

## Year 12A English

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## Course Overview

In this area of study, students apply reading and viewing strategies to critically engage with a text, considering its dynamics and complexities and reflecting on the motivations of its characters. They analyse the ways authors construct meaning through vocabulary, text structures, language features and conventions, and the presentation of ideas. They are provided with opportunities to understand and explore the historical context, and the social and cultural values of a text, and recognise how these elements influence the way a text is read or viewed, is understood by different audiences, and positions its readers in different ways.

On completion of this unit the student should be able to analyse ideas, concerns and values presented in a text, informed by the vocabulary, text structures and language features and how they make meaning.

## Key Knowledge

- reading and viewing strategies to draw out meanings in a text
- the dynamics of a text including characters' motivations, the tensions in relationships, the function of settings, the complexities of plot and the role of point of view
- ideas, concerns and conflicts in a text
- vocabulary, text structures and language features in a text used to construct meaning
- the historical context, and the social and cultural values in a text
- the features of analytical writing in response to a text, including the use of appropriate metalanguage
- the conventions of small group and whole class discussion, including ways of developing constructive interactions and building on ideas of others in discussion

## Key skills

- apply reading and viewing strategies to a text
- read and engage with a text for meaning
- engage in discussions to clarify, test and extend views about a text
- employ appropriate metalanguage
- explore and analyse:
  - - the dynamics of a text including characters' motivations, the tensions in relationships, the function of settings, the complexities of plot and the role of point of view
  - - the ideas, concerns and conflicts in a text
  - - the historical context, and the social and cultural values in a text
- explore and analyse the impact of the vocabulary, text structures and language features on a text and how these elements shape meaning
- plan, construct and edit analytical writing that:
  - - responds explicitly to set topics

- - develops and sustains ideas
- - explores and refines the organisational structures of analytical writing
- - demonstrates knowledge of a text
- - uses key evidence from a text to support ideas and analysis
- - demonstrates understanding of purpose, audience and context

## Assessment

Outcomes	Marks allocated	Assessment tasks
<p><b>Outcome 1</b></p> <p>Analyse ideas, concerns and values presented in a text, informed by the vocabulary, text structures and language features and how they make meaning.</p>	40	An analytical response to text in written form.

## Background

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 centre of society and it was supposed to create peace and harmony.

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.

## Synopsis

Set in a secluded town, the novel looks at the lives of the Blackwood sisters, Merricat and Constance, who are both outcasts in their community. Despite the hatred they face from the townspeople, the sisters are able to find comfort in each other and in their ancestral home, where they live in relative seclusion.

Through the character of Merricat, Jackson examines the psychological impacts of isolation and persecution. Merricat is an eccentric and paranoid young woman who has been ostracized by the townspeople, who view her as a witch. Due to her isolation, Merricat's mental state begins to deteriorate, leading to an increase in her paranoia and delusions. Despite this, she remains fiercely protective of her sister and their home, and is willing to do whatever it takes to keep them safe from the outside world.

Jackson's incorporation of Gothic elements, such as the eerie and dilapidated Blackwood estate and the supernatural beliefs of the townspeople, adds to the novel's atmosphere of unease and isolation. The novel also explores the consequences of societal persecution, as the townspeople's mistreatment of the Blackwood sisters ultimately leads to tragedy.

## Chapter Analysis

### Chapter 1

Mary Katherine Blackwood is an eighteen-year-old girl who lives with her older sister, Constance, and her invalid uncle, Julian, in the Blackwood family mansion. Everyone else in the family is dead. Mary Katherine—whose nickname is Merricat—does the shopping for the family twice a week. She dreads going into the village because the people there hate the Blackwoods.

While shopping one April morning, Merricat goes into the grocery store. The other patrons make rude comments and other noises behind her back. Merricat wishes they were all dead. Merricat goes into Stella's to buy a cup of coffee. Stella is civil to her and asks about her family. A man named Jim Donell comes into the shop and, though the store is empty, sits down very close to Merricat. He starts teasing her mercilessly, even though Stella tells him to stop. Another man comes in and they both bully Merricat until she is forced to leave.

On the way home Merricat passes a yard full of children playing. Upon seeing her, the children run up to her and begin singing a sinister song: "Merricat, said Connie, would you like a cup of tea? Oh no, said Merricat, you'll poison me." Merricat fantasizes about their tongues burning until she reaches the gate to the path leading home.

### Chapter 2

Merricat meets Constance at the end of the garden, which is as far as Constance ever goes. Their cat, Jonas, also comes up to her. Constance loves to work in the garden and cook, while Uncle Julian spends much of his time working on his "papers."

Today is the day that Helen Clarke visits for tea. Occasionally some of the wealthier citizens of the town come to visit, and today Helen Clarke brings a friend—Mrs. Wright—which unnerves Constance. During tea, Helen implores Constance to come back into the world, adding "You've done penance long enough."

Uncle Julian comes into the room in his wheelchair. In the dialogue that follows, we learn that, six years earlier, Constance was accused of murdering her family at dinner by putting arsenic in the sugar. Her father, mother, younger brother, and Uncle Julian's wife all died, while Uncle Julian survived. (Merricat had been sent to her room without dinner for misbehaving.) Constance was acquitted at the trial. The "papers" that Uncle Julian obsessively works over are newspaper clippings about the "most sensational poisoning case of the century."

All this talk of the unfortunate incident upsets Helen Clarke (while titillating the curious Mrs. Wright) and they leave. Merricat asks Constance if she really wants to go out into the world more. Constance replies that she doesn't know.



## Digging Deeper Questions

1. Because the book is written in the first-person narrative, the reader views the world through Merricat's eyes. In the beginning of the book, do you trust her vision of the world? Why or why not? Does your trust increase or decrease over the course of the first chapter?
2. From the very first page, we sense that something calamitous will happen at some point in the novel (the library books were the last ones they'd ever have). How does Shirley Jackson create an atmosphere of doomed inevitability—a sense that the Blackwood family and the villagers are on a collision course that can't be avoided?
3. In the second chapter, we learn of the poisoning of the Blackwood family. This is a particularly nasty story, but is it as menacing as Jim Donell and the chanting children we saw in the first chapter? How does Shirley Jackson make murder less frightening than bullying? What is Jackson trying to say here?
4. Discuss the relationship between Merricat and her sister Constance. Is there a dark side to their love for each other? Do you think the reader is justified in, once again, questioning the reliability of Merricat's narration?
5. Compare and contrast the first two chapters. What are the main differences—in tone, emotion, and setting—between chapters one and two?

## Chapter 3

Merricat senses that a change is going to come. After breakfast she checks to make sure the fence around the property are secure, and all the gates locked. She also checks her safeguards—a box of silver dollars and a doll she has buried, and a book she has nailed to a tree. She decides to come up with three magic words for extra protection. Dr. Levy comes and checks on Uncle Julian. After the doctor leaves, Uncle Julian reminisces about the events on the last day before the fatal poisoning.

## Chapter 4

While roaming around outside, Merricat comes across a very bad omen—the book she has nailed to the tree has fallen to the ground. Back at the house for lunch, Merricat sees a man approaching the house. At first, she thinks it's one of the many curiosity-seekers who often try to get in, but it turns out to be their cousin—Charles Blackwood. When Charles asks Merricat for a kiss, she runs out of the house and down to the creek, where “there was no cousin, no Charles Blackwood, no intruder inside.” She decides she must nail something else to the tree for protection and falls asleep under the trees, not waking up till morning.

### Digging Deeper Questions

1. Alchemy is an ancient pseudo-science that aimed to turn base metals like copper and lead into silver and gold. In what ways are the Blackwood sisters like alchemists? What does this suggest about their powers and abilities?
2. What is the relationship between the Blackwood sisters and nature? How do they measure time? And how does the visit of Dr. Levy comment upon the differences between men and women as portrayed in the novel?
3. Ambiguity and double meanings fill the pages of *We Have Always Lived in the Castle*. What are some of the ambiguities presented in this section? How do they shape the experience of reading this book?
4. What kind of person was John Blackwood, the deceased “Father” of the family? How does he symbolize a patriarchal system of power?
5. We’ve already seen how men can be threatening (Jim Donell) and dismissive (Dr. Levy). In this section we are introduced to a new man, Charles Blackwood. How is his arrival presented, and how does it reflect, or reinforce, the novel’s attitudes towards men in general?

### Chapter 5

Merricat comes in for breakfast after spending the night in the woods. Charles is still asleep upstairs. Constance explains that while Charles’ father was alive, he would not allow Charles to visit his cousins, but now that his father has died, Charles has come to help them.

Charles comes down for breakfast and, under questioning from Uncle Julius, explains that his father left him no money and that he is 32 years old (Constance is 28). Uncle Julius starts talking about his favorite topic—the day of the poisoning—but Charles tells him it should all be forgotten, which upsets Uncle Julian. Merricat decides to smash the mirror in Charles’ room if he hasn’t left in three days.

At dinner, Charles says that he will do the shopping from now on and asks where the money is kept. Constance tells him the money is kept in the safe in the study. Once again, Uncle Julian starts talking about the poisoning and Charles tells him to be quiet.

### Chapter 6

While Charles is busy shopping, Merricat goes into his room (which used to be Father’s) and takes her father’s gold watch chain, which she nails to the tree for protection. Charles finds it and is horrified that such a valuable thing would be used in that way. His attitude towards Merricat becomes more malevolent.

Charles has thoroughly antagonized Uncle Julian and Merricat, but his influence over Constance has grown. She starts to believe that she has made many mistakes—Uncle Julian should be put into a hospital where he can be taken care of by nurses, and Merricat shouldn't be allowed to run so wild.

Merricat asks Charles directly to go away but he refuses, and then threatens her, "Come about a month from now, I wonder who will still be here...You...or me?" Merricat goes to his room and smashes his mirror.

### Digging Deeper Questions

1. Food is very important to Constance. What do you think food symbolizes for her? How does Charles alter her relationship to food?
2. How does Charles' view of the natural order of things conflict with Merricat's view? What does this conflict represent?
3. Clearly, Charles is a living human being. Why do you think Merricat keeps calling him a ghost?
4. Except for in the first chapter, all the action in the novel takes place in the Blackwood mansion or on its grounds. What is the relationship between the house and the sisters? How is Charles interfering with that relationship?

### Chapter 7

Thursday is Merricat's "most powerful day" and she totally trashes Charles's room—breaking things, putting glass and metal and woods and sticks all over the room, and pouring a pitcher of water on his bed.

Charles is furious and starts shouting, which upsets Uncle Julian, who keeps referring to Charles as John. Constance repeats over and over that it's all her fault. Merricat calls Charles a ghost and a demon. "It's a crazy house," Charles says with conviction.

Merricat runs outside and down to the summerhouse, which is all wet and dark. Inside, she starts fantasizing about a family dinner, with her father at the head of the table and everyone else in their places. She imagines that they all love her and would never punish her by sending her to bed without dinner. Her fantasy culminates with the family all rising and saying, "Bow all your heads to our adored Mary Katherine."

### Chapter 8

Merricat returns to the house, where Charles is still fuming. She goes upstairs and quietly enters Charles's room. She sees his burning pipe on the table and brushes it off into a wastebasket full of newspapers. She returns downstairs and joins the family at dinner. Suddenly Charles turns his head and says he smells smoke. He runs upstairs and returns shouting "Fire!"

There's no phone in the house, so he runs into the village to get help. Uncle Julian goes to collect his papers and Constance and Merricat go onto a corner of the porch outside. The firemen arrive, led by Jim Donell, and they enter the house to put out the fire. Charles is repeatedly heard saying, "Get the safe in the study."

Everyone in the village comes to stare at the fire, but they don't see Constance and Merricat, who are hidden by vines on the porch. People in the crowd shout at the firemen, "Why not let it burn?" but the firemen eventually put the fire out.

In the front yard, Jim Donell picks up a rock. The crowd becomes totally silent. He hurls the rock through one of the tall windows of the drawing room. A wall of laughter rises up and the villagers move like a wave into the house, where they riot and smash things.

Merricat takes Constance by the hand and they try to escape into the woods, but the villagers surround them, laughing and taunting: "Merricat, said Connie, would you like a cup of tea? Oh, no, said Merricat, you'll poison me."

The villagers only stop their antics when someone says, "Julian Blackwood is dead." Quickly, Merricat pulls Constance into the woods. Safe in her secret hiding spot, Merricat tells Constance she will "put death in all their food." Constance asks, "The way you did before?" Merricat replies, "Yes, the way I did before."

### Digging Deeper Questions

1. The battle between Charles and Merricat escalates in this section. What is Charles' strategy in this conflict and how does it compare to Merricat's?
2. What is the significance of the scene in the summerhouse when Merricat imagines a family dinner? What does Merricat ultimately want from people, especially her family? Is there anything sinister about her fantasy?
3. Why do you think Shirley Jackson had Uncle Julian survive the poisoning? Why does Merricat always say she must be kinder to him?
4. Why do you think Merricat started the fire? What do you think she hoped to accomplish? Do you think everything went according to her plan?
5. Why do you think the villagers want the Blackwood house to burn, with "them in it" (referring to Constance and Merricat)?

## Chapter 9

After sleeping in the woods all night, Merricat and Constance return to the house. The entire upper part of the house has been destroyed. The house looks like a castle, turreted and open to the sky. The sisters enter the kitchen and inspect the damage. Constance finds some untouched food and says, "We are going to lock ourselves in more securely than ever."

Constance begins the long process of cleaning up the mess. Merricat sets to work shuttering all the windows. Helen Clarke and her husband come by, but the sisters hide in silence. When the Clarkes leave, Merricat uses cardboard to cover all the kitchen windows so no one can look in.

## Chapter 10

Merricat and Constance slowly start to make a life for themselves in the burnt house. Merricat barricades the sides of the house so no one can get to the back, where the kitchen is. Constance puts all of Uncle Julian's papers in the cellar, preserving them. Since all their clothes burned, Constance wears Uncle Julian's clothes, and Merricat uses fabric from tablecloths to fashion some makeshift clothing.

The villagers start to bring food for the sisters which they leave outside the front door. They leave notes apologizing for trashing the house. The sisters never leave the house (except to go to the garden) and never answer the door. Curiosity-seekers come by to look at the house. Charles comes by too, but the sisters don't answer the door. They have totally shut themselves off from society. "Oh Constance," Merricat says, "we are so happy."

### Digging Deeper Questions

1. Why do you think the villagers start leaving food and notes of apology at the front door? What made them change their attitude towards the sisters?
2. What does the food left by the villagers represent?
3. What do you think the title *We Have Always Lived in the Castle* means?
4. What does the broken step represent?
5. Does *We Have Always Lived in the Castle* have a happy ending? Why or why not?
6. In the last few pages of the novel, how does Shirley Jackson use language to question the reliability of Merricat's narration? Is the reader as convinced as Merricat that Constance is happy to continue living in the house?

## Characters

### Mary Katherine “Merricat” Blackwood

Merricat narrates the novel. Though she is eighteen during the events she 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, 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.

### 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

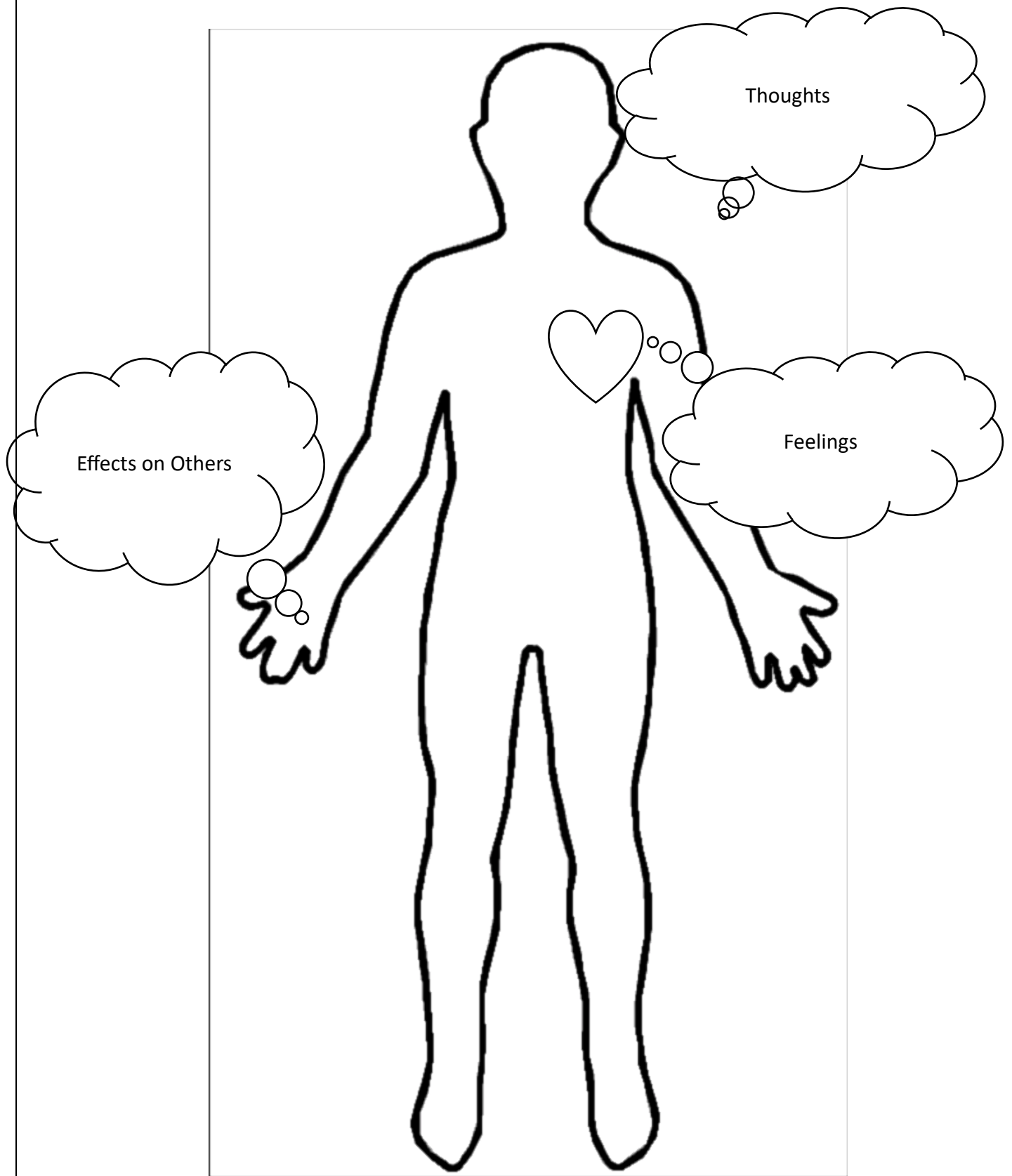
The owner of the grocery store where Merricat goes. He tries to get her out the door as quickly as possible.

### Mrs. Donell

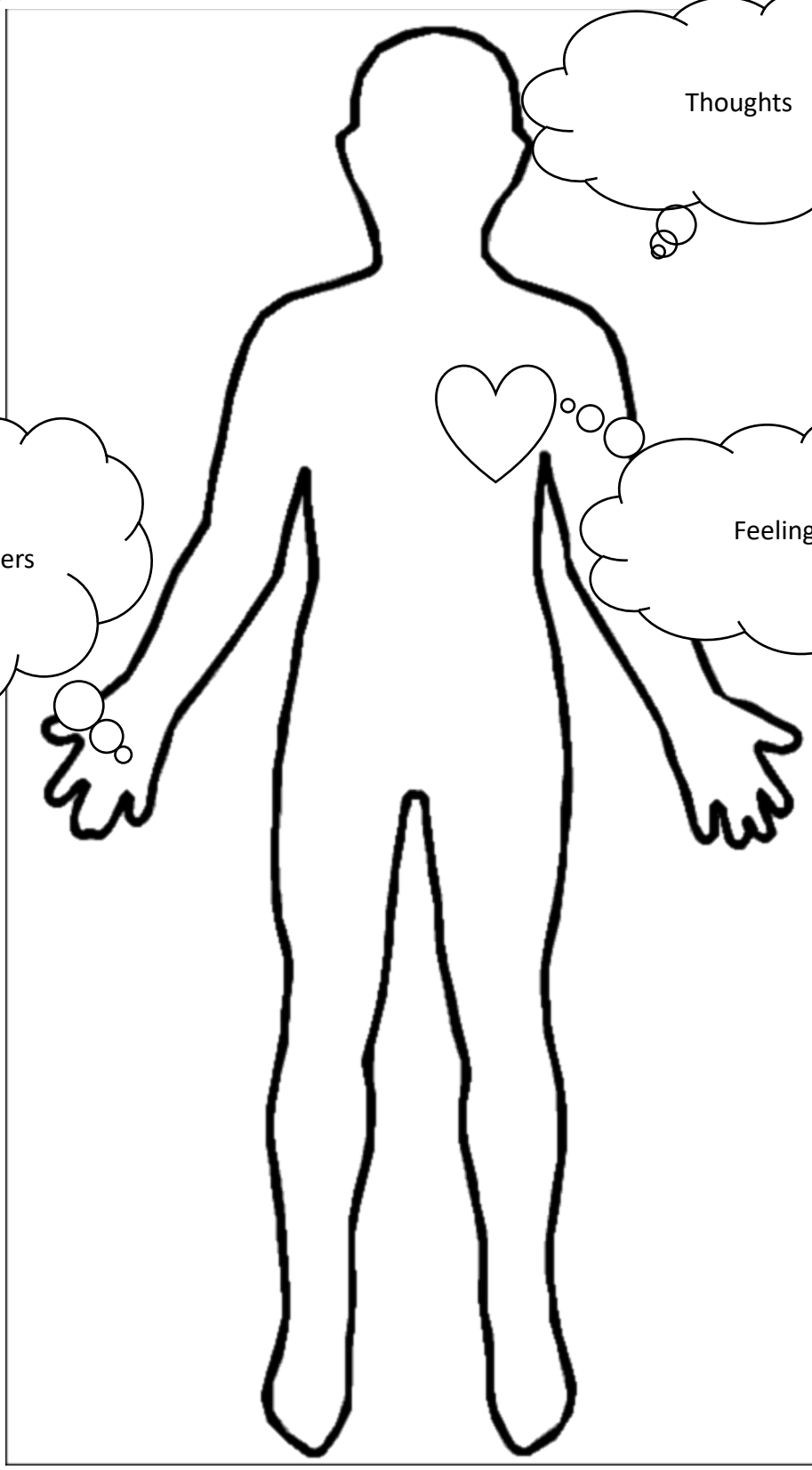
Jim Donell's wife, and one of the cruelest villagers.



Character Autopsy  
Merricat



Constance



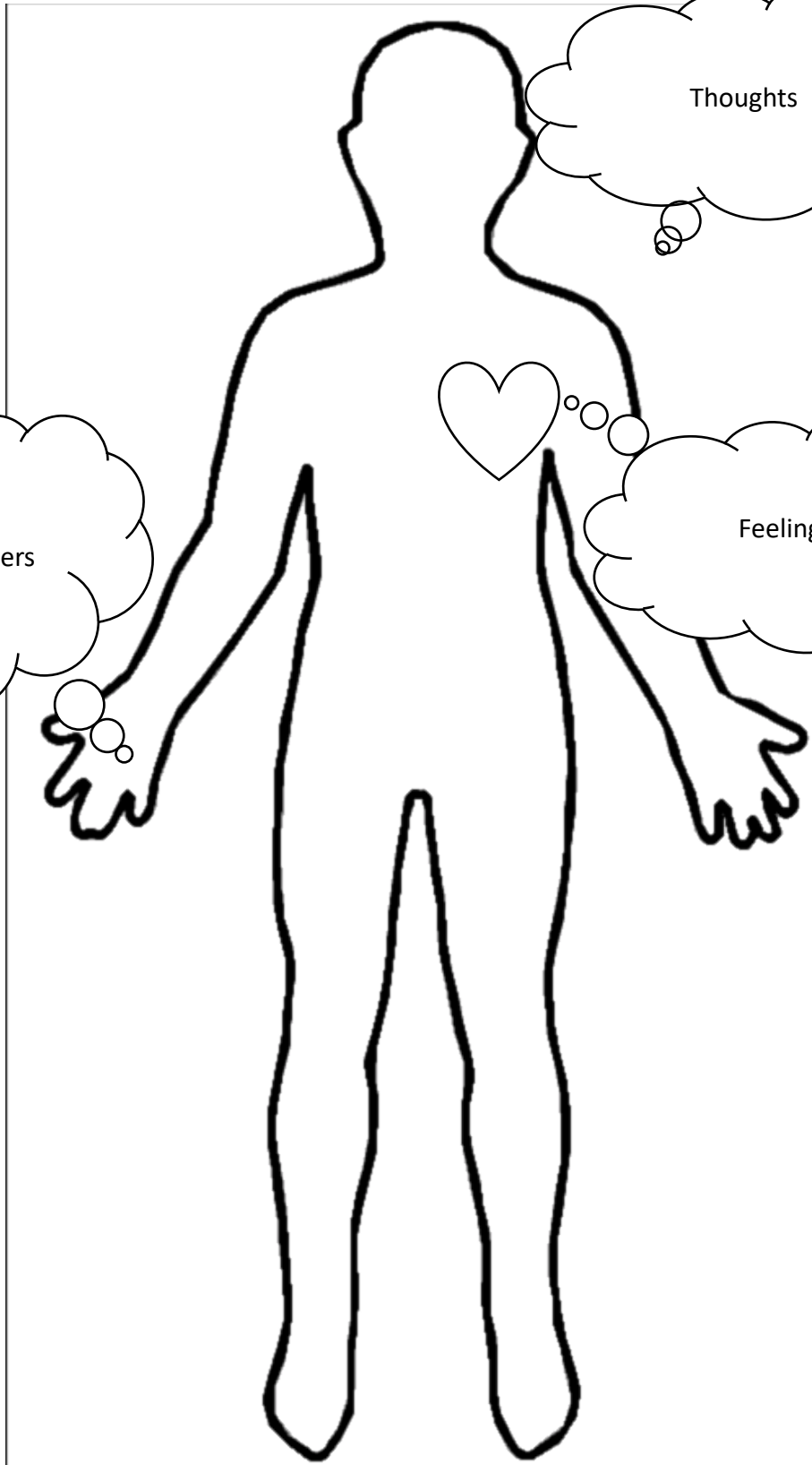
Thoughts



Feelings

Effects on Others

Charles



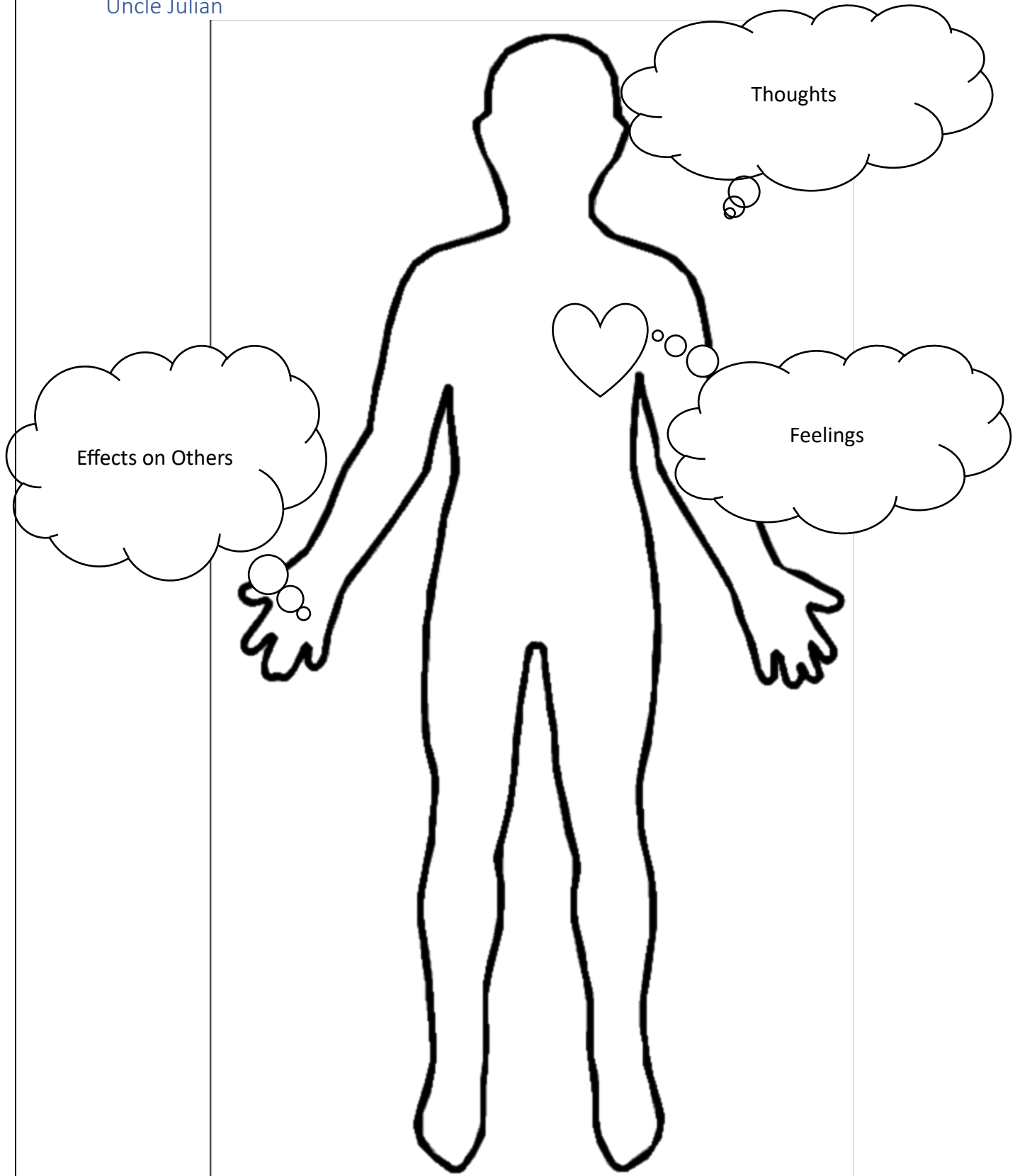
Thoughts



Feelings

Effects on Others

Uncle Julian



## Themes

### 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.

## 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.

### The Supernatural

In "We Have Always Lived in the Castle," magic and witchcraft are presented as a means of coping with and resisting the difficulties and isolation faced by the main characters. For Merricat, her practice of sympathetic magic can be seen as a way of trying to exert some control over her circumstances and to find a sense of agency in a world that often seems unfair and unpredictable. By engaging in magical practices, Merricat is empowered to create some sense of order and meaning in her life, and to connect with a world that is beyond the narrow-mindedness and judgment of the villagers. Magic and witchcraft characters' resistance and subversion of the expectations and norms of their society.

Jackson also uses the supernatural to represent the otherness of characters. The ghost in Gothic literature often manifests as a phantasmic spectre of a "Madwoman in the Attic" (a term coined by Gilbert and Gubar and the title of their work), an outcasted woman. However, in *Castle*, this role is filled by Charles – a masculine presence – who is always referred to by Merricat as a ghost. By replacing the madwoman with a male ghost, Jackson enables the preservation of female power and subverts the relationship between men and women.

## Extended Response Questions

1. How is the reader's experience impacted by Shirley Jackson's decision to have Merricat narrate the whole story?
2. Who are the main antagonists in the story, and what do they represent?
3. Discuss the way the book creates a supernatural atmosphere, given that the story is not in any way supernatural. Why and how do you think Shirley Jackson does this?
4. What is the relationship the Blackwood sisters have with nature, and how does it contrast with men's relationship to nature?
5. Discuss how food is used throughout the novel. What does food symbolize for the various characters?
6. What is the role of Uncle Julian in the novel?
7. What is the meaning of the end of the novel? How does it comment upon the society Shirley Jackson lived in?
8. The final line of the novel is Merricat saying, "Oh Constance...we are so happy." Considering that Merricat is an unreliable narrator, do you think Constance is as happy as Merricat? Why or why not?

## Focussed Writing

### The Village

Consider the following quotes that describe the Village:

- “The people of the village have always hated us.”
- “I thought about burning black painful rot that ate away from the inside, hurting dreadfully. I wished it on the village.”
- “What place would be better for us than this? Who wants us, outside? The world is full of terrible people.”
- “perhaps they came in darkness not to be recognised, as if each of them wanted to hide from the others, and bringing us food was somehow a shameful thing to do in public.”
- “This is for the dishes” “We apologise about the curtains” “Sorry for your harp”
- “Poor strangers, they have so much to be afraid of.”
- “When Jim Donell thought of something to say he said it as often and in as many ways as possible, perhaps because he had very few ideas and had to wring each one dry.”
- “It was as though the people needed the ugliness of the village, and fed on it. The houses and the stores seemed to have been set up in contemptuous haste to provide shelter for the drab and the unpleasant.”
- “... whatever planned to be colourful lost its heart quickly in the village.”

Write an extended paragraph that draws on three or four of these quotes to analyse the impact of the Village on the Blackwoods and Merricat in particular.

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## Social Norms

Consider the following quotes that describe the Social Norms in the text:

- "...protected from the rain by the trees crowding overhead"
- "our wall of safety had cracked"
- "I was pretending that I did not speak their language; on the moon we spoke a soft, liquid tongue, and sang in the starlight, looking down on the dead dried world."
- "I remember that I stood on the library steps holding my books and looking for a minute at the soft hinted green in the branches against the sky and wishing, as I always did, that I could walk home across the sky instead of through the village."
- "It's wrong to hate them...it only weakens you."
- "Time was running shorter, tightening around our house, crushing me."
- "What place would be better for us than this? Who wants us, outside?"
- The world is full of terrible people."
- "There had not been this many words sounded in our house for a long time, and it was going to take a while to clean them out."

Write an extended paragraph that draws on three or four of these quotes to analyse the impact of the Social Norms on Merricat.

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## Obsession

Consider the following quotes that describe Merricat’s obsessive tendencies and paranoia:

- “I dislike washing myself, and dogs, and noise. I like my sister Constance, and Richard Plantagenet, and Amanita phalloides, the death-cup mushroom.”
- “We always put things back where they belonged.”
- “If it was a very good day I would later make an offering of jewelry out of gratitude.”
- “I had always buried things, even when I was small;”
- “I decided that I would choose three powerful words, words of strong protection, and so long as these great words were never spoken aloud no change would come.”
- “We are going to lock ourselves in more securely than ever.”

Write an extended paragraph that draws on three or four of these quotes to analyse the the complexity of Merricat’s obsessive tenencies.

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## Passage Analysis

### Passage #1

*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!*

*I was pretending that I did not speak their language; on the moon we spoke a soft, liquid tongue, and sang in the starlight, looking down on the dead dried world; I was almost halfway past the fence.*

*"Merricat, Merricat!"*

*"Where's old Connie -- home cooking dinner?"*

*"Would you like a cup of tea?"*

*It was strange to be inside myself, walking steadily and rigidly past the fence, putting my feet down strongly but without haste that they might have noticed, to be inside and know that they were looking at me; I was hiding very far inside but I could hear them and see them still from one corner of my eye. I wished they were all lying there dead on the ground.*

*"Down in the boneyard ten feet deep."*

*"Merricat!"*

*Once when I was going past, the Harris boys' mother came out onto the porch, perhaps to see what they were all yelling so about. She stood there for a minute watching and listening and I stopped and looked at her, looking into her flat dull eyes and knowing I must not speak to her and knowing I would. "Can't you make them stop?" I asked her that day, wondering if there was anything in this woman I could speak to, if she had ever run joyfully over grass, or had watched flowers, or known delight or love. "Can't you make them stop?"*

*"Kids," she said, not changing her voice or her look or her air of dull enjoyment, "don't call the lady names."*

*'Yes, ma," one of the boys said soberly. "Don't go near no fence. Don't call no lady names." And I walked on, while they shrieked and shouted and the woman stood on the porch and laughed.*

*Merricat, said Connie, would you like a cup of tea?*

*Oh, no, said Merricat, you'll poison me.*

*Their tongues will burn, I thought, as though they had eaten fire. Their throats will burn when the words come out, and in their bellies they will feel a torment hotter than a thousand fires.*

## Passage #2

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

*He knocked again, and then called out, "Constance? Constance?"*

*Well, they always knew her name. They knew her name and Uncle Julian's name and how she wore her hair and the color of the three dresses she had to wear in court and how old she was and how she talked and moved and when they could they looked close in her face to see if she was crying. I want to talk to Constance, he said outside, the way they always did.*

*It had been a long time since any of them came, but I had not forgotten how they made me feel. At first, they were always there, waiting for Constance, just wanting to see her. "Look," they said, nudging each other and pointing, "there she is, that one, that's the one, Constance." "Doesn't look like a murderess, does she?" they told each other; "listen, see if you can get a picture of her when she shows again." "Let's just take some of these flowers," they said comfortably to each other; "get a rock or something out of the garden, we can take it home to show the kids."*

*"Constance? he said outside. "Constance?" He knocked again. "I want to talk to Constance, he said, "I have something important to say to her."*

*They always had something important they wanted to tell Constance, whether they were pushing at the door or yelling outside or calling on the telephone or writing the terrible terrible letters. Sometimes they wanted Julian Blackwood, but they never asked for me. I had been sent to bed without my supper, I had not been allowed in the courtroom, no one had taken my picture. While they were looking at Constance in the courtroom I had been lying on the cot at the orphanage, staring at the ceiling, wishing they were all dead, waiting for Constance to come and take me home.*

*"Constance, can you hear me?" he called outside. "Please listen for just a minute."*

### Passage #3

*"Constance put her hand against the door frame to steady herself, and said again, "My kitchen, Merricat."*

*"My stool is still there," I said.*

*The obstacle which made the door hard to open was the kitchen table, turned on its side. I set it upright, and we went inside. Two of the chairs had been smashed, and the floor was horrible with broken dishes and glasses and broken boxes of food and paper torn from the shelves. Jars of jam and syrup and catsup had been shattered against the walls. The sink where Constance washed her dishes was filled with broken glass, as though glass after glass had been broken there methodically, one after another. Drawers of silverware and cooking ware had been pulled out and broken against the table and the walls, and silverware that had been in the house for generations of Blackwood wives was lying bent and scattered on the floor. Tablecloths and napkins hemmed by Blackwood women, and washed and ironed again and again, mended and cherished, had been ripped from the dining-room sideboard and dragged across the kitchen. It seemed that all the wealth and hidden treasure of our house had been found out and torn and soiled; I saw broken plates which had come from the top shelves in the cupboard, and our little sugar bowl with roses lay almost at my feet, handles gone. Constance bent down and picked up a silver spoon. "This was our grandmother's wedding pattern, she said, and set the spoon on the table. Then she said, "The preserves," and turned to the cellar door; it was closed and I hoped that perhaps they had not seen it, or had perhaps not had time to go down the stairs. Constance picked her way carefully across the floor and opened the cellar door and looked down. I thought of the jars and jars so beautifully preserved lying in broken sticky heaps in the cellar, but Constance went down a step or two and said, "No, it's all right; nothing here's been touched." She closed the cellar door again and made her way across to the sink to wash her hands and dry them on a dishtowel from the floor. "First, your breakfast," she said.*

*Jonas sat on the doorstep in the growing sunlight looking at the kitchen with astonishment; once he raised his eyes to me and I wondered if he thought that Constance and I had made this mess. I saw a cup not broken, and picked it up and set it on the table, and then thought to look for more things which might have escaped. I remembered that one of our mother's Dresden figurines had rolled safely onto the grass and I wondered if it had hidden successfully and preserved itself; I would look for it later.*

*Nothing was orderly, nothing was planned; it was not like any other day. Once Constance went into the cellar and came back with her arms full. "Vegetable soup," she said, almost singing, "and strawberry jam, and chicken soup, and pickled beef."*

## Key Vocabulary

- **Anonymous:** Without a known or disclosed identity, often used to describe something or someone whose name or origin is not revealed.
- **Arbor:** A shaded area or structure in a garden or outdoor space, often formed by a framework of arches or trellises covered with climbing plants.
- **Arsenic:** A highly toxic chemical element, represented by the symbol "As" on the periodic table, often used in the past as a poison or in industrial applications.
- **Barricade:** A barrier or obstacle, often made of materials like wood or metal, used to block or restrict access to an area.
- **Blight:** A plant disease that causes damage, withering, or decay, often affecting crops or vegetation. It can also refer to something that ruins or spoils conditions or circumstances.
- **Blandly:** In a mild, unexciting, or unremarkable manner, often used to describe something lacking in flavor or excitement.
- **Brocade:** A richly decorative fabric characterized by raised patterns or elaborate designs woven into it, often used for upholstery, clothing, or drapery.
- **Charitable:** Showing kindness and generosity toward others, often involving the giving of money, goods, or assistance to those in need.
- **Chivalrous:** Displaying qualities of courtesy, honor, and gallantry, often associated with the medieval code of chivalry.
- **Commence:** To begin or start something, often used formally or ceremoniously.
- **Consumed:** Completely absorbed or engrossed in something, often used to describe intense focus or passion.
- **Corpuscles:** Small particles or cells, especially referring to blood cells such as red and white blood corpuscles.
- **Coveting:** The strong desire or longing to possess something that belongs to someone else, often associated with envy or jealousy.
- **Cynic:** A person who is skeptical, distrustful, or inclined to believe that people's actions are motivated primarily by self-interest or selfishness.
- **Damask:** A type of fabric characterized by a reversible pattern, typically woven with a shiny design on a matte background.
- **Decorum:** Proper behavior, manners, or etiquette in social situations, characterized by respect, dignity, and adherence to conventions.
- **Digitalis:** A genus of plants that includes the foxglove, which contains chemicals used in medicine to treat heart conditions.
- **Eradicated:** Completely eliminated or removed, often used in the context of eradicating diseases or problems.
- **Gaunt:** Extremely thin, haggard, or emaciated in appearance, usually due to illness, hunger, or suffering.
- **Griffin:** A mythical creature with the body of a lion and the head of an eagle, often depicted in various forms in ancient and medieval art and literature.

- **Hemmed:** Having a border or edge that is folded and sewn, often used to prevent fraying.
- **Impertinent:** Showing a lack of respect or rudeness, often involving behavior that is considered inappropriate or irrelevant.
- **Intrepid:** Fearless, brave, and undaunted in the face of danger or challenges.
- **Metaphorical:** Relating to or involving figures of speech or expressions that use symbolic language to convey meaning beyond their literal interpretation.
- **Morsel:** A small and bite-sized piece of food or something else that is being consumed or eaten.
- **Mousse:** A light, frothy, and often creamy dessert or dish, typically made with whipped ingredients like chocolate or fruit.
- **Navigable:** Capable of being traversed or sailed through, often used to describe bodies of water or routes suitable for ships or boats.
- **Nightshade:** A family of plants that includes both edible and poisonous species, such as tomatoes, potatoes, and bell peppers.
- **Notoriety:** Widespread and often unfavorable recognition or fame, especially for something negative or scandalous.
- **Omen:** A sign or event that is believed to foretell or indicate the future, often considered a harbinger of good or bad fortune.
- **Pegasus:** In Greek mythology, a winged horse that was born from the blood of the Gorgon Medusa, often associated with poetry and inspiration.
- **Possessive:** Showing a strong desire to own or control something or someone, often characterized by jealousy or protectiveness.
- **Profusion:** An abundance or large quantity of something, often used to describe an excessive or extravagant amount.
- **Rarebit:** A dish made with melted cheese and other ingredients, typically served over toasted bread or crackers, also known as Welsh rarebit.
- **Repentant:** Feeling remorse or regret for one's actions and being willing to change or make amends.
- **Reproach:** Expressing disapproval or disappointment, often through criticism or blame.
- **Rhubarb:** A plant with edible stalks that are often used in cooking, especially in pies and desserts.
- **Sauntering:** Walking in a relaxed, unhurried manner, often with a casual or leisurely gait.
- **Shawl:** A large, square or rectangular piece of cloth worn as a loose outer garment, often draped over the shoulders.
- **Shrill:** High-pitched and piercing in sound, often used to describe a loud and sharp noise or voice.
- **Signet:** A small, decorative seal or stamp used to mark or authenticate documents or objects.
- **Stature:** The height or physical size of a person, often used metaphorically to refer to a person's reputation or importance.

- **Tarnish:** To become dull, discolored, or less shiny, often due to exposure to air, moisture, or chemical reactions.
- **Tassel:** A decorative bunch of threads or cords, often attached to the end of a cord or fabric as an ornament.
- **Toga:** A loose, draped garment worn in ancient Rome, typically by male citizens and officials.
- **Transient:** Something that is temporary or short-lived, lasting only for a brief period of time.
- **Turreted:** Having one or more small towers or turrets, often used to describe the architectural features of a building.
- **Veranda:** A roofed, open-air porch or gallery that is typically attached to the exterior of a building and used for relaxing or entertaining.

## Quotes

### Chapter 1

"I dislike washing myself, and dogs, and noise. I like my sister Constance, and Richard Plantagenet, and Amanita phalloides, the death-cup mushroom."

"Everyone else in my family is dead."

"We always put things back where they belonged."

"Blackwoods had always lived in our house, and kept their things in order; as soon as a new Blackwood wife moved in, a place was found for her belongings, and so our house was built up with layers of Blackwood property weighting it, and keeping it steady against the world."

"Fridays and Tuesdays were terrible days, because I had to go into the village."

"The Rochester house was the loveliest in town and had once had a walnut-panelled library and a second-floor ballroom and a profusion of roses along the veranda; our mother had been born there and by rights it should have belonged to Constance."

"If it was a very good day I would later make an offering of jewelry out of gratitude."

"I always thought about rot when I came toward the row of stores; I thought about burning black painful rot that ate away from inside, hurting dreadfully. I wished it on the village."

"It never mattered who was in the grocery. I was always served at once;"

"The Blackwoods always did set a fine table."

"I would have liked to come into the grocery 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."

"They tell me," he said, swinging to sit sideways on his stool and look at me directly, "they tell me you're moving away."

"There won't be any peace around here until you go."

"I liked my house on the moon, and I put a fireplace in it and a garden outside (what would flourish, growing on the moon? I must ask Constance) and I was going to have lunch outside in my garden on the moon. Things on the moon were very bright, and odd colors; my little house would be blue."

"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!"



## Chapter 2

"Merricat," she said, smiling at me, "look how far I came today."

"She was the most precious person in my world, always."

"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."

"Even now, Constance and I still saw some small society, visiting acquaintances who drove up the driveway to call."

"It hardly seems like six years, sometimes," Constance said. I took the yellow tablecloth and went outside to the lawn to start the table; behind me I heard her saying to Uncle Julian, "Sometimes I feel I would give anything to have them all back again."

"I saw the car turn into the driveway and then saw that there were two people in it instead of one; "Constance," I said, "she's brought someone else."

"I was chilled. "I want to send them away."

"Have you met Julian Blackwood?" Helen Clarke asked Mrs. Wright, and Mrs. Wright, shaking her head, began, "I would love to meet him, of course; I have heard so much --" and stopped. "

"Do you suppose that people would really be afraid to visit here?"

"A family gathering for the evening meal," Uncle Julian said, caressing his words. "Never supposing it was to be our last."

"Arsenic in the sugar," Mrs. Wright said, carried away, hopelessly lost to all decorum.

## Chapter 3

"Always on Wednesday mornings I went around the fence. It was necessary for me to check constantly to be sure that the wires were not broken and the gates were securely locked. I could make the repairs myself, winding the wire back together where it had torn, tightening loose strands, and it was a pleasure to know, every Wednesday morning, that we were safe for another week."

"On Sunday mornings I examined my safeguards, the box of silver dollars I had buried by the creek, and the doll buried in the long field, and the book nailed to the tree in the pine woods; so long as they were where I had put them nothing could get in to harm us."

"I had always buried things, even when I was small;"

"I decided that I would choose three powerful words, words of strong protection, and so long as these great words were never spoken aloud no change would come."

"When I'm as old as Uncle Julian will you take care of me?" I asked her. "If I'm still around," she said, and I was chilled."

#### Chapter 4

"On Sunday morning the change was one day nearer."

"I found a nest of baby snakes near the creek and killed them all; I dislike snakes and Constance had never asked me not to."

"We'll always be here together, won't we, Constance?"

"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."

"There was no cousin, no Charles Blackwood, no intruder inside. It was because the book had fallen from the tree; I had neglected to replace it at once and our wall of safety had cracked."

#### Chapter 5

"Today my winged horse is coming and I am carrying you off to the moon and on the moon we will eat rose petals."

"I dreamed that he came. I fell asleep on the ground and dreamed that he came, but then I dreamed him away." I was held tight; when Constance believed me I could breathe again."

"Cousin Charles was a ghost, but a ghost that could be driven away."

"I'm not afraid to eat anything Constance cooks," Charles said."

"It was a sad and horrible time and it's not going to do Connie here any good at all to keep talking about it."

"Oh, well," Charles said to Jonas, "Constance likes me, and I guess that's all that matters."

"I wonder if it would be right for me to wear Mother's pearls. I have never worn pearls."

"They've always been in the box, I said. "You'd have to take them out."

"Cousin Mary doesn't like me," Charles said again to Jonas. "I wonder if Cousin Mary knows how I get even with people who don't like me?"

“Merricat, dear, I think if Charles doesn't mind it might be a good idea. I never feel quite comfortable when you're away in the village.” Constance laughed. “I'll give you a list, Charles, and the money, and you shall be the grocery boy.”

“The *Amanita phalloides*,” I said to him, “holds three different poisons. There is amanitin, which works slowly and is most potent. There is phalloidin, which acts at once, and there is phallin, which dissolves red corpuscles, although it is the least potent. The first symptoms do not appear until seven to twelve hours after eating, in some cases not before twenty-four or even forty hours. The symptoms begin with violent stomach pains, cold sweat, vomiting --”.

“Oh, Merricat,” she said, laughing through the words, “you are silly. I taught her,” she told Charles, “there are mushrooms by the creek and in the fields and I made her learn the deadly ones. Oh, Merricat.”

## Chapter 6

“How could he know about the library books? He doesn't belong in this house; he has nothing to do with our books.”

“On the moon we have everything. Lettuce, and pumpkin pie and *Amanita phalloides*. We have cat-furred plants and horses dancing with their wings. All the locks are solid and tight, and there are no ghosts. On the moon Uncle Julian would be well and the sun would shine every day. You would wear our mother's pearls and sing, and the sun would shine all the time.”

“That's my brother's gold watch chain,” Uncle Julian said, leaning forward curiously. “I thought he was buried in it.” Charles' hand was shaking as he held it out; I could see it shaking against the yellow of the wall behind him. “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 worth money,” Charles said, explaining carefully to Constance. “This is a gold watch chain, worth possibly a good deal of money. Sensible people don't go around nailing this kind of valuable thing to trees.”

“Constance, has he said anything yet about leaving?”

“It's all been my fault,” she said. “I didn't realize how wrong I was, letting things go on and on because I wanted to hide. It wasn't fair to you or to Uncle Julian.”

“I have decided to ask you please to go away.”

“As a matter of fact,” he said, “come about a month from now, I wonder who will still be here? You,” he said, “or me?”

“I never realized until lately how wrong I was to let you and Uncle Julian hide here with me. 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."

"I could have worn this scarf," he said irritably, and I heard him from the vegetable garden where I had found Jonas sleeping in a tangle of young lettuce plants. "It's an expensive thing, and I like the colours."

"I want you to have my papers afterwards. No one else is to touch my papers, do you hear me?"

"No more now," Charles said. "Now Constance and I want to talk, Uncle. We've got plans to make."

## Chapter 7

"I remember," Constance said. "Silver dollars. I remember when she buried them."

"There must be twenty or thirty dollars here; this is outrageous."

"She likes to bury things."

"I haven't quite decided what I'm going to do with you," he said. "But whatever I do, you'll remember it."

"Don't bully her, Charles," Constance said. I did not like her voice either because it was strange and I knew she was uncertain. "It's all my fault, anyway." That was her new way of thinking."

"Shut up," Charles said; he was shouting again and I was pleased. "Constance," he said, lowering his voice a little, "this is terrible. The sooner you're out of it the better."

"Merricat? Why should anything be done? I said I would clean your room." "Aren't you even going to punish her?"

"Punish me?" I was standing then, shivering against the door frame. "Punish me? You mean send me to bed without my dinner?"

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

## Chapter 8

"So you decided to come back again, did you? And high time, too, \_young\_ lady; your sister and I have been trying to decide how to teach you a lesson."

““My papers,” Uncle Julian said. “I shall collect my papers and remove them to a place of safety.”

““Can they see me?” she whispered back. “Is anyone looking?”

““Why not let it burn?” a woman's voice came loudly, laughing, and “Get the safe out of the study downstairs”; that was Charles, safely in the crowd out front.”

““Put them back in the house and start the fire all over again.”

“Listen to me,” Jim Clarke said, raising his voice, “listen to me. Julian Blackwood is dead.”

““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.”

## Chapter 9

“Today was Helen Clarke's day to come to tea, but there would be no tea today, because we would have to neaten the house, although it was not the usual day for neatening the house.”

““Most of our house is gone, Merricat; we are all that is left.”

“We are going to lock ourselves in more securely than ever.”

“As long as we sat quietly together in the kitchen it was possible to postpone seeing the rest of the house.”

““It was all my fault,” she said. “Somehow it was all my fault.”

““But I'm sure they misunderstood the people last night; I'm sure Constance was upset, and I \_must\_ tell them that nobody meant any harm.”

““Tomorrow I will barricade the sides of the house. Tomorrow Jonas will catch us a rabbit. Tomorrow I will guess for you what time it is.”

“Listen, no one's going to hurt you. We're your friends.

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

## Chapter 10

“Slowly the pattern of pour days grew, and shaped itself into a happy life.”

“All the strangers will come, but they can t see inside.

“I am thinking that we are on the moon, but it is not quite as I supposed it would be.”

“I suppose I'll keep them all in the box," she said at last. "I suppose I'll put the box down in the cellar.”

“Constance. We are going to be very happy, Constance.”

“I got a chicken here. My wife fixed it, roasted it nice, and there's some cookies and a pie. I hope you can hear me.”

“Sometimes they brought bacon, home-cured, or fruit, or their own preserves, which were never as good as the preserves Constance made.

“This is for the dishes," or "We apologize about the curtains," or "Sorry for your harp.”

“They're in there all right," he said. "And so is a whole damn fortune.”

“Hey, Connie? It's Charles; I'm back.”

“I've got to see her once more. I was the cause of it all.”

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

“Oh, Constance," I said, "we are so happy.”

## Planning a Text Response Essay

### Keywords and Synonyms

- Underline the Keywords of the topic.
- Brainstorm synonyms for the keywords.

### Contention

- Turn the topic into a Question and then provide the answer. This will become your contention.

### Ideas

- Make a list of 3-4 ideas that link to your contention.

### Examples

- Brainstorm examples for each of your ideas.

### Sort and Order

- Decide which 2 examples you will use with which idea.
- Decide which idea will be your 1<sup>st</sup> paragraph, 2<sup>nd</sup> paragraph, and 3<sup>rd</sup> paragraph.

## Text Response Essay Structure

### Introduction (4-7 sentences)

- Overview
  - 1-2 sentences
  - Introduce the text, author, setting, plot overview
- Contention
  - 1-2 sentences
  - What is your response to the topic? You should be able to see the keywords of the topic (or synonyms) in this sentence.
- Ideas
  - 2-3 sentences
  - Signpost the ideas that you will be discussing in each paragraph

### Body Paragraphs (9 sentences)

- Topic Sentence (Umbrella)
  - 1 sentence that introduces the **IDEA**.
- Explanation of the Idea
  - 1 sentence that explains the **IDEA**.
- 1<sup>st</sup> Example
  - Begin discussing your first **EXAMPLE**.
  - Include details from the text and quotes.
  - Aim for 2-3 quotes per example.
- Bridge
  - Create a Bridge between your first **EXAMPLE** and second **EXAMPLE**.
- 2<sup>nd</sup> Example
  - Begin discussing your second **EXAMPLE**.
  - Include details from the text and quotes.
  - Aim for 2-3 quotes per example.
- Link
  - Link back to the **IDEA**.



### Conclusion (4-5 sentences)

- Contention
  - Restate your contention using different words.
- Author/ Director Intent
  - Explain the central message that the author/ director was aiming for around the theme of this topic.
- Memorable Ending
  - Include a final sentence that wraps up the essay and try and include a quote in this sentence.



## Text Response Topics

- 1..What literary techniques has Shirley Jackson used to further her themes and main messages?
- 2..How does Shirley Jackson use literary techniques to further her main messages in *We Have Always Lived in the Castle*?
- 3..How does Jackson use literary techniques to further her message that some may need to take refuge in a world of their own creation?
- 4..What narrative devices does Jackson use to further her main messages?
- 5..What narrative devices does Jackson use to further her main message that some may not be able to deal with the evils of a patriarchal society?
- 6.. 'One of Jackson's significant themes is that a regular life in a capitalistic society is not for everyone.' To what extent do you agree?
- 7.. To what extent does Jackson use her text to criticise modern society? Discuss.
- 8..' Jackson uses her novel to criticise a society that is prejudiced and suspicious.' Discuss.
- 9.. How does Jackson use her novel to criticise modern social injustices?
- 10.. How does Jackson use her text to explore the problem of prejudice?
- 11..How does the structure of this novel influence the reader's response to Merricat and Constance?
- 12..How does Jackson use her novel to explore the problem of self-interest?
- 13..How does Jackson use her text to explore the problems caused by a lack of respect?
- 14..How does Jackson construct her novel to further her significant themes?
- 15..How does the text creator structure their text to further their main messages?
- 16..How does Jackson's writing style influence the audience's response?
17. How does Jackson represent Uncle Julian as a way to further her main messages?
18. How does Jackson represent Merricat as a way to further her theme of the value of connection to others?
19. How does Jackson represent minor characters as a way to further her main messages?

20. How does Jackson represent minor characters as a way to further her theme of the dangers of hysteria?
- 21..To what extent does Jackson suggest to her readership that there are benefits in doing what is right for you?
- 22..How does Jackson attempt to convince her audience of the evils of conventionality?
- 23..How does Jackson use symbolism to further her main messages?
- 24..How does Jackson use symbols and motifs to further her main messages?
- 25.. How does Jackson utilise imagery to further her main messages?
- 26..To what extent does Jackson use description to enhance her reader's understanding of her main messages?
- 27.. How does Jackson use setting to further her significant themes?
- 28.. How does Jackson utilise setting to portray the world as a place of troubles?
- 29.. How does Jackson utilise setting to portray the difficulties caused by prejudice?
- 30.. How does Jackson utilise themes to portray the difficulties in life for individualists like Merricat and Constance?
- 31..'The characters depicted in the text reflect the text creator's view of society.' To what extent do you agree?
- 32..How does Jackson demonstrate the lengths some must go to in order to conquer their fears?
- 33..How does Jackson create an atmosphere of anxiety in *We Have Always Lived in the Castle*?

## Sample Text Response Essay

'We Have Always Lived in the Castle offers reads an unsettling experience.' Discuss.

The darker side of human nature is explored in Shirley Jackson's 1962 gothic novel We Have Always Lived in the Castle, which invites readers into the unusual mind of Merricat as she navigates life with her sister Constance and her Uncle Julian after rest of their family are murdered. Merricat's childlike narrative voices occasionally interrupted by sudden violent fantasies; the novel works to unnerve readers by presenting a character who appears naive and vulnerable, but his menacing at the same time. The prejudiced villagers and the large isolated house serve as backdrops to the psyches of the central characters, encouraging readers to consider how fear and distrust drives human behaviour. By viewing the world through Merricat's eyes, readers are immersed in a captivating yet unsettling story of witchcraft and suspicion that causes them to question their assumptions about and sympathies for the Blackwood family.

In the novel's first paragraph readers are introduced to Merricat, a character full of unexpected contradictions and dark impulses that create a mysterious and unnerving narrative point of view. Jackson immediately establishes Merricat's unreliability through her manner of speaking with a juvenile voice despite her age. Merricat is literal and straightforward introducing herself and if she has not stated that she is '18 years old' readers may have assumed she is much younger, given her childlike voice and simple direct sentence is. She is clearly an eccentric character- her dislike of washing herself suggests is something of a social outcast - and the emotionless frank statements that "everyone else in my family is dead" is all the more disturbing coming from someone who presents as innocent and vulnerable. Readers may even assume that perhaps there's been some kind of abuse or trauma that is fixed Merricat in this immature and detached state of mind, and therefore feel concern for her. This initial sympathetic response is strengthened when Merricat carries out her own form of witchcraft to protect herself in her home from strangers she explains her seemingly innocuous Sunday morning routine, checking "the box of silver dollars... buried by the creek" and the "doll buried in the long field" so that "nothing could get into harm us" in a way that makes her appear eccentric yet innocent.

However, despite her fears and perceived need for these protective spells, there is a dark side to Merricat. Her violent fantasies and impulses are revealed unexpectedly and with a complete lack of empathy. When Merricat feels the eyes of the villages judging her while shopping, she envisions "walking on their bodies" in the same thought as she imagines having an idyllic "lunch in the garden". It is quite disturbing that Merricat finds the idea of the painful deaths of the villagers just as comforting as that of having a pleasant family lunch, and readers' initial sympathies for Merricat begin to come into question. When it is finally revealed that it is she who murdered her family, perhaps because of something as simple as being sent to bed "without dinner as a punishment" at age 12, readers are shocked to learn that they have been inside the mind of, and even sympathising, with a potential psychopath. The experience of seeing the world through Merricat's distrustful impulsive and disturbing mind is certainly an unsettling one, particularly as the mystery around the deaths of her family members is unveiled.

While readers grapple with the paradoxical nature of Merricat's psyche, they are also unsettled by the wider social setting. The Blackwood estate is isolated from the village- not just in its geographical location, but also by the wire fence that encircles the property. This creates a fortress of sorts, and reinforces the 'us v them' view that Merricat has of the villagers. She states that "the people of the village have always hated us", a situation that is possibly due to the villagers jealousy of the Blackwoods wealth. Merricat imagines that there are "plenty of rotting hearts in the village coveting our heat heaps of golden coins" and, as if affirming Merricat suspicions, Mrs Donald snidely remarks that "the Blackwoods always did set a fine table" when Merricat does the grocery shopping. Here villages themselves act as a source of discomfort for readers. Merricat's paranoia, such as when she "felt someone watching me", is validated through the sly comments and overt taunts she experiences on her weekly excursions. The chant of "you'll poison me" suggests the villages have given the Blackwood something of a mythical status, when even the children are taught to fear the family despite Constance's acquittal for the murders. This herd mentality intensifies after the fire at the Blackwood house is extinguished, and Jim Donnell removes his fire chiefs hat (a symbol of removing his responsibility to protect the villages, including the Blackwoods) and "smashed" a rock through the window. This act inspires the rest of the village to join in the mindless vandalism of the house, fuelled by generational envy and blind prejudice. It is the "wall of laughter" that is "most horrible" to Merricat, and readers are positioned to consider that despite her violent fantasies about the villagers, she is justified in her fear and her desire to protect herself from them. The villagers cruel and destructive actions confront readers with a disturbing notion of how easily ordinary people can abandon their morals, and raises the question of who the true villains of the novel are.

The introduction of Charles works to create suspicion in readers through his somewhat 'Jekyll and Hyde' demeanour, apparently rational and helpful on the surface, but quietly ominous. Merricat is immediately distrustful of Charles and calls him a "ghost" as he so closely resembles her dead father. Further, she uses the dehumanising pronoun "it" when describing Charles' almost disembodied "great round face... smiling and opening its mouth to talk", creating an unnerving image. It is clear that, at least in Merricat's eyes, Charles poses a threat which leads readers to question his motives for suddenly returning to his estranged family. Again, Merricat's distrust is justified to readers on occasions when Charles is alone with Merricat, such as when he asks, "I wonder if cousin Mary knows how I get even with people who don't like me?" All of this leads Merricat to take steps to protect her family from Charles, destroying his room and wishing him "dead until he died". It becomes clear that Charles' motivation is money, for instance, when he finds the watch chain nailed to a tree, he is outraged because "this things made of gold". Although Constance is deceived by Charles' apparent goodwill, readers are positioned to support mMrricat because Charles is clearly an unsavoury and deceitful character.

The ending of the novel, where Merricat says to Constance "we are so happy" in the isolated, burnt family home, is the final opportunity for Jackson to unsettle her readers. Questions around Merricat's motivations- has she experienced some kind of trauma or abuse that led her to commit the crime, or does she have a psychological condition that causes her violent impulses, or is she simply a cold blooded egocentric killer?- remain unanswered. The eerie, childlike voice of Merricat, along with the disturbing characterisation

of the villages and cousin Charles, make the narrative of We Have Always Lived in the Castle one that unsettles readers longer after finishing the last page.

