

Sugar in the Castle

How is it that two sisters, one a small child and the other like a “fairy princess...pink and white and golden,” are the perpetrators of a mass homicide of their own family (Jackson 19-20)? Appearances have a way of veiling deceit. While something is seemingly one item, a whole other narrative is actually occurring just below this outward guise. Facades create an artificial identity of inferences and oversimplified generalizations. In Shirley Jackson’s *We Have Always Lived in the Castle*, this principle is applicable to many people, objects, and situations. However, the focus of this paper will be on the infamous sugar of the Blackwoods. Like the sisters, sugar is a seemingly sweet, unaffected treat to perhaps sprinkle over berries for dessert. Yet in the case of the Blackwoods, it is anything but—it is the sugar that contains the lethal arsenic which leads to the demise of the majority of their family. Whenever sugar is mentioned throughout the novel, it symbolizes this dualism; it calls the reader to attention so that they may notice no matter how things may appear, the situation is, in reality, sinister or malicious. This occurs multiple times over, not just in the case of the arsenic in the sugar at dinner. To take a closer look at this, recall the scene when Mrs. Wright and Helen Clarke are in the Blackwood house for tea:

I came from my place in the corner to take a cup of tea from Constance and carry it over to Mrs. Wright, whose hand trembled when she took it. ‘Thank you, my dear,’ she said. I could see the tea trembling in the cup; it was only her second visit here, after all.

“Sugar?” I asked her; I couldn’t help it, and besides, it was polite.

“Oh, no,” she said. “No, thank you. No sugar” (Jackson 28).

Merricat, as the reader well knows from having an insider’s look at her inner dialogue, does not care about polite society or proper etiquette. She hates everyone from their town and wishes them dead and rotting on the ground. With the invocation of sugar, this is known. Merricat

wishes to terrify the already frightened Mrs. Wright by asking her if she wants sugar—the infamous murder weapon used by Constance (and Merricat). In fact, just a bit later in the novel, Merricat says “I can’t help it when people are frightened; I always want to frighten them more,” thus confirming that her intentions, although seemingly polite, were actually meant to harm and scare (Jackson 39). Surprisingly, Constance also reveals that she was being false throughout their entire tea time by stating, “‘That *impossible* woman.’ Constance put her head back against the couch and laughed. ‘Ill bred, pretentious, stupid. Why she keeps coming back I’ll never know’” (Jackson 39). Constance acts as though she is kind and welcoming; in reality, she is pretentious herself, judgmental, and harsh. For another example, sugar indicates deceit is imminent in Stella’s café. Merricat orders her coffee black even though she prefers cream and sugar because she not only does not want to be in the café and is simply there as an enforced societal nicety, but also she must know the outrage it would cause the townspeople for her to mention sugar again as she did in the grocery store just a bit earlier. She is not in the safety of her home with Constance nearby, so she does not want to taunt anyone in her vulnerable state. As she is thinking about how she wishes she had sugar, Jim Donell walks in. Had one overheard their conversation without context, one would think he was being a harmless, nosy neighbor, wondering how the sisters were and if they were moving away. However, the audience is aware that he is maliciously taunting Merricat. This is clearest when he ironically states, “I’m not bothering anybody, Stell. Am I bothering anybody? I’m just asking Miss Mary Katherine Blackwood here how it happens everyone in town is saying she and her big sister are going to be leaving us soon. Moving away. Going somewheres else to live” (Jackson 12-13). He is threatening Merricat, scaring her. He will later throw the first rock at the Blackwood manor, thus giving the villagers permission to destroy the house which he had just kept from burning down.

At this moment in the café, Jim Donell is projecting the image that he is a curious acquaintance. His much more malicious intentions are indicated by the introduction of sugar within the scene via the thoughts of Merricat. Lastly, the spilled sugar all over the kitchen floor following the villagers' raid of the Blackwood house symbolizes the aforementioned dualism but by a different method. While the villagers pretend that society is very important (Constance must have over Helen Clarke for tea, Merricat must go to Stella's for a coffee, they believe they should be invited to dinner at the manor, and Cousin Charles must be provided for because he is family), these same villagers went feral during the house fire as soon as the Blackwood sisters were at their most vulnerable. They destroyed the house which they were so jealous of, for they hated the arrogant family within, not for the murders but for their pretentiousness. They were angry not because Mr. and Mrs. Blackwood were murdered but because they were shut out of this house they believed they had a right to be in. To indicate that this revelation had taken place, "the floor was gritty" with the infamous sugar of the Blackwoods. It shows that the villagers only care about control of the situation, not proper society or manners; thus the doubleness of the villagers, revealed by the invocation of sugar, is exhibited. All in all, sugar is a device used by Shirley Jackson to convey the idea that appearances are almost entirely deceiving, especially within "polite" society.

Shirley Jackson bastardizes the Gothic novel as she does fairy-tales within her novel *We Have Always Lived in the Castle*. Like the Blackwood sugar, this novel is seemingly Gothic; yet it is deceptive and far from the expectations of the genre. While the heroines seem naive and princess-like (like two Rapunzels in their tower), they are the actual killers instead of damsels-in-distress. Gothic heroines should swoon at the thought of death, yet these heroines (if you would call them that) actively seek it out. The Byronic hero is typically brooding and complex with a

dark secret; Charles Blackwood is brutish and only focused on one thing—money. His only “secret” is that he is using Constance for her inheritance, but it is relatively easy to figure out his intentions. The setting of this book is castle-like, similar to that of a Gothic novel; however, this castle is not a treacherous maze but a safe haven for the women within it. The kind-of supernatural killing of the Blackwoods, which could be explained by perhaps a ghost in a traditional Gothic novel, is actually the doing of the heroines. The heroines are not in distress; they are in control. They invoke horror on the villagers and their families instead of being subject to it. In a way, this novel warps the Gothic genre in the same way it warps our expectations of the characters. Jackson plays with the genre to defy the audience’s expectations and, ultimately, try to unsettle them.

Work Cited

Jackson, Shirley. *We Have Always Lived in the Castle*. The Viking Press, 1962.