

# **We Have Always Lived in the Castle Study Guide**

**We Have Always Lived in the Castle by Shirley  
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## Plot Summary

Two young women and their elderly uncle live in an isolated, grand old estate after the rest of the family was poisoned by arsenic six years previously. The uncle is disabled now because of the effects of the arsenic, and the older sister Constance takes care of him. The younger sister, Mary Katherine, is eighteen years old, and she is the narrator of the story.

Constance and Uncle Julian never leave the property, so Mary Katherine, also known as Merricat, walks into the village every week to buy supplies, get new books at the library, and stop at the coffee shop. She knows she is not welcome in the village and she quietly tolerates the taunting received from children and adults alike. It's clear from Merricat's thoughts that she is a very strange girl. When others tease her she imagines them dead on the floor and she is very superstitious. Merricat buries relics all over their property and nails items to trees in order to protect their property.

One day a man comes to visit the Blackwoods. It is their cousin Charles Blackwood, and Uncle Julian immediately dislikes him because he is greedy, just like his father. Constance is interested in Charles and gives in to his demands, but Merricat doesn't like him and does her best to get him to leave. She puts dirt and sticks and dead leaves in his bed and then soaks the whole mess with water. She also refuses to sleep in the house while Charles is there. She makes a little camp in the woods to avoid him.

Uncle Julian worries that Charles is trying to take over the household. Charles keeps asking for the deceased father's papers and access to the safe where all the money is kept. Julian will not let Charles look at any of his own papers. Through all of this, the reader is unaware of who the original murderer was. We know that Constance was tried for the murders but was acquitted.

When Merricat feels that Charles's influence in the household has reached a dangerous point, she sneaks into Charles's room, which had formerly been her father's room. She sees a cigar smoldering on a saucer on the dresser. She is disgusted with this and sweeps the cigar along with the saucer into a waste basket. Then she goes down to dinner. The cigar starts a fire, and the entire second floor is burned down before the firefighters get the fire out. Everyone in the village comes to watch the fire, and once the fire is under control, the fire chief throws a rock through one of the windows, which gives everyone else permission to attack the house. During the commotion Uncle Julian dies of a heart attack and Constance and Merricat hide until it's all over. The villagers destroy everything they possibly can, breaking all the dishes in the cupboards and tearing down drapes from the windows. They pile up furniture on the lawn to take away for themselves later.

Merricat takes Constance to her little camp in the woods, and Charles disappears with the villagers after trying to carry away the large safe. After the dust has settled, Merricat and Constance move back in to the remains of the house. They clean up the kitchen as best as they can and seal off most of the house. They salvage what they can. They



wear Uncle Julian's old clothes and make some items out of old tablecloths. Constance had stored lots of canned food in the cellar, which escaped the mob, and they live quietly in the old house. Over time, ivy covers the burned beams, and people come to see the old place. In the night, people leave food items in baskets on their porch along with notes of apology. We find out at the end that Merricat was the original murder of the rest of their family.



# Chapter 1

## Chapter 1 Summary

Mary Katherine Blackwood introduces herself as an eighteen year old girl who lives with her sister Constance. She says that it has been five months since the library books were put on the shelf in their kitchen. She wonders if she would have chosen different books if she'd known they would be the last books she would check out of the library.

Mary Katherine recalls the Friday in late April when she last went to the library. Her routine was to go into the village on Tuesdays and Fridays to go to the grocery store and the library. She also stopped in to Stella's coffee shop before her return home. Stella is polite to Mary Katherine, but it's clear that she's not comfortable around her.

Mary Katherine gives the reader a summary of the village. She explains that the Rochester house is the nicest one in the village. Her mother was a Rochester, and Mary Katherine believes that the house should belong to Constance by rights. Mary Katherine thinks that most of the villagers are mean, detestable people, and she hates them as a group.

She plays a game while she's shopping in order to distract her from the rudeness of the villagers. She pretends that she's in a board game, and when good things happen she gets a bonus like, "advance three spaces." But when bad things happen, like when the grocery bags are heavy and no one offers to help her she thinks, "lose one turn." The people in the store whisper about Mary Katherine, and Mrs. Donell mentions that the Blackwoods always did set a nice table. At Stella's, Jim Donell, who is the fire chief, teases Mary Katherine, and she wishes him dead, but she doesn't say anything to him. Instead of replying, Mary Katherine imagines her house on the moon where nothing bad ever happens. On her way back home from the village, children call out to her and sing morbid childish songs about poison. They call her "Merricat."

## Chapter 1 Analysis

From the very first paragraph, the author lets the reader know that her main character, Mary Katherine Blackwood, is unstable. She is an eighteen-year-old girl, but she says that she dislikes washing herself. She also says that her likes include her sister Constance, Richard Plantagenet, and the death-cup mushroom. The reader knows right away that this narrator cannot be trusted to give an accurate account of reality, and the unreliable narrator adds to the suspense immediately.

The action in the first chapter is very simple. A girl walks to town to buy groceries, return and check out library books, and stop at the coffee shop. Despite the simplicity of the action, this first chapter is full of mystery because of the way the characters interact. The narrator is suspicious of everyone around her and does her best to avoid personal contact. Also, the other characters behave strangely around her. Therefore, it is safe to

assume that something has happened with the narrator, and the entire chapter is cloaked in mystery because of this assumption.



# Chapter 2

## Chapter 2 Summary

Merricat returns from her errands in town and the reader is introduced to her sister Constance. The first thing Constance says is, "Look how far I came today." Constance is so afraid of the world that she doesn't leave the Blackwood property. Merricat tells Constance that she shouldn't have come so far, to the end of the garden. Merricat is chilled by the fact that Constance has ventured so far.

Uncle Julian and Jonas join the action in Chapter 2. Uncle Julian is the brother of Merricat and Constance's father. He is in a wheel chair and must be cared for constantly. Jonas is Merricat's cat. Constance is preparing to have Helen Clarke over for tea, and Uncle Julian talks about a quarrel he had with his brother John. Constance mentions that it has been six years since the rest of the family died.

Helen Clarke arrives and announces that she has brought Lucille with her. Lucille Wright is a villager who hasn't been to the house before, and Merricat and Constance are not pleased by this intrusion. Mrs. Wright comes across as an immature woman. She is eager to meet Julian. Helen confronts Constance about being a recluse. She suggests that it is time for Constance to return to the world, that she's done penance long enough. Merricat is very upset by this suggestion, but Helen and Lucille push it further, suggesting that Constance get some new clothes and visit a few friends at first. Lucille suggests that she could have a little luncheon.

During the tea, Uncle Julian makes an appearance. He has washed up and put on a nice tie. He immediately mentions that people should not be afraid to visit the Blackwood house because Constance was acquitted of murder. He plays up the murder case until Lucille is mesmerized, and Helen Clarke finds great discomfort in his behavior. Lucille, however, wants to hear more and more. Julian takes her into the dining room where he tells the whole story about how there was arsenic in the sugar, which was sprinkled on the blackberries for dessert. He is the only one who survived the arsenic, but his body was severely damaged by it, and he has been in a wheelchair ever since. Helen Clarke announces that she's leaving and takes Lucille away. Merricat asks Constance if she is going to consider what Helen Clarke said about going back into society, and Constance responds that she doesn't know.

## Chapter 2 Analysis

Some details about the past are revealed in Chapter 2 when Uncle Julian regales Lucille Wright with tales about the murder that occurred in the Blackwood home six years previously. Although the reader knows more about what happened, there are still many unanswered questions. For example, by the end of Chapter 2 the reader knows



that the majority of the Blackwood family was killed by arsenic poisoning and that Constance was accused of the murders and then acquitted.

Constance's character takes on a complexity in Chapter 2 because we know that she is very timid, but she seems willing to consider entering society once more. Constance's movements toward society seem to frighten Merricat, which doesn't make much sense because Merricat is the only member of the family who has any contact with the outside world. This dichotomy adds to the mystery.

The author continues to set the Blackwood household up as a completely predictable place. The sisters have certain things to do on certain days, and they take pride in the organization and neatness of their household. Merricat goes to town on certain days, and Helen Clarke comes for tea only on certain days. The contrast between this orderliness and the chaos of their past adds to the intrigue.





# Chapter 3

## Chapter 3 Summary

Merricat feels that a change is coming, but she thinks that Constance and Julian are unaware of it. She is very superstitious and feels that there are omens and signs pointing toward the change. On Sunday mornings, Merricat makes sure that all of her safeguards are in place. She has buried items all over the Blackwood property and she has nailed one of her father's books to a tree to keep evil away. She checks the perimeter of the property for problems with the fence and repairs any areas that need attention.

On Saturdays Constance works in her garden and preserving fruit. The cellar is full of preserves made by Constance and others of the Blackwood women who are now deceased. Some of the preserves were made by the girls' great-grandmothers, so they are no longer safe to eat, but they line the shelves of the cellar. Merricat says the Constance buries food the way she buries treasure.

Constance decides that one way to keep the change away is to come up with three powerful words. As she works in the house and garden on Saturday she thinks about the three powerful words: melody, Gloucester, and Pegasus. That day, Julian's doctor comes to visit him. Julian is very rude to the doctor and calls him a quack. The doctor barely tolerates the visit and can't leave the Blackwood house fast enough.

Julian fixates on the murders, recalling everything that happened that day. Constance and Merricat had a brother who was killed with the arsenic, and Uncle Julian recalls his wife and sister-in-law and the conversations they had that day. Julian wonders how things would have been different if everyone had known it would be their last meal. Through all of his ramblings, Constance and Merricat are unaffected by the talk of the murders. Constance patiently listens to Julian talk and calms him.

## Chapter 3 Analysis

Merricat's eccentricities are even more pronounced in this chapter than they were in Chapter 1 when she went to the village and played the board game in her head as she faced the villagers. Here, she reveals her faith in omens, buried treasure, and magical words. The fact that she feels that a change is coming while Julian and Constance go about their regular day adds to the suspense and leads up to the climax.

There is foreshadowing at the end of the chapter when Constance takes Uncle Julian into the house. She is afraid that he is getting cold outside and wants to protect him against the chilly spring air. He wants to keep working on his book because he says he has a thousand details to remember and not a minute to waste. This is foreshadowing to the climax of the story when Julian's heart cannot take the stress of the house fire.



# Chapter 4

## Chapter 4 Summary

The next morning is Sunday, and Merricat is even more sure that a change is coming, so she keeps her three magic words close to her heart. It's a stormy morning, but Merricat takes Jonas outside to play. She checks all of her buried treasure and maintains her secret hiding spot out in the woods. She has a blanket out there where she can rest and hide if she needs to escape something.

Merricat mentions that this is the last of her lovely slow days. A man drives up to the house and calls Constance's name. Merricat says that it has been a long time since anyone came to the house looking for Constance. After the trial, people would come to the house and bang on the door hoping to catch a glimpse of Constance or take her picture. That hasn't happened for a while, so this visitor calling Constance's name is a surprise.

Merricat is upstairs, and when she comes down Constance introduces her to Charles Blackwood, their cousin. Charles is their father's brother's son. Merricat says that Charles is the first person who has ever gotten inside, and Constance let him in. Instead of saying something pleasant to Charles, Merricat runs outside to her secret hiding place and lies on the blanket with Jonas. She blames herself for neglecting to replace the book nailed to the tree which had fallen down. She resolves to find something to replace it tomorrow. She falls asleep in her secret hiding place and stays there all night.

## Chapter 4 Analysis

Merricat says the Charles is the first person to go inside their house, but we know from Chapter 2 that Helen Clarke and Lucille Wright have been in their house very recently. Therefore, she either says whatever is convenient to support her emotions or she has a different category for Charles than she has for Helen Clarke and Lucille Wright.

Merricat's response to Charles's arrival seems extreme. She goes outside and sleeps in the woods. Also, Constance's reaction to Merricat's behavior is somewhat surprising. Constance cares for Uncle Julian so attentively, taking him in the house if she is afraid that he might get cold and cooking him whatever he wants to eat. It seems likely that she would care for her younger sister attentively as well. However, when Merricat flees to her secret hiding place in the woods, Constance allows her to stay outside all night, even though it is only April.



# Chapter 5

## Chapter 5 Summary

When Merricat returns to the house in the morning, she has a playful conversation with Constance about going to the moon and eating rose petals there, but not poisonous rose petals. Merricat orders a nice, particular breakfast, and Constance makes it for her. Julian is working on his book, and Constance says that Cousin Charles is still sleeping. Merricat tells her that Charles was a ghost and she breaks a glass to show Constance that he really is a ghost.

Constance sits her down and explains that while Charles's father Arthur was alive, Charles couldn't come to help them because his father would not permit him to see them, but now that Arthur is dead, Charles has come to see them and help take care of them. Constance asks Merricat to be pleasant to Cousin Charles. This speech helps Merricat to feel a little better, but she still believes that Charles is a ghost and will go away.

As Merricat looks at the broken glass on the floor she decides that today will be a glittering day, "full of tiny sparkling things." This is Monday, the day they neaten the house. Charles comes downstairs, and during his talk with Julian we find out that although Charles's father Arthur had been a wealthy man, he left nothing to his family upon his death. Merricat watches as Constance and Charles talk, and she notices that Constance is not at all shy around Charles.

Charles tries to make conversation with Merricat about her cat Jonas, but Merricat says as little as possible to Charles. Charles says that he won't have breakfast, and Constance teases him, saying, "You had dinner here last night and woke up alive this morning." After that, Charles takes his breakfast. Julian talks with Charles about his book and hopes to get some information from him, but Charles doesn't remember anything that is useful to Julian.

As Constance and Merricat neaten the house, Constance wonders if it would be OK if she wore their mother's pearls. Merricat doesn't like this idea and tells Constance that the pearls should remain in their box where they've always been. Merricat continues to say that Charles is a ghost. Charles looks like their father, and Constance says that it is right that Charles sit in their father's chair at dinner. At dinner, Julian talks to Charles as if her were John, Merricat and Constance's father. Charles is impatient with the old man and talks about him as if he weren't there. Charles volunteers to go into the village on Tuesday and run Merricat's errands. Merricat begins reciting the facts about poisonous mushrooms, and Charles doesn't think it's funny.



## Chapter 5 Analysis

Charles resembles John Blackwood, the father of Constance and Merricat, and the reader gets the idea that John Blackwood was an unpleasant man. The longer Charles stays in the house, the more his weaknesses become apparent. By the time he has been in the house twenty-four hours, he is showing his greedy side, asking about where the money is kept and finding ways to get access to it.

In Chapter 5, Constance also shows a weakness: a fondness for Charles despite his unkindness. She shows this weakness by wondering if it would be okay for her to wear her mother's pearls. She is clearly attracted to him and wants to please him. This supports Merricat's idea that a change is coming. Merricat is unwavering in her opinion that Charles is a ghost and must be driven from the house. She refuses to be civil to him.



# Chapter 6

## Chapter 6 Summary

Charles leaves for the village, and Merricat is upset because Constance has given him a key to the outside gate. It is Tuesday, Merricat's day for going into the village, but Charles has gone for her. She goes up to her father's bedroom, which Charles is staying in, and she looks for a charm to use against Charles. She finds her father's gold watch chain. She takes it outside and nails it to a tree.

Charles finds the gold watch chain nailed to the tree and brings it into the house. He is furious that Merricat would treat an object of value in such a way. One of the links is smashed, and he goes on and on about how much the item is worth and how he could have used it. Uncle Julian makes comments about John Blackwood and how he was given to adorning himself.

Over the next few days Constance talks about how she should get out more and not hide in the house any longer. She also talks about how Merricat's wildness is her fault. Merricat decides to come out and ask Charles to go away, but he refuses. She can see that he's wearing her father's gold watch chain. She tells him to stay away from Jonas and then she runs up to her father's room and hits the mirror until a large crack appears across it.

One day, Merricat follows Charles to the village to see what he does there. He stops and talks to Stella, buys a newspaper, and sits down on a bench with the other men to read it. Back at home, Charles says that he wants to go through their father's clothes and papers. Uncle Julian says that Charles is not allowed to touch his papers. Julian asks Constance to get a box for him so he can keep his papers safe from Charles. Constance gets the box for him but frets that she should have put Uncle Julian in a hospital. That evening, Constance plays the harp while Charles examines the knick-knacks in the drawing room and asks if they're valuable. Then Charles tells Julian that he and Constance have to make plans.

## Chapter 6 Analysis

Charles's character is fully revealed in Chapter 6. When he was first introduced in Chapter 4 he seemed to be an amiable enough visitor, and Uncle Julian was excited about the prospect of having another man around to talk to. Now, though, after having spent several days with Charles, Julian is very suspicious of him and doesn't even want him to touch his things. In fact, the only member of the household who is even friendly with Charles is Constance. Charles's greed is apparent in the way he is always asking for John Blackwood's possessions and always trying to find out the value of household objects.



There are several aspects of Romantic literature that come out in this chapter. There is a supernatural element to Romantic literature, an Merricat's obsession with magical objects and omens has a supernatural quality. Also, in Romantic literature, the very young and very old have intuitive powers that everyone else lacks. Julian acts as a sort of safety barometer here. Although he is senile sometimes, he senses that there is something evil in Charles's presence. The reader knows that she should trust Julian's instincts.



# Chapter 7

## Chapter 7 Summary

Merricat decides that Thursday will be the day to get rid of Charles because Thursday is her most powerful day. Charles is trying to fix a broken step outside, but he isn't doing a very good job of it. Merricat makes a plan for getting rid of Charles. The first thing she does is break Charles's watch that he has been using with her father's watch chain. Then she tries to make her father's bedroom unrecognizable to Charles by removing the books from the desk and the blankets from the bed and replacing them with dirt, sticks, and scraps of glass and metal that she had collected during the night. After she puts the dirt and sticks in the bed, she pours water over them so he won't be able to sleep there.

When Charles discovers what Merricat has done to his room, he storms downstairs and shouts. He has also found Merricat's collection of silver dollars, which she buried outside by the river bank. Charles rages at Merricat and Julian, and Constance begins to cry. Julian tells Charles that Mary Katherine died of neglect in the orphanage during the murder trial so he won't be including her much in his book.

Charles threatens to punish Merricat, and Merricat runs off to the summerhouse. She has not been near the summerhouse for nearly six years, but she goes now because Charles has made her feel so badly. Jonas won't follow her to the summerhouse. She hasn't buried anything around the summerhouse because the ground is so wet. Inside, everything is dark and wet. She remembers her mother and how they all used to sit at the dining-room table. Merricat's mother didn't much like the summerhouse though, so after a while they didn't go there much. Merricat imagines her family talking about her and saying that they all love her and would never punish her.

## Chapter 7 Analysis

The author uses overt foreshadowing in the first chapter to set up the climax that will occur in Chapter 8. Merricat says that Constance makes spice cookies for dinner but that she shouldn't have bothered because this would be the last day. She doesn't say what she means by this, but we know that she must be telling the truth in some fashion because she has been leading up to this since the very first chapter where she says that the library books are five months overdue.

As in the previous chapter, there are elements of Romantic literature in this chapter. Jonas, the cat, refuses to go into the summer house with Mary Katherine. Romantic literature presupposes that animals have intuitive powers, and therefore, the reader pays attention to Jonas's actions. Merricat, however, doesn't pay attention to Jonas and goes into the summer house. The summer house is a damp, dank place, and once she is inside, her fantasies seem to go wild. She imagines her family having a conversation

that never could have taken place. She imagines her mother saying, "Bow all your heads to our adored Mary Katherine."





# Chapter 8

## Chapter 8 Summary

Merricat returns to the house for dinner and overhears Charles saying that something must be done about here. Merricat notices that Constance is dressed up more than usual and has her hair done nicely. Constance tells Merricat to go comb her hair and wash her face before she sits down. She goes upstairs, and while she's up there she peeks into her father's room. Constance has cleaned it up, but it looks empty because the broken mirror is gone. Merricat sees that Charles has left a pipe still burning on the bedside table. Merricat brushes the pipe into the wastebasket and it falls onto Charles's newspapers.

Uncle Julian eats well at dinner and is very agreeable. Charles thinks he smells smoke, and goes to investigate. The whole house is on fire, and they don't have a phone to call the fire station. Uncle Julian frets over his papers, and Constance gets his shawl to wrap around him before they go outside. Before long, Jim Donell and the other firemen arrive dragging hoses up to the house. People from the village come to watch the house burn.

Constance and Merricat hide on the porch, and Uncle Julian manages to get his chair out the back door where there was no fire. The firemen put the fire out, but the villagers continue to taunt the Blackwoods. Jim Donell takes off his firefighter hat and then picks up a rock. Then he throws it through one of the great tall windows into the drawing room. This sets off a mob attack. The villagers run into the house and begin destroying anything they can find. They throw the Dresden figurines against the wall and knock over Constance's harp.

During all the mayhem, Charles is trying to get the safe out of the house. Some of the village children grab handfuls of Constance's spice cookies, but their mothers slap their hands and tell them not to eat them because they might be poisoned. Merricat decides it's time to get away from the house, so she grabs Constance's hand and they run down the steps toward the trees. Stella shouts, "There they are!" and someone yells, "Put them back in the house and start the fire all over again."

Dr. Levy, Uncle Julian's doctor, is trying to find Julian to make sure he's okay. He finds him around the back of the house, and he is dead. Jim Clarke, Helen's husband, tells everyone to stop and announces that Julian Blackwood is dead. People asked if she killed him, and Jim Clarke says she did not but that everyone should leave because there has been a death in the house. Merricat leads Constance to her secret place in the woods and wraps Julian's shawl around her. When they lie down on the blanket, Merricat says she's going to "put death in all their food and watch them die." Constance said, "the way you did before?" The mystery of the original murder is solved. Merricat killed the rest of her family.



## Chapter 8 Analysis

Chapter 8 is the climax of the story. The remaining chapters consist of the dénouement, or resolution of the story. The chapter begins with a conflict between Charles and the rest of the family at dinner. Constance is the peacemaker, trying to keep conflict to a minimum between Charles, Merricat, and Uncle Julian, who are at odds with each other.

The fire results from the conflict between Charles and Merricat. Constance has asked Charles to be more careful with his pipes several times. In an effort to protect the house from his pipes, she has given him saucers to place it on, but he still neglects to put his pipe out before leaving rooms. When Merricat happens upon a smoldering pipe, she swipes it into the wastebasket, rationalizing her action by telling herself that Constance wouldn't want it sitting around on the furniture. However, it is clear that Merricat doesn't fully believe that the fire is completely Charles's fault because she keeps calling it Charles's fire, as if she's trying to convince herself that it isn't her own fault.

The villagers' hatred toward the Blackwoods is unleashed after the fire is put out, and they are portrayed as completely heartless. Even when it is announced that Julian has died, they still make horrible remarks. There seems to be no human feeling in them. The only people at the fire who seem to care at all are Helen and Jim Clarke and Dr. Levy. The rest of the villagers are virtually strangers to the Blackwoods, so their hatred is unjustified.



# Chapter 9

## Chapter 9 Summary

Merricat and Constance stay outside in the woods all night long. They hear an ambulance come and take Uncle Julian away, and they hear voices calling for them, but they never respond. Merricat recalls her game that she played at the beginning of the book during her errands to the village and she says, "Fire; return to Start." When Constance wakes up, Merricat tells her that they are on the moon at last.

They wash themselves in the creek and then go to the house. The first room they enter is the kitchen, which is almost completely destroyed. The drawers have all been pulled out and broken against the walls. The floor is covered in broken glass and dishes. Silverware is warped and twisted. There has been no fire in the kitchen, but the villagers have destroyed what the fire spared. Constance goes down into the cellar and finds that everything in the cellar is fine. She finds a small saucepan on the floor and puts some food on the stove to heat. Merricat finds three unbroken chairs and sets them around the table.

They walk around the rest of the house. The front porch is littered with furniture. One of the villagers had gathered up furniture and set it out on the lawn to come back for in the morning. Merricat finds an unbroken Dresden figurine against a tree root and brings it to Constance. The drawing room is destroyed. Merricat and Constance close the house up as best they can. They close the shutters and stop up broken glass with cardboard or anything else they can find.

Constance returns to the kitchen to clean it up. Among all the rubble, they find two unbroken cups with handles and enough plates and bowls for the two of them to use. They rescue as much undamaged food as they can and straighten some silverware to use. They sweep the rubble into the dining room and decide to not use the dining room anymore. Helen Clarke comes to the house and tries to get them to open the door. She wants to know if they're OK, but they don't respond at all. Her husband Jim is with her, and eventually Jim convinces her that they want to be left alone. Constance tells Merricat that Helen Clarke can never come for tea again because they only have two cups with handles.

Jim Clarke brings Dr. Levy back to the house. They call to Constance and Merricat and ask them if they're sick or if they need help. They don't respond. The doctor just asks for one word so they'll know they're alright, but they don't say a word. They live in the kitchen, sleeping on the floor near the stove. Constance apologizes for reminding Merricat why they all died.



## Chapter 9 Analysis

After the raucous climax in Chapter 8, Chapter 9 is quiet but intriguing. The Blackwoods have always been very orderly and consistent with their routines. The morning after the fire, Constance and Merricat find a way to return to routine and order. They salvage what they can from the mob attack and fire, and by the end of the day they have made a home of the kitchen. It is clean and orderly, and they seem emotionally balanced once more.

The outreach from the Clarkes and Dr. Levy is refreshing after the brutality of the night before. Although Constance and Merricat don't respond to the kindness, they feel better knowing that someone cares about them. The relationships are not as important to them as the thought behind the kindness. In fact, they seem to take some prideful pleasure in not responding to the mens' pleas.



# Chapter 10

## Chapter 10 Summary

Constance and Merricat grow accustomed to their new lives and routines. With the perimeter fence down, people begin using the road in front of the house to get to the highway, and children come to play on the front lawn. Sometimes people stop to picnic in front of the house when they walk or ride their bikes down the road. Constance and Merricat never show their faces, but people know they're in there and legends begin to spring up about the two ladies who live in the Blackwood house.

Merricat feels that she is now on the moon but it's not quite the way she thought it would be. They don't abide by the social norms they did before. They don't have many clothes because the bedrooms were burned up in the fire, so they wear Uncle Julian's clothes and make dresses out of tablecloths found in the kitchen. From time to time, baskets of food are left on the porch, often with a note apologizing for the destruction the night of the fire. They are grateful for the food, but they never talk with the people who leave it.

Charles comes back one day with a photographer. He yells into the house that he needs to talk with Constance. Constance and Merricat crouch by the door and listen to him, but they don't make a sound. Charles wants to let the photographer take pictures of them so he can make money off of the photos, and Constance finally sees Charles truly for what he is. When Charles leaves, Constance is very happy. They live together isolated in the old house, and Merricat says they are very happy.

## Chapter 10 Analysis

Merricat and Constance construct a new life with what is left from the old one. This life they are living suits Merricat much better than the old life. The relics of those she murdered are gone. Their bedrooms burned up in the fire, and the only room they have left to inhabit is the kitchen, which always belonged to Constance anyway, since she was the member of the family who enjoyed cooking and cleaning. Therefore, the productive, happy, and useful part of the house remains, while the ghosts of the past are gone.

Constance, always the malleable peacemakers, eventually takes to the new life as well, though she has to mourn for the loss of the old life. She never becomes the outgoing person that she longed to be for a while. In fact, she becomes a full-fledged hermit, but her life is simple and pleasing, and she enjoys seeing the people who come to picnic on the lawn and look at the odd house. Ivy grows up over the burned rafters, and the house doesn't look too bad after a while. She grows her garden when others are not around, and she brings in flowers to put on the table. The resolution is strange but pleasing. The rightful murderer, Merricat, has never been publicly identified, but she seems to have made peace at last.



# Characters

## Mary Katherine Blackwood

Mary Katherine Blackwood, known to her family as Merricat, is an eighteen-year-old girl who seems much younger than she is. She is the youngest daughter of the well-known Blackwood family. When she was twelve years old, everyone in her family except her older sister Constance and her Uncle Julian were killed at dinner one evening when arsenic was sprinkled on the blackberries along with the sugar.

Mary Katherine is very superstitious and believes that all the villagers hate her. She buries things all over the Blackwood property and nails items to trees in an effort to keep harm away. When her cousin Charles Blackwood comes to visit, she immediately dislikes him and tries to get him to leave. Mary Katherine leads a very simple life and follows her own rules of conduct strictly. She also has rules imposed on her by her older sister Constance. Merricat loves Constance and is very loyal to her. She does what she can to protect Constance from outsiders or from hurt.

Throughout the novel, the author gives clues about whether or not Mary Katherine was guilty of the murders, but it is not clear until the very end whether or not she is guilty. Despite constant taunting and her own superstitious worries, Merricat remains an unflinching optimist throughout the book, especially at the end after the fire.

## Constance Blackwood

Constance Blackwood is Mary Katherine's older sister. Although she is a grown woman in her late-20s, Constance seems much younger. She is fragile, and Merricat always wants to protect her. However, she is very capable and hardworking, and she takes good care of the remaining Blackwoods. She is a tender caretaker to Uncle Julian, always making sure he is comfortable and content.

Constance loves to grow flowers and vegetables in her garden, and she preserves the food she grows. She stocks the cellar with food she cans during the summer. In addition to taking care of the food, Constance keeps a clean house and respects the generations of Blackwoods who have lived in the house. She knows which sets of China belonged to each grandmother and aunt, and she keeps the house just as it was when the rest of her family was alive.

Constance was accused of the murders but was acquitted during the trial. Since the trial, Constance never leaves the house to go into the village. She sends Mary Katherine to the village for food, supplies, and library books. When her cousin Charles comes to visit, Constance begins dressing up more and is very eager to please him. She starts blaming herself for Mary Katherine's and Julian's eccentricities.



## Julian Blackwood

Julian Blackwood is the brother of Constance and Mary Katherine's father. He survived the arsenic poisoning, but his health was severely damaged by the poison. He has been in a wheel chair since that time, and his mind was also altered by the arsenic. At times his mind is very lucid, but he often forgets people or events.

Julian is very suspicious of Charles. Julian has been working on writing a book about the murders for many years. When Charles comes to look into the estate, Julian gathers his papers together and refuses to let Charles look at them. He contends that Charles's father was a greedy man and Charles is just like him. Julian dies during the fire.

## Charles Blackwood

Charles Blackwood is the cousin of Mary Katherine and Constance. Charles's father was the brother of Julian and Mr. Blackwood. Charles is a bachelor in his 30s. He claims to have come to visit his cousins and make sure that they're looked after properly. He says that the reason he has not come previously is because his parents forbade him to have any contact with them after the murders because of the bad publicity.

Charles is a greedy man, and he thinks only of how to get his hands on the money left to Constance and Merricat. He threatens Merricat with sending her away, and he makes overtures of marriage to Constance. During the fire, instead of making sure that Julian and Constance and Merricat are safe, he goes to the cellar and finds the large safe where the money is kept. When he can't get the safe out, he disappears. Later, he comes back with a photographer to try and make money off the tragedy, but Constance refuses to speak with him.

## Stella

Stella owns the coffee shop where Mary Katherine stops after she has finished her errands in town on Tuesdays and Fridays. Stella is polite to Mary Katherine when she stops at the coffee shop, but when others come in, Stella allows them to tease her. Stella appears later in the story when the villagers destroy the Blackwood home, and she doesn't defend Mary Katherine or Constance.

## Mr. Elbert

Mr. Elbert owns the grocery store where Mary Katherine does her shopping on Tuesdays and Fridays. He provides her with the groceries she requests, but he doesn't speak a word to her while she's in the store. He seems to be afraid of her or intimidated by her presence.



## Mrs. Donell

Mrs. Donell is a village gossip, and Mary Katherine dreads seeing her when she goes into town. Although she is not cruel to the Blackwoods, Mrs. Donell reminds them of what they used to be when the Blackwoods were a force in the town. When she sees what Mary Katherine buys at the grocery store, she reminds others that the Blackwoods always did set a nice table.

## Jim Donell

Jim Donell is the fire chief in the village. When Mary Katherine goes into Stella's coffee shop, Jim teases her until she leaves. The night of the fire at the Blackwood home, Jim comes to the rescue with the rest of the firefighters and puts the fire out, but as soon as the fire is out, Jim throws a rock through one of the windows, which gives all the villagers unspoken permission to attack the house and destroy everything they can.

## Helen Clarke

Helen Clarke is a friend of Constance from the village who comes once a week to the Blackwood house for tea. Helen is very proper, and comes to the house with her white gloves on. They always sit in the nicest room to have tea with Helen, and Helen encourages Constance to come out into society and meet people. After the fire, Helen sends her husband to the house with food. She worries about Constance and Mary Katherine and does what she can to help them.

## Lucille Wright

Lucille Wright comes to tea with Helen Clarke one day. She is obviously very curious about the Blackwood house, and she eagerly asks Uncle Julian details about the murders. Helen Clarke is embarrassed by Lucille's behavior, and Merricat doesn't like her at all. Julian loves the attention given to him by Lucille, but Constance thinks that Lucille's behavior is abominable.

## Jonas

Jonas is Mary Katherine's cat, although he is much more like a human friend to Mary Katherine than he is a pet. Because Mary Katherine lives such an isolated life and has no friends outside of her small family, she becomes very attached to her cat.





## Objects/Places

### The Rochester House

The Rochester house is the loveliest house in the village. It is the house where Mary Katherine and Constance's mother was born and raised. Mary Katherine says several times that by rights it should belong to Constance, but it doesn't, so she looks at it every time she goes to town.

### The Blackwood House

The Blackwood House is not in the middle of the village, but it is on the way to the highway from town. It is one of the nicest estates in the area, but ever since the murders, people think it is haunted. It is an older house, having been in the Blackwood family for several generations, and it is filled with nice things from these generations of Blackwoods.

### Stella's Coffee Shop

Stella's coffee shop is Mary Katherine's link to normal life. She stops at the coffee shop on Tuesdays and Fridays after she has gone to the library and the grocery store. She doesn't enjoy her time in the coffee shop, but she goes anyway.

### Preserves

The Blackwood cellar is filled with preserves made by several generations of women. Constance continues to add to the store of preserves. Mary Katherine and Constance eat Constance's preserves, but they don't eat the older ones because Constance says they could be killed if they ate them.

### Arsenic

Arsenic is the mode by which the rest of the Blackwood family was murdered. Julian talks about arsenic frequently, and it is an item scarcely mentioned by the rest of the village since the murders.

### The Dining Room

The Blackwood dining room is the scene of the murder. When Lucille Wright comes to visit with Helen Clarke, she wants to see the dining room, and Julian re-enacts the



murder scene for her. Until the fire, Mary Katherine, Constance and Julian still eat dinner in the dining room every night.

## Wheelchair

Julian's wheelchair is a constant reminder of the murder. He is unable to walk now because of the effects of the small amount of arsenic he ingested that night. He depends on Constance to help him get around.

## Garden

Constance works nearly every day in her garden. She finds comfort and solace in her garden, and she knows she can depend on the fruits of her garden to help her maintain her family.

## Gold Watch Chain

When Charles comes to stay at the house, he finds Mr. Blackwood's gold watch chain and begins to wear it. Julian recognizes the watch chain and says that he thought his brother was buried with it. Merricat had nailed the watch chain to a tree because she thought it would protect them from Charles. Charles is incensed that such an expensive item would be treated in such a manner.

## Mr. Blackwood's Study

Mary Katherine, Constance, and Julian have stayed out of Mr. Blackwood's study since the murders, but Charles wants to go in there and see what is in the safe. The study represents sacred ground to the girls because it belonged to their father. To Charles, the study represents money.

## Thursday

Mary Katherine believes that Thursday is her most powerful day. Hence, Thursday is the day when she tries to get Charles to leave their home. It is also the day of the big fire.

## Harp

Constance's harp represents the culture entrenched in the Blackwood home. Although they are shunned by society because of the murders, the Blackwoods are cultured people. Constance plays her harp from time to time, but when the villagers destroy their home the night of the fire, the harp is one of the items that is destroyed.

## Ivy

After the house is burned, ivy grows up to cover the burned beams. The ivy represents mother nature's way of covering up the messes made by people. As the ivy grows the memories of all the wickedness of the villagers is covered up and people begin to grow kinder toward Mary Katherine and Constance.



# Themes

## Death

Death is a prevalent theme throughout *We Have Always Lived in the Castle*. From the beginning of the story, most of the characters seem to be obsessed with the Blackwood murders. Although they hint at the deaths, most of the characters shy away from talking about it directly. Mary Katherine pictures people dead when she is upset with them. To her, death is an answer to her problems.

The only death that occurs during the novel is the death of Uncle Julian during the fire at the Blackwood home. Julian's death is different than the murders in that his death releases him from the Blackwood house. The others who died in the arsenic incident are trapped in the house. Nothing has been moved. Their possessions are not being used by anyone; they stay in exactly the same positions. Because of this, no one can move on from the deaths. With the fire, everything is changed. Most of the possessions of the deceased are ruined, so they are released from the house. Uncle Julian's bedroom remains, but with so much destruction, Merricat and Constance are forced to use his possessions. They wear his clothes and use his mattress. In this way, Julian's death gives him back some of the respect and usefulness he enjoyed in his pre-arsenic days.

Although Mary Katherine and Constance live a deathly sort of existence, especially to the villagers who treat them like ghosts, they live a very normal life together, raising vegetables, reading books, and taking care of Uncle Julian. What seems like death to some seems like a comfortable life to others.

## Constancy

Constance's name is purposeful in that she represents constancy in the novel. Despite the horrors that have been endured by the Blackwoods, they have been able to maintain some semblance of a normal, respectable life, even if they are outcasts in their society. Constance maintains a household where they always have good food to eat, routines to keep the house in order, and beauty and culture around them.

As the novel progresses, it is clear that the order maintained in the household is completely due to Constance's influence. When we find out that Mary Katherine is the murderer, Constance's influence is especially felt. She blames herself for the wild way Mary Katherine has turned out, but it's a marvel that she hasn't turned into something wilder.

Constance's fruit preserves are a metaphor for her personality. She is responsible and a nurturer. The preserves show that she can take care of her family and also that she cares enough to provide them with the very best. She denies herself a normal life in favor of taking care of what is left of her family. However, it is clear that she is very timid



and that she may not have a normal life anyway, even if she hadn't been tried for murder.

## Material Objects as Burdens

The Blackwoods have been a wealthy family for generations, and in the village they are resented because of their money, even before the murders. After the murders, Mary Katherine, Constance and Uncle Julian live in the large Blackwood home by themselves. They spend a great deal of time just maintaining the house because it is so large and so full of objects. Mary Katherine and Constance neaten the house as part of their routine, and they seem to enjoy this chore for the most part.

Constance always reminds Mary Katherine about the stories behind the objects. She knows which china patterns belonged to which Blackwood bride, and each object has a history. Once these histories involve murder, however, the objects themselves take on a sinister tone. The girls never go into their father's study, and they leave everything just as it was before. In this way, the house seems haunted, although it is only because it holds the objects involved in so many stories.

When the fire burns the second story of the house, many of these useless, storied items disappear. The useful part of the house, the kitchen and main living area, remains. Constance and Mary Katherine are free to live in their own way without the burden of caring for and maintaining the possessions of generations of deceased Blackwoods. Although it is sad at first to see the destruction of so many of their things, they are freed from the burdens the objects represent.



# Style

## Point of View

*We Have Always Lived in the Castle* is written from a first person point of view. Mary Katherine Blackwood is the narrator. She is an eighteen-year-old young woman, but she comes across as much younger and much more immature than eighteen. She lives with her older sister Constance and her Uncle Julian.

Mary Katherine Blackwood, also known as Merricat, is an unreliable narrator. An unreliable narrator cannot always be trusted to tell the reader the truth, either because she is deceitful or because she is mentally unstable and cannot see reality for what it is. Using an unreliable narrator in a mystery such as this is an effective way to get the reader involved in the action. The reader becomes a detective, cross-examining even the narrator on whom she depends for information.

Mary Katherine's perspective is such that she is looking back at the story, knowing full well how it ends. She refers occasionally to the present, which adds additional intrigue to the story. For example, she says that the library books on the shelf are months overdue, but at the beginning of the story we know that she goes to town twice a week to get new library books. This tells the reader that something has happened which doesn't allow them to go to town, and this increases the suspense.

## Setting

The setting of the story is a small American town, but we're not told where the town is. The town is old enough to have had generations of families inheriting the same houses, and the Blackwoods are one of these families. The first scene introduces the reader to the town as Mary Katherine makes her twice weekly trip into town for groceries and library books. We know that most of the villagers are fairly poor, but there are a few grand families.

The Blackwood house is set outside the village center on the way to the highway. There is a considerable amount of land around the Blackwood house, and the land is fenced off so that people can't pass through the property on their way to the highway. The short distance from town allows the Blackwoods some privacy but also makes them more mysterious to the villagers.

The time setting doesn't appear to be in the past, although the book was published in 1962, so we can assume it was set roughly 50-60 years ago. The women wear dresses all the time and hats and gloves to tea.



## Language and Meaning

The language in the novel is straightforward and includes quite a bit of dialogue. The narrator, however, is mentally unstable, and she rambles about tangents. For example, whenever things go sour for her or for Constance, she talks about living on the moon. To Mary Katherine, living on the moon is like living in paradise. On the moon, none of her enemies can get to her and everything is perfect.

The children in the village tease Mary Katherine when they see her. They sing childish rhyming songs about Mary Katherine and Constance and the arsenic murders. Although the song is not musically written out, it's clear from the words and the rhymes that these songs are children's songs, not unlike the ones that would be sung on a playground while jumping rope.

The grammar in the dialogue varies depending on whether the villagers are talking or whether the Blackwoods are talking. The Blackwoods all speak with proper grammar, but the villagers, such as Jim Donell, speak with poor grammar. This emphasizes the difference in education and culture between the Blackwoods and the villagers.

## Structure

The structure of the novel is mostly chronological, but the narrator, Mary Katherine, tells the story from a point in the future, and she hints about the status of the future as she tells the story. This increases the suspense because we know all along that something big has to change, but we don't know how or when or exactly what must change in order to get to the future state.

In addition to looking for clues about the future, the reader is also involved in searching for clues about the past. Although the murder is years in the past when the novel opens, we do not find out who the murderer was until the end of the novel. This keeps the action moving forward because the current action helps to unfold the past.

The novel is divided into ten chapters. The chapters are all about twenty pages in length. There are spaces within the chapters to designate changes in scene or timeframe. The climax of the novel occurs during the emotional house fire at the Blackwoods' house. This is about three-fourths of the way through the novel, but there are still many loose ends to tie up after the climax, and the characters must settle in to their new lives before there can be a true resolution.



## Quotes

"We dusted and swept under tables and chairs and beds and pictures and rugs and lamps, but we left them where they were; the tortoise-shell toilet set on our mother's dressing table was never off place by so much as a fraction of an inch. 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." Page 2

"—the sugar bowl on the sideboard, the heavy silver sugar bowl. It is a family heirloom; my brother prized it highly. You will be wondering about that sugar bowl, I imagine. Is it still in use? You are wondering; has it been cleaned? You may very well ask; was it thoroughly washed? I can reassure you at once. My niece Constance washed it before the doctor or the police had come, and you will allow that it was not a felicitous moment to wash a sugar bowl. The other dishes used at dinner were still on the table, but my niece took the sugar bowl to the kitchen, emptied it, and scrubbed it thoroughly with boiling water. It was a curious act." Page 51

"All the Blackwood women had taken the food that came from the ground and preserved it, and the deeply colored rows of jellies and pickles and bottled vegetables and fruit, maroon and amber and dark rich green stood side by side in our cellar and would stand there forever, a poem by the Blackwood women." Page 61

"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. I was on my way back to the house when I found a very bad omen, one of the worst. My book nailed to a tree in the pine woods had fallen down. I decided that the nail had rusted away and the book—it was a little notebook of our father's, where he used to record the names of people who owed him money, and people who ought, he thought, to do favors for him—was useless now as protection." Page 77

"It was important to choose the exact device to drive Charles away. An imperfect magic, or one incorrectly used, might only bring more disaster upon our house. I thought of my mother's jewels, since this was a day of sparkling things, but they might not be strong on a dull day, and Constance would be angry if I took them out of the box where they belonged, when she herself had decided against it." Page 101

"I was thinking that being a demon and a ghost must be very difficult, even for Charles; if he ever forgot, or let his disguise drop for a minute, he would be recognized at once and driven away; he must be extremely careful to use the same voice every time, and present the same face and the same manner without a slip; he must be constantly on guard against betraying himself. I wondered if he would turn back to his true form when he was dead." Page 120





"I wondered how long Charles was going to go on shouting. He made a black noise in our house and his voice was getting thinner and higher; perhaps if he shouted long enough he would squeak. I sat on the kitchen step next to Jonas and thought that perhaps Constance might laugh out loud if Charles squeaked at her." Page 131

"'We neatened it just the other day,' she said. 'It has no right to burn.' She began to shiver as though she were angry, and I took her by the hand and brought her through the open front door and just as we turned back for another look the lights came into the driveway with the disgusting noise of sirens and we were held in the doorway in the light." Page 149

"Smoke was everywhere, thick and ugly. Sometimes when I looked out the faces of the people were clouded with smoke, and it came out the front door in frightening waves. Once there was a crash from inside the house and voices speaking quickly and urgently, and the faces outside turned up happily in the smoke, mouths open." Page 152

"We were going to be very happy, I thought. There were a great many things to do, and a whole new pattern of days to arrange, but I thought we were going to be very happy. Constance was pale, and still saddened by what they had done to her kitchen, but she had scrubbed every shelf, and washed the table again and again, and washed the windows and the floor. Our dishes were bravely on their shelf, and the cans and unbroken boxes of food we had rescued made a substantial row in the pantry." Pages 183-184

"Then Constance laughed, and I laughed, and for a minute I saw Charles in the car turn his head quickly, as though he had heard us laughing, but the car started, and drove off down the driveway, and we held each other in the dark hall and laughed, with the tears running down our cheeks and echoes of our laughter going up the ruined stairway to the sky." Page 211



## Topics for Discussion

How is Merricat Blackwood an unreliable narrator? How much of what she says is true?

Discuss the meaning of Constance's name in the story. Does she represent constancy? How so?

What are Charles's intentions when he comes to visit the Blackwoods. The author never tells us exactly, but what can you infer from his actions?

Compare and contrast Mrs. Wright and Mrs. Clarke. What are their motivations for visiting Constance? Who is a more honest character?

Do you think the villagers would behave differently toward the Blackwoods if they really knew them? Why or why not?

What do you think Mary Katherine was like before the murders? Why do you think she murdered her family?

Discuss Uncle Julian's relationship with Charles Blackwood. How does the relationship change over the course of the story?