



## Food Symbolism and Traumatic Confinement in *We Have Always Lived in the Castle*<sup>1</sup>

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**Abstract.** *We Have Always Lived in the Castle* (1962) is a contemporary Gothic Novel in which women appear as both villains and victims, subverting the traditional characterization of women in classic Gothic Fiction. The apparently innocent and selfless Constance and the young Mary Kate live isolated and absolutely dedicated to housewifery. Due to the recurrent presence of food in the novel and drawn by the significance of its omnipresence, the purpose of this article is to discuss the symbolic meaning of food based on a cultural approach and how the characters' relationship with food marks their social class, power position, anxieties, fears and desires within and outside the family.

**Keywords:** Gothic; Gender Roles; Food and Mother; Food and Social Class; Power.

### [es] El simbolismo de la comida y la reclusión traumática en *We Have Always Been in the Castle*

**Resumen.** *We Have Always Lived in the Castle* (1962) es una novela gótica contemporánea en la que las mujeres son a la vez víctimas y villanas, invirtiendo así la representación tradicional de las mujeres en la ficción Gótica clásica. La supuestamente inocente y desinteresada Constance y la joven Mary Kate, viven aisladas y totalmente dedicadas a los quehaceres del hogar. Debido a la repetitiva presencia de la comida en la novela y llevado por su ubicuidad, el propósito de este artículo es debatir sus significados simbólicos desde una perspectiva cultural y cómo la relación de los personajes con la comida marca su clase social, posición de poder, ansiedades, miedos y deseos dentro y fuera de la familia.

**Palabras clave:** Gótico; Roles de género; Comida y Madre; Comida y clase social; Poder.

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## 1. Introduction

Shirley Jackson (1916-1965) was an American writer who turned famous after the publication of “The Lottery” in 1949. This shocking short story, in which a person randomly selected in a lottery is stoned to death, had a great impact and mainly negative reactions on American readers, who considered their traditional values under attack. She was considered a minor writer by some critics (Friedman 1975:161) —probably due to the ease with which Jackson alternated between tales written for women’s magazines and sinister, fantastic and mysterious stories tainted with gothic elements. On the other hand, other critics describe Jackson as “a talented writer who focused on female anxieties and the contradictory pressures of domesticity” (Murphy 2005: 4).

*We Have Always Lived in the Castle* is the last novel published by Jackson in 1962. It is the first-person account of the story of Mary Kate–Merricat–Blackwood who lives in the old fine Blackwood<sup>3</sup> house/castle enclosed with her sister Constance and her invalid uncle Julian after the poisoning and death of her parents, brother, and aunt, six years before. The novel reflects Merricat’s thoughts and feelings towards the rest of the world and, as the story unfolds, her alienation from reality and presumable insanity —which led her to the murder of her family when she was only twelve— is brought to the surface.

Both sisters spend most of their time enclosed in the kitchen focused on the daily routine of preparing foods. The kitchen and the preparation of meals —in a patriarchal society— have been traditionally women’s exclusive space and responsibility. In the novel, food becomes omnipresent and even central in the climatic moments. As Sceats (2000: 6) rightly points out, “in women’s writing ... food and eating themselves convey much of the meaning of the novels”. A great dose of suspense and mystery surrounding *Castle* is born from the fact that the only information given stems from a highly unreliable narrator that, in addition, is a psychotic and paranoid woman. This article explores how the highly symbolic meanings of food conveyed in the novel can be interpreted through an interdisciplinary approach, thus becoming the most reliable vehicle to infer the complementary insane identities shared by Constance and Mary-Kate/Merricat Blackwood. Furthermore, the characters’ relationship with food marks their power position, anxieties, fears and desires within and outside the family. This working hypothesis will be developed and tested through close reading of the novel and analysis of the psychological portrayal of Mrs. Blackwood, Merricat and Constance as well as of the relationship of these women with food and its symbolic and social meanings in Western societies.

## 2. *Castle*, a Contemporary Gothic Novel

*Castle*, generically, belongs to and draws from the gothic novel, in its contemporary reconfiguration. If the gothic “has always been a barometer of the anxieties plaguing a

<sup>3</sup> The choice of Blackwood as the family name was not at all accidental. Formerly Blackwood’s Edinburgh Magazine and later on Blackwood’s Magazine was a sensational magazine published and ruled by the Blackwood’s dynasty from 1817 to 1980. Presumably as conservative and immobile as Jackson’s literary characters, “family leadership tended to preclude commercial innovation ... and it encouraged a complacent resistance to emerging tastes and trends in literature” (Boehm 2004: 103). This commercial strategy triggered the magazine’s decline and gradually transformed it from a “leading house” to a “niche publisher that issued unremarkable books” (Boehm 2004:103). Even Edgar A. Poe himself wrote in 1838 a satire entitled “How to Write a Blackwood Article” in which an editor —Mr. Blackwood— gives instructions on how to write an “*intensities* article” (Poe 1978:334). These instructions are ironically put in practice with the result of a ridiculous story: “A Predicament”.

certain culture at a particular moment in history” (Bruhm 2002:260), or has to be “historicized” and read within its historical moment and context (Goddu 1997: 2), Jackson demonstrated her talent to translate “the stock devices and settings of the gothic form in order to skillfully reflect contemporary fears and anxieties” (Murphy 2005: 5). Jackson’s female gothic —written by a woman— is particularly concerned with the “horror of domesticity” (Smith 2009: 155), that is, the horror set in everyday life. But it is almost impossible to try and define gothic literature in a few words; in general, all gothic fiction has to do with family problems, the problems that arise in a patriarchal family ruled by the law of the father. Freud (1964:235) in “Family Romance” said that children under the law of the father were unhappy because of the prohibitions; they had to rebel against their parents’ authority in order to acquire maturity. The desire of breaking this law of the father is omnipresent in all classical gothic fiction, although it is not the law of any specific father but “the almost equally adamant principles of the elaborate cultural system Lacan called ‘the law of the father’” (Williams 1995: 12). In other words, Lacan’s concept of the Name/Law of the father “is much more than any actual father; in fact, it is ultimately more analogous to those social structures that control our lives and that interdict many of our actions” (Felluga 2011: n.p.). Williams (1995:12) explains that ‘the law of the father’ is related to boundaries: what is allowed by social rules and what is forbidden. These rules shape metaphorical walls which are mirrored in the walls of the gothic castle restricting freedom and provoking “images of imprisonment, entrapment, and the struggle for release and self-determination” (Miller 2009: 135). The creation of rules implies also the desire of breaking them and the possibility of being punished. This fascination with transgression is very present in the Gothic. *Castle* reveals itself as novel in which all kind of transgressions take place and are not openly exposed but, I contend, inferred through the symbolic meanings of food.

### 3. Food and Social Meanings

#### 3.1. Food and Social Class

Eating has an undeniable social role “instrumental in the definition of family, class, ethnicity . . . people are defined by what they eat or are affected by whoever provides their food” (Sceats 2000: 1). The novel begins with Merricat’s journey to the village, as she herself narrates “it was not pride that took me into the village twice a week, or even stubbornness, but only the simple need for books and food” (Jackson 1976: 2). Food is, in the narrative present, the only element that sustains a link between both sisters and villagers; it is also a means to express hate and mutual resentment. The villagers “have always hated us” (4), says Merricat. The Blackwoods’ snobbism and self-awareness of class superiority has always separated them from the villagers, even before the murdering. They were landowners, the antiquated high-class people who have never worked and even less mixed with the “common people” (18). As anthropologist John R. Goody (1982: 112) explains “the hierarchy between ranks and classes takes a culinary form”. The Blackwoods had always had enough money to buy whatever food they desired, without sparing any expense: “The Blackwoods always did set a fine table” (9). The Blackwoods made ostensive exhibitions of economic power which, together with a self-inflicted social ostracism that did not allow them to be mixed with the ‘common’ people —further demonstrations of the Black-

woods' deep self-assumed class superiority—, are the core reason for the villagers to reject them. They never invited any of the villagers to their table as they were not worthy to share their meals. People in the village felt offended by the snobbism and high-class pretensions of the Blackwoods and “their stylish way of living” (14). In addition to a fence closing off the path through Blackwood property, the refusal to share their meals with the villagers manifested a conscious decision to be apart. As anthropologist Carole Counihan (2013: 102) rightly explains: “[F]ood offered in a generalized way, notably as hospitality, is good relations. Food not offered on the suitable occasion or not taken is bad relations [...] in these principles of instrumental food exchange there seems little variations between peoples” (Anthropological). But the Blackwood sisters represent the old decadent aristocracy, pinned and immovable not only in their prejudices but also in their location. Practically enclosed in their property, Merricat and Constance live in near complete social isolation. In spite of their pretentious class pride, they remain deeply dependent upon the villagers to get food, whereas the new rich, who are factory owners—in contrast with the Blackwoods, the old-fashioned aristocracy of landowners—, send their children to private schools and the food in their kitchens comes “from the towns and the city” (3). These new rich have evolved with the times, whereas the two Blackwood sisters, the only survivors from a different era, remain timeless, ‘frozen’ as the novel’s title indicates: *We Have Always Lived in the Castle* (Jackson 1976, emphasis added). As Hattenhauer explains, in Jackson’s fictions, haunting is a repetitive presence and settings “trap her characters not only in space but also in time” (2003: 4). In Merricat’s thought, even the ‘correct’ way of eating, establishes a clear dividing line between “the people of the village” (3) and them. She contemptuously imagines them “eating their dinner off broken plates set” (5). Merricat is a rightful heiress of her parents’ prejudices and personifies a decadent high class still attached to their imagined superiority. There is no place for such old class divisions in the present of the novel and seclusion and social class decadence in a ‘castle’ also remark the gothic mood of the novel.

### 3.2. Food: Power and Belonging

Furthermore, food—within the Blackwood family—also symbolizes a watershed that divides those in power from those subjugated. The place at the table, and the quantity of food they are allowed to take, mark the power position in the family structure. Uncle Julian, a permanent guest in his brother’s home, remarks his economic dependence through the distribution of food at the Blackwoods’ table:

He [Mr. Blackwood] was a just man, and never stinted his food, so long as we did not take too much. ... We took little enough from him ... He had pancakes and fried eggs and sausages ... the boy ate hugely. (Jackson 1976: 48)

Mr. Blackwood was a greedy man who indulged his appetite and his son’s while he was avidly controlling what his brother and sister-in-law ate. Constance, cooking always for the others, was in a powerless position and Merricat, often expelled from her place at the table and sent to bed without eating, felt alienated from her family. The fixed and ‘right’ place around the table in the ‘ritual’ of eating became also an accurate indicator of the family structure. Fixed places in ceremonies and rituals are critical in Merricat’s mind to feel accepted in and belonging to her own family. When

she daydreams the night of the murder she has not been expelled from the dinner table and everyone is in his/her *right* place.

...in the circle around the dining-room table. Our father sat at the head. Our mother sat at the foot. Uncle Julian sat on one hand of our mother, and our brother Thomas on the other; beside my father sat our Aunt Dorothy and Constance. I sat between Constance and Uncle Julian, *in my rightful, my own and proper, place at the table.* (Jackson 1976: 95; emphasis added)

As Sceats (2000:139) rightly states: “food clearly is a signifier of belonging”. Merricat, frequently expelled from the family dinner table, did not feel plainly included in the family. Bruhm explains that one specific characteristic of contemporary gothic is that something, an ‘object’, has been lost. The possible recuperation of it also implies the “thread of punishment” (2002: 263). She wishes not only to recuperate her place/object but also “the approval of the tyrant who took that object from [her]” (2002:265). This displacement and the feeling of non-belonging were the triggers that drove the insane Merricat to destroy a family in which she did not feel welcome. The only person who had demonstrated love and worry for Merricat, Constance, was pardoned. Constance made sure, as often as Merricat was punished, she would receive her food. But even after the crime was committed, Merricat was ignored; she remained almost invisible to the rest of the world. In the immediate aftermath of the crime, her invisibility to the media and even the fact that she was not taken into account as a possible suspect for the murder, increased her social phobia and family hatred: “I had not been allowed in the courtroom ... I had been lying on the cot at the orphanage staring at the ceiling, wishing they were all dead, waiting for Constance to come and take me home” (Jackson 1976: 56). Merricat further develops her social isolation after getting rid of her family, and demonstrates her rejection with her refusal to share her meals with other people: “I disliked eating anything while people were looking at me” (24). Merricat’s powerless situation, her feeling of non-belonging and being dismissed by her family can be clearly inferred through the social rituals surrounding food.

### 3.3. Reversing Power Positions: Food as Trust

The act of feeding and being fed entails an ambiguous power relationship. If initially the person in charge of feeding the others seems to be subjugated, as Sceats (2000:133) points out, “Eaters are always vulnerable, since eating is an act of trust, and history and literature are full of poisonings that take place during the course of a meal”. *Castle* is an accurate example of a multiple poisoning, an enormous breach of faith. It was a terrible and unforeseen event that uncle Julian, six years after the tragedy, is still trying to understand. Despite his unsound mind, he recalls and analyzes every small detail on that fateful day as “a kind of reader’s surrogate” (Lethem 2006: X). Constance, who cooked the supper the day of the murder, was first accused and later on acquitted of criminal charges, but still most of the people in the village consider her to be a poisoner/killer. Whenever Merricat goes to the village, she has to endure the children singing an accusing song to her: “Merricat, said Connie, would you like a cup of tea? Oh no, said Merricat, you’ll poison me. Merricat, said Connie, would you like to go to sleep? Down in the boneyard ten feet deep!” (Jackson 1976:

16). But to what extent is Constance innocent and subjugated? The night of the murders, she willingly accepts the consequences and helps in eliminating traces at the crime scene. Her intentions are not very clear. Was she protecting her younger sister from the justice system or was she using the opportunity provided by the crime to take real control? Constance “saw them dying around her like flies ... and never called a doctor until it was too late ... she told the police these people deserved to die” (Jackson 1976: 37). Constance’s attitude can be interpreted either as directly asserting her power in the family or the exact opposite, complying with Merricat’s wishes without questioning them, an extreme case of blind submission, as if Merricat were her God: “He who does not hate father, mother, sister, brother, for my name’s sake, is not worthy to be my disciple” (Bible; Luke 14, 26). The eventual result is that Constance throws off the yoke of being almost her family maid to become Merricat’s mate and accomplice.

Constance, even though exonerated by the justice system, had been condemned by the people in the village, whereas the factual criminal, Merricat, remains invisible. On the day of the crime, Merricat acquires her long-yearned protagonist role in her forced family of two. In spite of the fact that uncle Julian is still alive, it was only a matter of chance that he did not eat much sugar the day of the murders. He was also Merricat’s intended victim and Constance, perfectly aware of that, protects her uncle’s life by controlling her insane younger sister. Merricat repeats as a litany over and over again “I [am] to be kinder to Uncle Julian” (Jackson 1976: 26; 43) but Constance does not trust her and Merricat is not allowed to do anything that can pose a threat to the others’ life and security: to prepare food, to gather mushrooms, to handle knives, to enter Uncle Julian’s room and the use of matches (Jackson 1976: 20; 42; 126). Power seems divided equally between both sisters: Merricat literally obeys Constance’s prohibitions at the same time that she has the protagonist role as the almost exclusive subject of Constance’s care and concerns. They are dependent on each other, equated in their mental disorders, “two odd, damaged sisters” (Lethem 2006: X).

## 4. Food and Motherhood

### 4.1. Food and Biological Mothers

It is widely argued by feminist critics of this novel that the greedy Mr. Blackwood was the patriarchal authority and target of Merricat’s rebellion in the form of homicide (See Hall 1993; Murphy, 2005, 2007) since the law of the father, which is at the core of the gothic novel, is usually embodied by the male parent. But in the case of *Castle*, both parents personify authority, the mother is included within ‘the law of the father’ and Merricat rebels against Mrs. Blackwood as well. Other critics have seen Constance and Merricat as a reflection of the author’s family problems with her own mother, “a phallic mother, Geraldine” (Hattenhauer 2003: 1). Jackson suffered particularly badly for her mother’s disregard, given that their relationship was a difficult one, as Rubenstein (2005: 128) explains:

Tensions between daughter and mother originated early in the author’s life and were not resolved by the time of her premature death ... Shirley was not the



daughter her mother wanted; that much was clear from the start. Throughout her life, Shirley was distressed by her mother's profound insensitivity to her actual personality, combined with persistent attempts to control her unconventionality.

These difficulties also expanded and arose from the author's relationship with food. Jackson herself felt rejected by her mother because of her overweight, "a fact that her mother never accepted and tried repeatedly to alter through disparaging remarks and disapproving actions" (Oppenheimer 1988: 14). Moreover, Lethem (2006: IX-X) sees both sisters as the embodiment of Jackson's psyche, divided into two halves: the traditional housewife and cook that her mother approved and the odd and unconventional girl interested in witchcraft, enchantments, myths and legends. As Smith explains, Jackson had serious doubts about "how to mother...but the alternative option...accepted gender scripts for mothering [was] also stifling" (2009: 158-59).

Some other feminist analyses, outlining the importance of the mother-daughter relationship in the construction of the daughter's identity, have underlined the fact that female identity is "threatened by separation, and shaped throughout life by the fluctuations of symbiosis and detachment from the mother" (Newman 2005: 171). Following this line of argumentation, Merricat's identity should have been strongly affected by her relationship with her mother in a more decisive way than by her father's. The problem arises when the mother, egoistic and a presumably powerful woman, has no interest in her middle daughter. According to Counihan, (2013: 102) in western societies based on Judeo-Christian ideology, the association of women with food is an intrinsic part of a family pattern that restricts female independence and aptitudes in order to sustain a male-controlled political and economic structure. Moreover, the close association women/mother with food reaches the category of symbolic identification

Food is life-giving, urgent, ordinarily symbolic of hearth and home, if not of mother ... women themselves are food for their children during their pregnancy and lactation, intensifying their identification with food and its relevance as symbol. (Anthropological)

As Sceats (2000: 18) appropriately explains, the source of the mother-daughter relationship's failure can be originated by two extreme and divergent maternal behaviors: either invasiveness or indifference, which are manifested in particularly different attitudes towards the act of feeding "for example, as force-feeding or denial, smothering or neglect". Mrs. Blackwood was an absent mother that had delegated her responsibilities on Constance, her eldest daughter while Merricat dreamed to be admitted in her mother's room: "when I was a child I used to believe that someday I would grow up and be tall enough to touch the tops of the windows in our mother's drawing room" (Jackson 1976: 23). Neither Constance nor Merricat were allowed to enter their mother's more appreciated space.

American society in the 1950's was very conservative and thus male-controlled. Usually at that time, the mother should be the responsible for family feeding. This is why Mrs. Blackwood's refusal to fulfill her expected role can be seen as a manifestation of power because "mothers are overwhelmingly powerful but at the same time are socially and domestically disempowered by their nurturing, serving role" (Sceats

2000: 11). It was precisely Mrs. Blackwood who imposed the closing of the path in the Blackwood property: “our mother disliked the sight of anyone who wanted to walking past our front door, and when our father brought her to live in the Blackwood house, one of the first things *he had to do* was close off the path” (Jackson 1976: 18; emphasis added). Mr. Blackwood obeyed his wife’s desires without hesitation, as if they were orders. This snobbish and absent mother is described by uncle Julian as “a woman born for tragedy, perhaps, although inclined to be a little silly” (34). Moreover, he also remarks that “both my brothers married women of very strong will” (84). It would be questionable to say that Mrs. Blackwood was under her husband’s authority. Moreover, it seems that at least in Merricat’s reminiscences of the past, Mrs. Blackwood enacted her family’s laws: “where our mother did not go, no one else went” (95).

Merricat, instead of being the conventional daughter, was interested in enchantments, magic and history books and she was neither accepted nor understood by her family. Merricat “was always in disgrace” (Jackson 1976: 34). By contrast, the apparently well adapted and obedient Constance —a conventional model of daughter suitable to be accepted in general— had her space and role in the family structure: she cooked in her mother’s place. The connection between mothers and food is well established at the time of birth. It is generally agreed not only that the mother fulfills her children’s biological needs but also that the child receives a strong component of feelings together with food. This is why “for many people the connection of food with love centres on the mother ... along with nutrition she feeds her child love, resentment, encouragement or fear” (Sceats 2000: 11). Merricat wanted to be with the person who has always fed her, Constance, whereas the presence of her mother and by extension of the rest of the family only nourished feelings of hatred, jealousy, and the will to destroy.

Mrs. Blackwood’s middle daughter, Merricat, was neither the eldest in charge of her mother’s responsibilities, nor the younger son and heir of the family name. She felt neglected and rejected by her mother who, nevertheless, had an enormous influence on her character formation and infused her with snobbism and superiority complex. Furthermore, Merricat inherits from her mother not only her profound pretensions but also her egotism and desire to call the others’ attention. But Merricat, even if insane, can be categorized as an evil character. The daughter, Nadal (2011: 165) explicitly asserts, “does not embody shyness, purity and innocence, but evil, malice and madness”. Besides, Merricat literally walks in her mother’s old brown shoes (Jackson 1976: 5) and duplicates her behavior towards the villagers taking it to the extreme. She felt banned and imagines all of them dead while she helps herself to groceries, whatever food “I fancied from the shelves” (9). Free access to food is associated in her sick mind with dead people as if the people she hated were only an obstacle between her and food/love. If people did not give Merricat love/food/care she would take it.

Merricat was noticed only to be punished. She was frequently sent to bed without dinner. Thus, food acquires one more meaning: it also becomes punishment. Denial of food, a metaphor for a negation of love and her invisibility, is what triggers Merricat to kill her family. According to Rubenstein (2005:140), “withholding of food as a form of punishment may reflect emotional dynamics in Jackson’s own family life, from both maternal and filial perspectives”. Jackson would have suffered in her own flesh this type of punishment. Even the author in Mrs. Clarke’s voice criticizes the



measure: “An unhealthy environment ... a child should be punished for wrongdoing, but she should be made to feel she is still loved” (Jackson 1976: 34). Mrs. Blackwood did not cook, did not nourish her family whereas Merricat was obsessed with the need of being fed, and the social act of eating. In other words, she was obsessed with the need to have a ‘mother’ exclusively for her, only dedicated to her care.

#### 4.2. Food and Surrogate Mother (Constance)

Merricat killed all her family, poisoning them, but she protected the life of her beloved sister and substitute mother who was “the most precious person in [her] world, *always*” (Jackson 1976: 20; emphasis added). In Merricat’s sick mind immobility is a key ingredient of her idea of happiness; this is why the adverb *always* is so important and appears even in the novel’s title. She had chosen her sister as her caretaker and protector and this state of things should last forever: “‘when I’m as old as Uncle Julian will you [Constance] take care of me?’ I asked her. “‘If I’m still around,’ she said, and I was chilled” (Jackson 1976: 50). Only Constance used to keep some food to feed her when she was punished and only Constance keeps feeding her six years after their family’s death. According to Sceats (2000: 21), food-as-love is also a firm and deep-rooted medium to present relationships such as “disinterested sisterhood, sibling love, altruistic caring ...”. Moreover, Myrte et al (2014: n.p.) underline the importance of food offering in “empathic emotion regulation”. They suggest that “the offer of food is motivated by—and results in the regulation of—the emotional state of both provider and receiver ... [and] the use of food as support behavior increases interpersonal closeness”. Constance demonstrates her love for Merricat by means of preparing her the dishes she likes more: “Merricat will have something lean and rich and salty” (Jackson 1976: 21). And Merricat enjoys the vision of her sister happy, in her kitchen, both of them alone in this enclosed space “It was a joy to watch her, moving beautifully in the sunlight, touching foods so softly” (21). As anthropologist Penny Van Esterik (2004: 85) recalls, in many cultures, “food conveys symbolic messages ... the relationship established by feeding others is a voluntary one”. Constance had willingly assumed the responsibility and obligation to feed her sister, but problems arise when cousin Charles enters the scene and Constance displaces her care and attentions from Merricat to him. Charles acts as a precipitating factor. Before his arrival, Constance already had expressed certain desires to go out into society. During six years Constance has been secluded in the house and Merricat is very happy with the situation. She makes sure that the fence and gates are locked and separate them from the rest of the world. Whenever someone suggests Constance should return to society, Merricat is “chilled” with the idea of Constance leaving the house: “We’ll *always* be here together, won’t be, Constance?” (Jackson 1976: 54; emphasis added). Merricat does not wish to change anything in her life. She wants her ‘castle’ frozen in time and every object and person in their *right* place. Charles represents the physical materialization of Merricat’s worse nightmare: the disruption of the order and power relationships in the Blackwoods’ house and, later on, the imminent threat he poses to Merricat of being separated from Constance. Charles invades Merricat’s safe place, thus she initially expresses non-verbally her animosity towards him by refusing to eat in his company. “I always had my breakfast earlier than Charles on those sunny mornings, and if he came down before I finished I would take my plate out and sit on the grass...” (Jackson 1976: 81). However,

Constance makes Charles feel welcome by cooking for him. She places Charles in Merricat's role as gatekeeper of food: "I'll give you a list, Charles, and the money, and you shall be the grocery boy" (72). Charles conquers the kitchen with his presence and his appetite and prevents Constance from cooking for uncle Julian or even for Merricat — "your sister works like a slave" (81). And Constance, docile, shifts the object of her care from Merricat to Charles: "I'm sorry," Constance said, "I have so much to do" (Jackson 1976: 81). Food is at the center of the fighting between Merricat and Charles: both try to demonstrate which of them is more influential and exerts more power over Constance. Both figuratively try to assert 'land rights' over Constance because "food is a central, readily available battleground for issues of autonomy, control and love" (Millman 1980: 72). It is when Charles tries to impose his authority over Merricat that all the alarms trigger in Merricat's brain: "punish me? You mean send me to bed without my dinner?" (Jackson 1976: 94). Merely the thought that she can be expelled again from her rightful place at the dinner table — from Merricat's construction of home/castle and family— causes the second tragedy in the form of the house's burning down. Merricat does not accept any kind of discipline. Punishment and food are inseparable in her mind, because they were both ingredients in the tragedy of her family's death six years before. Merricat alone and hidden in her secret place, fantasizes what the fateful night should have been like:

I sat between Constance and Uncle Julian, my rightful, my own and proper, place at the table.

Slowly I began to listen to them talking.

"—to buy a book for Mary Katherine. Lucy, should not Mary Katherine have a new book?"

"Mary Katherine should have anything she wants, my dear. Our most loved daughter must have anything she likes."

"Constance, your sister lacks butter. Pass it to her at once, please."

"Mary Katherine, we love you"

"You must never be punished. Lucy, you are to see to it that our most loved daughter Mary Katherine is never punished."

"Mary Katherine would never allow herself to do anything wrong; there is never any need to punish her."

"I have heard, Lucy, of disobedient children being sent to their beds without dinner as a punishment. That must not be permitted with our Mary Katherine."

"I quite agree, my dear. Mary Katherine must never be punished. Must never be sent to bed without her dinner. Mary

Katherine will never allow herself to do anything inviting punishment."

"Our beloved, our dearest Mary Katherine must be guarded and cherished. Thomas, give your sister your dinner; she would like more to eat."

"Dorothy—Julian. Rise when our beloved daughter rises." "Bow all your heads to our adored Mary Katherine." (Jackson 1976: 95-96)

Her longing for love and recognition is evident in her mental representation of the night of the murdering. Once again food is used as a means to convey love, care and worship and to mark the privileged situation of the person that receives the food

from the others, Merricat. It is not a coincidence that, in Merricat's ideal recreation, both parents hurry Constance to attend Merricat in the first place and deprive the younger boy, Thomas, of his supper in favor of Merricat. She wants to be noticed and loved, but also, above the rest, an attitude that reveals her narcissism. Merricat, blind to the others' needs, only wants to be served by Constance —without norms or rules— and remain still in time, *always* a child, Constance's "poor baby" (Jackson 1976: 112) forever.

## 5. Food, Gender and Voice

As Sceats (2000: 126) argues, "ideology permeates food and eating practices almost invisibly, through family and social structures which perpetuate particular patterns. Gender is clearly a factor ... [since] women have traditionally done the domestic cooking in Western culture". Food gives Constance a rightful place in the long genealogy of Blackwood's women. Following a classical tradition and pattern for many women in the past, elaboration of food becomes "a symbol of their social position and of the love they offered their families" (Counihan, 2013: Anthropological 104). She not only assumes the patriarchal role of woman as food provider but also, she presumes to be the best, the genuine American house wife:

American women have been portrayed from colonial times to the present in ways that emphasize their domestic responsibilities ... women's status was determined primarily through the performance of domestic roles. Important among these roles were the acquiring, storing, preserving, and preparing of food for family consumption. (McIntosh 2013: 126-27)

Constance functions firstly as surrogate mother for Merricat and later on as the most feminine role of the couple formed by both sisters, she is the owner of the kitchen. Constance has reached adulthood through domestic responsibilities and her sister care. As Lethem (2006: X) truly underlines, "sexuality is barely present in the book and, needless to say, sexuality is therefore everywhere in its absence". Constance is a grown-up woman that considers the possibility of living another kind of life, outside the 'Castle' walls, a life with a man in which sexuality would have a place. Cousin Charles can also be seen as her male principle/prince, the man who can save Constance from being an imprisoned princess forever. But Merricat, who is eighteen-year old, is and will *always* be a child, a "poor baby" (Jackson 1976: 112). She eliminated the threat posed by her family control on her desired way of living, without rules or norms. According to Sceats (2000: 137), "food preparation provides not only a means of training young women but an inculcation into some of the mysteries of adult female roles and perceptions". An eternal child by her own inclination and banned from the kitchen and the preparation of food, Merricat is unable to be a 'Blackwood woman' because "all the Blackwood women had made food" (Jackson 1976: 42), but the Castle only admits one 'Mrs. Blackwood' at a time and this is Constance.

Constance's relationship with food carries many meanings, "food of any kind was precious to Constance" (Jackson 1976: 20). She is a very perfectionist cook, almost an artist, and food is the way in which she expresses her creativity, what

Counihan (2013: 113) names “use of food as voice” (Anthropological). Constance feels fulfilled through cooking as apparently happened to Jackson when she wrote; however, as happens with Constance’s cooking, writing was for Jackson “both the way out and the thing that paradoxically locks [her] in” (Smith 2009: 164). Moreover, acknowledging the similarities between both creative processes, the great supply of colored containers of food kept in cellar by generations of Blackwood women is defined in the novel as “a poem by the Blackwood women” (Jackson 1976: 42) and Constance’s were the best ‘poet’ of all. Constance stands as the best prototype of classical housewife in a patriarchal model of family. Food brings about happiness and pleasure to her and she puts it at the same level as what she feels for her sister: “I’m always so happy when you come home from the village,” Constance said ... “partly because you bring home food, of course. But partly because I miss you” (21).

After the apparently incidental burning of the Blackwood house provoked by Merricat, she recuperates her initial position with her sister. After the return to the house, Constance’s first concern is the state of the kitchen: “‘My kitchen,’ Constance said. ‘My kitchen’... ‘My kitchen, Merricat’” (Jackson 1976: 114). It is not ‘the kitchen’ but *hers*, the space that she owns thanks to her mother’s death. Maybe this is why Constance, the supposed healthy sister, had said before: “Things have been much different with all of them gone, but I’m sure I don’t think myself as suffering” (32). Constance finds happiness again by cooking “‘It’s a good dinner,’ Constance said warm and happy from cooking” (127). Several times Merricat, exultant having Constance only for herself, declares her love for her sister (Jackson 1976: 116, 130, 136) and affirms that they are going to be very happy. The ending of the novel presents a situation that is the greatest possible happiness on earth for Merricat: Constance only cares for her, and the villagers worship them as if they were witches or a kind of goddesses: now they are feared instead of only hated and receive gifts to ‘placate them’. The villagers’ reverence and dread are expressed by means of food offerings as the Ancient Greeks and many other peoples did: “food sacrifices as a means of propitiating their gods” (Counihan 2013: 8 Anthropological). At least the narcissistic Merricat has achieved the adoration that she dreamt her family should have given to her. Constance subordinated to Merricat and relocated in her narcissistic and perfect housewife position is also happy receiving other women’s food and comparing them with her cooking, always superior of course: “Do you think it’s as good as my pies?” (Jackson 1976: 138) or “these cookies are not crisp enough” (139) and even sometimes re-cooking what has been offered according to her own—and apparently perfect—rules (139). Both sisters end up their story enclosed in the Castle, voluntarily trapped in their fixed and chosen identities: Constance, the perfect housewife, has food and cooking as her solace and way of expressing and Merricat, the eternal only child, is taken care of by the person she wants: her indulgent surrogate mother.

## 6. Conclusion

As the analysis above has attempted to show, *Castle* narrates events of a strange lack of empathy and filial love in the genuine line of a Gothic tale that in this occasion is set in 20<sup>th</sup> century US America. The overwhelming presence of food and its place, the kitchen, in the novel seems to be absolutely premeditated, an effective strategy

of adding meanings derived from the cultural heritage that surrounds food and its preparation in Western societies. Firstly, it is the common thread which acts as a link between the Blackwoods and other people as an instrument of social differentiation. Through social meanings attached to food they show economic power, class and difference. Food, which is also a symbolic signifier for the mother, is denied to the psychotic Merricat by the egotistic and absent Mrs. Blackwood. Merricat wants to be adored by her family and suffers a class superiority complex, an unforgettable impression left by her mother. The association between food and motherhood has been extensively documented in many cultures and implies that the withdrawal of food by some mothers may stand for negation of love and non-acceptance of the children. Food, in the shape of Merricat's punishment, triggers twice the tragedy in the Blackwood property and it is in food and its preparation that Constance places her metaphorical kingdom and happiness, the way of expressing her voice, offering love and sustaining her self-confidence. Parks (2005: 249) contends that Jackson's fiction is "an effective mode for her exploration of the violations of the human self, the aching loneliness, the unendurable guilt, the dissolution and disintegrations, the sinking into madness, the violence and lovelessness", all of them part of the most sinister and sad side of human beings. While it is true that many of these elements and their dark mood usually featured in Gothic novels coexist in *Castle*, it would be questionable to understand Constance and Merricat Blackwood as victims of "aching loneliness" or "unendurable guilt". Furthermore, the Blackwood's sisters achieve in any case their own 'paranoid' happiness that would hardly be conceivable<sup>4</sup>. The ending transforms the Blackwood sisters in a kind of mythical figures, out of reality. Their happiness is not conventional or ordinary because they are very special human beings, out of the parameters of the sane or at least of the common.

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<sup>4</sup> It is interesting to remark that enclosure, a voluntary choice of Constance and Merricat became the forced situation of the author that suffered agoraphobia and was unable to leave her own house (Rubenstein 143).



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