

**We Have Always Lived in the Mind:
The Freudian Topographic Model of the Mind as Depicted
in Shirley Jackson's *We Have Always Lived in the Castle* (1962)**

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Abstract: The literary setting of Shirley Jackson's 1962 novel *We Have Always Lived in the Castle* is eerie, symbolic, and inextricably interconnected with the main characters of the book. The Blackwood family, haunted by its macabre past, is confined to its mansion, which is a manifestation of its dwellers' troubled minds. The Blackwoods abide in a reciprocal influence with their house, the titular castle. The aim of this paper is to contribute to the discourse on Jackson's work and to illustrate a symbolic rather than mimetic reading of the novel. The theory of psychoanalysis, and more specifically the concept of the Freudian topographic model of the mind, is used to characterize the novel's setting and its foreground characters. The paper identifies the three focal characters with Freudian archetypes of id, ego, and superego, and uses the theory to further analyze the relationships between the characters to prove they are each ruled by one of the archetypes. Then, it places the characters within the plane of the Blackwood mansion to demonstrate the house's psychological agency over its dwellers. This is achieved by comparing the mansion's floors to the Freudian levels of consciousness. Such an interpretation not only compares the Blackwood family to a single entity, a shared mind, but also includes the house as an integral part of its manifestation.

Keywords: Shirley Jackson, psychoanalysis, literary studies, Gothic novel, topographic model of the mind

The spatiality of the human mind and the location of mental processes have long been subjects of philosophical divagations and numerous theories. Although neurology has recognized separate parts of the brain and the relations between them, thus providing much information about the mechanics behind the brain functions, the source of human identity is a question of nurture rather than nature. One of the most recent attempts at the spatial categorizations of the human mind in a metaphorical sense is Freud's theory on the levels of consciousness.

Freud's research was aimed at finding causes of neurosis and due to his patients often having problems remembering traumatic experiences, he assumed that there is a part of the psyche hidden even from itself. In 1915 Freud contextualized the stratification of the mind, dividing it into three levels of consciousness. Although Freud never put forward such a comparison and its origins remain unknown, the iceberg remains the most common image depicting this Freudian theory (Green). The iceberg's top as the only level remaining in immediate contact with the outside world represents the human conscious: the location of the processing of external perceptions. The immersed part initially was theorized to represent the unconscious as the source of needs, urges, and difficult to retrieve memories. However, Freud differentiated an intermediate level of the preconscious, just below the water level, and described it as a place of "storage" for memories (which are not repressed to the unconscious), and

knowledge gained via the systems of the conscious. This topographic representation of the human consciousness located some of the mental processes and put them into the context of social interactions.

However, the stratification of consciousness does not provide a full image of the human mind as theorized by Freud. According to him, these levels constitute a matrix for yet another tripartite division of the psyche. Its first element is the ego, a psychological component and the place of the coherent organization of the mental processes. It operates mostly on the conscious and the preconscious levels and is responsible for external perceptions. It also facilitates the movement of memories from the perceptions into the repressed, which is located on the unconscious level where the second part of the psyche operates, the id. It is a biological component, ruled by impulses, basic needs, and self-preservation instincts. The id is limited in its operations in the unconscious and is regulated by the superego, the third element of the psyche and its social component. As the superego stretches from the very bottom to the top of the iceberg, it is a place of synthesis of moral imperatives learned from the society and imposed upon the id. These three elements are both static and dynamic, as not only do they stand for different elements and processes of the human mind, but they also interact and influence each other. For example, Freud says that the ego to the id is what a rider is to the horse: the ego, as it represents reason, "has to hold in check the superior strength of the horse," i.e., the passions of the id (Freud 1927). Freud stresses the reciprocity of such a relationship: "often a rider... is obliged to guide where it [the horse] wants to go; so, in the same way the ego constantly carries into action the wishes of the id as if they were its own" (Freud 1927). Freud believed that if all the elements of the psyche are in a constant tension of such regulations, the mind remains healthy. However, had the boundaries of one of the elements were violated, the psyche loses its stability. The topographical model of the mind, reflecting both tripartite divisions as theorized by Freud, establishes these boundaries, and illustrates the mutual dependence of all the elements.

The topographic model of the mind remains controversial even among psychoanalysts. Jacques Lacan, one of the most influential theorists of this strand of psychology, argued that the mind is not topographic but topologic: it is subject to constant deformations, and that the boundaries between the id, the ego, and the superego are continuously pervaded, thus the mind should not be depicted as a stratification but rather the Borromean knot which consists of three linked rings, inseparable until one of them is removed. The Freudian partition of the mind also may be perceived as questioning the unity of a person and, as Gardner notices, although Freud stresses the 'functional interdependence as much as the conflict of the parts' (Gardner) it is still arguable whether each of the elements introduces new sortal into the psychology. Yet, the topographic model remains one of the most thought-provoking psychological and philosophical concepts of the past century as Freud's theories still provide researchers with a broad basis for interpretation.

One of the fields in which psychoanalysis proves its proliferation is literary theory. Shirley Jackson's last novel, *We Have Always Lived in the Castle* (1962), offers a unique view on the agency of the topography on its dwellers and contrariwise. The world depicted in literary works has often been used as a symbolic representation of

the mental state of the characters inhabiting it, probably most famously in Edgar Allan Poe's *The Fall of the House of Usher* (1839), where the family mansion falls into ruin as its occupants' descent into madness and tragic death. In *We Have Always Lived in the Castle* (1962), the reciprocal relationship between the characters and their surroundings seems to source from the Freudian theory of the topographic model of the psyche.

We Have Always Lived in the Castle (1962) tells the story of two sisters, Mary Katherine "Merricat" and Constance Blackwood who live in a family mansion with their mentally and physically disabled Uncle Julian, who lost his health six years prior in a mass murder attempt: arsenic was mixed with sugar and served for dinner in the Blackwood mansion. The three have prevailed seemingly by chance: Merricat was sent to her room before the dessert and Constance never eats sugar. Uncle Julian was poisoned but managed to stay alive. The murder was carefully planned by Merricat who was never accused of the crime. Yet, this event has left the Blackwood family in trauma: Constance has become agoraphobic and has not left the house since, Merricat is assured of her superiority, and Julian is left disabled and obsessed with authoring a book about the murder. The novel describes their repetitive daily life, to the point of the visit of Cousin Charles and the subsequent burning of the upper levels of the house. At the end of the book, Uncle Julian dies from a heart attack and the sisters confine themselves to a lonely life in the remains of a burned house. The story however is not a linear narration. Instead, it is told from the perspective of Merricat and full of distorted reality perceptions, it delves into such issues as society, family life, magic, and mental illness.

The novel's ambiguity is highlighted by Darryl Hattenhauer: "In the end, the sisters become part of the social text of the mad-women in the attic (although in this case they are so mad that they have burned up the second floor and the attic and now live on the ground floor and in the basement—in Jackson's recurrent architectural metaphor, *their higher consciousness is destroyed*"(183). He stresses the particular significance of the book's topography. In my research I would like to further expand Hattenhauer's thought of the Blackwoods' consciousness destroyed with the burning of the upper levels of the mansion quoted above. To develop this idea, I focus on the topographic model of the psyche theorized by Sigmund Freud as it seems to best correspond to the performative characteristics of the novel's figures and its literary setting. I will show that not only the Blackwood mansion but also its inhabitants reflect the Freudian model. Merricat, Uncle Julian, and Constance respectively correspond to the id, the ego, and the superego operating on the house's levels also modeled on the three planes of consciousness as theorized by Freud. This paper argues that Shirley Jackson's *We Have Always Lived in the Castle* (1962) can be analyzed by applying the comparison to the Freudian topographical model of the mind to demonstrate how the effects of the ego, the id, and the superego can be conceptualized within a single unit of a family and to analyze the agency of the setting on its inhabitants.

We Have Always Lived in the Castle is a first-person focal character narrative told from the point of view of the younger Blackwood sister, Mary Katherine. It is her wishes and needs that motivate and push the narrative. She can be identified as id-dominated as her actions are dictated by her instinctual thoughts and serve her subjective wish-fulfillment, even if they lack a particular purpose—she was the one who killed the Blackwoods and the real motivation behind the crime can only be

conjectured. Her self-centered disposition and tendency to brutality are on par with the Freudian characterization of the id.

The reader confronts the fact that Merricat was often mistreated and punished when she was a child, which, according to not only Freud, but also contemporary psychiatrists, may lead to mental trauma and memory repression (Badura-Madej and Dobrzyńska-Mesterhazy). The id operates in the unconscious, which is also the place of storing the repressed, strictly corresponding to the neuroses Freud was researching. The troubled relationship between Merricat and her family manifests in her narration by referencing the events the reader learns are not true. Mary Katherine, repressing the real memories of her family punishing her, reminisces them praising and glorifying her: “Mary Katherine, we love you.... You must never be punished.... Mary Katherine will never allow herself to do anything inviting punishment.... Bow all your heads to our adored Mary Katherine” (99-100), while Constance reports: “Merricat was always in disgrace. I used to go up the back stairs with a tray of dinner for her after my father had left the dining room. She was a wicked, disobedient child” (41). The repression of the real connected with the manifestation of the desire to be not only accepted but also worshipped, further establishes Merricat as id-dominated or even its avatar in the novel’s plane.

The compulsion to repeat traumatic events by Merricat in multiple ways resembles Freud’s case study of a child described in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* (1920). Freud says that the boy played a game of “disappearance and return” by throwing away his toys into the room’s corner and then having them retrieved. In this way, he compensated himself for his mother leaving him for short periods of time by putting himself in the active position of a “person who leaves” and not “a person left” (Freud 1920). A similar action is performed by Merricat when she destroys her mother’s favorite milk pitcher and leaves it in the kitchen “so Constance would see” (35). In this way, she shows her sister her dissatisfaction with the elder even considering leaving the house and Merricat. Freud says that a year after the start of the boy’s play his toy throwing was accompanied by an exclamation “go to the front!” alluding to his absent father who was at the war front. The play developed: not only did the boy express dissatisfaction of not being in the constant presence of his mother, but he also showed his satisfaction with the absence of his father (Freud 1920). A corresponding situation can be observed at the end of *We Have Always Lived in the Castle*: Merricat can no longer stand Charles’s presence as he is a direct threat to her union with Constance. Therefore, she takes drastic—and successful—measures of his disposal. By throwing her father’s pipe used by Charles into the bin, she also throws Charles away from the sisters’ life. Freud concludes his case study of the boy by saying that children “pass over from the passivity of the experience to the activity of the game... and in this way revenges... on a substitute” (Freud 1920). As Constance says, Merricat was very often sent to her room, almost disposed of the family life. Later in Mary Katherine’s life, she revenges herself on her family. Moreover, Merricat often treats her activities as a game, but always set up to make her win: “I played a game when I did the shopping... there were always dangers, like ‘lose one turn’... and little helps, like ‘advance three spaces’... until I reached the black rock, when I would win” (17). Thus, Merricat can be compared to the id-dominated, pleasure principle motivated child from Freud’s case study.

The superego, the social component, is embodied by Constance. She readily receives guests at the house and mimics her mother's way of doing so, confirming her role as the guardian of internalized moral standards—of course, in this case, those which are relevant to the Blackwood's social class. Yet, the Freudian convention is played with. Although Constance embodies the characterization of the superego, she is agoraphobic and is only able to leave her house as far as her own garden, drawing attention to the impairment of the social sphere of the Blackwood lives caused by the murder.

According to Freud, the superego is the location of conscience. In fact, using her position as the house's matriarch, she moralizes Merricat quite often: "Wear your boots if you wander today" (55); "Please be pleasant to Cousin Charles" (63); "It's wrong to hate them [people from the village]" (20), as if trying to make Merricat-id conform to social norms. Even after the house burns and the sisters live in ruins, she only allows them to drink from cups with handles, "like ladies" (111). Merricat is fully aware of her sister's moral teachings, but she chooses to ignore them. She does not wear boots on rainy days, is particularly unkind to Charles, and hates the villagers. The Constance-superego is not suppressing the desires of the Merricat-id completely: what is more, she sometimes actively encourages her impulsive behavior. She enables it by laughing at her morbid jokes, infantilizing (calling her "silly"), and by giving quiet compliance to Merricat's crimes. Even just after the murders, having seen whole her family poisoned, Constance remains cold-blooded as she first washes the sugar bowl to dispose of hard evidence. The Merricat-id does not feel any guilt over her crimes because Constance-superego fails to suppress the "socially unacceptable." In turn, it looks like Constance is the one who takes over the feelings of guilt, although she does not fully comprehend it: she says, "somehow it was all my fault" (108) when they return to the burned house. The controlling function of the superego as theorized by Freud is not sufficiently executed, thus resulting in the id breaching its boundaries freely.

Uncle Julian complements the trinity, playing the role of the ego of the family. The Freudian ego is a coherent organization of mental processes (Freud 1920) and a representation of a psychological component of the mind, ruled by the reality principle. Paradoxically, the only Blackwood living in the house after the murder that takes interest in objective reality is the mentally disabled Uncle Julian. His behavior shows he has not completely lost his cognition as he recognizes Charles momentarily as his nephew, remembering well that his family has declined to help Constance during the trial as if wanting to point out the audacity that Charles shows appearing in their house. In one of the last scenes before the fire—and his death—Julian confuses Charles with John, the sisters' father, and accuses him of greed, selfishness, and loss of dignity. Although he uses the name of his late brother, he aptly defines the cousin's characteristics, recognizing in him a strong patriarchal figure and a threat to the Blackwood household, highlighting the new matriarchal order of the family. Uncle Julian's reality perception is impaired; yet he accurately reads the underlying social codes around him. Although Julian is a symbol of a neurodivergent mind, he still is a man in the society, thus establishing himself as the ego of the Blackwood family.

The Freudian ego also consists of what is repressed in the unconscious by the id (Freud 1927). According to Freud, the ego brings the influence of the external world upon the id, and, in exchange, it carries into action the id's wishes as if they were its

own. Thus, the ego can overcome the repressed with the help of the id (Freud 1927), but otherwise, the ego is unconscious of what is represented in the id. If assumed that Uncle Julian represents the ego, he should be able to communicate with Merricat, representing the id, to relieve the traumatic events from the past. However, his link to the Merricat-id is broken from the moment it was created: the poisoning. Julian as the ego is unable to retrieve the repressed and remains unconscious of the id as he believes that Merricat has died in an orphanage during Constance's trial. Although they live in the same house and eat at the same table, he never recognizes her: throughout the novel, they never exchange a word and she is not allowed in his room (47) as if highlighting the lack of his patriarchal authority over her. She considers him "dead" in a way: when introducing herself in the first paragraph of the novel, she mentions living with Constance only, concluding the passage with a statement: "Everyone else in my family is dead" (14). What is more, it has been suggested that Merricat and Constance are complementary and, in fact, "two halves of the same person" (Hardin 113). This stance reassures my view of both sisters as symbolic parts of the same mind, embodiments of the Freudian theory of the elements of the psyche. I also believe that the treatment of Constance and Merricat as "two halves of one person" further belittles Uncle Julian's share in the Blackwoods' life, highlighting his role as a suppressed part of the family.

The communication between the ego and the id does not exist thus leaving the Blackwood family unable to deal with its past. The trauma and its reliving by the Blackwood family are also facilitated by the house and its stratification. The mansion's floors each have a different purpose, and each can be related to the Freudian theory of the levels of consciousness.

As mentioned before, the Freudian concepts of the id, the ego, and the superego are often depicted in relation to another tripartite division of the mind: the Freudian levels of consciousness. As the Blackwood mansion's dwellers correspond to the three elements of the psyche, the place they occupy seems to comply with the stratification of consciousness into three levels: the conscious, the preconscious, and the subconscious.

The house floors that correspond to the level of the conscious are the attic, where the deceased Blackwoods' possessions are stored, and the second floor with its bedrooms and the father's room. This plane symbolizes the times when the Blackwoods were still both, a family community, and a part of the village community. The "upstairs" is also the original place of confinement of the Merricat-id. Her parents, in an attempt to civilize her "wicked" behavior, abused Merricat by sending the child to her bedroom without food so she could humble herself and get rid of her primal, aggressive behavior. However, according to the placement of the id on the Freudian iceberg, consciousness is one of the planes unable to contain the id: since this plane has no agency over her drives, she is free to subdue the conscious and destroy it. Merricat revolts and disposes of her oppressors and, at the same time, transforms the top levels of the house. After the mass murder, the sisters constitute a new, modified version of the familial bonds and still use their bedrooms upstairs. The remaining bedrooms are abandoned completely. The father's room is also merely "neatened" once a week and not due to its usage but from the attachment to the high social standing provided in the past from the patriarchal privileges. The sororal family is not "civilized" enough to still be a part of western society: they are flawed by crime (especially dramatic because committed by a young

woman) and by the absence of the patriarch. Although Uncle Julian is theoretically the eldest remaining male Blackwood, his disabilities prevent him from becoming the head of the household. The attic and the second floor are also not accessible to him. He can never go upstairs just as he can never become fully conscious of his surroundings and memories: he is equally impaired physically and mentally. Charles Blackwood upon his arrival at the mansion occupies the father's room symbolizing his attempt to "re-civilize" the family and re-establish patriarchy over them. Merricat, perceiving his arrival as a disruption coming from the outside world, effectively blocks this influence. By setting these floors on fire, she banishes the male-dominated culture and marks the definitive separation of the sisters from the outside world, also destroying their Freudian consciousness.

An intermediate plane between the conscious and the unconscious and a place of their mutual exchange is called the preconscious. It consists of "memory-traces," making it a representation of stored knowledge and memories. The embodiment of the Freudian preconscious is the mansion's first floor. The kitchen is where the sisters spend most of their time, having most of their conversation and memory-making activities, especially cooking together. These activities are not only connected to their memories but also the knowledge they gained: as they are both women, they were conditioned to learn how to be a housewife. The mother's drawing-room is of special significance as it is a place of the re-enactment of the mother based on the memories from before the murder. The first floor can also be read as the preconscious due to its purely architectural, transitional position in-between the cellar and the upper levels of the house. The sisters live between life and death, society, and reclusion, in a way stuck in their memory of the Blackwoods being a distinguished family, barely noticing their demise.

Subconsciousness is at the bottom of the Freudian iceberg, and it is the source of human behavior. It is the place of storage of the traumatic memories repressed from the preconscious (thus they can never be made conscious), but also a source of urges, primal needs, and desires. Below the ground, in the Blackwood's cellar, preserves dating many years back are hidden: Preserving food is the basis of a Blackwood woman's life in the mansion, a part of the family tradition, one reserved exclusively for women. Not only is the cellar the furthest from the attic spatially, but also regarding its designation. The second floor is associated with the late father and his material possessions, useless to the sisters. However, especially after the fire, the basement becomes a source of food and thus preservation: not only fulfilling basic human needs but also preserving the matriarchal order. It is worth noticing that the Blackwood preserves are eaten for the first time after the fire, so upon Merricat ruining the upper levels of the home. This resonates with the fact that the sisters have lost their consciousness and rational minds (Hattenhauer 185) and have been pushed into the deeper levels of their psyche, focused on basic survival, a characteristic not only inherent to the unconscious but also the id.

Another place of realization of the subconscious and the Merricat-id's influence upon it is the ground. The younger sister often buries tokens and treasures in the soil to perform magical rituals of protection, all with Constance's knowledge about the procedure. Not only does it correspond to the placement of the id and superego over the consciousness iceberg, but also refers to Freud's idea of magic as a primal force

developed in his 1913's book *Totem and Taboo: Some Points of Agreement between the Mental Lives of Savages and Neurotics*. Since the comparison of Aboriginal practices to a neurotic mind and the general imagery of the book are both marked by colonial perspective and racism (Frosh 143), this theory will not be given further attention in this article, and it serves only to ascertain the placement of Merricat's behavior in the Freudian idea of the unconscious. Nevertheless, the ritualistic procedure of burying protective tokens in the ground is not only spatially connected with the level of the subconscious, but it is also an expression of Merricat's id-motivated non-scientific reasoning of the world (via the medium of magic) and self-preservation mechanisms.

The relationship between the mansion and the Merricat-id does not end on its levels. Although Merricat has given anthropomorphic features to the house even before the fire, Hattenhauer notices that Merricat projects herself onto the house fully only after the arson (185). She says: "the house ended above the kitchen doorway in a nightmare of black and twisted wood" (167) reflecting on her own family name, now not only associated with wealth but also nightmarish and twisted behavior. Upon the sisters' return to the house, Merricat notices that the house "shivers" when it is safe to assume it was her who quivered from anxiety about the change in both, the appearance of the house and the lifestyle of its dwellers. Not only does the mansion's state influence Merricat's feelings, but she projects herself onto the house, presenting it in a new, post-humanistic shape, an expression of the psyche itself. This reciprocity Gothicizes the house: it becomes a manifestation of the troubled, toxic family, while at the same time becoming the plane of its imprisonment.¹ Such an extreme anthropomorphizing of a house is also one of the characteristics typical of a Female Gothic genre, but for the sake of this paper, I shall stress its role as the realization of the id taking total control over the collective Perception-Conscious system, which is in fact close to the Gothic interpretation².

A narrative place that ought to be included in this categorization is Merricat's fantasy world, the moon. Initially, it only exists in Merricat's imagination, and she can visit it. She escapes there in her mind when she wants to run from the villagers. The moon is also a promised land: oftentimes, Merricat promises Constance that they will live there with Jonas, Mary's cat, and there "they have everything" (78). Merricat also talks about the moon in the context of Julian's escaped death: "You should have let me take him to the moon" (55), signaling that the moon can also function as an afterlife and Merricat, like ancient Charon, can take other people there. It raises questions about her promise to Constance—it may be perceived as a deathly threat. However, after the fire, both sisters compare their living in the house to the Merricat's fantasy place. Taking into consideration the fact that Merricat is surprised by what her moon, eventually, looks like, conclusions can be drawn. First, the place on the moon is the creation of the Merricat-id: she has conceived it, can control who enters it, and, eventually, contributes

1 As Andrew Hock Soon Ng in *Women and Domestic Space in Contemporary Gothic Narratives: The House as Subject* notices, the house in *We Have Always Lived in the Castle* is "marked by condemnation" for both the reader and the minor characters of the novel, but for Merricat it is "a paradise that collaborates with... her" (3). Thus, the mansion is at the same time a symbol of the Blackwood murder and plays an active role in it, enabling Merricat committing it.

2 Hattenhauer quotes Chris Baldick: "The Gothic castle or house is not just an old and sinister building; it is a house of degeneration, even of decomposition, its living-space darkening and contracting into the dying-space of the mortuary and the tomb" (185).

to its physical apparition by burning the house. Secondly, the moon can only come into the existence when their “higher consciousness” in the shape of both, the upper stories of the house and the Julian-ego, is destroyed, thus further establishing the moon as an id-creation. “We are so happy,” Merricat says to Constance when they hide from the eyes of the villagers, far from civilization and close only to each other and ruled by the primal needs of the id³.

I believe that the relationships of the three focal characters of *We Have Always Lived in the Castle* are not only family relations, but also realizations of internal mental processes. The characters’ embodiment of the tripartite division of the human psyche, makes them supplementary to each other, just like the id, the ego, and the superego coexist as complementary parts of one’s mind. However, in the novel, their coexistence is not harmonious as it should be in a neurotypical, “healthy” mind—the tensions between the characters and their influences upon each other mirror the collective trauma of the Blackwood family. The family, haunted by its history of abuse and toxic patriarchy, is unable to function in the society and within the boundaries of its own unit, disintegrating from the inside. The pathology of the Blackwoods is facilitated by the Gothic house they are confined to, as it is an inextricable element of their collective identity. Recalling Poe’s *The Fall of the House of Usher*, the house crumbles under the burden of familial conflict. At the same time, its structure determines the behavior of its inhabitants giving it its own causative power, what constitutes the house as a character of its own, the Freudian iceberg itself.

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3 These include food that was left by previous Blackwood women, food that is often delivered to them by local housewives, shelter and clean water (Jackson 123-24).

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