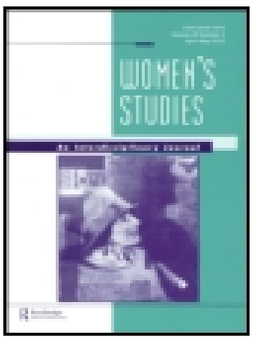

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Women's Studies
An interdisciplinary journal

ISSN: (Print) (Online) Journal homepage: https://www.tandfonline.com/loi/gwst20

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To cite this article: Jen Cadwallader (2020): Picnicking at Hill House: Shirley Jackson's Gothic Vision of Heaven, Women's Studies, DOI: 10.1080/00497878.2020.1814289

To link to this article: https://doi.org/10.1080/00497878.2020.1814289

Published online: 17 Sep 2020.

WOMEN'S STUDIES
https://doi.org/10.1080/00497878.2020.1814289

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Picnicking at Hill House: Shirley Jackson's Gothic Vision of Heaven

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ABSTRACT

This essay examines scenes of eating, specifically picknicking, in The Haunting of Hill House and We Have Always Lived in the Castle, demonstrating that meals in Jackson's gothic novels capture an irreconcilable duality at the heart of Jackson's depiction of family: picnics become both idyllic heaven-like spaces in which women may escape the confines of patriarchal society, at the same time that they reveal the potential horrors of motherhood, subject to the all-consuming, monstrous appetites of her children.

I saw the Gym Exhibit
Thirty-seven times;
I mended the wreck that she made in Home Ec;
I paid off the March of Dimes.
I bought my Girl Scout cookies;
I planted the garden she planned;
I went to the play sponsored by P.T.A.
And boosted the High School Band.
Oh, I've been a wonderful mother.
I've read all the columns, and now
I've done all they said, I'd be better off dead –
And how.

– *The Bad Children* 12

Shirley Jackson wrote *The Bad Children* in 1957 as a one-act play for her daughter Joanne's school musical. A version of "Hansel and Gretel" in which the titular fairy-tale characters are horrible children tormenting their long-suffering parents, it was an immediate hit. Reversing the power dynamic between parent and child, between sinister witch and innocent victim, provided a comic turn that the schoolchildren and their parents delighted in, not because of its absurdity, but because it brought into focus the kernel

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of truth in its depiction of sacrificing parents and casually heartless (to borrow J. M. Barrie's term) children. Good comedy is founded on exaggeration, not impossibility, after all. Written shortly before Jackson began composing *The Haunting of Hill House* (1959) and five years before the publication of *We Have Always Lived in the Castle* (1962), *The Bad Children* might also serve as a frame for reading these two decidedly not comic novels in which the issue of whether the texts depict bad children or bad parents is still an open critical question. Much of current scholarship on *Hill House* favors a reading of Eleanor as the victim of bad parenting, particularly bad mothering, or "smothering." Richard Pascal, for example, in tracing the monstrous elements of motherhood, fatherhood, and childhood in *Hill House*, sees part of Eleanor's struggle as one to assert an autonomous identity in the face of overwhelming and developmentally arresting mother-love: "for Eleanor the allure of the house, and also its horror, is bound up with the sense that it wishes to envelop her in a maternal embrace so comprehensive that her newly won independence and all vestiges of her individuality will become subsumed utterly" (469). Roberta Rubenstein sees this pattern across Jackson's fiction: "In the first two novels, the mother is invasively present in the daughter's life; in each of the four succeeding novels, the mother is dead but no less powerfully present. In fact, the mother's absence becomes a haunting presence that bears directly on the daughter's difficult struggle to achieve selfhood" (311). To read mothers in Jackson's fiction as sympathetic figures is to read against the grain of one of the strongest patterns across her oeuvre. Unquestionably, her own experience as a victim of an emotionally abusive mother dominates her fiction. But in *The Bad Children*, we see Jackson specifically writing as a mother,[1] one who most definitely identified with the girl-scout-cookie buying, high-school -band boosting mother the play depicts. By this point in her career, she had been a mother for sixteen years. One might imagine that such experience gave Jackson a more nuanced view of the role. If another of the patterns scholars have noted in Jackson's fiction is its criticism of domineering patriarchal figures and the larger social structures that victimized women,[2] then the role mothers held as potential victims is worth considering, too. Indeed, the pivotal issue of power in *The Bad Children* – do the children eat the house, or does the witch eat the children? – suggests that in some places in Jackson's fiction, a woman doing her best to keep her house together, so to speak, might become the victim of predatory appetites over which she has no

[1]While this essay focuses on Jackson's fiction, it is worth noting that this nuanced view of motherhood is present in Jackson's domestic memoirs, where for every instance she portrays herself as a failure and a fraud, her children rightfully earn their titular monikers: *Life Among the Savages* (1953), and *Raising Demons* (1957).

[2]See for example, Julie Nash, "'Whatever Walked There, Walked Alone': The Feminist Supernatural in Charlotte Perkins Gilman, Shirley Jackson, and Fay Weldon" *Para-doxa: Studies in World Literary Genres* 20: 2006, 173-84, and Judie Newman, "Shirley Jackson and the Reproduction of Mothering: *The Haunting of Hill House*." *American Horror Fiction: From Brockden Brown to Stephen King*. Ed. Brian Docherty. New York: St. Martin's, 1990.

control. This is the struggle symbolically played out in Jackson's final two novels: eating, and more specifically, picnicking, is a major motif of both *Hill House* and *Castle*. A picnic is defined in two parts; the *OED* gives us "an informal meal eaten out of doors." It is a space – out of doors – and an activity – eating an informal meal. Examining Jackson's use of space and act in *Hill House* and *Castle* captures an irreconcilable duality at the heart of Jackson's depiction of family: picnics become both idyllic heaven-like spaces in which women may escape the confines of patriarchal society, at the same time that they reveal the potential horrors of motherhood, subject to the all-consuming, monstrous appetites of her children.

Space

Preparing to write her fourth novel, *The Sundial*, Jackson read through her previous work, a disconcerting experience in that she discovered "a kind of similarity to them … in images and metaphors" ("About the End of the World" 373). In a lecture delivered at Bennington College, Jackson explained,

> Prominent in every book I had ever written was a little symbolic set that I think of as a heaven-wall-gate arrangement; in every book I have ever written… I find a wall surrounding some forbidden, lovely secret, and in this wall a gate that cannot be passed. I am not going to attempt to analyze this set of images …but I found it odd that in seven books I had never succeeded in getting through the gate and inside the wall.
>
> ("About the End of the World" 373–4)

The symbolic set Jackson describes persists in *Hill House* and *Castle*; the two novels abound with "heaven-wall-gate" imagery, both literal and figurative. Not only does this symbolic set help define the inchoate longings and frustrated desires of Jackson's heroines, it suggests a topography through which to understand her use of space, particularly those spaces occupied by family. *Hill House* has for many years stood (alone) as a monolith of the American Gothic, embodying the "patriarchal dominance," that defines the genre (Anderson 204). The topographical distinctions between heaven, wall, and gate, however, call for a destabilization of the monolithic structures of Hill House and *Castle's* Blackwood Farm; Jackson's use of multiple spaces in and out of the doors of Hill House and Blackwood Farm provides us with particular insight into how a feminine "heaven," a place for picnicking, can exist in defiance of patriarchal control, even as it ultimately becomes another space representing the horror of nurturing.

The architectural and the literary go hand in hand in the gothic. In his preface to the first edition of *The Castle of Otranto*, Horace Walpole was insistent on the significance of place more than anything else: "Though the machinery [of the fantastic] is invention, and the names of the actors imaginary, I cannot but believe

that the groundwork of the story is founded on truth. The scene is undoubtedly laid in some real castle … . the author had some certain building in his eye" (*Otranto* 7–8). For Walpole, that "certain building" was Strawberry Hill, his faux-gothic villa in Twickenham. He famously wrote the first gothic novel based on a dream "of which, all I could recover was, that I had thought myself in an ancient castle (a very natural dream for a head filled like mine with Gothic story), and that on the upper-most banister of a great staircase I saw a gigantic hand in armour" ("Letter to William Cole"). How could Walpole avoid a head filled with gothic stories, as he worked obsessively on the gothic stories of Strawberry Hill? Even the particulars of the dream are architectural: the castle contains both the gigantic hand and the great staircase. As Nicole Reynolds notes, "Gothic domestic space offered [their creators] deeply personal, idiosyncratic sites for self-presentation, permitting at once the private cultivation of taste, talents, and pleasures, as well as the highly orchestrated public display of themselves" (89). The same description could be applied to Hugh Crain and to some extent John Blackwood, architect/owners of Hill House and Blackwood Farm, respectively. While Blackwood has only remodeled his home, fencing and gating the Blackwood land, installing the heating system that transformed the former summer house into a permanent "always lived in" castle, Hill House was entirely designed by Crain. The two passages in the novel that refer to his architectural work suggest a tension, though. In the first, Jackson writes that Hill House "was built as a home for [Crain's] family … a country home where he hoped to see his children and grandchildren live in comfortable luxury, and where he fully expected to end his days in quiet" (*HH* 75). Here, Crain's focus seems to be family, and the establishment of a permanent place for family to exist. In the second passage, we are told, "old Hugh Crain expected that someday Hill House might become a showplace … he designed Hill House himself, remember, and, I have told you before, he was a strange man. Every angle … is slightly wrong. Hugh Crain must have detested other people and their sensible squared-away houses, because he made this house to suit his mind" (*HH* 105). This second description more closely aligns Crain with Walpole, designing a home that defies social norms, that uniquely represents the mind of its creator, and that is focused not inward, toward the family that lives there, but outward, toward the public as a "showplace." But unlike his real-life counterpart, Crain is a father. The "comfortable luxury" he hopes to create for his family is only comfortable to him, only fitted for his mind; his "orchestrated public display" is of his family as an extension of himself, as carefully curated as the art on his walls. Crain's patriarchal oppression – hoping to keep his family trapped within Hill House, generation after generation – is literally embodied in an architectural oppression. In a sense, this depiction of patriarchal control over the family home could be Jackson's reflection on mid-century values regarding women's domestic role. As Ruth Franklin notes in her recent biography of Jackson, "Her interest in houses and their atmosphere extends back to the beginning of her career: to her early fiction, which so often describes the efforts

of women to create and furnish a home … " (409). Such efforts were a necessary part of the performance of female competence – neither the soufflé nor the woman baking it uncomfortably in heels could afford to fall. That competence is largely missing in Hill House and Blackwood Farm. As Pascal notes, any sense that Hill House's décor represents the work of a woman is "deceptive": "This is evident from the narrative's dismissive lack of interest in [the house's former mistresses]. They are hardly spoken of, and the little that is said about them suggests that they were so nondescript in personality as to have made as little impression on the house as in the narrative" (470). Personality is perhaps not to blame for these women's peripheral status. Women in *Castle* are similarly incidental to Blackwood Farm: "Blackwoods had always lived in our house, and kept their things in order; as soon as a new Blackwood wife moved in, a place was found for her belongings, and so our house was built up with layers of Blackwood property weighting it" (2). The women are a nameless, rotating cast, their identities and belongings alike subsumed by the house. Homes in Jackson's gothic novels are built by fathers and barely lived in by mothers. Women's control over the domestic is thus depicted as illusory; women are only ever occupying space created by someone else.

To return to Jackson's topographical symbolic set – heaven, wall, gate – we see a direct link between Crain's creation of Hill House and his creation of a vision of heaven. Jackson evokes the set early in both *Hill House* and *Castle*. As Eleanor arrives at Hill House, she finds it closed against her, "a gate that cannot be passed." Jackson writes, "The gate was tall and ominous and heavy, set strongly into a stone wall which went off through the trees … . Since the gate was so clearly locked – locked and double-locked and chained and barred; who, [Eleanor] wondered, wants so badly to get in?" (*HH* 28). The answer is of course Eleanor, in keeping with the heroines of Jackson's other works, all trying to "get through the gate and inside the wall" where presumably they will find some version of a longed-for heaven. Indeed, Eleanor makes this connection: "Hill House, she thought, you're as hard to get into as heaven" (*HH* 29). But in both *Hill House* and *Castle*, heroines do get through the gates, inside the walls. Jackson evokes nearly the same topography for *Castle*, but moves Merricat inside with ease: "Blackwood Road goes in a great circle around the Blackwood land and along every inch of Blackwood Road is a wire fence built by our father. Not far past the town hall is the big black rock which marks the entrance to the path where I unlock the gate and lock it behind me and go through the woods and am home" (*Castle* 6). In a sense, then, Jackson is aligning her gothic houses, created by controlling patriarchal figures, with a version of heaven. Indeed, just as Crain has designed Hill House, so has he designed a version of heaven, also for the "comfortable luxury" of his family. The only other item the reader is told Hugh Crain "made himself" is a conduct book for his daughter subtitled "A Legacy for Her Education and Enlightenment

During Her Lifetime From Her Affectionate and Devoted Father." The scrapbook is a horrifying pastiche of the very worst of evangelical fire-and-brimstone literature, waxing poetic about the tortures of hell and promising of heaven: "Holy, holy holy! In the pure light of heaven the angels praise Him and one another unendingly. Daughter, it is Here that I will seek thee" (*HH* 169). Like the heaven-wall-gate landscape of Hill House and Blackwood Farm, Crain's conduct book is designed to evoke longing to get in, and to make entrance seem almost impossible. He commands his daughter to remain upon the "fearful narrow path to everlasting bliss" and to "make it thine unceasing duty to remain as pure as [winged angels]" (*HH* 168). Heaven in Crain's conduct book is only for those who live the most restricted lives, hardly what one would call living at all, an idea reinforced through the detail with which he illustrates his catalog of deadly sins. Merricat and Constance's conduct is similarly circumscribed by their overbearing parents; their mother "cannot bear to see [her] lovely [drawing] room untidy" and "so Constance and [Merricat] had never been allowed in" (*Castle* 33–4). So strong is this voice of parental command that even six years after their deaths, Merricat continues to categorize her behavior as a set of musts and must nots; for example, "I was allowed to carry cups and saucers and pass sandwiches and cakes, but not allowed to pour tea" (*Castle* 34). There is no earthly reason for a young woman of eighteen to be prohibited from such a task – Merricat's constant refrain "I was not allowed" suggests that she has internalized the restrictions of her childhood.

And while the promise of heaven is held out as a prize for the child who navigates the rapids of every physical desire, to win it would be dreadful. While hell is depicted in vivid detail, only one aspect of heaven is offered to the Crain children: "Live virtuously, be meek, have faith in thy Redeemer, and in me, thy father, and I swear to thee that we will be joined together hereafter in unending bliss" (*HH* 171). Under the circumstances, this sounds more like a threat than a promise, capturing all the horror of eternity. Forever, in such a place, with such a father. The promise suggests a reexamination of Eleanor's initial question regarding Hill House: the locks and bars are not about who "wants so badly to get in," but who might want to get out. Indeed, once inside Hill House, all of Eleanor's and Theodora's feelings suggest a sense of entrapment, from Eleanor's thoughts on the entrance, "which led in a forthright, no-escape manner onto the veranda and aimed at the front door" (*HH* 35) to Theodora's longing to "get this roof off from over my head" (*HH* 46). The enclosing space of the gothic house is mirrored in the patriarchal version of heaven.

Crain's designs on his family in life and in death – literally designs imposed on his family – are claustrophobic, all-encompassing, suggesting the monolithic structure of gothic fiction. However, Jackson juxtaposes the group's reading of Crain's conduct book in the Hill House library with the scene immediately following and suggestive of its opposite: if the library is the "heart" of Hill House,

the garden to which Theodora and Eleanor venture is decidedly on the periphery. Not only is it not centrally located in the house, it is, importantly, an outside space. Drawing on a lecture by Jean Hyppolite, Gaston Bachelard notes that there is a strong distinction between outside and inside: "Philosophers, when confronted with outside and inside, think in terms of being and nonbeing … . You feel the full significance of this myth of outside and inside in alienation, which is founded on these two terms. Beyond what is expressed in their formal opposition lie alienation and hostility between the two" (228). Jackson moves Theodora and Eleanor outside of Hill House frequently and significantly to suggest this alienation from and hostility toward patriarchal order: they are outside when they first meet and discuss a future picnic, they are outside when Eleanor announces she will be following Theodora home after they all leave Hill House. If Hill House is imprisoning, the discussions of future plans the women have outside of Hill House suggest the idea of freedom and escape. This is true in Jackson's depiction of Merricat, too, who mentally combats her dread of town and the open animosity she faces there by moving imaginatively into a space she controls: "Today I was going to think about taking our lunch out into the garden … in my mind I was setting the table with a green cloth and bringing out yellow dishes and strawberries in a white bowl" (*Castle* 13). Merricat imagines a picnic; Eleanor and Theodora find one already taking place in the garden they venture to outside Hill House, a scene Michael T. Wilson labels the novel's "ultimate ineffable moment" (118). The tableaux of parents, a child, and a puppy enjoying a bright, sunny day is ineffable because it finds no analogy in Hill House: these are not ghosts of Hill House's inhabitants; this is not a scene in any way connected to the house itself. Its distance both literal and figurative sets it apart: if Hill House is the structure that patriarchy built, this garden is its feminine opposite.

The feminine quality of the picnic space is underscored by Jackson's source material for this part of the novel: Charlotte Moberly and Eleanor Jourdain's *An Adventure*, first published in 1911. Jackson sums up the book quite succinctly, as the story of "two British spinsters who got lost at Versailles, and believed that they had wandered through a time-gap into the eighteenth century and seen Marie Antoinette" (*HH* MS). According to Moberly and Jourdain's account, the actual adventure took place in 1901, on a hot August afternoon when the two women, who were vacationing together as a way to get to know each other prior to entering into a professional relationship, decided to tour the Petit Trianon, a place neither had visited before. Subsequent discussion of the afternoon, which was filled with unsettling moments – strangely dressed gardeners, the sound of running feet, an oppressive quality to the air – convinced the two that what they had actually visited was one of Marie Antoinette's memories of the Petit Trianon, captured in the days after she had been taken prisoner of the revolution. Jackson was enthusiastic about *An Adventure*, telling her publisher that it was a "wonderful, classic ghost story," and in a scene she decided not to use in

the final draft of *Hill House*, Dr. Montague calls it the "greatest ghost story of all time" (*HH* MS). This enthusiasm shows in the details Jackson borrows from the text. In Moberly's account of the incident she writes, "Everything suddenly looked unnatural, therefore unpleasant; even the trees behind the building seemed to have become flat and lifeless, *like a wood worked in tapestry*. There were no effects of light and shade, and no wind stirred the trees. It was all intensely still" (5, italics original). The stillness of the scene and Moberly's sense that her surroundings were more like a representation of reality than reality itself – a moment frozen apart, captured forever, part of a "time-gap" – is perhaps what interested Jackson. Her version recalls Moberly's: Eleanor and Theodora find that "on either side of them the trees, silent, relinquished the dark color they had held, paled, grew transparent and stood white and ghastly against the black sky. The grass was colorless, the path wide and black; there was nothing else" (*HH* 175). The black path is reminiscent of Crain's "fearful narrow path"; like his path, it leads to a version of Heaven, an eternal moment.

Modeling this space on an incident that took place at the Petit Trianon further emphasizes its feminine nature. Originally intended as a gift for Madame de Pompadour, the Petit Trianon passed into Marie Antoinette's hands after Louis XVI ascended the throne, and became her personal property, set apart from her court life. It was the space where she infamously (and perhaps disastrously) built the Hameau de la Reine and played at being a shepherdess. More significantly, the Petit Trianon was associated with Marie Antoinette's power to exercise choice, sexual and otherwise. Jill Casid writes, "Rumors that Marie Antoinette was a 'lover of women' had begun to circulate as early as 1770; however, this speculation was fueled not only by the royal couple's failure to produce an heir but also by the queen's retreat, her private and personal transformations of the grounds of the Petit Trianon" (304). Jackson's earliest draft of Hill House associated Theodora with Marie Antoinette: she planned to "do her painting outdoors, far, far away from the house" (*HH* MS); Moberly's account in *An Adventure* included seeing Marie Antoinette painting in the garden. This early version of Theodora had her constantly railing against the patriarchal voice of censure that would put her in her place sexually. Originally intending a larger speaking role for Mrs. Dudley, Jackson includes a scene of confrontation between the two women: "mrs. dudley grinned evilly. 'you better be getting out now, then,' she said. 'i know your kind – - you won't be wanting to go nowhere once the gentlemen come'" (*HH* MS, emphasis original). Like the young queen, Theodora is cast as sexually promiscuous and thus open to attack. The Dudleys, quite literally Hill House's gatekeepers, police what is considered appropriate feminine behavior within the house. In the final published version of the novel, a sexual partnership between Theodora and Eleanor is one of the possibilities Eleanor imagines as an escape from her circumscribed life.

Like the figure in their haunting, Moberly and Jourdain were criticized on the basis of their gender and sexuality. *An Adventure* elicited decades of debate and attention: follow-up studies, vituperative attacks, even a television movie. The two "spinster schoolmistresses" facing off against the world may well have appealed to Jackson in depicting Eleanor and Theodora contending with the patriarchal oppression of Hill House, or Merricat and Constance, literally barricaded in the remains of Blackwood Farm as villagers – the well-meaning, the ill-wishing, the busybodies – hammer on the door demanding entrance (*HH* MS). Indeed, it may be the aftermath of *An Adventure's* publication that most aligns with an oppositional space confronting patriarchy. Terry Castle writes

> The peculiar terror, the near-hysteric nature of the response generated by *An Adventure* can only be explained … by the fact that the book was the work of two authors – and two women at that. The "united front" presented by Moberly and Jourdain, their openly collaborative intellectual and emotional relationship, served without question as a subliminal goad to their critics. As female dons, Moberly and Jourdain represented a new and hitherto unprecedented generation of independent educated women; as single women living together (in however enigmatic a dyad) they stood as a threat to conventional sexual arrangements as well.
>
> (207)

In her first draft of *Hill House*, Jackson considered calling more attention to this history. She originally planned a lecture for Dr. Montague on famous hauntings, prominently featuring *An Adventure*. Of the two women's subsequent lives he notes, "they were never separated. any doubts as to their suitability as joint schoolmistresses wwer [sic] eliminated by the fact that they had to stand together against a disbelieving world; they could not afford to separate, indeed, a large part of their lives was devoted to research proving their case" (*HH* MS). Jackson's account suggests the tenuous nature of a female authoritative voice; it was not enough for Moberly and Jourdain to publish their account after a decade of research, they had to devote "a large part of their lives" to defending this account. Little wonder, then, that the garden space, the imagined picnic, seems so appealing.

At first glance, the picnic scene in *Hill House* seems to represent the apotheosis of Eleanor's fantasies. The black and winding path she and Theodora are on, "dies" beneath their feet and leads "into a garden" so bright that the women's eyes are "blinded with the light of sun and rich color; incredibly, there was a picnic party on the grass in the garden" (*HH* 176). The richly colored garden is suggestive of an edenic space; combined with the picnic the two see – symbolic of Eleanor's desire to be with Theodora, with her longing for the future – we might fruitfully read in this space another sort of heaven beyond the gate in the wall in Jackson's

topographical set. It is a feminine space, a space outside and opposite the inner space of Crain's house. The tableaux Eleanor sees is a

> picnic party on the grass in the garden. They could hear the laughter of the children and the affectionate, amused voices of the mother and father; the grass was richly, thickly green, the flowers were colored red and orange and yellow, the sky was blue and gold, and one child wore a scarlet jumper and raised its voice again in laughter, tumbling after a puppy over the grass. There was a checked tablecloth spread out, and, smiling the mother leaned over to take up a plate of bright fruit.
>
> (*HH* 176)

The scene represents the antithesis of Crain's version of family values, i.e., the "heaven" that more closely resembles an eternal hell. While picnics predate the Victorian era in which Crain built Hill House, for Jackson's initial readers, picnics evoked a particularly modern cultural moment, captured in 1950s *LIFE* magazine images and Coca-Cola advertisements, so iconic even today that the Draper family's recreation of it in an episode of *Mad Men* is immediately familiar. The scene is modern in its depiction of family as well: "affectionate," "amused," indulging in the physical pleasures of puppies and food, it is a marked contrast to the Victorian distance between parent and child captured in Crain's or Blackwood's treatment of his daughters. The scene seems particularly idyllic for the child, the recipient of its parents' love and care, represented by the offering of bright fruit and the provision of a puppy, every child's perfect playmate. Eleanor, starved for love throughout *Hill House*, would certainly see in this vision her happily ever after. Multiple readings of the scene focus on it as a childhood fantasy. Pascal, for example, notes that is "both idyllic and hypnotically treacherous. To attain it, to be that child in the scarlet jumper (so like the red sweater that is her one flamboyant article of clothing), Eleanor would have to pass through the annihilation of whiteness that is death" (478). To pass through death into this scene is to be translated into Eleanor's vision of the afterlife. Compared to the version of Heaven offered by Hugh Crain – eternal surveillance, eternal judgment – it might not strike the reader as a bad deal. Indeed, it recalls the picnic-as-heaven in Charles Causley's popular poem, "Eden Rock," where the narrator imagines his mother pouring "tea from a Thermos, the milk straight / From an old H.P. sauce bottle" (9–10). But of course *Hill House* is not a lyric meditation on happy reunions, and reading Eleanor only as a child-like figure is to ignore the role of caretaker she also holds. It is to overlook the figure of the mother, holding her tray, just as frozen in the eternal moment of the scene as her child. To reconsider the feminine heaven Jackson offers readers is to look at the other quality of picnicking – not space, but act.

Act

Jackson uses the out of doors in *Hill House* and *Castle* to suggest freedom and escape. The idea of eating a meal out of doors also takes on significance

when compared to scenes of eating within the house. By the time Jackson wrote *Hill House*, the family meal had been accorded significant cultural capital. Sociologist James H. S. Bossard, who championed the study of the family meal in the 1940s, saw it as "a vehicle for the transmission of the family culture to its younger members" (295). Indoctrination happened around the dinner table. Meals in Hill House are regulated and rule-bound – captured in Mrs. Dudley's unwavering refrain before and after each meal: "I clear off at ten … . The dishes are supposed to be back on the shelves. I take them out again for lunch. I set out lunch at one, but first the dishes have to be back on the shelves" (101). It does not matter when any of the group arrives; late or early, the meals start and end on schedule. Even Mrs. Dudley seems more like a cog in the machinery of formal mealtime than its director – she says the "dishes are supposed" to be on the shelves, but by whom? Whose rules is she following? Like the ghostly hand Eleanor finds holding her own, the politics of regressive gender roles haunt Hill House long after the house's tyrannical father is dead. The reader is left to imagine what meals in the Crain household were like; Mrs. Dudley's admonishments serve as a faint echo of the past. If the actual meal remains merely a suggestion in *Hill House*, in *Castle* it is patriarchy reified, its iconography of the 1950s nuclear family incisively realized and impossible to miss. Uncle Julian reminisces, "My brother, as head of the family, sat naturally at the head of the table, there, with the windows at his back and the decanter before him. John Blackwood took pride in his table, his family, his position in the world" (*Castle* 47). Blackwood's position, the statement implies, is built upon the family around the table paying deference to him as its "head." Indeed, Blackwood uses his control of food to assert authority over his family. Julian says, "My brother sometimes remarked upon what we ate, my wife and I; he was a just man, and never stinted his food, so long as we did not take too much" (*Castle* 69). Formal meals in both houses symbolize the structure of patriarchy, where things are done the way they are "supposed" to be, and where "too much" is a decision outside the diner's control.

Jackson's own vexed relationship with food – she once called calories "small demons which lurk constantly on the outskirts of the unguarded life" – seems to inform some of her thinking about meals in her gothic houses (Franklin 373). She was herself famously overweight, to a remarkable degree according to the standards of 1950s America. One friend recalls on meeting her:

> I was absolutely stunned … . I had read her funny books and 'The Lottery,' and I wasn't picturing her that way. She had written in one place about going to the hospital to have a baby and bringing lace nightgowns, something like that. And here was this woman who took up literally half the sofa. With lank hair hanging down. Oh, boy. It wasn't at all what I had pictured. I think I was prepared to be a little scared, but then I was stunned – by this monster.
>
> (qtd in Oppenheimer 220).

It's a horrifying statement, not because of Jackson's apparent obesity, but because of Harriet Fels' reaction; her feeling that it is impossible for Jackson to be both overweight and the owner (and wearer) of lace nightgowns suggests a denial of femininity even before she labels an overweight woman a "monster." Fels isn't alone: many of Jackson's acquaintances remarked on her weight in their reminiscences of her. Jackson was "on the heavy side" remembered one school friend (qtd in Franklin 47). Or, she was "a classic fat girl, with the fat girl's air of clowning frivolity to mask no telling what depths of unexamined self-loathing" (qtd in Franklin 372). Beyond the cruel humor of this statement is its assumption of a recognizable type of which Jackson is just an example: "the" fat girl who as a matter of course must loathe herself. As the meanness of the comment suggests, the rest of society certainly did. Jackson's weight was a source of ongoing embarrassment to her mother, who continued to make Jackson feel her disappointment throughout her adulthood, constantly haranguing Jackson about her appearance in letters, and once even sending her a corset by mail.[3] While Jackson often laughed off these criticisms, she was embarked on a serious diet during the composition of Hill House; her diet journal, according to Franklin, labeled each failure as "SINFUL" in capital letters, and amongst those notes and the equation of eating and sin are Jackson's planning notes for *Hill House* (374–5).

Gluttony was very much on Jackson's mind and her recognition of food-policing as another form of patriarchal control is evident in the group's examination of Crain's conduct book: "'He really put his heart into gluttony,' Theodora said. 'I'm not sure I'll ever be hungry again'" (*HH* 179). The gothic structure Crain creates controls and confines women, presenting the façade of the happy family; formal dining is just one more aspect of this, controlling and confining the woman's body in order to present the façade of ideal womanhood and motherhood. Jackson more sharply critiques the gender politics surrounding women's bodies in *Castle*, where she transmutes Crain's biblical warnings into daily practice. While Uncle Julian's reflections on his brother's miserliness with food suggest that John Blackwood's autocratic behavior did not discriminate on the basis of sex, both men, in fact, try to control women's appetites as a way to regulate their behavior. Julian, sensitive regarding his emasculated position in his brother's household, as dependent as any wife or daughter, displaces his powerlessness onto his wife, Dorothy: "I did not encourage her to eat heavily, since we were living with my brother," he notes, before reflecting, "I think if I had known it was her last breakfast I would have permitted her more sausage" (*Castle* 68). Julian

[3]One particularly cruel example: Jackson was interviewed for *Time* after the successful publication of *Castle*. Accompanying the article was a photograph of Jackson, whose yo-yoing weight was close to its highest point. Her mother wrote, "Why oh why do you allow the magazines to print such awful pictures of you …. I have been so sad all morning about what you have allowed yourself to look like … You were and I guess still are a very willful child" (qtd. in Franklin 453).

offers up his wife as a sacrifice: she must deny herself in order to perform the inferior role John Blackwood demands of his dependent family. By doing so, Julian holds on to his own tenuous position of patriarchal power. Further, in bringing to life the father/daughter relationship hinted at in *Hill House*, Jackson demonstrates that Blackwood's treatment of Merricat uses food and formal dining to symbolically and almost literally starve her out of existence. As Lynette Carpenter notes, Merricat is pointless to the patriarchal order: "The Blackwood family exploited its women if they were docile and dismissed them if they were not. Mary Katherine, the middle child who was neither a useful daughter nor a male heir, had no appropriate function in the family and was frequently dismissed from its presence for her rebellion against its laws" (33). This dismissal more specifically takes place at dinner. Uncle Julian remembers that on the night the Blackwoods were poisoned, Merricat had not been present: "A great child of twelve, sent to bed without her supper" (*Castle* 48). His phrasing suggests both that she was too old for such a punishment – a "great child of twelve" should know better than to behave badly – but conversely, that such a punishment is too infantile for a child of twelve, denying her not only a place at the table, but her position as a young woman at the threshold of puberty and adulthood.

To reconsider the symbolism behind men's power over food in the two novels is to bring forward the figure of the mother in *Hill House's* picnic tableaux as an antithesis to the "head of table" in the houses' formal dining spaces. Out of doors, she is the wielder of the tray, controller of the food. As she takes up "the plate of bright fruit" she evokes the most famous story of a woman eating fruit out of doors, and all of the rule-breaking defiance and power that fruit-eating entailed. Jackson's revisions to her first draft of *Hill House* suggest that she wanted to emphasize this connection with Eve: originally, the mother overwhelmingly held up a plate of chicken (*HH* MS). The picnic scene, then, could serve as a moment of triumph, representing a powerful, personally expansive space for the women in the novel, an antidote to the restrictive formal dining conditions within Hill House, a calorie-free heaven. But it does not. Theodora screams, shattering the scene, after which, Jackson writes, "Then they were beating and scratching wildly at the white stone wall where vines grew blackly, screaming still and begging to be let out, until a rusted iron gate gave way and they ran … " (177). Jackson has presented Eleanor with exactly what she wants, creating a space seemingly opposed to Hill House, and yet she has returned to the same enclosing wall and gate imagery that bounds the rest of the house. The picnic grounds are a circle within a circle, a trap within a trap. What Theodora's scream signals is that she perhaps recognizes first the flip side to the horror of eternal life with a parent represented by Crain's heaven; the matriarchal figure forever doling out fruit is equally frightening. Both versions of heaven suggest that it is a parent's unending obligation to parent, to accept the duty of eternal

caretaker, a horror Eleanor has already experienced, and mentally cannot move on from even though her mother has died.

Tricia Lootens suggests that Hill House's horror lies in its vision of "nuclear families that kill where they are supposed to nurture" (151). I would suggest that Jackson's gothic fiction explores the opposite horror as well, the horror of nurturing itself. The idea of the eternal nurturer is just as much a part of Jackson's relationship with food as are her feelings about eating and her weight. One of her friends remembered "Shirley loved feeding people, being the big mama" (qtd in Oppenheimer 97). Jackson's son Barry echoes this: "There was always enough to eat and it was good. And whatever we wanted to eat, we weren't denied … . She loved to serve food, she loved to eat, loved to see people eat" (qtd in Franklin 371). If there is a defiant power in giving her children "what they wanted" rather than forcing them into restraint, there is also a responsibility to constantly live up to that role. In *Hill House*, this vision of motherhood remains elusive, embodied only in Theodora's scream of recognition at a possible future in which she plays mother catering to Eleanor's voracious child-appetite. Jackson presents a more clearly articulated vision of this in *Castle*. Merricat, whose desire to be the perpetual child is even more pronounced than Eleanor's, re-envisions what that childhood should have looked like: imaginatively recreating the family dinner, Merricat tells the reader, "I sat between Constance and Uncle Julian, in my rightful, my own and proper, place at the table" (Castle 139). It is an assertion of identity – "rightful," "own," – and even existence – a "place at the table" – the fundamental qualities of personhood denied her by her father. But Merricat's imagined dinner grows quickly beyond an assertion of her basic rights:

> "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 … ."
> "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."
> (Castle 139)

One way to read this scene is to note how it highlights the extremity of Merricat's ill-treatment. If this looks ludicrous, one need only remember that Merricat literally lived its mirror version: she did give up her dinner to her brother, "who used the most sugar" (*Castle* 48), who characteristically "ate hugely" (*Castle* 69). So far from being conscious enough of her existence to rise when she left the table, Julian not only dismisses her importance in the past – "she need not concern us," he claims when telling the story of the Blackwood murders – he continues to deny her existence in the present, repeatedly asserting that she has died even when she occupies the same room

as him (*Castle* 68). Another reading of the scene, however, demonstrates the insatiability of the child's appetite, not just for all of the food – everyone's food – that Merricat consumes, but for all of the affection, all of the attention; her parents in her imagined childhood live only to serve. To be a parent giving Merricat what she wants is to lose everything else.

This is the gothic irony of Jackson's fiction: escape is an illusion for her heroines. Merricat destroys every vestige of patriarchal order, yet on that razed ground Constance is still a prisoner, perhaps more narrowly confined than before. Eleanor has already lived through the reality of giving up everything to nurture a dependent; this is the horror Constance faces as well. With more power than Eleanor, Merricat reshapes Blackwood Farm to fit her vision, starting the fire in her father's room that guts the upper floor and front rooms so that the only livable space is the back kitchen opening out into the garden. Merricat destroys the patriarchal façade of the house, leaving the nurturing, matriarchal space behind. By the novel's end she physically embodies Jackson's idea of a picnic: her clothing ruined, she dresses in a checked tablecloth of which her sister Constance says, "I believe the one you are wearing now was used for summer breakfasts on the lawn many years ago. Red and white check would never be used in the dining room of course" (*Castle* 200). The outfit, then, suggests the same opposition between inside and outside, hellish and heavenly, formal and informal eating that Jackson establishes in *Hill House*. Merricat is delighted with the heaven on earth she has created, repeatedly telling her sister "Oh Constance, we are so happy." But the novel's end does not suggest happiness to the reader; Jackson juxtaposes Merricat's narration with the reactions of tourists and townspeople: "It used to be a lovely old house I hear … Now it looks like a tomb" (*Castle* 266). Trapped inside Merricat's vision of heaven is Constance, who must be constant in her love for Merricat, perpetually cheerful, motherly, and symbolic of her nurturing role, providing food. After all, Merricat responded to her parents' restrictions on her eating by lacing the sugar bowl with arsenic and killing them.

When the curtains rose on *The Bad Children*, audiences saw the witch enjoying her own out-of-doors space and planning a meal. "Ah, there's nothing like waking up on a good rainy day in the forest" are the play's first, hopeful words (*Bad Children* 7). The statement has every reason to be hopeful – a witch living on her own in the forest is as far from the family horrors of Jackson's gothic novels as one could imagine. Breakfast for the witch promises to be a gustatory delight: there may not be delivery so far from civilization, but that does not mean the witch plans to do any cooking herself. "I thought that rather than bother to cook anything myself I'd just enchant [what they're having up at the castle] down here," she tells her neighbor, the enchanter, "I believe it's griddle cakes and maple syrup and sausages and orange juice and coffee – " (*Bad Children* 7). Anticipating the structural confinement and lack of bodily autonomy of her next two novels, Jackson here sums up the witch's power as

power over what she is going to eat. Ironically, she tells the enchanter, "I am the most modern kind of witch you can get" (*Bad Children* 9). What *The Haunting of Hill House* and *We Have Always Lived in the Castle* demonstrate is that modern witches are the stuff of fairy tale. Modern heroines have a far more complicated relationship with mealtime. Indeed, this is what the witch comes to realize as the monstrous Hansel and Gretel and their hapless, helpless parents descend upon her. Ultimately, *The Bad Children* captures the irreconcilable duality Jackson presents in her picnicking scenes. It is revenge against the patriarchal oppression of the gothic house – the showcase of the perfect family, the perfect woman. In *The Bad Children*, the children eat that house right up. But it also shows Jackson's deep ambivalence toward the power that mothers had to provide for their children, as nurturing itself could be just as destructive. Gretel captures this fatalistic view: "We've got a *right* to eat this house. {*Runs up to house and starts eating again. HANSEL follows and does likewise.*} And you and just go ahead and catch us if you can, because *everyone* knows what is going to happen *then*, and I get to watch Hansel push you in the oven, and everything" (*Bad Children* 17).

Acknowledgments

My thanks to the Special Collections librarians at the Library of Congress for their assistance, and to the anonymous readers of *Women's Studies* for their constructive and thoughtful feedback.

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