

Preserves in *We Have Always Lived in The Castle*

In Shirley Jackson's *We Have Always Lived in the Castle*, food plays an essential role. Sugar is the weapon of choice in the family's poisoning and the novel almost revolves around Constance's meals. However, especially important among these are the preserves in the cellar of the Blackwood home. Merricat describes how "all of the Blackwood women had made food and taken pride in adding to the great supply of food in our cellar" (42). The preserves are a tangible representation of the Blackwood matrilineal line. "Great-grandmothers," "great-aunts" and even "our mother" left jars of fruits and vegetables that have been carefully preserved and saved (42). Constance herself has worked "all her life at adding to the food in the cellar," (42).

Food in the novel is both life-giving and life-taking, a theme repeated with the preserves. They represent the lives of women long dead but important to the Blackwood family. Constance and Merricat honor their preserves in the cellar and memory in the house. However, Constance, Merricat, and Julian, "never touched what belonged to the others" because "Constance said it would kill us if we ate it" (42). While Constance is referring to the fact that food preserved generations ago would be long expired and unsuitable for eating, her statement is also a testament to the importance within the Blackwood family of preserving the past. The Blackwood women still have power within the house, and changing that is unthinkable. Much like Merricat, they still have the power to poison the family through food, a staple of the domestic sphere.

The strong influence of the women in the family is especially interesting in light of the power Constance and Merricat's father held as "head of the family" (33). He is described as a man who "took pride in his table, his family" and "his position in the world" (33). Julian describes him as "a very selfish man, [...] perhaps even a scoundrel" when he thinks Charles is his brother (92). He was clearly a controlling patriarchal figure. Yet, his lingering influence

within the house pales in comparison to the legacy of the women whose domestic efforts are preserved in the cellar. In addition, just as the preserves have survived as matriarchal memory, after the death of the family Constance becomes a matriarchal head of the house. She is terrified of leaving the domestic sphere and honors the memory of the women who came before her by cooking and contributing to the legacy of preserves. It is almost as though in usurping the patriarchal authority of the house by allowing Merricat to poison the family, Constance feels that she has violated the constraints of her gender and must retreat completely into the domestic sphere in order to make up for it, going so far as to refuse to leave the property. Merricat tells Constance that “you bury food the way I bury treasure” (42). This connects Constance’s preserves with the objects Merricat buries as magical talismans. Constance’s efforts to guard the family and protect the house as Merricat does come from her performance of gendered domestic tasks, the foremost of which is making preserves.

The Blackwood’s propensity for preserving the past, in preserving long expired fruits and vegetables for the sake of memory and tradition, is a familiar theme in the gothic. It is an example of the living past and the malleability of time within the genre. David Punter describes the gothic as “a reconstruction of the past as the inverted, mirror image of the present” (15). Constance is reliving the same domestic life serving the Blackwood family as her mother, aunts, grandmothers and great grandmothers before her. The preserves are one of many carefully maintained possessions belonging to now deceased family members. Their memory in the house is overwhelming. Fine china belonging to past matriarchs is still in the house, because “every Blackwood bride had brought her own silverware and china and linen into the house” (121). These past possessions are kept rather than thrown out. The house itself a preservation of the past—the girls keep their parent’s possessions in meticulous order, exactly as they left it. They

keep their mother's drawing room "perfectly" even though she is gone (23). Uncle Julian is consumed with the past and spends the end of his life writing his papers, a detailed account of the family's last day. His papers, what he describes as "my life work" (30) act as a preservation of the past, and a preservation of the family. At the end of the novel, Constance says she will put the box containing Julian's papers "down in the cellar" (134). Merricat asks "and preserve it?" to which Constance responds "and preserve it" (134). The story of their family's death is preserved alongside the food preserves in the cellar in a cycle of honored memory and toxicity. Merricat and Constance preserve the papers to honor Julian, while the papers themselves are a dark account of Merricat's killing of their whole family.

The preserves also help feed Constance and Merricat at the end of the novel, when they can no longer go into town to shop for groceries. When the villagers destroyed the house, they did not venture into the cellar. The "jars so beautifully preserved," were not disturbed (115). When asked about the preserves, Constance says that "the food comes from the ground and can't be permitted to stay there and rot; *something* has to be done with it" (42). Yet it is rotting in the ground—they are keeping expired preserves in the cellar under the house. Similarly, in another act of symbolic preservation, the girls literally close themselves off from the world—preserving themselves in house. They close off several rooms and go no farther than the backyard. Merricat remarks that "vines were growing over the burned roof of our house" (140). The house is rotting away with Merricat and Constance preserved inside, much like the inedible preserves of generations past rotting on their shelves. The preserves function as a tribute to matrilineal power within the house and contribute to a larger theme of preservation of the past and tradition.

Works Cited

Jackson, Shirley. *We Have Always Lived in the Castle*. Penguin Books, 2006.

Punter, David. *A New Companion to the Gothic*. Wiley-Blackwell, 2012.