



# **EXISTENTIAL ISOLATION IN SHIRLEY JACKSON'S *WE HAVE ALWAYS LIVED IN THE CASTLE***

Author 1: Joshika S

Class: II MA ENGLISH LITERATURE

Author 2: Dr. S. Vijayalakshmi

Designation: Assistant Professor of English

College: Sri Ramakrishna College of Arts & Science

## **Abstract**

Shirley Jackson's, *We Have Always Lived in the Castle* explores themes of isolation, alienation, and the human need for connection, focusing on the concept of existential isolation.

The novel's protagonists, Merricat and Constance Blackwood, live in voluntary seclusion after a family tragedy, fostering their detachment from the surrounding society. Their relationship reflects a shared world of isolation, where they reject the hostile outside community. However, Merricat's desire for complete control and her retreat into fantasy reveal the extent of her existential isolation, as she increasingly distances herself not only from society but from her sister and reality itself. Through this isolation, Jackson critiques the limitations of human connection and the psychological toll of estrangement, offering a disturbing yet poignant portrayal of existential loneliness and its impact on the psyche.

## EXISTENTIAL ISOLATION IN SHIRLEY JACKSON'S

### **WE HAVE ALWAYS LIVED IN THE CASTLE**

Shirley Jackson, born on December 14, 1916, in San Francisco, California, was an influential American author known for her works of horror and psychological suspense.

Jackson's writing career took off with her infamous short story, *The Lottery*, published in 1948, which sparked widespread controversy and cemented her reputation as a master of macabre storytelling. Shirley Jackson's body of work consistently explores several recurring themes, reflecting her interest in human psychology and societal norms. The most prominent themes found across her novels and short stories are Isolation and Alienation which is evident in the work *We Have Always Lived in the Castle*. This novel centers on the Blackwood sisters, who isolate themselves from a hostile society. Their physical and emotional seclusion underscore themes of alienation and the impact of societal rejection on individual identity.

Existential Isolation is a space created by a person who thinks it is necessary to know that every human life is important, unique and it has to be understood only by themselves. This mindset leads them to create a distance between them and the outer world. People who are diagnosed with this problem are restricted to stay in a certain place where they feel comfortable and secure. Existential isolation is a type of psychological problem that occurs due to trauma, cultural difference, gender discrimination and stigmatisation. Irvin D. Yalom who coined the term defined it as "an unbridgeable gulf between oneself and any other being." (Yalom, 355)

Merricat's sister, Constance, is ten years older to her in the novel *We Have Always Lived in the Castle*. Constance essentially controls the household, doing all of the cooking and caring for Uncle Julian and the garden. She adores Merricat and spoils her on a daily basis. Jackson have mentioned in the novel about the dark past of Blackwood sisters, six years before the tale begins, Constance is charged of poisoning her family. Despite her innocence, the court trial sparked a lot of intrigue and disgust, and most people seem to believe she is guilty. Though Merricat is the murderer, it appears that Constance is not completely innocent—at the very least, she is aware that Merricat was guilty but chose to remain loyal to her rather than report her.

Since that incident, Constance has been terrified of the outside world and has remained in the house, isolated from practically everyone except Helen Clarke. This incident marked as the reason for Constance's isolation.

People who are not really connected with a person with existential isolation are completely off the charts according to them, as they feel a sense of danger when they see not so frequent faces who never belong to their small world. Mr. and Mrs. Carrington and Helen Clarke are the infrequent faces for Constance. They check on the Blackwood sisters of how they are managing things. They never get the freedom of being the usual guest like others. "They never came inside or took any refreshment, but they drove to the front steps and sat in their car and talked for a few minutes" (21).

Existentially isolated people tend to have fear about the other people who are not connected with them, fear for their safety and the other person's psychology. People start to get aggressive for no reason just because they are not a known face. They think other people are here to harm them. The author showcases this fear of Constance "Constance was alone with them in the drawing room and I had to hurry back" (26). New company or acquaintances are prohibited for the people who are not connected with them, fear for their safety and the other person's psychology. People start to get aggressive for no reason just because they are not a known face. They think other people are here to harm them. The feelings of safety and protection that stem from a social connection with others also diminish when feelings of existential isolation loom large. Even any type of physical contact with that person is alarming and people keep a safe distance from them. Constance did the same "Thank you, she said to Constance, putting her hand out and then taking it back again quickly" (36).

Much of our existential loneliness stems from our interpersonal connections; Largely, your subjective feeling of loneliness may extend to how you may feel when you are around others and in interpersonal relationships. Despite being around others, you may still feel disconnected. You may report struggling to make friends, not being understood, not having a social network, social relationships or quality relationships. (Shaw, "Existential Loneliness")

Isolation occurs when someone feels threatened about people or being in a new place. It is not mandatory that all people should have a similar mindset while visiting a new place which has an unpleasant atmosphere. The author once again mentions about the past, Constance was once arrested for the trial of her family's death. She was presented in the court. Court is a place for justice as well as silence. The long building, wide area, people

wearing the black and white uniform where you can also see people who have committed some serious crimes.

Even though you are not guilty, the whole atmosphere changes your way of thinking. Jackson highlights how existential isolation, especially combined with trauma and fear, can wrap one's perception of the world and one's place in it. The novel portrays existential isolation as a double-edged sword that protects but also imprisons, ultimately leading to a distorted sense of self and reality.

The research mainly focuses on how feelings of existential isolation affect mental health. Constance's isolation is partly self-imposed as a response to societal rejection and trauma. Her limited interactions with the outside world and her confined existence within the Blackwood estate heighten her anxiety and fear. She is particularly anxious about venturing beyond the safety of her home, which reflects her deep-seated fears of judgment and harm from the outside world. Exploring social connections like interpersonal relationships and social behaviors.

Constance's isolation increases her dependence on her younger sister, Merricat. The theme existential isolation creates awareness about coping up with the problem. It portrays the complexities of human relationships and the deep-seated need for connection amidst the inevitability of individual isolation. The world is out there to explore rather than being ignored. Staying at the same point does not bring any growth. Adapting with time and situation is a solution for isolation. Isolating in fear is like death, one may not be aware of the symptoms now but one day it will cost our life.

## WORK CITED

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