred and isolation down on them. As this disclosure comes at the very beginning of an indefinite period in which Merricat and Constance will live in complete isolation and only ever interact with each other, Merricat's confession becomes a fitting opening to their new, more intimate life together. If Merricat has lived within her own mental world for many years, this moment helps her open that world to her sister, who is now ready to join her there.

Chapter 9 Quotes

☛ "We are on the moon at last," I told her, and she smiled.

"I thought I dreamed it all," she said.

"It really happened," I said.

"Poor Uncle Julian."

"They came in the night and took him away, and we stayed here on the moon."

"I'm glad to be here," she said. "Thank you for bringing me."

Related Characters: Constance Blackwood, Mary Katherine "Merricat" Blackwood (speaker), Uncle Julian Blackwood

Related Themes:  

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 112

Explanation and Analysis

This conversation takes place in Merricat's shelter by the creek the morning after the fire. Throughout the book, Merricat has daydreamed about living on the moon, where everything is exactly how she wants it to be and no one disturbs her and Constance. If the moon is Merricat's ideal place, and she feels that they are now on the moon, then she seems to feel that the fire was beneficial rather than destructive—which does make sense, since she started it.

Merricat knows immediately after the fire that their lives are going to be completely different from now on, and this is the sentiment that prompts her to declare her victory even

before seeing what's happened to the house. She instinctively knows that she and Constance will no longer interact with anyone else, and so her own version of reality will be allowed to reign in their house. Most of all, Merricat is thrilled that she will have Constance all to herself.

In the past, Constance has reacted to Merricat's talk of going to the moon by calling her silly or by playing along only to humor her. Now, however, when Constance says, "I'm glad to be here," she might mean the shelter by the creek, or she might mean the moon, which Merricat has just referenced. This dialogue indicates that Constance is already giving in to Merricat's view of the world more than she has in the past. Merricat will be allowed to sketch the fundamental lines of their new life.

“I could feel a breath of air on my cheek; it came from the sky I could see, but it smelled of smoke and ruin. Our house was a castle, turreted and open to the sky.”

Related Characters: Mary Katherine “Merricat” Blackwood (speaker)

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 120

Explanation and Analysis

After the fire, Merricat and Constance close up the drawing room and the dining room, and then Merricat looks upstairs to the burned part of the house, which is now open to the elements. This is the only mention of the house as a castle, and thus the only direct connection of the title to the text. Ironically, the house only becomes a metaphorical castle in its most ruined state, after the fire, though a castle is usually thought of as a royal, elegant building.

It's reasonable to assume that Merricat begins to think of the house as a castle as part of her reframing of their entire life after the fire. Castles are associated with fantasy and the supernatural, which fits with the alternate reality in which Merricat and Constance live, as well as with the fear with which the villagers now regard the house and the sisters. Castles are also fortifications—they are known for keeping enemies out, and this is precisely what the sisters hope that the house will do. In addition, Merricat thinks of herself as being terribly important and deserving of veneration. As she is the ruler of the sisters' new reality, she becomes almost like a queen who reigns over her castle while being served food by her worshiper Constance.

“She certainly wanted her tea,” I said to Constance when I came back to the kitchen.

“We have only two cups with handles,” Constance said. “She will never take tea here again.”

“It's a good thing Uncle Julian's gone, or one of us would have to use a broken cup.”

Related Characters: Constance Blackwood, Mary Katherine “Merricat” Blackwood (speaker), Uncle Julian Blackwood, Helen Clarke

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 124

Explanation and Analysis

The day after the fire is the day of the week that Helen Clarke comes to tea at the Blackwood house. She and her husband come knocking at the door, wanting to bring Merricat and Constance home with them to help them. Although the sisters hear Helen Clarke calling out her intentions, Merricat insists on believing that she has come for her tea, showing the extent to which Merricat lives in her own reality and depends on routines to keep her life in order.

In fact, this entire passage demonstrates the absurdity that the sisters increasingly embrace after the fire. Constance attributes Helen Clarke's absence from their house on their lack of cups, which is a miniscule problem compared to the fact that their house is entirely in shambles and they have no desire to interact with anyone else ever again. Taking this absurd fixation on the need for unbroken cups even further, Merricat actually expresses gladness at Uncle Julian's death. She essentially says that the tragedy of his death is less severe than the tragedy of using a cup without a handle.

It is important to note here that Constance participates in Merricat's absurd vision of the world. She supports Merricat's assumption that Helen Clarke wants her tea, and she doesn't protest Merricat's relief about Uncle Julian's death. Before the fire, Constance allowed Merricat to live in her own world, but she kept herself somewhat more connected to reality, often calling Merricat silly or reminding her that they didn't really live on the moon. Now, however, Constance surrenders herself fully to Merricat's reality, meaning that within their house, everything takes on a different level of importance than it does in the outside world.

“Will you sleep in there? In Uncle Julian’s bed?”

“No, Merricat. I want you to sleep in there. It’s the only bed we have.”

“I am not allowed in Uncle Julian’s room.”

She was quiet for a minute, looking at me curiously, and then asked, “Even though Uncle Julian’s gone, Merricat?”

Related Characters: Constance Blackwood, Mary Katherine “Merricat” Blackwood (speaker), Uncle Julian Blackwood

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 126

Explanation and Analysis

The day after the fire, Merricat and Constance clean up what they can of the house, and Constance says that she’ll clean Uncle Julian’s room the next day so that Merricat can sleep there. Merricat, however, has never been allowed into Uncle Julian’s room, and she insists that this rule has not changed. While the rules she obeys seem for most of the book to come from Constance, Constance’s powerlessness in this scene proves that Merricat is, in fact, making the rules for herself, though she obeys them as though someone else is enforcing them.

It seems likely that Merricat’s rules stem from her need for order in the world, also seen in her insistence on having a routine for certain days. Additionally, she might make these rules to keep herself under control—her state of mind when she sets the fire suggests that she isn’t entirely aware of her actions, and so she might have been similarly removed from herself when she poisoned her family. Rules such as staying out of Uncle Julian’s room would prevent her from having the opportunity to kill him. If this is the reason for her rules, it suggests that she does feel guilty about murdering her family and does not necessarily have control over her impulses.

“I was very wicked,” she said. “I never should have reminded you of why they all died.”

“Then don’t remind me now.” I could not move my hand to reach over and take hers.

“I wanted you to forget about it. I never wanted to speak about it, ever, and I’m sorry I did.”

“I put it in the sugar.”

“I know. I knew then.”

“You never used sugar.”

“No.”

“So I put it in the sugar.”

Constance sighed. “Merricat,” she said, “we’ll never talk about it again. Never.”

I was chilled, but she smiled at me kindly and it was all right.

“I love you, Constance,” I said.

“And I love you, my Merricat.”

Related Characters: Mary Katherine “Merricat” Blackwood, Constance Blackwood (speaker)

Related Themes:  

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 130

Explanation and Analysis

After Jim Clarke and Dr. Levy try and fail to get the sisters to open the door to them, Constance apologizes for the night before, when she acknowledged for the first time that she knew Merricat had put the arsenic in the sugar that killed their family.

Ironically—yet in keeping with the irrational nature of what these characters consider to be important—Constance has no sense that Merricat has done wrong by committing the crime, but she feels that she herself has done wrong by reminding Merricat of her crime. Besides, she somehow thinks that by not talking about Merricat’s role in the crime, Merricat can forget what she has done. This idea seems particularly ridiculous in light of all the characters’ constant references to the poisoning, and the way it affects their lives

every single day. Through her belief, however, Constance reinforces the idea that within the house, the sisters can create whatever reality they like.

Merricat's horrified reaction to Constance discussing the crime suggests that she does feel guilty about what she has done, though she never directly expresses sorrow for it. Her explanation that she strategized to keep Constance from eating the arsenic is surprisingly tender, and both sisters' declaration of love for each other is simultaneously moving and frightening—they are bonded by their knowledge of the truth, and yet Constance's unshakeable love for the murderer of her family is rather disconcerting.

Chapter 10 Quotes

☝☝ “I believe the one you are wearing now was used for summer breakfasts on the lawn many years ago. Red and white check would never be used in the dining room, of course.”

“Some days I shall be a summer breakfast on the lawn, and some days I shall be a formal dinner by candlelight, and some days I shall be—”

Related Characters: Mary Katherine “Merricat” Blackwood, Constance Blackwood (speaker)

Related Themes:   

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 137

Explanation and Analysis

Constance realizes that she and Merricat don't have anything left to wear other than the dresses they had on when the fire began, as everything else was burnt. Merricat refuses to wear Uncle Julian's clothes, but she's happy to wear tablecloths instead.

Throughout the book, Merricat has constantly been consuming the food that Constance spends all her time cooking. Food can be read as a symbol of power in this story, particularly as Merricat turns the traditionally female duty of cooking against her family when she puts poison in their dinner. Merricat now goes a step beyond simply eating all the time—she begins wearing the accessories of a meal and metaphorically thinking of herself as different kinds of meals depending on which tablecloth she's wearing.

In this isolated world that Merricat and Constance have created, Merricat is free to completely give in to her fixation

on food. She and her sister spend most of their time either preparing or eating food, they live almost entirely in their kitchen, and now she's literally clothed in tablecloths. If food is power, Merricat has the ultimate power in this situation, dictating the very reality of the world in which they live.

☝☝ “If you let me go this time, you'll never see me again. I mean it, Connie.... Take a last look,” he said. “I'm going. One word could make me stay.”

I did not think he was going to go in time. I honestly did not know whether Constance was going to be able to contain herself until he got down the steps and safely into the car.... Charles looked back once more, raised his hand sadly, and got into the car. Then Constance laughed, and I laughed... and we held each other in the dark hall and laughed, with the tears running down our cheeks....

“I am so happy,” Constance said at last, gasping. “Merricat, I am so happy.”

“I told you that you would like it on the moon.”

Related Characters: Constance Blackwood, Mary Katherine “Merricat” Blackwood, Charles Blackwood (speaker)

Related Themes:   

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 144-45

Explanation and Analysis

One day Charles drives up to the house trying to lure Constance out for a picture. From outside, he shouts to Merricat and Constance, apologizing for the damage he's done and begging Constance to come outside.

In this passage, Constance confirms her complete conversion to Merricat's reality—to living “on the moon,” as Merricat puts it. The main immediate conflict of the book is Charles's invasion of the house and the threat of him taking Constance away from Merricat. That conflict is only partly resolved when Charles leaves after the fire. To completely expel his influence, Constance must reject him, since she almost gave in to his attempts to draw her into a romantic engagement, which symbolizes Constance's near conversion to the logic of the outside world.

Here, Constance finally sees Charles for what he is and rejects him entirely, also rejecting the heterosexuality and male influence that he represents. Furthermore, she rejects him through laughter and derision, a method perhaps more effective than Merricat's violence, since it entirely strips him of any authority. Merricat's victims, on the other hand, retain some power through being the wronged dead. Finally, Constance confirms her happiness in the all-female, completely isolated space of the house, where Merricat's reality reigns and Charles can never come between the sisters.

☞ “I wonder if I *could* eat a child if I had the chance.”

“I doubt if I could cook one,” said Constance.

“Poor strangers,” I said. “They have so much to be afraid of.”

“Well,” Constance said, “I am afraid of spiders.”

“Jonas and I will see to it that no spider ever comes near you. Oh, Constance,” I said, “we are so happy.”

Related Characters: Constance Blackwood, Mary Katherine “Merricat” Blackwood (speaker), Jonas

Related Themes:   

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 146

Explanation and Analysis

Merricat and Constance take to sitting inside their front door and watching everyone who goes by their house. Children are afraid of it, and one day they hear a woman tell some children that the ladies inside the house will eat them if they go too near.

In her compulsive, unhindered consuming of food, Merricat comes almost logically to the question of whether she could eat a person. Considering her ability to poison most of her family, it doesn't seem beyond the realm of possibility that she could eat a child. The fact that Constance is willing to joke with Merricat about this question demonstrates the extent to which Constance now subscribes to the alternate reality that Merricat has created within the house. Furthermore, joking about eating children represents a complete rejection of motherhood, the mainstay of traditional feminine roles. Eating a child suggests the very opposite of birth, and the endpoint of Merricat's rejection of traditional gender roles and male power.

However, this passage also deals with the ways in which houses come to be seen as haunted. Haunted houses are commonly thought to be inhabited by witches who will eat children, but in this case, the reader sees the perspective of the supposed witches. The sisters have spent much of the book being afraid of the villagers and the outside world, but they now expel that fear from themselves, allowing the villagers to be the only fearful ones. Constance is left with only her fear of spiders, which was her excuse for washing out the sugar bowl after her family's poisoning. Her reference to this fear now seems to cement her collusion with Merricat in covering up Merricat's crime, and thus assures the sisters' unity in living happily within their chosen reality.



SUMMARY AND ANALYSIS

The color-coded icons under each analysis entry make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. Each icon corresponds to one of the themes explained in the Themes section of this LitChart.

CHAPTER 1

The narrator introduces herself as Mary Katherine Blackwood (or Merricat) and says she lives with her sister, Constance. She wishes she had been born a werewolf. She doesn't like washing herself, dogs, or noise, but she does like Constance, Richard Plantagenet, and the death-cup mushroom. All of her family members besides Constance are dead. The library books in the kitchen are more than five months overdue, and she anticipates them remaining so forever. Everything in her house has always had its place and has belonged to the Blackwoods for generations.

Merricat recalls that she got the library books on one of the terrible days when she had to go to the village, since neither Constance nor Uncle Julian ever went. On the way home she always went into Stella's café for coffee because, if she didn't, she knew Stella would think she was too afraid to go in. Stella would ask after Constance and Uncle Julian, and if anyone else entered, Merricat would leave.

Merricat carefully chose library books for herself and Constance. In the evenings, Uncle Julian liked to see Constance reading, and would ask her about her book. The last morning that Merricat goes to the library is a beautiful day in April, and she wishes she didn't have to walk through the village. She stands on the library steps and plans her path, wanting to avoid the general store, where men sit outside. She decides it's best to go past the Rochester house, though she doesn't like this fancy house where her mother was born.

Wealthy people like the Clarkes and the Carringtons live outside the village, and Merricat doesn't understand why the villagers are friendly towards them but not towards the Blackwoods. Village politics often split between the villagers and the wealthy families. The Blackwoods' land is enclosed by a fence, and the villagers have always hated the family.

The opening paragraphs make it clear from the outset that Merricat is not exactly a conventional person. It's important to note that she says "all of" her family is dead, as this hints at the death of Uncle Julian much later in the book—she's writing from some time after the end of the novel, recalling the events of this period of her life. Additionally, her affinity for werewolves and poisonous mushrooms primes the reader to consider Merricat a suspect in the poisoning of her family.



Though Merricat doesn't yet state the reasons she hates going into the village, she makes it clear that the village is a bad place. Her pride that she goes to Stella's café, and her eagerness to prove that she isn't afraid, likely indicate just how afraid she is.



The fact that Merricat is looking back on this time in her life, along with the fact that this will be the last time she goes to the library, implies that major changes have occurred since that day to alter her way of life. It begins to become clear that the people are what she hates about the village. Furthermore, her mother's birth in a fancy house suggests that Merricat herself may be upper-class.



If the villagers are friendly towards other wealthy families, then the Blackwoods' wealth can't be the only thing that turns people against them. Perhaps the Blackwoods' fence, symbolizing a desire to keep people out and a sense of superiority, contributes more to the villagers' hatred.



When Merricat does the shopping, she pretends she's playing a board game in which various circumstances make her approach or retreat from the finish line. This day starts out well. She walks quickly, knowing that someone is watching her from the post office. She avoids looking at the Rochester house, where the yard is in disrepair. The house should belong to Constance now.

When Merricat crosses the street, local drivers always give her dirty looks. She imagines that if she stepped into the road, someone would swerve towards her and everyone would laugh to see her jump away. In the middle of the street, Merricat observes the ugliness of the buildings and thinks how it matches, or perhaps comes from, the ugliness of the villagers. She wishes the stores would rot.

Constance has made Merricat a shopping list. The villagers hate the fact that the Blackwoods always have enough money, and since their money isn't in the bank, the villagers seem to think that the family has piles of it sitting around their house. Merricat is always helped immediately in the grocery store, and the owners try to keep everyone else away from her. Merricat is afraid of the children and mothers, but today there are few in the store. The store goes quiet and everyone freezes while she's there.

Merricat tells Mr. Elbert which **food** items she needs. When she mentions Uncle Julian and sugar, the people in the store react with horror. Mrs. Donell mentions that the Blackwoods have always had good food, and Merricat wishes everyone in the store were dead. She imagines finding them all dying and stepping over them as she gets her groceries. Constance always tells her not to hate the villagers, but Merricat doesn't listen. Mr. Elbert writes Merricat a receipt, and she checks his math carefully as a form of revenge.

As Merricat leaves the store, she hears the shoppers behind her preparing to go about their business again. In order to make it down the street and past the watching people, Merricat imagines setting the table in the garden for lunch. She can hear the people talking to each other about the Blackwood girls and Blackwood Farm. Merricat holds her grocery bags carefully, because she once dropped them and the villagers shouted while she gathered her groceries.

Merricat begins to show her tendency towards creating her own reality as she pretends her life is a board game. In addition, one of her motivations throughout the book will be escaping the watchful eyes of the villagers, which is shown here as she feels someone watching from the post office.



Merricat begins to display not only fearfulness of the village, but outright hatred, and she believes that this hatred is returned to such a degree that the villagers wouldn't hesitate to threaten her life. Even before knowing what causes this hatred, the reader can feel its deep, clinging roots.



The world outside the Blackwood house cares deeply about money, unlike Merricat and Constance themselves. This will become a bigger issue later. Merricat and the villagers seem to both feel afraid of each other, which intensifies their mutual hatred.



This scene presents the first indication that there's some odd association between the Blackwoods and sugar, but Merricat feels no need to inform her reader what that is yet. Merricat's fantasy about the villagers dying reveals her shockingly cruel and violent streak. Ironically, though, her actual revenge is extremely mild compared to her imagined revenge.



Merricat causes quite a stir in the village, but it's not yet clear why. The reader's first foray onto Blackwood land is through Merricat's imagined setting of the table. It's significant that this is a ritual around eating, since so much of the Blackwoods' lives revolve around food and poisoning.



There's a crack in the sidewalk in front of Stella's café. Merricat remembers roller-skating and bicycling over it when the villagers didn't yet express hatred of her family. The crack was even there when her mother was growing up, and she imagines it has been there ever since the village came to be.

Stella made a couple of changes to the café with the insurance money after her husband's death, but it's almost the same as when Merricat and Constance used to come here after school. When Merricat enters, Stella greets her and asks after Constance and Uncle Julian. Stella is slightly kinder than the other villagers.

Merricat only comes to the café for reasons of pride, so she orders black coffee even though she doesn't like it. Jim Donell comes in. He and his wife are particularly cruel. He sits right next to Merricat, too close. He says he's heard her family is moving. She wants to leave the café, but she stays and denies that the Blackwoods are moving. Jim Donell ponders the nature of gossip while Merricat tears apart a paper napkin and wishes death on him. She thinks of how Uncle Julian is dying, and she mentally promises to be kinder to him.

Stella tells Jim Donell to leave Merricat alone, but he continues wondering aloud why the villagers are saying that the Blackwoods are leaving. He's constantly stirring his coffee, and Merricat wants to stop the spoon. Joe Dunham comes into the café, and Jim tells him that Merricat is denying that her family is moving away. Jim pretends to regret the departure of old families and laughs over the fact that many of the Blackwoods are already gone.

Jim Donell remarks on the Blackwoods' isolated way of life. Merricat knows that he could go on talking for a while. She imagines she lives on the **moon**. Stella tells Jim to cut it out, and he says he certainly wouldn't have wanted to be invited to dine at the Blackwoods'. Joe Dunham remarks that he once fixed the Blackwoods' step and never received payment. This is true, because he didn't properly rebuild the step. Jim says he should go ask for payment, but if he gets invited to dinner, he should refuse.

Stella tells Merricat that she should go home. Jim Donell lets her get off her stool, saying they'll all help the family pack when they leave. Outside, she hears Stella, Jim, and Joe laughing. She imagines her house on the **moon**. Now she just has to pass the town hall, where people make licenses and count fines and won't bother her.

The fact that Merricat wasn't always hated in the village proves that some specific event caused the villagers' attitude to change. The crack, forever present, seems to symbolize something flawed within the fabric of village society.



If Merricat and Constance used to go to school, then they must have once interacted in a relatively normal fashion with large groups of people, which seems almost unthinkable in light of their fear of people throughout the book.



The villagers have little fear of threatening or ostracizing the Blackwoods, so it's interesting that Jim Donell chooses the Blackwoods' departure from their house as a sufficiently awful rumor with which to confront Merricat. She, too, reacts as though it's awful, indicating her deep connection to her house. Although Merricat never really interacts with Uncle Julian, she always reminds herself to be kinder to him, suggesting she might feel some guilt for poisoning him.



Jim attempts to control reality by imagining or saying what he hopes to come true in an attempt to make it come true, which mirrors Merricat's own behavior. Additionally, his comments show the villagers' class-based resentment of the old, wealthy families in the area, of which the Blackwoods are one.



Merricat uses her imagined moon as a way of escaping from an unpleasant situation, as she often does. Though Jim insults the Blackwoods' hospitality as a jibe about the poisoning, his comment does suggest that the villagers don't like how the Blackwoods have long held themselves apart from the villagers. Joe Dunham's one visit to the house supports the sense that the villagers have only been welcome there to do jobs.



Though Merricat considers Stella the nicest of the villagers, Stella doesn't defend her—she laughs along with Jim and Joe—and her kindness is limited to giving Merricat an opportunity for escape.



Merricat realizes the Harris boys are in their yard, but she doesn't want to have to go the other way home, which is harder. She imagines them crying in pain on the ground. They chant a rhyme about Constance poisoning Merricat with a cup of tea. As Merricat walks past, she hides inside herself and thinks about living on the **moon**. Once when she passed the Harris house, the boys' mother watched them taunting her from the porch. Merricat asked her to stop them. She told them without emotion to stop calling names, and then she laughed. Merricat imagines the boys burning from their words.

The chant that the Harris boys sing and the villagers repeat throughout the book indicates that they believe Constance was guilty of the poisoning. Though they don't think to blame Merricat, they hate Merricat just as much as—perhaps more than—Constance. Though Merricat's thoughts about the Harris family are cruel, their actions are also incredibly heartless, suggesting that cruelty feeds cruelty.



CHAPTER 2

Merricat goes through the gate to the path on her family's property. Before her father closed the path, the villagers used to use it as a shortcut, but her mother didn't like them to. The Blackwoods' guests come up the driveway from the highway. Merricat used to think of the driveway as the place for the good people and the path as the place for the sneaking villagers. She was relieved when the villagers could no longer use the path. She feels safe once she locks the gate behind her. The land is forested, and she knows it better than anyone. Constance never strays past the house and the garden.

The brief background that Merricat provides about the path indicates that, even before the poisoning, the Blackwoods isolated themselves from the village and may have seen the villagers as their inferiors. It's likely, then, that the villagers hate the sisters for this attitude. Merricat, however, reinforces this way of thinking, often imagining the villagers as strangers and generally horrible people. After this scene, Merricat never leaves her land again.



Constance meets Merricat at the end of the garden, teasing that before long she'll be going all the way into the village. Merricat doesn't like this idea. She used to draw pictures of Constance as a fairy princess because she was always so bright. Merricat's cat, Jonas, follows the sisters into the house. Merricat locks the front door, because they mostly live in the back of the house and on the lawn, where no one can see them.

Constance is even more isolated than Merricat, fearing to go so far as the woods. At this point, however, she hopes to conquer these fears in the future, believing that seeing the villagers would be a good thing. Merricat, however, wants to keep Constance within their property, acting almost as a jailor, as she wants Constance all to herself.



Uncle Julian is sitting at his desk in the corner of the kitchen. Constance puts the groceries away, since Merricat isn't allowed to deal with the **food**. Constance plans their lunch, remarking how happy she is whenever Merricat comes home from the village. Merricat declines to tell her how bad the village was, and Constance says she'll go someday, which worries Merricat.

At this point, it seems logical to infer that Constance forbids Merricat from dealing with food, although later it will become clear that Merricat actually forbids herself. Constance's thoughts dwell on her potential reentry into the world. Merricat's reaction indicates this is a new train of thought for Constance.



Uncle Julian says he doesn't have any information on whether the girls' father had a cigar on the morning he's studying. Merricat watches Constance put the library books on the shelf, where they'll stay forever, and prepare the **food**. She asks whether Constance is afraid because Helen Clarke is coming to visit. Constance says she isn't. A few acquaintances still visit for a few minutes every so often, though the sisters never return the calls. These people think they help the family, and they always go only where they're supposed to in the house. Sometimes Mr. and Mrs. Carrington drive up and chat from their car, but they never come inside.

Merricat teases that the Carringtons might bring her a horse if she asked, then says she really only wants a winged horse, so that they could fly to the **moon**. Uncle Julian says that the sisters' parents had a fight on the last night, though they rarely fought. Constance says it doesn't seem like it's been six years, and she wishes she could have them back.

The house was only supposed to be a summer house, since the family should have had the Rochester house for winters. The windows in the drawing room go all the way to the ceiling. The room is beautiful and the sisters keep it clean, though they only use it for Helen Clarke's visits. Their mother always kept the room perfectly, and her portrait hangs there. Constance serves tea just where her mother did. Merricat isn't allowed to pour the tea. Constance sets the table as usual for this visit, which is the last time Helen Clarke will ever come to tea.

Merricat watches at the window. She asks whether Constance is frightened, which Constance denies. When Helen Clarke's car arrives, there are two people in it. Merricat wants to send Helen away, but Constance says she'll be all right. Merricat goes onto the porch and is relieved to see that Helen has only brought Mrs. Wright, who has come before. When they enter the hall, Helen Clarke gives Merricat the opportunity to warn Constance of who the visitor is. When Merricat returns to the hall, Helen Clarke is telling Mrs. Wright about the origins of the staircase.

The guests enter the drawing room, and Helen Clarke's awkwardness forces Mrs. Wright to sit in a corner, while she herself sits too close to Constance. They chat about gardening, and only Merricat can see that Constance is nervous. Mrs. Wright says she would love to meet Uncle Julian, and Helen Clarke says he's eccentric, though Merricat thinks Helen is far more eccentric.

Though it isn't yet fully revealed, Uncle Julian is studying the circumstances of the poisoning, and his inquiry about the cigar shows the level of almost ridiculous detail he investigates while he unwittingly has the murderer right in front of him. The Clarkes and the Carringtons visit out of a sense of duty more than out of a real fondness for the family, as evidenced by their stilted visits. Constance seems to have some general social anxiety, if Helen Clarke's visit might frighten her.



Merricat's wish to go to the moon even when she isn't in an immediately unpleasant situation suggests that she's not entirely happy with her life at home. Constance's desire to have her family back raises the question of how she relates to Merricat while knowing that Merricat killed them.



The sisters' mother seems to live on in her drawing room, just as their father lives on in his study. Through serving tea in her mother's place, Constance takes on her mother's legacy. It seems Merricat can't pour tea because this action gives her too much access to what the guests will drink, suggesting that she doesn't trust herself not to poison them and that she does, perhaps, feel guilty about her family's deaths.



Merricat's insistence that Constance might be frightened by the visit implies that she wants Constance to be frightened, because she wants Constance to depend on her. Merricat is protective of her sister to an unhealthy degree. Notably, she also wants to regulate who enters the house, even if she chalks this impulse up to Constance's fear.



Helen Clarke is a bumbling, foolish character throughout the book, but she generally acts in a much more socially acceptable manner than anyone else. The fact that Merricat thinks Helen is eccentric gestures to Merricat's existence within her own reality. Normal villagers, to her, are strange.



Helen Clarke says she's going to give Constance advice, as a friend. Merricat has a bad feeling about this advice. Helen Clarke says that Constance should return to the world. Recently, Constance would have dismissed these words, but now she listens. Merricat interrupts the discussion to point out that there's no milk. She goes to the kitchen to fetch it.

Merricat realizes that three times today, Constance has mentioned entering the outside world. She begins to panic. She smashes a pitcher on the table and leaves the shards for Constance to see. Then she brings milk back to the drawing room, where the women are discussing how Constance might return to society.

Merricat brings a cup of tea to Mrs. Wright, whose hand shakes when she takes it. She offers sugar, but Mrs. Wright refuses. Merricat realizes that Mrs. Wright has worn black on purpose, but Merricat doesn't feel it's right for her mother's drawing room. She brings Mrs. Wright rum cakes to make her unhappy, mentioning that Constance made them.

Helen Clarke eats numerous sandwiches. Merricat believes that Helen Clarke thinks she can act however she likes because the sisters are so glad of her company. She imagines Helen Clarke wearing her worst clothes to their house, and then she imagines her sitting trapped in a tree and screaming. Helen Clarke suggests that Constance might have a dinner party. Merricat says she could ask the villagers, and Helen Clarke insists that Merricat exaggerates the villagers' dislike of the family.

Merricat thinks Constance is beginning to look tired. She hears Uncle Julian coming and opens the door. Helen Clarke asks whether people would be afraid to visit the house. Uncle Julian greets the visitors, though he doesn't remember them. He says that since his niece was acquitted of murder, no one could be afraid to visit. Helen Clarke insists that no one thinks about that anymore.

Uncle Julian remarks on how fascinating the case is. Helen Clarke tries to stop him from talking about it, but he mentions tasting arsenic and Mrs. Wright wants to know more. Merricat and Constance look somber, but are actually happy that Uncle Julian has an audience. Mrs. Wright can't help remarking that the deed happened in this house.

The reader has met Constance at a time of change, when she is just beginning to consider ending her six years of isolation. Thus, she is receptive to Helen's urging in this direction.



Though Merricat thinks Constance is terrified of the outside world, Merricat herself is terrified of losing her control over Constance. Here, she displays her unpredictability and her willingness to take drastic steps without a sense of conscience. She acts far younger than her eighteen years.



Mrs. Wright is afraid of the tea and cakes because she fears they might be poisoned. She certainly can't accept the sugar, since the Blackwoods were poisoned by their sugar. But Merricat doesn't think mourning clothes should be worn in her mother's drawing room, even though her mother is dead.



Though Helen Clarke thinks she's doing the sisters a favor by visiting, Merricat sees her as an invader who disrupts the balance of the house. Helen Clarke obviously has no sense of how much the villagers hate the family. She suggests a dinner party, which would be the worst possible option considering that everyone associates the Blackwoods with being poisoned at dinner.



Helen Clarke and Uncle Julian each have their versions of the truth that they believe, despite the fact that Merricat's experiences in the village prove that everyone still thinks about the murder and are, indeed, afraid of the family.



As one of the only socially proper characters in the book, Helen Clarke can't stand the idea of actually talking directly about the poisoning. Merricat and Constance apparently don't mind having these traumatic memories discussed, perhaps because Uncle Julian discusses them so frequently.



Constance and Uncle Julian begin to reminisce about what happened. The family was having dinner, and there was arsenic in the sugar. Uncle Julian put the sugar on his blackberries, but not as much as some people. Constance eats neither sugar nor berries, which counted against her at her trial. Helen Clarke tries to stop them from continuing on this subject, as she pities Constance, but Constance insists she's fine.

Uncle Julian says he feels lucky that the poisoning happened to him, because it's so sensational. He begins to doubt whether it actually happened, but Constance assures him it did. He invites Helen Clarke to see the dining room where it occurred, saying he wanted to be a witness at the trial, but he wasn't well enough. Helen Clarke prepares to leave, but Mrs. Wright wants to see the dining room.

Uncle Julian takes Mrs. Wright into the dining room. He remarks that the table is now far too large for what remains of the family, but they feel they must keep it. He says the family was generally happy. Merricat wonders what Mrs. Wright would do if she met her in the village. Uncle Julian points out where each member of the family was sitting that night, saying that Merricat was not at the table because she had been sent to bed without dinner. Constance says that she would often bring her sister **food** in her room when she was in trouble.

Uncle Julian describes the **food** that night, much of which came from Constance's garden. He points out that if Constance wanted to poison them, she could have used any number of poisonous plants, which he describes in detail, rather than arsenic. Mrs. Wright protests that Constance shouldn't have had to cook dinner, but Uncle Julian says that Mrs. Blackwood was an awful cook. Helen Clarke interjects that Mrs. Wright wasn't supposed to bring up this topic, and they should leave.

Uncle Julian says that Constance scrubbed the sugar bowl before the police or the doctor even arrived, which was strange. She says there was a spider in it. Uncle Julian speaks of the pain he was in after the poisoning, while Constance was in jail. Mrs. Wright says she's always wanted to talk to the Blackwoods to find out the real story. She lays out the evidence. Constance bought the arsenic—for rat poison, Constance says—she cooked the dinner, she didn't call a doctor until too late, she washed the sugar bowl, she told the police that the poisoned deserved their fate, and that it was her fault. Uncle Julian doesn't think that Constance meant what she said to the police.

The fact that the arsenic was in the sugar may gesture to the assumption that young girls are unfailingly sweet and lovely. Merricat has never fit this sexist stereotype; she is metaphorically the sugar filled with poison. Ironically, Merricat's attempt to save Constance by putting the poison in a food she doesn't eat almost got Constance convicted of the murders.



Uncle Julian unfailingly reacts to the poisoning in unexpected ways. His happiness at having been poisoned adds to the topsy-turvy sense of reality in the house. Yet, despite his constant obsession with the murders, he also doubts the truth of his own memories, casting doubt on the account the reader receives of this essential event.



Merricat seems to think that Mrs. Wright would drop her politeness if she met her in the village, gesturing to the hostile mob mentality towards the Blackwoods. Uncle Julian thinks the family was happy, but Merricat obviously was not or she wouldn't have poisoned them. This oversight suggests that Merricat was often forgotten or left out. Constance, however, has always brought her food, just as she constantly cooks for her now.



Constance took over many of the traditional roles of the female head of the household even while their mother was still alive. In her lack of food-related skills, their mother broke from a long and important tradition of Blackwood women cooking and canning food, perhaps suggesting some betrayal of this female heritage and of her daughters.



Constance expresses the strange importance of minor problems in this house with her assertion that getting a spider out of the sugar bowl was more urgent than her dead family sprawled at the dinner table. Mrs. Wright seems typical of the villagers, as well, in her desire to figure out the truth of the matter. Her curiosity also helps the reader learn the facts without Merricat directly narrating the past, which she wouldn't do, as she never seems to directly think about it. Admittedly, the evidence against Constance seems quite convincing.



Uncle Julian reminds Mrs. Wright that she's met Constance, which she's forgotten. Mrs. Wright can't reconcile the Constance she's met with her image of the murderer. Helen Clarke finally tells Mrs. Wright that she's leaving. Merricat points out that Mrs. Wright hasn't drunk any of her tea. The guests say their farewells, and Merricat laughs to see Helen Clarke driving away almost before Mrs. Wright is entirely in the car.

Constance expresses exasperation with Helen Clarke and points out that Merricat was teasing Mrs. Wright. Merricat says she always wants to increase the terror of frightened people. Constance applauds Uncle Julian's performance. He says he'll rest until dinner. Merricat brings the tea tray to the kitchen and watches while Constance cleans up the broken pitcher. She asks whether Constance is going to follow Helen Clarke's advice on reentering the world, and Constance says she doesn't know yet.

CHAPTER 3

Merricat is the only one who can tell that a change is coming, though Constance might suspect it. Merricat watches Constance looking often down the driveway. The day after Helen Clarke's visit, Uncle Julian stays in bed, and Jonas is restless, often running all over the house. That morning Merricat thinks her family is calling her as she wakes up.

When Merricat doesn't have to go into the village, she does her work. On Wednesday mornings she checks the length of the fence to make sure it's secure. On Sunday mornings she checks her safeguards, which are items, such as silver dollars and dolls, that she's buried around the property to keep her remaining family safe. In the past, she's buried things to make the grass grow or the river run dry. Constance used to give Merricat pretty things to bury, and she also buried her baby teeth. On Thursdays, Merricat dresses in her family's clothes in the attic. On Mondays, the sisters neatened the house. Merricat isn't allowed into Uncle Julian's room.

On Saturday mornings, Merricat helps Constance in the garden. Their cellar is filled with jars of **food** that have been stored by generations of Blackwood women, and Constance takes pride in adding to the store. They never eat the food that their relatives have canned, however, and Constance says it would kill them. As Merricat eats jam that morning, she thinks of Constance making it.

Though Mrs. Wright seems to believe Constance committed the murders, Constance doesn't seem in the least like a murderer. The idea of Constance as murderer seems to have taken on almost mythic proportions, and it's difficult to remember that she's a real person. Mrs. Wright hasn't drunk her tea because she's afraid of it, and Merricat won't let her forget. Pointing out Mrs. Wright's fear is consistent with Merricat's own need to prove herself above fear by going to the café—to Merricat, fear is the enemy.



Ironically, Constance dislikes Helen Clarke's insistence that the poisoning is a taboo subject far more than she dislikes Mrs. Wright talking about it impolitely. The fact that she regards what Uncle Julian has done as a performance suggests that it has been removed from reality and may not be entirely true. Constance's calmness about the broken pitcher shows that Merricat frequently has outbursts of this sort.



Jonas's restlessness echoes Constance's. If Merricat still imagines her family calling to her, she probably does feel guiltier about their deaths than she usually lets on. This passage suggests that the family haunts the house in certain ways, if not literally.



A substantial amount of Merricat's time is consumed with making sure the family remains safe and isolated. Her practice of burying safeguards is the first hint of her witchcraft. The fact that Merricat dresses in her family's clothes every single week supports the idea that she feels preoccupied with their deaths, and this is her way of both remembering them and taking on all of the roles that they played in the house.



The shelves of preserved food represent the legacy and enduring strength of the female Blackwood line. Though it's unclear why, Constance says the food would kill them—this suggests that Merricat was acting in harmony with her heritage when she also used food to kill.



Uncle Julian sometimes has trouble getting up, so Constance always brings him a breakfast tray. On good days, he eats in the kitchen and studies his papers, saying that if he dies, someone who isn't too worried about truth must write his book for him. Merricat hopes that this morning he'll be able to sit in the garden. She tells Constance there's a change coming, but Constance chalks it up to the coming of spring.

Constance brings Uncle Julian his tray, and Merricat hears him ask whether her father is home. At first, Uncle Julian thinks that Constance is her mother. Merricat decides to choose three protective words, and as long as they're never spoken aloud, the change won't come. Her first word is "melody." Constance emerges, saying that Uncle Julian isn't well. Merricat wants to take him to the **moon**. She decides her second word will be "Gloucester" and she suggests that Constance make a pie.

Later, Constance runs down to the garden to gather vegetables while Merricat listens for Uncle Julian to awaken. A little after eleven, Constance goes to her room. Merricat opens the front door as Dr. Levy arrives. He hurries to Uncle Julian's room. Uncle Julian always wants to know why Dr. Mason, who was the doctor Constance called on the night of the poisoning, isn't there. Dr. Levy closes the bedroom door, and Merricat decides "Pegasus" will be her third magic word. The doctor emerges and rushes out of the house. Merricat calls Constance down from her room.

In the afternoon, Uncle Julian sits outside while Constance gardens. Uncle Julian describes the morning of the poisoning, remembering Constance and her father coming downstairs. He asks Constance what tune her father used to whistle, and she hums it. Uncle Julian thinks the girls' father might not have been whistling if he knew he was about to die. That day, Uncle Julian told his wife that she should go help Constance in the kitchen, since they were living in his brother's house.

Uncle Julian recalls that he was still strong in those days and could dress himself. He lists the breakfast items that day, thinking that he might have let his wife eat more sausage if he'd known it was her last day. Uncle Julian's brother (the girls' father) always watched how much Uncle Julian's wife ate, and Uncle Julian thinks his brother wanted his wife to be more helpful around the house. After breakfast, Uncle Julian sat in the garden with the women, and they talked about music while Constance weeded the vegetables.

Uncle Julian isn't terribly concerned about his likely death; he seems to expect it. He shamelessly disregards the value of truth, believing, in fact, that his book will do better without the truth. This suggests that truth can never really be pinned down in this novel as a whole.



Uncle Julian's memory has been disrupted by the effects of the arsenic he ate, and his misapprehensions of reality contribute to the house's atmosphere of alternative reality. Merricat turns to witchcraft to keep the world in the order that she wants, and the word "melody" suggests something that repeats in a predictable way, which makes sense if Merricat wants to prevent change.



The sisters follow a dependable routine such that Constance can go to her room without a word at a certain time and Merricat knows that it's because she's avoiding the doctor's visit. Although Dr. Levy is kind to Uncle Julian, his hurried passage through the house suggests that he doesn't feel comfortable there. Merricat's choice of "Pegasus" references her desire to fly to the moon on a winged horse.



Throughout the book, characters often wonder what people might have done differently if they had known the future—here, Uncle Julian does this about his brother. Julian seems to have felt that he and his wife were a burden on his brother's family, but he put increased responsibility onto his wife rather than working himself to make up for living in his brother's house.



Uncle Julian's memories suggest that there was tension in the family surrounding the cost of having Julian and his wife live in the house. However, the Blackwoods seem to have always had plenty of money, meaning that the sisters' father was simply a spendthrift. Uncle Julian is associated socially with the women here, and he will be consistently feminized throughout the book.



Constance reminds Uncle Julian that her brother was climbing a tree and dropping twigs on them. Uncle Julian says he hopes and believes his wife was nice to Constance's mother. They had a rarebit for lunch, and Uncle Julian wonders why the arsenic wasn't in that. He doesn't like rarebit. Constance takes him inside, since the sun is going down. He says he can't afford to rest, since he has too many details to write down about the day of the poisoning. Merricat and Jonas follow them inside. Merricat asks whether Constance will take care of her when she's old, and Constance says she will as long as she's around, which frightens Merricat. They plan to have dinner and sit safely in the kitchen, where no one can see them.

Uncle Julian truly lives in the past, as he gives far more attention to details of the day of the poisoning than to anything about the world around him. His constant recounting of that day makes it as though he, Merricat, and Constance are living it over and over, particularly as they do little with their days otherwise. Merricat is concerned about the prospect of keeping Constance near her forever, and Constance's ambivalence about being around when Merricat is old reinforces the sense of a coming change.



CHAPTER 4

On Sunday morning, Merricat feels the change coming nearer, but she refuses to think her three magic words. It seems like it might rain. Merricat asks after Uncle Julian, and Constance says that she's worried he's getting worse. He thought she was his wife and was wondering when he would die. Merricat decides that she'll remember to be kinder to him whenever she sees something long and thin.

Merricat believes she can keep change from coming through her witchcraft. She wants to be kinder to Uncle Julian, but the fact that she constantly has to remind herself of this suggests that it doesn't come naturally. Since his illness is her fault, perhaps her attempts at kindness are a sort of penance.



Merricat and Jonas go to the long field, where the grass is moving like an ocean in the wind. In the middle of the field, Merricat finds the rock marking the spot where she's buried a doll. She feels like she's walking on the buried treasure of everything she's put in the ground. Then Merricat goes to the creek and checks on a box of silver dollars she's buried there. She lies in one of her hiding places, where she's made a bed out of leaves and branches in between some bushes and covered the entrance with a branch. She lies there and listens to Jonas tell her stories. She feels that nothing will ever change.

Merricat has made herself powerful by putting pieces of her life in the ground all over the property, as though marking her territory. However, the fact that these items are buried makes them almost unsettling—it's as though, having missed her family's burial, she now buries them over and over everywhere she can. Furthermore, it becomes clear that she believes she can understand Jonas, which suggests the relationship of a witch to her animal familiar.



Merricat kills a nest of baby snakes because she doesn't like them. On her way home, she discovers that a book she nailed to a tree has fallen down, which is a terrible omen. She decides she'd better destroy the book. Little does she know that there's a man approaching who's probably already passing through town. Merricat and Jonas run back to the kitchen.

Merricat's nonchalant killing of the snakes demonstrates her ability for sudden, irrational cruelty. She fully believes in the power of the book to protect or hurt her, and she blames the coming change on the book falling, though in a rational world this makes no sense.



As Merricat and Constance have lunch, the approaching man is trying to find a way in past the fence. It begins to rain, and the sisters watch it from the kitchen. Constance asks whether Merricat ever wants to leave, and Merricat replies that the world is full of terrible people who don't want them around. In the minute before the man arrives, Merricat could have done many things to try to prevent him from coming, but she only goes to fetch Constance a sweater.

Constance is still considering the virtues of the outside world, but Merricat is uncompromising in her pessimistic view of it. Admittedly, Merricat has had plenty of bad experiences with the villagers while Constance has remained safe at home. Merricat's narration is very retrospective as Charles arrives, looking backward to imagine how things could have happened differently.



Merricat sees the man coming up the steps and tells Constance to lock the kitchen door, but Constance has gone into Uncle Julian's room. Merricat leans against the front door while the man knocks and calls for Constance. The people who come to the house always know everything about Constance and her trial. They want to see her, and when they can't, they take a souvenir from the yard. They want to talk to her or Uncle Julian, but never to Merricat, for Merricat hadn't been present at the fatal dinner, and she was in an orphanage during the trial.

Merricat knows that the man will look for a face in the upstairs windows, and then he'll go around to knock on the side door. Only the really stubborn people walk around trying every entrance. They drive right up to the steps, have picnics on the lawn, and graffiti the house. The man goes down the steps. Merricat can't look outside, because any movement will give her away. She imagines him lying dead in the driveway. She goes upstairs to get Constance's sweater, and when she goes back to the kitchen, Constance has let the man in.

Merricat says that they were supposed to be safe until someone said her three magic words. Constance introduces Merricat to their cousin, Charles Blackwood. He wants Merricat to greet him with a kiss. Constance tries to soothe Merricat, but she runs outside and down to the creek. Jonas follows. She lies there and imagines that nothing is wrong. She blames the book falling from the tree for Charles's appearance, and she plans to replace it with something new. She sleeps there with Jonas that night, and when she wakes, mist brushes her face and she laughs.

CHAPTER 5

Merricat returns to the kitchen to find Constance making Uncle Julian's breakfast. She says that he's feeling much better. Merricat says that today she's going to carry Constance to the **moon**, where they'll eat rose petals. She wants to know whether leaves can be planted, and Constance says some can. Constance takes Uncle Julian his breakfast while Merricat considers putting a feather on the lawn where he'll sit outside. Uncle Julian says he might begin writing a new chapter of his book today. He also says that he'll brush his own hair and he requests liver for lunch.

Merricat and Constance are talking about breakfast and planting leaves when Constance says that Charles is still asleep, and suddenly Merricat can't breathe. She insists that Charles was a ghost or a dream and that he can't be in the house, but Constance tells her that he slept in their father's bed. Merricat smashes a glass on the floor to make Charles go away.

Merricat's first interaction with Charles involves her trying to keep him out, and their relationship will essentially maintain this dynamic forever. The wide publicity of the murders becomes evident here, along with the fascination that people have with a beautiful female murderer. Merricat, however, remains almost unbelievably above suspicion and always ignored.



Merricat's hatred of strangers comes largely from her experience with these people who trespass and disrespect her space with their rude interest in Constance. Though Charles is, outwardly at least, not one of these people, perhaps he actually shares more of their characteristics than it initially seems. The fact that Constance lets him into the house is one of her biggest betrayals of Merricat.



This is one of the only times that Merricat actually admits that her magic failed. Since Merricat is eighteen, Charles's request for a kiss both makes her seem like a child and gives him the potential to be sexually dangerous. By leaving the house, Merricat initially allows Charles to take her place there. The fact that she can so easily imagine him away suggests just how much of her life is fabricated in her mind.



Though Merricat chooses to believe that Charles isn't in the house, her insistence on going to the moon indicates that she has been unsettled by his arrival and feels more than ever that she must convince Constance to join her in her ideal alternate reality where Charles can't disturb them. Since Merricat and Uncle Julian never directly interact, her kindnesses to him consist of small, strange things such as leaving feathers on the lawn.



Merricat believes so fully in the world in her mind that she can't accept the reality that she saw with her own eyes. As Charles sleeps in the sisters' father's bed, he begins to replace their father, and he will exhibit many attributes common to Blackwood men.



Constance insists that Charles is in the house, and he's their cousin. His father wouldn't let him help the sisters because he didn't like them, but as soon as his father died, Charles came to them. Merricat says he can't help them because they're already happy, and she feels better because she can drive him away. Constance explains that Uncle Julian hasn't seen Charles yet, because he wasn't well the night before.

Constance says they'll neaten the house after Charles wakes up. She sweeps up the broken glass while Merricat eats breakfast. Constance brings Uncle Julian to his papers in the kitchen, and he says he's going to begin his next chapter with an exaggeration and proceed into a lie by saying his wife was beautiful. They all hear Charles's footsteps upstairs. Uncle Julian wants Charles to tell him about his family's behavior during the trial.

Constance greets Charles in the hall. He and Uncle Julian meet, and Charles reveals that, contrary to Uncle Julian's expectations, his father left no money when he died. Uncle Julian had expected his brother, Charles's father, to handle his inheritance better than Julian himself did. He recalls Charles's mother writing to Constance to break off the family connection during the trial. Uncle Julian requests a cup of tea so that he can discuss matters with Charles.

Merricat can't see Charles clearly, either because of his size or because he's a ghost. She hides in a corner of the kitchen, and when he greets her she ignores him. Constance excuses her behavior, seeming almost as though she's always expected Charles to appear. Charles asks what Jonas's name is, and Merricat tells him. Charles says they'll all be friends. He decides he'll have pancakes for breakfast. When Uncle Julian's papers fall, Charles picks them up.

Uncle Julian commends Charles's chivalry and, finding out that he's thirty-two, remarks that Constance is approximately twenty-eight. He thinks that Charles is brave for eating Constance's cooking, but when Charles says he's not afraid of Constance's **food**, Uncle Julian says he was referring only to the heaviness of pancakes, not to poison. Even so, Charles hesitates to eat the pancakes. Instead, he offers to Uncle Julian that he could do some work around the house while he stays. Constance points out that he survived eating dinner last night, and Charles finally eats his pancakes.

Charles seems to arrive with some good intentions of helping the sisters, but they are undoubtedly always mixed with a desire for money. Although Merricat sees no improvements that he can make to their life, Constance obviously does or she wouldn't have welcomed him so easily.



Constance again shows her complete tolerance for Merricat's destructive fits of anger. Uncle Julian proves his disregard for the truth as he openly admits to lying in his book, which is supposed to be the definitive guide to the poisoning. He seems not to feel even the slightest guilt at being untruthful, and no one protests that he should be truthful.



Charles's lack of an inheritance already points to the fact that he's searching for money. Furthermore, Julian's comments indicate that skill with money is an especially prominent marker of success for men within the Blackwood family, even though the sisters' father's success also made him unlikable in many ways.



Merricat's mental molding of the world around her seems to affect her eyesight, so that her desire for Charles not to be there makes her see him as not entirely real. She acts, as usual, much younger than her eighteen years, simply ignoring someone she doesn't want to talk to. Charles accordingly treats her like a child.



Uncle Julian initially takes a liking to Charles. His remark on Charles's and Constance's ages might imply that they would be well-matched romantically. Precisely by claiming not to be afraid of Constance's cooking, Charles reveals that he is. Though Constance didn't mind when Helen Clarke and Mrs. Wright were afraid of her food, Charles seems to be a different matter. Also, he exposes his patriarchal viewpoint when he speaks specifically to Julian about working on the house.



Uncle Julian decides to return to an earlier chapter in which he discussed Charles's family. Charles, however, wants everyone to forget about the trial. Uncle Julian feels that Charles is insulting his work, and he'll have to make things up if Charles refuses to talk to him, which Charles does. Uncle Julian suddenly needs Constance to confirm that the poisoning really did happen. Merricat is angry with Charles for being cruel to Uncle Julian. Constance takes Julian outside into the sun, while Charles seems oblivious to his effect on Julian.

Charles is immediately upsetting the balance of the house, as he doesn't understand that Uncle Julian must be indulged and the murders aren't taboo. He's already trying to impose his sense of what's right on this family. Uncle Julian again displays his willingness to stray from the truth, implying that a good story is better than a true one. This could be a justification, since Julian is unsure of what the truth is. It could also be a symptom of his delusions.



Jonas sits in the doorway. Charles tells Jonas that Merricat doesn't like him, and asks how he can make her like him. Merricat wonders if holding her breath until a drop of water falls from the sink might make Charles go away. When Constance returns, Charles says he's trying to get to know Merricat, and Constance says she'll like him before long. Merricat says it's the day to neaten the house.

Charles tries to gain Merricat's trust through her cat, a technique that would usually be used on a much younger girl. He only seems to want to gain her trust so that Constance will like and trust him more. Merricat wants to stick to normal routines rather than let Charles change everything.



While Merricat and Constance clean the house, Constance often goes to the window to check on Uncle Julian. She says they won't clean their father's room, since Charles is staying there, and she considers wearing their mother's pearls, but then laughs at herself for being silly. Merricat wonders if Charles has moved items in their father's room. She asks how long it took him to get to the house, and she speculates about how he'll get home again. She thinks she needs to strengthen her protection around Constance to shut Charles out, and she needs to clean everywhere he's touched.

When Constance thinks about putting on pearls, she not only deviates from the established pattern of their life, but she also veers towards traditional gender roles and heterosexuality by appearing to make herself more beautiful in order to attract Charles. Merricat begins to plot how she can get rid of him, but she only considers methods of witchcraft, rather than any more rational means.



Next, the sisters dust the drawing room and Merricat pretends that the ceiling is the floor as she dusts the trim. Constance remarks that she should have already shown Charles this room, and she insists that Merricat will have to sit at the table with him soon. Merricat promises to do so at dinner. She asks where he sat the night before, and Constance says he sat in Father's chair. Merricat plans how she'll clean Charles's touch from the chair and silverware.

The house itself seems to welcome alternate realities, as Merricat easily remakes it in her imagination. Unlike Merricat, Constance wants to integrate Charles into their life. By sitting in their father's chair at dinner, Charles further takes his place in the house. Considering their father's death, though, Charles might also be dooming himself.



The sisters return to the kitchen, where Charles is smoking. When Constance goes outside to get Uncle Julian, Charles tells Jonas that Merricat doesn't like him and wonders whether she knows how he gets back at people who don't like him. Merricat and Jonas go eat sandwiches in a tree, and Merricat tells Jonas not to listen to Charles. She considers what magic device she might use to get rid of Charles. She decides that if he's still there in three days, she'll smash a mirror.

Pipe smoke is a very masculine symbol, and Charles is filling the very air with it. Since Merricat isn't responding to him yet, he begins to become more openly hostile towards her, showing his true colors. Merricat displays her faith in an irrational witchcraft—she's perfectly willing to break items in her own house even though there's no reason it will make Charles leave.



At dinner, Charles watches Constance helping Uncle Julian eat. Merricat doesn't eat because Constance put dressing on her salad and because Charles is there. Charles doesn't see how they stand eating with Uncle Julian. Uncle Julian speaks to Charles as though Charles is his father, Julian's brother. When Julian begins to talk about the poisoning, Charles stops him. Constance is glad that Merricat has come to the table.

Charles offers to fix the broken back step and go into the village for groceries, and Constance is grateful. Charles, however, is concerned to discover that she keeps their money in the house, in their father's **safe**. He says that Merricat will have to find another job, now that he's going into town. Merricat begins to tell him the details of the poisons found in the *Amanita phalloides* mushroom. He tells her to stop, but Constance only laughs, saying that she taught Merricat about poisonous mushrooms. Charles doesn't think it's funny.

CHAPTER 6

Constance gives Charles the shopping list and a key to the gate. When she gives him grocery money, he protests that it isn't safe to keep the money in the house. Merricat waits till he's gone, then tells Constance he forgot the library books because he doesn't know how things work in this house. Constance remarks on the warm weather, and Merricat tells her how wonderful life is on the **moon**. Constance wonders when to start making gingerbread for Charles. Merricat thinks about the villagers waiting to see her come into town and seeing Charles instead. Then she suggests that Constance could make a gingerbread Charles and Merricat could eat him, which irritates Constance.

Merricat goes to her father's room to look for a magic object to use against Charles. Since Charles is staying here, the room is filled with his things. An open drawer shows that he's been looking at her father's expensive jewelry. Merricat takes her father's gold watch chain and brings it into her room. She decides to nail it to the tree where the book fell down, and in the meantime she lies on her bed and plays with it.

Charles becomes more openly hostile towards Uncle Julian, as well, no longer regarding him as the male head of the family, but instead as a disgusting invalid who is unworthy to even eat at the family table. Uncle Julian's confusion suggests that the Blackwood men are similar enough to be interchangeable.



Charles is integrating himself more and more into the life of the house, even to the point of replacing Merricat, which he seems to do quite consciously. In response, Merricat uses the family history to frighten Charles without directly threatening him. She particularly likes poisonous mushrooms, perhaps because they masquerade as food while actually being lethal, and she's somewhat fixated on food.



Charles is beginning to show his fixation on the sisters' money. Merricat tries to prove to Constance that he doesn't belong here. Her mention of the library books also reminds the reader that some event is approaching that will cause the library books never to be returned. Charles's presence is dividing the formerly united sisters, as they now have opposite goals—Merricat wants to ostracize Charles, but Constance wants to make him feel welcome. As Merricat eats constantly, she wants also to consume Charles.



Charles wants to get his hands on the money and valuable objects in the house, echoing the sisters' father's similar greed. Merricat, on the other hand, cares nothing the value of money, and she tries to remove the watch chain from Charles's masculine world of money and bring it into her feminine world of witchcraft.



Later that day, Charles brings the watch chain to the kitchen, having found it in the tree. He's enraged that something so valuable would be damaged in such a way. Constance doesn't think it's important, and he tries to impress its monetary worth on her. When he says they need to figure out how the chain got on the tree, Constance tells him that Merricat put it there, like she always does. Charles looks closely at Merricat. When Constance helps Uncle Julian into bed for a nap, Charles asks Jonas what Merricat would do if Constance didn't love her and turned her out of the house.

Merricat decides that the next step is to ask Charles politely to leave, before he leaves his mark on the house any more than he already has by leaving his pipe and tobacco and newspapers lying around. After he's been there three days, Merricat asks Constance whether he's mentioned leaving. Constance gets cross when Merricat brings this up, even though she was never cross with Merricat before. Merricat says Charles makes Uncle Julian sicker, and Constance says that Uncle Julian shouldn't think about the gloomy past so much. She says she's been undutiful to him and to Merricat, who runs wild. Merricat begins to say what life is like on the **moon**, but Constance stops her. She says Uncle Julian should be in a hospital. Then she becomes her old self again and says Merricat is being silly.

Merricat goes outside to ask Charles to leave. She tries to be kind to him in her thoughts, but when she thinks of his face she wants him to die. She approaches him in the garden and politely asks him to leave, but he refuses. He's wearing her father's watch. He wonders aloud whether he'll be there in a month, or she will. Merricat runs up to her father's room and breaks the mirror with a shoe.

Merricat has been doing a better job of being kind to Uncle Julian. Charles hates watching Uncle Julian eat and says he should wear a bib. Charles eats huge breakfasts in the kitchen, and if Uncle Julian calls from his room, Charles tells Constance she shouldn't wait on him. Merricat avoids eating breakfast with Charles. She looks in Uncle Julian's window from the outside and pities him. When she asks Constance to make Uncle Julian a cake, Charles says that Constance is too busy.

One afternoon, Merricat follows Charles to the edge of the village, where she sees him sit down with the village men. When she returns home, Constance asks where she's been and tells her she's no longer allowed to wander. Constance says she's been wrong to shut them away from the world, and Merricat should have boyfriends. Then she realizes how ridiculous she sounds and they both laugh.

Charles tries to force a capitalist obsession with money onto a house removed from such concerns, as proven by the fact that even Constance doesn't care about the damage to the watch chain. Constance prefers Merricat to be happy than to have a watch chain that does no one any particular good—money is irrelevant to the sisters. It's also notable that the sisters disregard the watch chain, since it's associated with their father. This shows their antipathy towards him, even after his death.



Pipes, tobacco, and newspapers are all very masculine objects, and by leaving them around the house, Charles corrupts this female-ruled space. He's beginning to change Constance, too, making her see their lives from the point of view of the outside world, rather than from a point of view sympathetic to the worlds Uncle Julian and Merricat create in their minds. Significantly, she no longer wants to hear about the moon, which stands for Merricat's ideal imagined world. Even though she quickly repents, it seems only a matter of time before Charles gains complete control over her.



Merricat now makes some effort to control herself, trying to be kind and rationally asking Charles to leave. Once this fails, she has no choice but to abandon rationality and kindness once again, particularly as Charles continues to threaten her. Now wearing her father's watch, Charles almost begins to creep into her father's skin.



Charles now starts to act as an awful, controlling husband who keeps his wife constantly busy serving him in the kitchen. He says that Constance is too busy to do anything for Uncle Julian, but she's only busy because of the demands Charles puts on her. If food is a symbol of power, his consumption of large amounts shows his increasing influence.



Charles isn't so different than the village men in his cruelty to Merricat. Constance continues to think in the way Charles is teaching her to, even trying to impose heterosexuality on Merricat. The fact that they find this ridiculous shows how far outside mainstream culture they are.



Merricat goes to look for Jonas, and Charles returns with a scarf that Merricat had used to tie the gate shut. He's irritated that she used it that way because it's expensive. He wants to look over their father's clothes and papers in his study, which is where the **safe** is. Merricat isn't allowed to open the safe, and she avoids the study in general. She thinks that being a demon and a ghost must be hard for Charles, because he has to constantly pretend he's human.

Later, Merricat goes into the kitchen, where Constance and Uncle Julian are. Uncle Julian demands a box for his papers so that Charles can't touch them. He calls Charles dishonest and a bastard. Constance brings him a box from the cellar, but Uncle Julian temporarily forgets why he wanted it. Constance says she should have put him in a hospital, and she might have to, though Merricat says it wouldn't be kind. Merricat feels like time is running out and is considering smashing the mirror in the hall when Charles comes downstairs for dinner.

That evening, Constance plays songs that their mother played on the harp in the drawing room. Charles is restless while he listens, but doesn't dare put his feet on the furniture. Uncle Julian says all the Blackwood women had a delicate touch. Charles takes a Dresden figurine off the fireplace, asking whether it's valuable, but Constance says it isn't. He says it's time for her to stop playing, because they have to discuss plans.

CHAPTER 7

Merricat decides that Thursday is the day to get rid of Charles. Constance makes spice cookies, which is a shame because they'll go to waste since it's the last day of their former life. Merricat watches Charles trying clumsily to fix the back step. She creeps upstairs, finds her father's watch on his dresser, and twists the winding knob backwards until the watch breaks. She feels like she has finally attacked Charles effectively. She knows she can't get rid of his mark everywhere, but she hopes that if she changes the house enough, he'll become lost and leave.

The night before, Merricat brought baskets of wood and leaves in from outside. Now she takes her father's things from his room and replaces them with these scraps. She pours water on the bed and tears down the curtains so Charles will have to see the road leading away. In this room, he won't know who or where he is.

Merricat continues to annoy Charles with her disregard for monetary value—she even seems to be repulsed by the place where money is kept. Meanwhile, Charles is coming closer and closer to getting his hands on the money he's been seeking. Merricat sees the world as supernatural, and she fits Charles into it as a supernatural evil. Her vague pity for him gives her power.



Uncle Julian finally becomes entirely hostile to Charles, who presents a challenge to his comfort and his ambitions. Under Charles's influence, Constance is now considering abandoning Uncle Julian to the outside world, which Merricat believes to be the worst fate possible. Merricat has to do something before Constance completely changes her thinking to match with Charles's objectively realistic viewpoint.



The drawing room can be read as a female space, having belonged to the sisters' mother. Charles, however, tries to make it masculine by ignoring the beauty of the figurine in favor of his obsession with money. The nature of his plans with Constance is left vague, but they undoubtedly involve change, which Merricat dreads.



Charles trying to fix the back step symbolizes his trying to fix what he perceives to be broken in the sisters' lives. Merricat attacks him through her father's watch, rather than through any possession of his own, adding to the sense that he has taken her father's place. Her attempt to disorient Charles indicates that she really does believe he's a supernatural being, as a human wouldn't become lost in a house he knows.



Though Merricat loves and needs her house, she doesn't seem to care much about the actual appearance and structure of it—the atmosphere of safety and isolation is more important. She doesn't hesitate to ruin an entire room, acting in opposition to the conventional female role of homemaker.



Merricat is lying in her room when she hears Charles shouting angrily to Constance outside. He hasn't managed to mend the step. He's carrying the silver dollars that Merricat buried, and is enraged that so much money would be buried. Constance tells him that Merricat did it, and is entirely unconcerned. Merricat thinks that perhaps Charles finds money no matter where it is, or else he's methodically digging up all of the land.

Constance goes inside to answer Uncle Julian's call, and Charles follows. When Charles goes to put the silver dollars in the **safe**, Merricat runs outside. She considers turning Charles into a fly in a spider web or trapping him inside a tree or burying him. She finds the hole where the money was and imagines him digging it up. She scratches a face on a stone and buries it in the hole, imagining that it's Charles's head.

Merricat cleans out her shelter because Charles was so close to it. She returns home when she gets hungry, and Charles is shouting in the kitchen. Merricat wonders whether he'll start squeaking if he shouts long enough, and whether Constance would laugh if he did. He stops shouting when he sees Merricat and says that whatever punishment he comes up with, she'll remember. Constance says that it's all her fault. Merricat begins listing poisonous plants and their properties, but when she says she came home for lunch, Constance tells her she has to explain herself to Charles.

Charles has brought a handful of sticks and dirt from his room and placed it on the kitchen table. He tells Merricat to listen, and Uncle Julian asks Constance to tell Charles to be quiet, which makes Charles say he's fed up with Uncle Julian because Uncle Julian can't remember Charles's name. Merricat thinks she must be kinder to Uncle Julian. Charles tells her to explain why she dirtied his room, but she ignores him. Uncle Julian thinks that Charles is the sisters' father, John, and advises him not to get involved in their wives' arguments. Charles says Constance must get out of this environment, and Uncle Julian says that he and his wife will leave if John insists.

Constance looks like she's going to cry, and Merricat calls Charles evil. He says the house is crazy, and Constance tries to pacify him by saying she'll clean his room. Charles goes to Uncle Julian, and Julian tells Charles to stay away from his papers and calls him a bastard. Charles wants to convince him that he's not John Blackwood, but Julian suddenly seems to know exactly who he is and wants him to tell his father that Julian said Charles was a bastard.

Charles's failure to mend the step foreshadows his failure to, in his eyes, mend the sisters' lives. Though Merricat doesn't care about money, she's aware of it enough to have noticed that Charles cares deeply about it. He can't stand the irrationality of Merricat's actions.



Merricat seems to practice a sort of voodoo here, attempting to have an influence on the real Charles by burying a model of him. The urgency of the situation is reflected in Merricat's new witchcraft. Rather than trying to doom Charles through objects associated with her father, she has acknowledged Charles' own power by burying objects that represent Charles directly. This is perhaps a result of Charles now having access to the safe.



Charles wants to frighten Merricat, so in remaining perfectly aloof in her interactions with him, she conquers him in a small way. Furthermore, she can tell that Constance laughing at Charles would be a sign that she is out from under his influence, so making Constance laugh at him becomes a goal of Merricat's—one that seems notably tied to reality in contrast to her witchcraft.



This scene becomes a nightmare for Charles, who wants to be in control and have people listen to him. Instead, Merricat ignores him entirely and Uncle Julian doesn't even know who he is, but wants him to shut up nonetheless. If Charles is trying to create an orderly, rational reality in the house, this scene tears it to shreds. Significantly, Uncle Julian now thinks that Charles is the sisters' father, rather than Charles's own father, another indication that he's acting like John Blackwood.



Notably, Charles calls the house crazy rather than naming its inhabitants. The sisters often refer to the house as though it's alive, and Charles's comment suggests that the craziness of the inhabitants comes from the house itself. Uncle Julian's revenge on Charles feels more satisfying than Merricat's, perhaps because he gives a real-world sort of insult that Charles can understand.



Uncle Julian tells Charles to be quiet, and Charles says he has to deal with Merricat first. Julian, however, says that Merricat died in the orphanage during Constance's trial, and she hardly matters to his book. Charles is outraged and points out that Merricat is right in front of him. Julian just tells him to be quiet. Merricat laughs. Julian asks Constance why his papers are in a box and when Charles is going to leave. Charles says he's staying.

Constance cleans the dirt off the table while Charles looks baffled, and Merricat thinks Charles is becoming trapped. Constance tells him to go rest, but he says Merricat needs to be punished. Merricat asks whether he's going to send her to bed without her dinner. She runs out to the field and sits in the middle with Jonas, where the high grass hides them.

A while later, Merricat goes to the summerhouse her father had built, which she hasn't visited for six years. Her family never liked the summerhouse because something bad had gotten into it when it was built. Merricat never buried anything around it. The trees grow close to it and the flowers around it have died. It's so ugly that her mother wanted to burn it down. Merricat sits on the floor and imagines her dead family as they would sit around the dining room table.

Merricat imagines her family's conversation. They say she should have anything she wants. They all love her, and she should never be punished because she never does anything wrong. Most of all, she must never be sent to bed without her dinner. They pass her more **food**, rise when she rises, and bow their heads to her.

CHAPTER 8

Merricat can't let the family eat dinner without her. When she returns, she and Jonas stand looking at the house with love. Merricat thinks it is almost clean of Charles's influence. He's still angry at her when she goes in, and Merricat can tell that Constance is tired of his anger. Uncle Julian is mashing his **food** up and eating with a napkin under his chin. Constance tells Merricat to tidy herself before she comes to dinner, and Charles says that they're thinking of a good punishment for her.

It may come as a shock to the reader that Uncle Julian believes Merricat is dead, but the two characters have never directly interacted. This is perhaps the main illusion of Uncle Julian's internal reality, and it's striking that this mistake doesn't seem to bother Merricat. This is the first time that Charles says he intends to stay indefinitely.



If Charles is becoming trapped, it's because he can't understand the personal realities in which Merricat and Julian live, and which Constance accepts. Merricat was sent to bed without her dinner on the night of the murders, so her bringing that up now does not bode well. Charles has treated her as her family did, behavior that led her to kill them.



The summerhouse, an ugly, closed-off, and uneasy place, seems to represent Merricat's sense of insecurity about Charles' presence (as opposed to the safety of the main house). Since her father built the summerhouse, Merricat's fear seems related to the way that he (and Charles) made her feel.



In imagining how she wishes her family had treated her, Merricat reveals how they did treat her. Judging from this scene, they ignored her, disrespected her, and punished her. However, this scene also shows that Merricat has a swelled sense of self-importance, almost imagining herself a queen.



This will be the last time that Merricat sees the house whole—it's ironic that she looks on it so fondly, since she's about to destroy it. If Constance is tired of Charles's anger, it means that she hasn't yet given into his influence entirely. Charles incessantly reminds Merricat that he's going to punish her without ever actually doling out a punishment, which is unwise, as Merricat so resents punishment.



Merricat goes upstairs and creeps into Charles's room. Constance has cleaned the dirt out and now it looks very empty, because Merricat moved everything else to the attic. She can tell that Charles has been lying on the bed, and she imagines him trying to find something familiar in the room. He's left his pipe smoldering in an old saucer on the side table. Constance brought these saucers out specially for him and said that they must have come from some great-grandmother's dowry. Merricat felt that they belonged in their place in the pantry.

Merricat brushes the pipe and the saucer into the wastebasket, and they fall onto newspaper. One of her eyes is seeing shades of orange and the other is seeing shades of blue and green, and she wonders about this. She almost forgets to tidy herself before she returns to the dinner table. She requests that Constance make her a cake. When Charles threatens her with the prospect of a long talk, Merricat says the Latin name for deadly nightshade. Uncle Julian is eating more than usual and feeling much better, partly because he's been so impolite to Charles.

Suddenly Charles smells smoke. Constance checks the kitchen and Charles the hall. He suspects that Merricat is somehow the cause of the smoke, but then Constance reminds him of his pipe, and he runs upstairs. Merricat asks whether it would start a fire. Charles screams from upstairs and tells them all to run because the house is on fire. Uncle Julian remains calm and goes to retrieve his papers. Charles flees to get help, telling Constance to put the money from the **safe** in a bag.

Constance helps Uncle Julian to his room while Merricat looks upstairs. She can see the fire in her father's room. The fire doesn't seem in a hurry, so she doesn't hurry either. She wants to shut the door to her father's room to keep the fire confined to Charles's things, but it's already coming outside the room. Everything belonging to Charles must be burnt by now. Constance returns, saying that Uncle Julian is getting his papers. Merricat suggests they shelter on the porch. Constance seems angry with the house for burning.

Merricat guides Constance onto the porch just as fire engines roar into the driveway. Constance covers her face. Jim Donell runs into the house first, and the sisters hide behind vines growing on the porch as the rest of the firefighters drag hoses in and light up the front of the house. Charles is yelling for the men to get the **safe**. Constance is worried that people might be able to see her. Merricat looks out to find that the entire village is watching.

Charles puts his pipe, a symbol of masculinity, on a saucer that has been passed down through the female Blackwood line. This seems to represent his desire to control the Blackwood women, as well as years of Blackwood men demanding service from Blackwood women. The fact that Merricat feels that Charles has no right to use the saucers in this way can be read as a feminist statement.



If her narration is to be believed, Merricat doesn't seem to premeditate setting a fire, and she doesn't seem to understand that the pipe will set the newspaper on fire. In fact, she doesn't even seem to recognize the shades of orange that her eye is seeing as fire. If she's able to commit an act of such impact almost unconsciously, then it's possible that she was in a similar state of mind when she poisoned her family. It's also equally possible that her narration is deliberately unreliable so as to suggest false innocence.



When Charles briefly places the blame on Merricat for the smoke, it's the only time in the whole book that anyone other than Constance recognizes her capacity to do such things as poisoning her family or setting her house on fire. However, she seems sincere in wondering whether the pipe could start a fire. Charles shows that he cares more about money than about the family getting out safely.



Merricat acts as though the fire has a mind of its own, which perhaps helps her pretend that the house burning isn't her fault. She also doesn't understand that shutting a door against fire most likely would not keep it in Charles's room—in trying to chase Charles out, she's going to end up burning down her own life, too. Constance, meanwhile, seems to think of the house as something alive and conscious.



Merricat and Constance are consistently more afraid of the villagers than of the fire. In this light, Merricat's arson initially seems to backfire by bringing more men and strangers to her house than ever before. Even though Charles doesn't know where the sisters are, he's still more worried about the money than about their safety.



Someone asks where the sisters and Uncle Julian are, but Charles says they're fine. Merricat thinks Uncle Julian must have gotten out the back door, but in any case the fire seems confined to the bedrooms upstairs. Constance says that Uncle Julian was more annoyed than frightened, as was Jonas, who went out the back door. She remarks how much scrubbing she'll have to do to get the hall clean. Merricat thinks everything is all right, and once the fire is out, they'll go inside and clean.

Merricat can't distinguish any faces in the crowd in the yard. She thinks of the fire as belonging to Charles and marvels at the firemen's ability to destroy it. She can hear the fire and the voices of the firemen and the crowd. One woman suggests that they let the house burn, and Charles is still saying to get the **safe** out. The firemen insist that they have to put the fire out. The smoke obscures the faces of the villagers.

Merricat is tired and hungry and wonders how long the firemen will make the fire last, because she wants dinner. Soon the light begins to dim and the voices inside sound more satisfied. Those outside sound disappointed. The villagers wish the house had burned down with the Blackwoods inside. When Jim Donell emerges, someone asks him why he couldn't let it burn. He puts his hat that says "chief" in the fire engine. Then he picks up a rock and throws it through the drawing room window.

The villagers laugh and begin to storm the house. They shatter the windows and break the Dresden figurines and the harp, laughing all the while. Charles tries to get someone to help him with the **safe**. The villagers begin to chant the rhyme about Constance poisoning Merricat. As they approach the sisters' hiding place, Merricat tells Constance they need to run, but Constance is afraid. The window behind them is smashed. Merricat pulls Constance to the porch steps. A little girl runs out the front door and her mother stops her from eating a handful of Constance's spice cookies.

Merricat and Constance have to run through the headlights of the cars to get to the woods. While they hesitate, two more cars arrive, and Jim Clarke and Helen Clarke get out of one. Jim Clarke goes inside, enraged at what's happening, but his words have no effect on the villagers inside. Dr. Levy gets out of the other car and follows him in, asking where Uncle Julian is. No one sees the sisters.

Even when other people bring up the family inside, Charles shows no concern for them—at the very least, Merricat has succeeded in exposing his true colors. Merricat and Constance take a very skewed view of the fire, worrying more about the cleaning they'll have to do than about Uncle Julian's life. This is in accordance with the strange reality they live by.



With the faces of the crowd indistinguishable, the villagers begin to become a mob—it's clear that they're thinking as a unit and wanting to punish the Blackwoods. In their official capacity, the firemen feel that they must do their duty and put the fire out. However, it soon becomes clear that they're not immune to mob rule.



Though Merricat was just impressed with the firemen's ability to quench the fire, she suddenly thinks that they're making the blaze continue. While this isn't literally true, it becomes metaphorically prophetic: Jim Donell switches from being a fireman to a villager when he begins to contribute to the destruction of the house.



The villagers, who have always hated the Blackwoods, finally have their chance to punish them, perhaps feeling that they're serving justice since the law didn't punish anyone for the poisoning. Though the sisters have long avoided the villagers, the villagers are now ruining their one safe haven. Even in the midst of the madness, the villagers are still fixated on the Blackwoods' food and are ridiculously sure that it's all poisoned.



The Clarkes are always the most objectively "normal" people in this book, and Dr. Levy, too, shows the most rational concern yet—Uncle Julian's safety should have been taken care of much earlier. However, no one seems terribly concerned about what's happened to the sisters.



Merricat helps Constance down the steps. Someone sees them and shouts, and then the villagers surround them, pushing to see them better and taunting them. Helen Clarke is crying against her car. The villagers don't want to touch the sisters, and so Merricat and Constance run towards the woods. People keep blocking their path no matter where they turn, chanting the rhyme and laughing. Merricat worries that Constance might fall, so she stands still.

From the porch, Jim Clarke announces that the fun is over, because Uncle Julian is dead. The villagers fall silent. Charles asks whether Constance killed him, and the crowd moves away from the sisters. Dr. Levy says that Uncle Julian's heart failed. Jim Clarke pushes the villagers towards their cars, and they go. Merricat pulls Constance into the trees. No one sees them. When they reach the path Merricat hugs and soothes Constance.

As Merricat leads Constance to her shelter by the stream, she thinks how glad she is that she can keep Constance safe. She'll tell her stories and bring her berries. She brings Constance to a pile of leaves and a blanket in the corner. Jonas is already there. Merricat covers the entrance with branches and looks up at the stars peering through. Thinking of their mother's broken Dresden figurine, she tells Constance that she's going to poison everyone. For the first time since it happened, Constance acknowledges that she knows Merricat poisoned their family, and Merricat admits that she did.

CHAPTER 9

During the night, Merricat hears an ambulance take Uncle Julian away. People call for the sisters, but no one comes into the woods. Because Uncle Julian believed Merricat was dead, Merricat takes his death to mean that people will die if they don't respect her. She wonders how the house will be different, and whether the fire might have burned away the last six years and her family might have returned. Maybe she and Constance will be living in an entirely different house, or maybe she could persuade the fire to burn the village instead. Maybe the village is really a game board, and Merricat is almost at the end, where home is.

The villagers are in such a frenzied state of communal violence that they act almost as one, never pausing to think about the awful things they're doing. Though Helen Clarke has said she wants to help the sisters, she's completely useless now. Ironically, the villagers' chant reiterates over and over the falsehood that Constance was the poisoner.



Real, objective tragedy strikes and the villagers are forced to confront their own temporary madness. Charles reveals the depths of his dishonesty, as he must never have really trusted Constance in the whole time he's been pretending to help and love her. He effectively reveals himself to be more of a villager than a family member.



Merricat's shelter is a place all her own, where no one has ever challenged her perspective on the world. By taking Constance there now, Merricat takes the first step towards their new life where Merricat's reality will reign. Finally, Merricat confirms what the reader has most likely suspected about her role in the poisoning. In speaking aloud about their mutual knowledge of this secret, Merricat and Constance enter into a new level of intimacy and collusion.



Although Merricat has never expressed any anger at Uncle Julian for his refusal to recognize that she's alive, her response to his death suggests that she actually did resent his treatment of her—perhaps because it echoed her family's tendency to ignore her. Furthermore, she thinks that she has unconscious power over life and death. The house is the main structure of her reality, and now that it's burned, reality is up for grabs. Merricat thinks the fire could quite possibly have altered both time and space.



It's Helen Clarke's day to come to tea, but Merricat and Constance will have to straighten the house instead. Merricat decides that in the future she won't be allowed to give people teacups. Still in the shelter, Merricat goes to Constance when Constance awakens, and Merricat tells her they're finally on the **moon**. Constance feels like she's dreamed everything that happened, but she thanks Merricat for bringing her to the shelter. Her face is dirty, and Jonas stares at her. Merricat says they need to neaten the house, and reminds her that she never ate dinner the night before. This concerns Constance.

Constance washes her face in the stream while Merricat folds Uncle Julian's shawl, which Constance has been wearing. Merricat has never touched the shawl before, and it shows her that the rules are different now. Constance is worried Merricat will starve. They go carefully down the path, watching for anyone who might still be around. Finally they come to the edge of the woods and see their house. The second story is entirely gone, and they can hardly believe it. The garden is smoky and covered in ash.

The ground floor seems unharmed, so Constance opens the kitchen door. Merricat fears this will make the house collapse, but it doesn't. Constance can hardly bear the sight of her kitchen. Merricat thinks perhaps they haven't come home on the right path. The kitchen table is turned on its side, two chairs are smashed, and the floor is littered with broken dishes and silverware. The walls are covered with jam and syrup and the sink is filled with broken glass. It seems like all the treasures of the house, particularly the Blackwood women's items, have been broken and scattered. Constance goes to the cellar to check on the preserves and finds that they haven't been touched.

Constance prepares to make breakfast while Merricat begins to look for items that are still intact. Constance brings **food** up from the cellar and finds a saucepan on the floor. She discovers that some of the food in the pantry is untouched, and Merricat realizes that the floor is scattered with sugar. The villagers must have had lots of fun throwing it at each other. Merricat examines the cans and boxes of food broken on the floor, and Constance says the food in the cooler is also safe to eat.

Even as Merricat feels that everything is different, her mind still works through routine and rules. It becomes clear for the first time that Merricat herself has made all the rules that she's been following throughout the book. She says she and Constance are on the moon now because she knows instinctively that they will never interact with other people again and will live as they like. Ironically, Constance is most worried not about the fire, but about Merricat missing her dinner. This shows the supremacy of food and care over material things in the sisters' world.



Though Merricat makes her own rules, they also seem to come from something beyond her that she can't control. Constance's concern that Merricat will starve is absurd, particularly in the face of the real death of Uncle Julian, but it shows that the normal rules of the world apply even less than they ever did to these women. It also implies that Merricat must be constantly satisfied to keep from becoming dangerous.



The kitchen has always been the heart of this house and the place where the sisters do their main activities: cooking and eating. Thus, the villagers have been sure to ruin this most important place, in part due to their morbid fascination with Blackwood food as a result of the poisoning. However, the preserves, which represent the power of the female Blackwood line, are still intact, suggesting that the sisters still have their fundamental strength.



Now that the sisters are beginning a new, entirely isolated life, they are free to give in wholly to their fixation on food. Even though their house is in shambles around them and their uncle is dead, they immediately begin to make food. The villagers would obviously have targeted the sugar in their destruction of the house because of its role in the poisoning.



Merricat puts three unbroken chairs around the table and drinks chicken soup. Time and orderly days have disappeared, so it's impossible for Merricat to say in what order she does things. Constance thinks she hears Uncle Julian waking, then realizes this is impossible. They sit in the kitchen, unwilling to go further into the house yet. Constance says that there will be a funeral for Uncle Julian. Merricat was in the orphanage during the funerals for the rest of her family, but Constance went. She says he'll be buried with the family. She remarks that she and Merricat are all that's left, and they're going to isolate themselves more than ever. Helen Clarke will never come to tea again.

The library books are still sitting on their shelf, and Merricat thinks this is because anyone who destroyed them would be fined. Constance sits still, staring into the distance, but Merricat says they need to clean up. The dining room is a mess, as the windows and chairs are broken. The front door is open and the drawing room drapes are in the hall. Merricat sees the marks of the cars and feet and hoses on the front lawn. She retrieves one of her mother's Dresden figurines from under a bush and brings it to Constance.

Constance takes up the figurine and says that everything was her fault. Merricat says she loves her and requests a cake for herself and Jonas. Constance says she's going to clean the kitchen. She goes to put the Dresden figurine back in the drawing room. The room is destroyed, though their mother's portrait still hangs, undisturbed. Fabric is torn and dirty, and the walls are blackened. Constance hesitates, but Merricat steps out of the broken windows and closes the shutters. She goes back in through the front door, and Constance puts the figurine on the mantel. For a moment the room looks as it should, but then it falls apart forever.

The **safe** is on the ground, and they laugh at the fact that no one got it out of the house or opened it. They close the drawing room door, and no one ever goes in again. Merricat closes the shutters over the dining room windows, and then they lock the front door and feel safe. They can look out the glass beside the door, but no one can see in because the hall is so dark. There are spots of sky showing through upstairs, but Merricat doesn't think anyone will come from above. She wonders where the house has gone as she feels the air come in from outside. She thinks of the house as a castle with turrets. Constance tells her to come back to the kitchen.

If time is one of the fundamental structures of the outside world, then its disintegration in Merricat's mind signals the disintegration of reality within the house and the dissolution of ties to the village. Though Constance is aware of Uncle Julian's death, she shows no sadness over it. Merricat has been trying to keep Constance from reentering the outside world for the whole book, and now Constance is finally in total agreement that isolation is the best policy for their lives. She's seen what the villagers are capable of and has been betrayed by Charles—Merricat is the person she can trust.



Merricat's remark about the library books is absurd—the villagers were certainly not worried about library fines the night before—but it shows her own dependence on rules. The Dresden figurines can be seen as a symbol of the female Blackwood line, since they belonged to the sisters' mother. The survival of this figurine, then, indicates the support and endurance of the Blackwood women.



When Constance blames herself for everything, it's very possible that she means not only the debacle with Charles, but also the poisoning six years earlier, which she might feel she played a role in or could have prevented. Merricat remains fixated on food even in the ruins of their house. The drawing room has held some of their mother's presence, but now they close it up as though they're ready to abandon their own past in addition to the outside world.



Charles and the outside world in general are obsessed with money, so the continued presence of the safe in the house where no one cares about it represents a victory for the sisters over the world of masculinity and capitalism. As they close the shutters and lock the front door, the sisters close themselves off from the outside world once and for all. As they're able to see out while nobody can see in, they become voyeurs, gaining power in their ability to watch.



Merricat and Constance go through the trash on the kitchen floor to find everything that's still intact, including china, silverware, cans of **food**, and spices. Every Blackwood woman brought her own china into the house. Constance designates a cup for each of them, reminiscing about which china their mother used. Then she sweeps everything into the dining room and they close the door forever. Merricat has Constance cut her a piece of the cord for the drapes, and she considers burying it for Uncle Julian.

They clean everything from the kitchen through the hall to the front door. They lock the front door and the kitchen door and feel safe, sitting at the kitchen table drinking milk. Then someone begins to knock on the front door, and they run into the cellar. Helen Clarke begins to call their names outside. Merricat wonders if she has come for tea. She comes around to knock on the kitchen door, convinced that the sisters are inside. Jim Clarke is with her, and she tells him that the sisters misunderstood the villagers the night before—no one meant them any harm. She wants Merricat and Constance to come to the Clarke house where she can take care of them, but Jim says to leave them alone.

Merricat thinks they'll have to cover the kitchen window so Helen Clarke won't be able to see in if she returns. Helen continues to call to them, and Constance gets impatient because her soup is going to boil over. The Clarks finally return to their car. Merricat goes to the front door to make sure they're leaving, and she can hear Helen still calling for Constance as they drive away. Merricat says Helen really wanted her tea, but Constance says she'll never have tea there again, since they only have two cups with handles. Merricat is relieved that Uncle Julian isn't there, or else someone would have to use a broken cup.

Constance asks how they're going to live a normal life, but Merricat isn't worried. There's a dirty mattress on the stairs, and they pull it out onto the lawn to dry. They look at the spot where Uncle Julian used to sit, and Constance says she'll bury a flower there. There's lots to do, but Merricat thinks they're going to be very happy. Constance is sad about her kitchen, but she's neatened it up. Merricat suggests she could train Jonas to catch rabbits for them.

Constance makes an onion pie while Merricat covers the kitchen windows with cardboard so that no one can see in. She says it would help if they let the windows get dirty, but Constance can't stand the idea of living in a house with dirty windows. She's unhappy about the darkness of the kitchen, so Merricat says they can keep the door open if they watch for anyone approaching. The kitchen is cozy.

The china is a symbol similar to the food in the cellar, representing the female Blackwood heritage. Significantly, china is generally used for serving food. In permanently closing the dining room, the sisters leave behind their past, particularly the poisoning. Besides, Uncle Julian is no longer around to dwell on it constantly.



Merricat and Constance essentially narrow their house to consist only of the kitchen, the hall, and Uncle Julian's room. As the center of food and eating, the kitchen is all that they really need. The Clarks' visit is the first test of their new, complete isolation. This scene becomes absurd, as both Merricat and Helen minimize the impact of the events of the night before, Merricat thinking Helen might still be coming for tea, and Helen insisting that the people who destroyed the house meant no harm.



Complete isolation will require the sisters to take drastic measures, such as living with boarded-up windows. Constance treats the situation absurdly, worrying most about food, as usual. In fact, Constance shows her willingness to help construct and live within Merricat's strange reality, as both of them place the value of teacups over the value of their uncle's life or their association with an old friend. They're free to worry about what they want now and dismiss the rest.



Constance is still in the beginning stages of accepting Merricat's point of view, and so she continues to have moments in which she sees their new life from an outside, "normal" perspective. Merricat finally has what she's wanted during the whole book—Constance all to herself, with no one to disturb them.



Constance continues to cook without end, and the kitchen becomes more than ever the center of their life. Absurdly, Constance is horrified at the sight of dirty windows even though the entire house is in ruins, but she can stipulate whatever rules she wants for what is and isn't acceptable.



Merricat makes sure the front door is locked. Constance says that tomorrow she'll clean Uncle Julian's room so that Merricat can sleep there. However, Merricat says she isn't allowed in his room. She wants to sleep in the kitchen on the mattress. Despite Constance's worry, she goes out to her hiding place by the creek and retrieves her blanket. When she returns, Constance has made dinner. They plan the improvements they'll make the next day.

A car stops in front of the house. Merricat makes sure the kitchen door is locked. There's a knocking at the front door, but before long Jim Clarke and Dr. Levy come around to the kitchen door. They see a crack of light through the cardboard over the windows. Dr. Levy wants to know whether they're hurt, and Jim Clarke is supposed to bring them home with him. They knock on the door. Dr. Levy says they don't want to bother the sisters, just to know whether they're safe. He just wants them to say they're all right. Constance and Merricat are glad to see their safeguards are working.

Dr. Levy says that Uncle Julian's funeral is the next day. Jim Clarke says the sisters might feel differently about their friends if they saw all the flowers that have been sent. Merricat doesn't understand why flowers would make them feel differently. Constance takes a bite of her biscuit, and Merricat has to keep herself from laughing. Jim Clarke gets frustrated. Dr. Levy says one day they'll need help, but Jim Clarke pulls him away and they walk around to the front. Merricat wonders if they're trying to fool the sisters, but she hears the car drive away.

Constance apologizes for being wicked the night before and reminding Merricat of why their family died. Merricat is chilled and tells her not to remind her now. Constance wanted Merricat to forget about what happened. Merricat says she put the arsenic in the sugar because Constance never used sugar, and Constance says that she knows. They'll never talk about it again. They say they love each other. They sleep on the kitchen floor that night. Constance says that, since she's taken such good care of the kitchen, it has to welcome her now.

Merricat begins to compulsively check the front door, showing that she's more concerned about keeping them in isolation than about anything else. Though it has seemed at times that Merricat follows Constance's rules, it's confirmed again that Constance doesn't set the rules, Merricat herself does. Even now, she can't go in Julian's room.



Jim Clarke and Dr. Levy represent a good, rational slice of the outside world—they are far different from the villagers. However, the sisters never waver in their resolve to have nothing to do with anyone. They hardly even seem to hear what the men are saying, and they only take note of the men as proof of their own ability to keep everybody else out. In this sense, their new isolation is not only physical, but also mental.



Merricat and Constance have no use for the ceremonies and social niceties of normal society; such things literally have no meaning to them anymore. Food and laughter are important to them now, and being able to eat and find humor while the men try to drag them back to reality shows that the sisters have created an impenetrable fortress in which they rule entirely.



Constance demonstrates an almost frightening degree of acceptance of the fact that Merricat killed her family. In fact, she's the one who feels bad for bringing it up, rather than placing any blame on Merricat. Although it's ridiculous to think that Merricat could forget what she did, Constance's desire for her to do so shows her love for her sister and suggests that Merricat does feel guilty, after all.



CHAPTER 10

Over time the sisters develop a pattern for their days and create a happy life. Every morning Merricat makes sure the front door is locked. Now that the gates to the path are open, children come and play on the lawn. However, they seem uneasy, and Merricat wonders if they've actually been sent to look for the sisters. When Constance comes to look out at them, Merricat says to pretend they're just birds, because they'll never see the sisters. The kitchen is dark until Merricat opens the door in the morning, and Constance makes breakfast.

One night Merricat barricades the sides of the house with pieces of junk. If anyone tries to get past it, the noise they'll make will be a warning. Merricat nails boards across the window in the kitchen door and thinks she might try mending the broken step.

During breakfast one morning, Merricat laughs that they're on the **moon**, but it's not as she imagined. Constance thinks it's a happy place and says they should preserve as much **food** from the garden as they can. They leave the kitchen door open when they go to the garden, because they can see whether anyone's coming. The vegetables are still covered with ash.

Constance cleans Uncle Julian's room. She keeps his papers in their box and puts it down in the cellar for safekeeping, as she thinks he would want. Merricat goes to check the front door. Whenever she does this, the children are playing on the lawn and people are walking on their path. They seem to do it only to show it can be done.

Constance discovers two suits in Uncle Julian's room. She barely remembers him going to buy a suit once. Merricat asks what he would have been wearing on the night of the poisoning, because he would have liked them to remember. Constance says that when she got him at the hospital he was wearing pajamas. She points out that the suits are the only clothes that didn't burn. They'll have to wear them. Merricat says she isn't allowed to touch Uncle Julian's things, so she'll make herself clothes from leaves and moss. Constance says Merricat is allowed, but Merricat insists she isn't.

The locked front door becomes a symbol of safety and isolation in this new life. However, the isolation is not to be so complete as it seemed, since people can now come to the lawn. Characteristically, Merricat wishes these visitors away by imagining that they are birds. They continue to eat food almost ritualistically.



Merricat does all she can to keep everyone out, thinking of these as safety measures. In trying to fix the step that Joe Dunham and Charles have failed to fix, she takes on a new, almost masculine role.



In saying that they're living on the moon, Merricat means both that they're as far from the rest of the world as the moon is from the Earth, and that she adores their way of life just as much as her imagined life on the moon. Their life centers more than ever around food.



Though Constance keeps Uncle Julian's papers, she closes another door against their past by relegating the papers to the cellar. The villagers seem to both fear the sisters and show their defiance by trespassing, and Merricat compulsively checks the lock to keep them out.



The sisters now remember the poisoning more as a way of remembering Uncle Julian than for its own sake. Constance shows that she's perfectly willing to break social rules now, as she wants to wear male suits. This contributes to the sense that the society within the house has broken with gender traditions, and that Constance is no longer threatened by Blackwood men like Charles.



Constance laughs and gets tablecloths out of the pantry. She says Merricat can wear those, and Merricat is pleased. However, Constance has no sewing materials, so Merricat has to drape them and tie them with a cord. Suddenly Constance is aghast at the state of their life, and blames herself. Merricat insists that they're going to be very happy this way. Merricat dresses in a red and white check tablecloth. Constance looks sad, but Merricat likes it. Constance thinks it used to be used for breakfasts on the lawn. Merricat says sometimes she'll be a summer breakfast, sometimes a formal dinner.

Merricat convinces Constance to wheel Uncle Julian's chair out to add to the barricade. Merricat can no longer imagine him in it, and she's worried that he might entirely vanish. However, Constance plants a rosebush in the spot on the lawn where he used to sit, and Merricat buries his pencil by the creek. She never goes in his room.

Helen Clarke returns to knock and call for the sisters, but when she sees the barricade she goes away. One evening, there's a soft knock at the door, and they go to it. Someone quietly calls their names outside. He says his wife made a chicken, cookies, and a pie for them. He's sorry he broke one of their chairs. He leaves a basket. Later, when they finish dinner, they bring the basket inside. The **food** is still warm, and Constance imagines the woman making it. She says she must wash the napkins before they put the basket back on the porch.

The villagers begin to leave all kinds of **food** for the sisters in the evenings. They imagine that the women have the food ready when the men come home from work, and the men seem to want to hide from each other, as though they're ashamed to bring the food. Sometimes there are notes in the baskets apologizing for breaking different household items. Merricat and Constance never retrieve the baskets until they can be sure no one is around.

Merricat discovers that she's not allowed to go to the creek anymore because Uncle Julian is there and it's too far from Constance. She's also not allowed to bury anything or touch stone. She repairs the boards over the windows and constantly makes sure the front door is locked. They spend lots of time sitting on either side of the front door, watching the people outside.

Merricat now immerses herself in food and its power more than ever by wearing the accessories of a meal and actually saying (metaphorically) that she's becoming food. The outside world recedes as the sisters break more and more rules of normality—just imagine a villager's reaction to finding Constance dressed in a suit and Merricat in a tablecloth. Though Constance temporarily sees this as a tragedy, she adjusts her thinking with Merricat's urging.



Even though Merricat never exactly mourns Uncle Julian's death, she does feel that he deserves to be remembered. His wheelchair now helps protect them from the outside world. Though the sisters didn't go to his burial, both sisters bury things that represent him.



This evening marks a new phase of the sisters' life, in which their complete isolation begins to be tempered by the villagers' attempts at apology, which they accept. Of course, it is significant that the villagers reach out to the sisters using food left on the doorstep—in this way, the villagers are acquiescing to the sisters' terms, accepting their isolation and honoring their fixation on food. The villagers, in a way, are finally bending slightly to Merricat's reality.



Though the villagers used to want to punish the sisters, they are now the ones feeling guilty and doing penance. Furthermore, Merricat seems to imagine that the men's unwillingness to be seen bringing food shows their fear, and is thus an example of men relinquishing some of the power given to them by patriarchal society.



The pencil of Uncle Julian's that Merricat buried at the creek acts almost like a ghost, as she feels that it makes Julian present there. Merricat's rules multiply nonsensically, confining her life more and more and complicating the idea that Merricat's power over herself and Constance is a source of their freedom. Even though the sisters have isolated themselves, they become increasingly fascinated with the outside world.



One day a group of bicyclists come and rest on the lawn. The sisters learn from the bicyclists' conversation that vines are growing over the burned roof. The strangers don't look straight at the house, and they shush each other, unsure whether anyone inside can hear them. They warn their children away from the house, one woman saying that the ladies inside will poison the boys and eat the girls. She says they hunt children at night.

One afternoon, Charles arrives in a car with another man. They walk up to the steps, and Merricat remembers the first time Charles came, thinking that this time he won't get in. Constance knows it too. The strange man asks whether the sisters are inside, and Charles says they are, along with a fortune of unknown value. The man wants to get a picture of Charles talking to one of the sisters, and Charles agrees to try to get them to come out as long as he gets half of whatever money the man makes from the picture.

The man hides behind the car and Charles calls out to Constance. Merricat can tell that she now sees Charles for what he is. Charles says he wants to forget the past and be friends. He's been waiting to hear from Constance and wants her to let him in. Constance smiles unpleasantly up at the door. Charles says he put flowers on Uncle Julian's grave that morning, and compliments Julian.

The man says that Charles is wasting his breath, but Charles says he needs to see them because it's his fault that the sisters shut themselves up in the house. He really does want to talk to Constance. He says the man could get pictures of him with the house, but the man says it's a waste of time. Charles begs Constance to open the door, saying he doesn't deserve this treatment. The man wants to leave, and Charles tells Constance that he's never going to come back. Merricat is afraid he's not going to leave quickly enough for Constance to contain herself. He gets in the car reluctantly, and then Constance and Merricat burst into raucous laughter. Constance says she's incredibly happy.

One Sunday, the Carringtons park outside the house and look at it. Now that the drawing room and the dining room are shut up, different parts of the house become important to the sisters. Constance is always afraid that one of the two cups with handles will break. They wear Uncle Julian's clothes and the tablecloths. There are always flowers on the table. Merricat is no longer allowed to go to the field, and she feels that the safeguards she buried were meant to protect a different house. Now her safeguards are the lock, the boards, and the barricades.

Since the sisters don't even go into their front yard, they have to depend on the perspective of outsiders to learn about their own house. People begin to see the house as haunted by the sisters, adding to the impression of them as witches. In one sense, this entire book can be read as a story of how a haunted house comes to be.



Though Charles has left the sisters' life, he did so more or less of his own accord, meaning that they did not exactly conquer him. This time when he arrives, Merricat and Constance are of one mind—Constance won't betray Merricat a second time by letting him in. Charles hasn't changed a bit, as his main goal is still to wring money from his family in whatever way he can.



Charles is horribly duplicitous, shamelessly trying to regain Constance's confidence for his own financial gain and even saying nice things about Uncle Julian after insulting him repeatedly to his face. Constance is no longer fooled—she now sees that Charles isn't good and never was.



It does seem for a moment that Charles actually feels some guilt for the damage he caused to the family. As Charles becomes increasingly desperate, the power of Constance's denial of him grows. Charles thinks that Constance truly needs him and can't possibly let him go forever. However, Constance exercises the ultimate triumph over him by seeing him for the fool he is and laughing him off, rather than even giving him enough importance to hate him. This moment represents the sisters' final rejection of the patriarchy and heterosexuality.



The sisters have built a new life for themselves, and though it may seem bizarre to outsiders, they're happy with it. In fact, if their biggest worry is that a cup will break, it's hard not to envy them. Their clothes represent almost a mockery of heterosexuality, as Constance dresses in a man's clothes and Merricat in tablecloths that gesture mockingly to the traditional female role in the home. Meanwhile, their house becomes almost militarized, and the space available to them shrinks.



In the evenings, people walk past the house, speculating about the ladies inside. The sisters think that people will start calling the path Lover's Lane, perhaps after Charles. Constance says Charles should have shot himself in the head in the driveway. They learn that the vines have made the house barely recognizable. Children are afraid of it. When one boy runs onto the porch and shouts a line of the old mocking rhyme on a dare, someone leaves a basket of **food** with a note of apology that night. Merricat wonders if she could eat a child, but Constance said she probably couldn't cook one. Merricat pities the people outside, who have so much to fear, and Constance says she's afraid of spiders. Merricat says that she and Jonas will keep all the spiders away from her.

The sisters' comment about Lover's Lane supports the idea, always vague, that Charles and Constance were romantically involved. Constance expresses her only violent fantasy, showing the depth of her rejection of Charles. The villagers now fear the sisters in an almost reverential way. Embracing their role as reclusive witches, Merricat and Constance's final lines also confirm their roles in the house; Constance will cook and Merricat will eat, no matter what it might be. Finally Merricat can pity the villagers rather than hating them, as she no longer fears them, which gives her more comfort and power over them than she ever had.





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