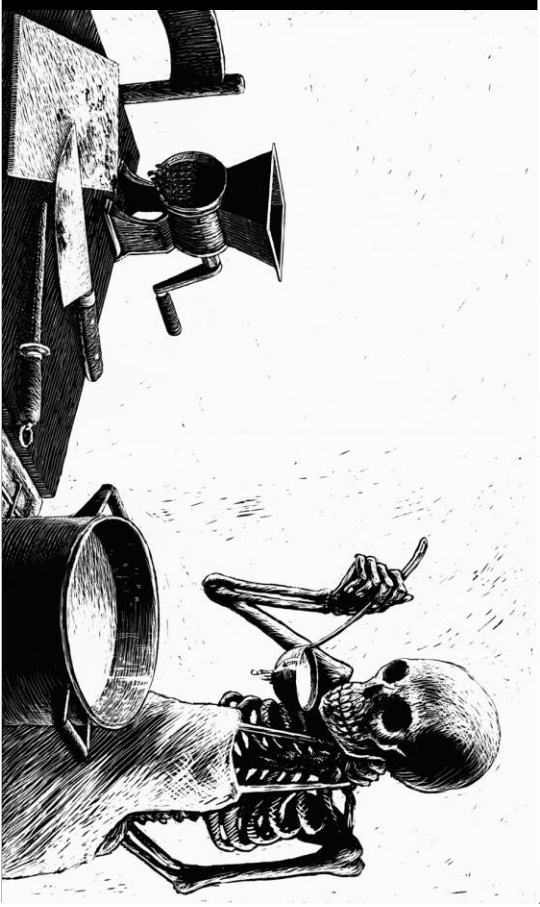


SHIRLEY JACKSON

We Have Always Lived in the Castle

Postmodernism | Spring 2015



Name _____

Date _____

ESSENTIAL QUESTIONS

Who was Shirley Jackson? Why do you think so much of her work has been forgotten and excluded from the canon of American literature?

Shirley Jackson alludes to Edgar Allan Poe with Constance and Mary Katherine's last name, Blackwood, as Poe published many of his best short stories in *Blackwood's Magazine*. What other Poe influences are there in *We Have Always Lived in the Castle*?

How does Jackson's writing anticipate the transition from modernism to postmodernism?

Most readers and critics agree that Mary Katherine's voice—ingenious, defiant, and razor-alert—is the novel's triumph. How does Jackson manage to make Merricat such a likeable character?

What is Mary Katherine's reason for telling her story? Where and to whom would she be addressing herself? Is she speaking to a general audience of readers? Or is Mary Katherine, like Holden Caulfield, addressing someone in an institution?



MERRICAT'S MAGIC WORDS

“I decided that I would choose [twenty-five] powerful words, words of strong protection, and so long as these great words were never spoken aloud no change would come” (44).

1. Transient – (adjective) lasting only for a short time; impermanent.
2. Profusion – (noun) an abundance or large quantity of something.
3. Gloat – (verb) to contemplate or dwell on one's own success or another's misfortune with smugness or malignant pleasure.
4. Blight – (noun) a plant disease, especially one caused by fungi such as mildews and rusts.
5. Covet – (verb) yearn to possess or have something.
6. Gaunt – (adjective) lean and haggard, especially because of suffering, hunger, or age.
7. Brazen – (adjective) bold and without shame.
8. Eccentric – (adjective) unconventional and slightly strange.
9. Penance – (noun) voluntary self-punishment inflicted as an outward expression of repentance for having done wrong.
10. Incredulity – (noun) the state of being unwilling or unable to believe something.
11. Inexorable – (adjective) impossible to stop or prevent.
12. Unerring – (adjective) always right or accurate.
13. Prescience – (noun) the fact of knowing something before it takes place; foreknowledge.
14. Felicitous – (adjective) well-chosen or suited to the circumstances.
15. Emphatically – (adverb) in a forceful way.
16. Pretentious – (adjective) attempting to impress by affecting greater importance, talent, culture, etc., than is actually possessed.
17. Cynic – (noun) a person who believes that people are motivated purely by self-interest rather than acting for honorable or unselfish reasons.
18. Chivalrous – (adjective) courteous and gallant, especially toward women.
19. Intrepid – (adjective) fearless; adventurous.
20. Falter – (verb) to start to lose strength or momentum.
21. Bellow – (verb) emit a deep loud roar, typically in pain or anger.
22. Reproach – (verb) address someone in such a way as to express disapproval or disappointment.
23. Stature – (noun) importance or reputation gained by ability or achievement.
24. Impertinent – (adjective) not showing proper respect; rude.
25. Methodical – (adjective) done according to a systematic or established form of procedure.

Names:

WEEK ONE GROUP WORK

Discuss the following questions in your literature circles. When you have reached some kind of consensus, write the answers below. Only one completed handout per group is required, and everyone in the group will receive the same grade.

Later in the novel, Mary Katherine will break her father's watch in a desperate attempt to stop time and maintain constancy: "I took up the watch and listened to it ticking because Charles had started it; I could not turn it all the way back to where it had formerly been because he had kept it going for two or three days, but I twisted the winding knob backward until there was a small complaining crack from the watch and the ticking stopped" (86). How does Shirley Jackson develop this theme in the first half of *We Have Always Lived in the Castle*? How does Mary Katherine compare to other characters from literature—like Jay Gatsby and Holden Caulfield—who have tried to stop time?

Social criticism, whether overt or implicit, is central to all of Shirley Jackson's works. What is Jackson saying about society in the novel? Do you agree or disagree with her?

Names:

WEEK TWO GROUP WORK

Prepare a brief presentation for the rest of the class (including the students who read *Despair*) explaining the postmodern aspects of Shirley Jackson's work. You should have at least one visual aid and each member of the group should take part in the discussion. Your presentation, including time for questions and answers, should be about five minutes in length. Here are some ideas for you to consider:

- **Ambiguity/Closure** – Why does Mary Katherine murder most of her family? What about the mysterious summerhouse that Mary Katherine visits at the end of Chapter 7... does it exist?
- **Fiction/Real World** – How does Shirley Jackson blend fiction and reality in *We Have Always Lived in the Castle* to make readers question what is real? This aspect of Jackson's postmodern writing will require research. Look up the Lizzie Borden murder trial as well as biographical information on Jackson herself.
- **Unreliable Narrator** – What parts of Mary Katherine's story can we trust?
- **Antihero** – How is Mary Katherine different from traditional protagonists?
- **Architecture** – How does the Blackwood house compare to other houses we've read about this semester?
- **Doppelgänger** – How are Mary Katherine and Constance doubles? How does their duality compare to the duality of other characters we've read about this semester?
- **Metafiction** – How does Shirley Jackson self-consciously and systematically draw attention to *We Have Always Lived in the Castle* as an artifact by writing about the process of writing?



"Without looking I could see the grinning & gesturing; I wished they were all dead and I was walking on their bodies."