

Merricat and Shirley Jackson's

Fascination with Witches

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One impression left by Shirley Jackson on the generations after her is her close association with witches and witchcraft. Although she held a rather ambivalent attitude towards this association throughout her life, she is still known as the writer who “writes not with a pen but a broomstick” (Franklin), and witch-related elements do make frequent appearances in both her dark-sided works and light pieces about family life. For example, as the protagonist of *We Have Always Lived in the Castle*, the sensitive and fragile Merricat possesses many features related to sorcery. With characters like Merricat, Jackson finds an outlet for her anxiety, uneasiness and fear. As a professional writer, housewife and daughter of a harsh mother in the 1950s' America, she struggled to maintain the balance among these three roles like an acrobat walking on a tightrope. In her relaxing and funny pieces about domestic life, she portrays herself as a carefree housewife who enjoys doing housework, taking care of her children and sometimes being bothered by their sick behaviors. However, in her more significant and serious works, she displays her desperation of living in a patriarchal society. Being trapped at the intersection of these two entirely distinct worlds, Jackson thus develops her interest in witchcraft due to the fact that witches are instinct representatives of female strength and thus natural fighters against patriarchy. By creating Merricat and eventually finishing the story with a fairy-tale like ending of the Blackwood sisters living in a patriarchy-free world, Jackson reveals her fascination for witches and expresses her longing for gaining a living space of her own.

In *We Have Always Live in the Castle*, Merricat's association with witchcraft is hard to be ignored. She directly states in her impressive self-introduction at the beginning of the book that she wants to be a werewolf whose two middle fingers have the same length. And she likes Richard Plantagenet as well as *Amanita phalloides* (Jackson 1). Accompanied by her black cat Jonas—a common pet for witches, she buries stuff like silver dollars and dolls around the house, nails a book to a tree and sees all of these objects as her “safeguards” (Jackson 41). She repeats “melody Gloucester Pegasus” whenever she senses the approaching danger (Jackson 51), and she also owns the power of making prophecies. The day before the arrival of Charles, she has already known that “the change was one day nearer” (Jackson 51) and

can see every move of him clearly. With these powers, Merricat resists against the outside world throughout the novel and has defeated her enemies twice. She gets rid of the family members who ignore her by poisoning, which is a typical way of committing murders for the witches. After feeling threatened by Charles and knowing his plan to occupy the family's property, she believes that he is “a ghost and a demon” (Jackson 92) and fights back by damaging the room and objects occupied by Charles. Since her father originally owns both the room and the objects, this act of damaging in fact demolishes the last traces of the father's patriarchal power in the house. By setting fire to the house, which is another typical act of witches, eventually Merricat has realized her dream of living “on the moon” (Jackson 145), a place that only belongs to her and her sister Constance. Oppressed by the patriarchal world outside, other members of the family and the patriarchal intruder Charles, Merricat finds witchcraft the most effective weapon for it is a power exclusive to women. In this way, we can see *We Have Always Lived in the Castle* as a dark fairy tale, in which a young witch defeats patriarchy with a very matriarchal power—witchcraft.

In history, witches are always women to be feared of. For instance, witches in classic fairy tales like Gretel and Hansel are often depicted as evil spinsters who live in desolate places like forests. With similar folktales and fairy tales, the patriarchal society has successfully passed on the fear and resentment towards women through generations, as most of the witches are believed to be women. Unlike other ordinary women, the power possessed by them and their mysterious inscrutability make them hard to be manipulated by men. As rebelling women, they are someone terrifying to the patriarchal rulers. As a result, women who were believed to be witches in history were either exiled or executed. However, due to this marginalized status, many of them are now seen as a group of pioneers fighting against patriarchal rule, and their witchcraft has also become the “province of marginal individuals” (Oates). Ironically, witches always fight against patriarchy with tools that used to be the embodiments of patriarchal suppression on women. One typical impression that they leave on people is their brooms. In earlier times, they used pitchforks instead. These two pieces of equipment are common objects in domestic life and thus symbols of “home and hearth” (Franklin). Assigned with these tools, women who live under the patriarchal rule are forced to play the role of mother, wife and daughter.

By choosing pitchforks and brooms as their weapons and using them to fight against patriarchal rule, the witches have successfully cast off the chains upon women and made a great mockery of patriarchy. Jackson makes another similar mockery towards patriarchy by having Merricat set fire to the Blackwood home. Many women accused of practicing witchcraft



Photograph from Weilin Zhang, Brockville, Canada, Aug., 2018

were burnt to death. Merricat using fire as her weapon to expel Charles is an act that shows female power has already taken control of it and claimed a great victory over patriarchy. The “pagan movement” of the witches, which later grew into a “hard-to-dismiss new religious movement”, started since the 1960s (Mar). Since this era was also a time for the feminist movements, it can be inferred that Jackson was deeply influenced by both of these movements when she created Merricat in the last years of her life.

Jackson shares many similarities with Merricat. They both suffer a lot from their relationship with their parents and are both suppressed by the patriarchal regime. The first-person narrative suggests that Merricat is an idealized Jackson and Merricat's story is also an idealized version of Jackson's life story. However, Merricat fights rebelliously with patriarchs and finally gains a place for herself, but Jackson never wins a real victory against the patriarchal rule in her lifetime. She was constantly tortured by her relationship with her mother, who refused to give any praises for her even after her success in writing and “made it clear that she would have preferred a prettier, more pliable” daughter who fitted into the patriarchal society (Heller), and her marriage to Stanley Edgar Hyman was also proved to be afflicting in which she “found a person with whom to replicate the abusive relationship” (Heller). Although her family life seems to be harmonious and cozy in domestic pieces such as “Charles”, it is not very hard to spot a few hints at Stanley's indifference and ignorance towards her in it. The husband in “Charles” shows little interest towards children's education, so the wife in the story goes to the PTA meeting alone. In reality, Jackson had to do all the

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housework, take care of the children and write light-hearted domestic stories for magazines to earn money. Trapped by these endless trivialities, she had little time for serious literary writings, while Hyman never truly respected her works and later saw her success as a threat to him. By designing an “ironic nuclear family” (Rubenstein 319) consisting of a sister and an uncle for Merricat, Jackson has showed a sarcastic attitude towards her own life.

Through Merricat, Jackson demonstrates her fascination towards witchcraft and her hatred towards patriarchal system. Her interest in witchcraft is a way to “transform everyday life into something rich and strange” (Franklin), to show her rebellious spirit, female strength and yearning towards a life of her own. She also created a shelter for herself, a sanctuary to escape from her vapid and hideous life as a housewife. Her life was split into two halves, and the attempt at keeping them from falling apart finally wore her out. At the end of *We Have Always Lived in Castle*, Merricat lives happily with her sister Constance in a house that only belongs to them. This cheerful ending represents the freedom of women, something so luxurious that Jackson never obtained in her life. She passed away as the daughter of Geraldine, the wife of Stanley Hyman, the mother of Laurence, Joanee, Sarah and Barry, and most importantly, as a woman entangled at the center of the chains that patriarchal system used to constraint her—a common blight of American women who lived in the mid-twentieth century, and also of women who live in the 2010s. More than half a century has passed, but women’s situation has not changed a lot. Witches are still marginalized and feared in the society. They are now also worshipped by feminists for the female power they possess. Moreover, there are many Shirley Jackson in today’s world, but we still have only one Merricat.

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Photograph from Weilin Zhang, Brockville, Canada, Aug, 2018