

# Food as Agency in Shirley Jackson's *We Have Always Lived in the Castle*

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## Abstract

The present study expands on the relationship between Shirley Jackson and food by discussing her last novel *We Have Always Lived in the Castle* (1962). The fifties and early sixties were a time particularly characterized by the housebound nature of American women, who struggled to conform to what Betty Friedan called the “feminine mystique.” However, while Shelley Ingram and Willow Mullins claim that *Castle* “links food [...] with the

terror often wrought by the home” (342), it is also true that it presents food as a symbol of woman’s self-affirmation. This is demonstrated by discussing three ways in which Jackson confers agency to women’s cooking. Ultimately, the aim of this paper is to show how Jackson employs food not only as a symbol of women’s social constraints, but also as an ironic tool for feminist empowerment.

## Introduction

Despite being now generally acknowledged as one of the great writers of twentieth-century American literature, some of the most famous anecdotes about Shirley Jackson (1916-1965) revolve around her relationship with food: the dinner parties she hosted were remembered for their eccentric decadence, and legend says she used to cook with a pound of butter a day. Valerie Stivers pointed out “just how many of Jackson’s horror stories start in the grocery store” (*The Paris Review*): as it appears, all of her Gothic works involve a definite preoccupation with domesticity and women’s role in it, expressed by narrative *files rouges* that specifically concern food. In addition to her disquieting fiction, Jackson was also the author of many humorous sketches about her family life as a faculty wife and mother of four, which were published in women’s magazines such as *Good Housekeeping* and *Mademoiselle*, making her one of the most famous “Housewife Writers” (Friedan 50) of her generation. Jackson’s “split authorial persona” (Ingram and Mullins 343) mirrors her own personal struggles: on the one hand, she seemed determined to conform to what Betty Friedan called the “feminine mystique,” crafting a public image of a happy and fulfilled stay-at-home mom, albeit with ironic undertones. On the other hand, her uneasiness about her domestic role was channeled into her Gothic fiction, which centered around lonely women who are confined in malevolent houses or generally struggle to adhere to social norms.

A perfect example of the primary role of food in Jackson’s narratives is her 1962 novel *We Have Always Lived in the Castle*. The plot sees sisters Constance and Merricat Blackwood living secluded in their mansion with their disabled Uncle Julian, after the rest of the family died by poisoning. Since Constance is the one usually cooking the family meals, the other villagers are convinced she is the one responsible for the murder, which results in the Blackwoods being completely cut off and isolated. Nonetheless, this extravagant trio leads a peaceful life consisting of small domestic rituals, mainly revolving around Constance’s food preparation. In this paper, *Castle* will be employed as a case study in order to explore Jackson’s narrative usage of food as a symbol of American women’s anxieties during the fifties and early sixties; in fact,

the post-war era was a time particularly characterized by the house-bound nature of women's daily lives and their struggle to conform to a limiting notion of femininity. While I agree with Shelley Ingram and Willow Mullins' claim that the novel "links food [...] with the terror often wrought by the home" (342), I also believe that Jackson conceives of food as a tool for woman's self-affirmation, at a time when cooking and eating habits played a major role in the lives of American housewives. The article begins with an overview of the relationship between food and the feminine mystique, followed by a brief account of Jackson's own domestic experience, which is crucial to understanding her Gothic fiction (Murphy 238). Secondly, I carry out an analysis of *Castle* and its food symbolism. More specifically, I present and discuss three ways in which Jackson confers agency to women's cooking, namely: food as art, food as performance, and food as danger. Ultimately, the aim of this paper is to demonstrate how Jackson employs food not only as a symbol of women's social constraints, but also as an ironic tool for feminist empowerment, thanks to the creativity inherent to meal preparation and its challenging of patriarchal narratives in 1950s America.

### **“Quick and Easy”: Housewives, Food, and the “Feminine Mystique”**

As World War II unfolded, women's role in society grew increasingly influential as they were suddenly the nation's main work force. However, when the war ended and GIs returned home, media seemed suddenly keen to convince women that doing housework and taking care of their families should be their only concern (Pallejá-Lopez 74-75). Women's femininity started to be hypersexualized and presented as their strongest weapon. Moreover, housing conditions changed drastically: as many middle class families started to move to the suburbs, and housewives found themselves isolated while their husbands worked in the cities, "the percentage of a woman's day spent chauffeuring other family members about increased exponentially" (Matthews 211). For this reason, women's magazines of the time started to feature "quick and easy" recipes using "convenience foods, canned goods, and the like,"

mainly to maintain housewives' driving schedule intact (Matthews 212). Unsurprisingly, "quick and easy[s]" did not liberate housewives: on the contrary, they arguably further deprived them of creativity and power. Resorting to canned goods and mixes did not make space for women's own interests and pursuits, since now they were even denied the creative outlet represented by the act of cooking, in order to be more efficient wives and mothers. Women's magazines and their "quick and easy[s]" portrayed unrealistic expectations of attractive, orderly, efficient, and hysterically happy women – a perfectly staged performance of domesticity, which was defined by activist Betty Friedan as the "feminine mystique" (1963). Housewives were starting to be conceived of as empty shells, only waiting to be (ful)filled by their husbands and children. Without higher education, without purpose, and without agency, many women began to rely heavily on prescription drugs and alcohol (Pallejá-Lopez 77). The lack of direction in women's lives during the fifties and early sixties, and their consequent confusion, Friedan called "the" problem that has no name" (11): part of this unnamed problem, arisen by women's struggle to conform to the feminine mystique, was their unmet need of a creative outlet. In fact, as observed by Glenna Matthews, "[i]n 1960 'creativity' consisted in combining a pudding mix with a cake mix and adding extra salad oil rather than merely following the instructions on the package of cake mix" (212).

In this context, Jackson's own life experiences are particularly relevant: as an author who was also a mother, with little to no help from her husband, she used to think of stories to write while doing the dishes or vacuuming the floor, and managed to sit down at her typewriter only late at night. However, she relished the art of cooking: those who met her reported how motherly and welcoming she and her house looked. She loved eating, which was also a way to rebel against her own mother, who often scolded her for her weight. In this sense, her preoccupation with food might be interpreted as a form of rebellion against the restrictions of her domestic role, too: Jackson was said to "host lavish dinner parties for [her] friends and set a rich, decadent table" (Ingram and Mullins 352), often to the scorn of her fellow villagers in North Bennington, the rural Vermont town in which she resided. By indulging

in the very thing that cast her apart from societal expectations of women as aesthetically pleasing and highly performative, Jackson's cooking became her revolutionary act. Her usage of food as resistance is one of the main themes of *Castle* as well: food plays a major role in the novel, both as a destructive force and a creative/liberating experience.

### ***We Have Always Lived in the Castle* and Its Food Symbolism**

According to Ingram and Mullins, *Castle* voices the fears of women whose own lives were often constrained by the endless planning of meals (Ingram and Mullins 342). However, I argue that it also subverts the traditional notion of feminine domesticity by conferring food both a creative and destructive power, an aspect of the novel which many scholars yet fail to acknowledge. Contrary to Ingram and Mullins' view, in fact, I strongly believe that *Castle* presents food in a mostly empowering way, which highlights women's influence within the domestic sphere, microcosm of society as a whole, since "family is the most central institution in any society" (Hawes and Nybakken 4). The novel's main characters are sisters Constance and Merricat and their Uncle Julian, the only survivors of the tragic incident that cast them away from all social relations in their small town: six years prior, all the members of their family were killed, poisoned by arsenic hidden in the sugar they used for their berries. Uncle Julian survived as he only ate a small amount of sugar, which left him disabled; Constance survived as she did not use sugar, and Merricat was sent to bed without her dinner. The novel is narrated by Merricat. Constance never leaves the house, as she is the one publicly blamed for the murder, while her younger sister occasionally ventures into the village for supplies. The trio's serene balance is disrupted by the arrival of Cousin Charles, who seeks to marry Constance and inherit the family fortune. Merricat's dislike for him eventually leads to her burning the Blackwood house down, causing the death of Uncle Julian. The remains of the house are torn down by the town-dwellers, who see the fire as an opportunity to unload their rage at the Blackwoods, whom they hate not only for the supposed murder

but also for their wealth and snobbishness. After hiding in the woods for a while, Constance and Merricat return to the ruins of their house and resume their daily routine as if nothing happened. Therefore, the novel offers a somewhat happy ending, which sees Constance and Merricat ‘haunting’ the ruins of their house and living off the food offerings from the villagers’ wives, afraid of the sisters’ newfound status as supernatural beings. As one can notice, food is the main element which recurs throughout the novel, being mainly displayed as a symbol of agency and creativity, as the following examples will show.

### **Food as Art: Constance’s Creativity**

As noticed by Merricat, Constance conceives of food as having an almost sacred quality: “food of any kind was precious to Constance, and she always touched foodstuff with quiet respect” (Jackson 20). Her entire daily routine revolves around inventing and preparing elaborate recipes: in this regard, her reading of *The Art of Cooking* at the beginning of the novel is likely an allusion to the spreading of cookbooks for housewives in the fifties. However, the very title of the book suggests Constance’s own conception of meal preparation as art: her “skill at growing and preparing food reveals her creativity” (Carpenter 33), thus conferring her more agency than initially expected. Also, Jackson’s linking of the act of cooking to that of reading is significant: typically, women characters involved in literary undertakings have always been portrayed as resisting gendered norms (see, for instance, Elizabeth Bennet in Jane Austen’s *Pride and Prejudice*, or Jo March in Louisa May Alcott’s *Little Women*). It is not inconsistent, then, for the “rows of jellies and pickles and bottled vegetables and fruit” in the Blackwood cellar to be defined as “a poem by the Blackwood women” (Jackson 42). This passage is crucial to understanding Constance’s rebellion to gender norms:

All the Blackwood women had made food and had taken pride in adding to the great supply of food in our cellar. [...] Constance had worked all her life at adding to the food

in the cellar, and her rows and rows of jars were easily the handsomest [...]. Each year Constance and Uncle Julian and I had jam or preserve or pickle that Constance had made, but we never touched what belonged to the others; Constance said it would kill us if we ate it. (42)

As is noted, Constance has worked all her life to add her own contribution to the Blackwood women's legacy; however, she also rejects tradition by refusing to touch what she has not personally made, which speaks of women's desire of reclaiming agency by actually owning the products of their creativity, instead of conforming to a ready-made lifestyle of prepackaged goods.

### **Food as Performance: The Grocery Store and the Afternoon Tea**

All social interrelations in the novel are set in environments concerning food. For instance, the description of Merricat's outings in the village revolve around the grocery store and Stella's, the local diner. Shopping for groceries is narrated as a perfectly rehearsed dance, which nonetheless involves a great deal of hostility:

I was always served at once; Mr. Elbert or his pale greedy wife always came right away from wherever they were in the store to get me what I wanted. [...] [T]he women in the store were watching. I turned my back to them, but I could feel them standing behind me, holding a can or a half-filled bag of cookies or a head of lettuce... (Jackson 7-8)

Merricat's perception of the shopping moment as a subtly dangerous activity is representative of housewives' own experience of their role in society, which was exclusively aimed at fulfilling the family's needs. Activities such as grocery shopping required women to perform their part, putting on a happy face and submitting to external judgement.

Merricat's anger towards the village women, who clearly try and cast her apart from the social performance, is evident in her wishing that

they were dead. I would have liked to come into the grocery some morning and see them all [...] lying there crying with the pain and dying. I would then help myself to groceries, [...] stepping over their bodies, taking whatever I fancied from the shelves... (8-9)

Merricat's fantasy undoubtedly represents women's frustration, and the gesture of helping herself to groceries and taking what she wants is a clear symbol of rebellion and assertiveness inside the patterns of mundane, domestic rituals.

A similar message is conveyed by the description of the sisters having tea with one of the town women, who occasionally still visits them out of adherence to social norms. Once again, the scene is described as apparently eternally repeating itself, like some sort of mechanical circus:

Our mother had always served tea to her friends from a low table at one side of the fireplace, so that was where Constance always set her table. She sat on the rose sofa with our mother's portrait looking down on her, and I sat in my small chair in the corner and watched. I was allowed to carry cups and saucers and pass sandwiches and cakes, but not to pour tea. I disliked eating anything while people were looking at me, so I had my tea afterwards, in the kitchen. (24)

Again, Merricat's refusal to drink her tea in front of visitors might represent women's own refusal to adhere perfectly to the social performance, gaining agency with respect to their relationship with food and deciding for themselves how to approach it. Therefore, *Castle* employs food not only as a symbol of women's submission, but also of their awareness of their condition; consequently, food becomes the very symbol of women's struggle for freedom and self-determination.



## **Food as a Witch's Brew: Overturning the Feminine Mystique**

Ultimately, food is, in *Castle*, a destructive force. The first lines of the novel, in which Merricat introduces herself to readers, list a poisonous mushroom among some of her favorite things, thus straightforwardly attributing food a dangerous, predatory quality. Readers might, then, not be entirely surprised to find out it was actually Merricat who poisoned the whole family, as a revenge for being sent to bed without her dinner. Merricat's alienation from the rest of her family is evident in her being often expelled from the dinner table (Muñoz-González 83), a symbol of the traditional image of the nuclear family crafted by society; in a sense, then, Merricat's isolation might also be representative of women's universal alienation from their place at the 'dinner table', that is, in society. However, Merricat reclaims agency by putting arsenic in the sugar. The fact that the sweet ingredient par excellence is employed to poison an entire family is significant, as it ironically overturns the social narrative imposed on mid-century American housewives, since femininity was traditionally linked to softness and sweetness. The novel actually seems to suggest that domesticity as a whole could be rotten and poisonous: even Constance's food prepared with herbs and vegetables from the garden might not be entirely safe. As pointed out by Uncle Julian in the novel,

“It could be said that danger is everywhere,” [...] “Danger of poison, certainly. My niece can tell you of the most unlikely perils – garden plants more deadly than snakes and simple herbs that slash like knives through the lining of your belly, madam.” (Jackson 30)

The fact that Uncle Julian links danger to Constance speaks of the hidden perils of domesticity itself, which Jackson narratively employs to empower woman's role in the house and, more specifically, in the kitchen. Indeed, Esther Muñoz-González remarks how eating food prepared by someone else always implies vulnerability (83): in short, their domestic role gives women power over life and death, since they are the ones providing the food (hence life), but the food they provide could

also be poisonous (hence death). The idea of food preparation as potentially murderous is strongly connected to the traditional representations of witchcraft, an activity repeatedly hinted at by Jackson to craft her public image. Indeed, Julian's description of Constance's vegetable garden suggests it resembles that of a witch's, which is precisely the role the two sisters will take on at the end of the novel, accepting food offerings and being feared by the villagers. The sisters refuse to conform to their role as "angels in the house," as put by Virginia Woolf (3), by becoming evil, haunting spirits; in a way, then, they kill the 'angel in the house' by becoming witches. The image of motherly, welcoming femininity is now fused and intertwined with another trope, which is only the other side of the coin. As observed by Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar, "the images of 'angel' and 'monster' have been so ubiquitous throughout literature [...] to such an extent that few women have definitely 'killed' either figure" (17). However, Jackson ironically employs the monstrous side of femininity to counterbalance and overturn the feminine mystique of the fifties and early sixties: housewives have actually been witches all along. "I wonder if I *could* eat a child if I had the chance," says Merricat at the end of the novel, to which her sister answers: "I doubt if I could cook one" (Jackson 146).

### **Concluding Remarks**

Although scholarly critics usually present *Castle* as a mere denunciation of women's social constraints in 1950s middle-class America, I believe the above discussion contributed to presenting a more rounded perspective on the novel: while it certainly presents an image of woman as chained to domestic rituals, it also empowers domesticity by conferring food both a creative and destructive force. The novel actually represents women as having agency in domesticity and being able to fend for themselves through the constraints of the feminine mystique, reclaiming their power thanks to the rebellious aspects of food preparation. Thus, in *Castle*, Jackson proposes her own personal interpretation of a homebound life: the only possible reaction for 1950s housewives

was, according to Jackson, to find agency in the liberating force of food, symbol of domesticity itself; in other words, to serve poison at the family dinner.

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## Biography

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