

## Transfer of Power Through the Murder of John Blackwood

In *We Have Always Lived in the Castle*, John Blackwood is the patriarch of the Blackwood family and Merricat and Constance's father. As the head of the household he is the main masculine authority and owner of the property, the house, even the table at which the family eats. He is the physical representation of the patriarchy for Merricat and Constance until Merricat murders him and the sisters establish new a power dynamic in the family home.

Before the murder, Merricat doesn't have a function in the Blackwood home. She isn't an heir nor does she function similarly to hired help like Constance. Instead, she pushes back against the family and threatens Mr. Blackwood's dominance. She is punished frequently as a result, and it can be gathered that Mr. Blackwood is the one who does the punishing when Constance tells Helen Clarke about how she would have to wait until her father left the table to sneak food to Merricat. Her unwillingness to fall into line with the established patriarchal norms leads to her poor treatment which leads to her poisoning the family. The only thing that Merricat has is her bond with Constance, who, although significantly more docile, still supported Merricat's murder of the family by covering for her and taking the blame. Their bond allows them to push against the patriarchal structure of the family and create a new world with new values.

The poisoning represents a transfer of power from the men of the house to the women. John is the obvious target. Julian ingests a significant amount of poison but not enough to kill him; this is in line with his position as man who is not seen as strong or successful. He is less of a threat to the overthrow of the patriarchal power structure, especially now that he has physical and mental disabilities. Thomas, Merricat's brother, is a young child at the time of the murder. Even so, he is a mini version of John, and is described as possessing "many of his father's more

forceful traits of character” (p. 48). His death is necessary for the newly established power structure to be sustainable.

One of John Blackwood’s main displays of patriarchal power is stinginess, with a list of people who owe him money and who he believes owe him favors. Uncle Julian and his wife are living with the other Blackwoods under John’s reign and have frequent spats with John about finances, with the two even eating less for worry of overstepping. Julian, while a man, is considered to be a failure because of his lack of material wealth and is therefore not viewed as a masculine presence in the family. When compared with the other characters, it is clear that John Blackwood’s power comes from his gender and his wealth. This contrasts starkly with Merricat and Constance’s power, which comes from their sisterly bond (and poison). When John dies, the money and all the power that came with said money go away. The remaining Blackwood women still have the money but do not value it the same way, with Merricat even burying it. This shows a more feminine view of power and success which is implemented in the Blackwood house after the poisoning.

In the broader context of the novel, the remaining three Blackwoods still have to confront patriarchal structures after the murder of their father in the form of the village and Charles Blackwood. The antagonistic village people are men and fathers much like Mr. Blackwood. They never liked the Blackwoods, but when the family is left without a patriarch they feel much more comfortable verbalizing their distaste and confronting Merricat when she takes her trips to the village. Because their father’s death was the catalyst for the establishment of a new power dynamic, Charles Blackwood, who looks just like Mr. Blackwood, serves to create conflict between the patriarchy and female self-sufficiency. When he arrives, he’s like a ghost, wearing Mr. Blackwood’s clothes and sleeping in his room and sharing a similar obsession with money.

He is also like a ghost of Mr. Blackwood in his actions; he punishes Merricat. His visit is the first time since the poisoning when Merricat is corrected through punishment, or at all. Charles threatens to completely walk back all of the newly established norms in the male-free world the remaining Blackwood women had created. Merricat identifies this in him, which explains her immediate suspicion and distaste.

In the broader context of Gothic literature, the death of Mr. Blackwood represents the death of most of the conflict in the Gothic heroines' lives. The tyrannical patriarch who holds the power is killed before the audience even enters the story. While the poisoning still haunts the house, the survivors live in a relative utopia without patriarchy or conflict. At home, Merricat and Constance are safe. This creates a bubble which Charles's return and the villagers' presence pop. Rather than a story of female victimization, *We Have Always Lived in the Castle* is a story of female self-sufficiency and power reclamation. Feminine power, though foreign to the other characters in the story, allows Merricat and Constance to survive and create a world where the two can survive and rebuild, together.