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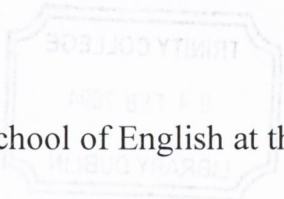
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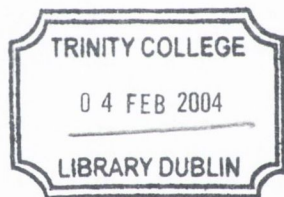
**“Do You Know Who I Am?”  
Contextualising Shirley Jackson**

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A Thesis submitted to the School of English at the University of Dublin,  
Trinity College, in fulfilment of the requirements for the Degree of  
Doctor of Philosophy.

September 2003



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***Declaration.***

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### *Summary.*

This thesis attempts to broaden the current critical approach towards Shirley Jackson by discussing her work within the cultural, social, literary and historical contexts of America during the 1950s. This is the first time that such a perspective has been adopted whilst discussing Jackson's writing, whose work has, since her death in 1965 generally been evaluated from within a fixed set of critical perspectives – primarily feminism, the psychoanalytical approach, and in relation to her status as a writer of gothic fictions. Therefore, although the relationship between Jackson's work and the period in which she produced most of her writing has been largely ignored, this thesis will challenge this oversight by arguing that Jackson actively engaged with many of the most prominent preoccupations and anxieties of her age.

I have discussed Jackson's *entire* body of work during the course of this thesis – from her three much neglected early novels *The Road Through the Wall* (1948), *Hangsaman* (1951) and *The Bird's Nest* (1954) to her slightly better known texts *The Sundial* (1958) and *We Have Always Lived in the Castle* (1962), and of course her most famous literary creations *The Haunting of Hill House* (1959) and her short story "The Lottery" (1948). I shall also be discussing her short story collections *The Lottery and Other Stories: Or, the Adventures of James Harris* (1949); and the posthumously published *Come Along With Me* (1966) and *Just an Ordinary Day* (1996). Most discussions of Jackson (with the notable exception of some valuable articles by feminist writers such as Nancy Walker and Lynette Carpenter) have, from the beginning of Jackson's career, tended to dismiss her more obviously commercial writing for the women's magazine market as harmless "fluff" – or failed to consider it at all. In contrast to this rather blinkered approach, I have discussed Jackson's entire

oeuvre during the course of this thesis, and devoted an entire chapter to her two sorely neglected volumes of domestic humour, *Life Among the Savages* (1953) and *Raising Demons* (1957). It is my contention that, far from being a disparate mishmash of “literary” texts, which are worthy of critical attention, and “commercial” texts, which, apart from their autobiographical content have little interest, her writing instead deserves to be looked at as a unified, cohesive body of work.

I have aligned Jackson’s writing within the contexts of her age by looking at specific instances in which her work has interacted with contemporary issues. In my first chapter, I locate Jackson’s fiction within the context of the American gothic and the work being produced by the 1950s most famous horror writers. Then I explore Jackson’s so-called “house novels” and neglected debut *The Road Through the Wall* in relation to the effects that the vast shift in living patterns which took place during the decade had upon American culture and society. In Chapter Three, I discuss Jackson’s “psychological” fiction in relation to the surge of interest in psychiatry and mental illness that took place during the post-war era, whilst in Chapter Four I discuss *The Sundial*, *We Have Always Lived in the Castle* and several of Jackson’s short stories within the context of Cold War anxiety and the apocalyptic strain in American culture. Chapter Five focuses upon Jackson’s domestic humour and the demands made of American women during the 50s. I conclude by contrasting Jackson’s literary afterlife with that of Sylvia Plath and suggest reasons for her posthumous neglect. I end by arguing that the very reasons why Jackson has tended to be marginalized – her ability to thrive in a range of writing disciplines at once: the combination of success and literary acclaim which made her one of the most prominent female writers of the 1950s – should instead be viewed as reasons why her writing deserves to be celebrated, not sidelined.

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*“Do you know who I am?” Contextualising Shirley Jackson.*

Shirley Jackson was one of the most prominent American writers of the 1950s, an author who managed to combine critical acclaim with substantial popular success. From the late 1940s, with the publication of her second book *The Lottery and Other Stories* (1949), until her death in the summer of 1965 she was a consistent bestseller (indeed, one of the most commercially successful female writers of the period) whose short fiction and essays were much sought after by many of the most famous magazines and journals of the day. In Jackson’s lifetime her work was also adapted for the stage, television, and twice brought to the nation’s movie screens, thus ensuring her exposure in a notably varied range of cultural and commercial outlets. The diverse nature of her talent is perhaps best exemplified by the apparent contradiction between the gothic fictions she is today most recognised for and the immensely popular domestic humour which helped make her one of the 1950s most visible “housewives”.

Yet despite Jackson’s undoubted talent and contemporary visibility, the decades since her death have seen critics (and readers) largely overlook the greater part of her output. The controversy caused by the publication of her most famous single piece of prose in 1948 meant that every interview or article about her hereafter was prefaced with the observation that Jackson was the author of “The Lottery,” a story so shocking that it prompted an unprecedented flurry of angry responses from the *New Yorker*’s normally sedate readership. The years since have not seen the critical approach to Jackson change all that much: “The Lottery” along with her most famous novel *The Haunting of Hill House* (1959) still receives the lion’s share of what scant critical attention has been paid to their author. Indeed, whilst the body of Jackson criticism

remains fairly small, the fact remains that much of Jackson's writing has barely been discussed at all. In particular, her three early novels *The Road Through The Wall* (1948) *Hangsaman* (1951) *The Bird's Nest* (1954) and her two volumes of domestic humour *Life Among the Savages* (1953) and *Raising Demons* (1957) have yet to be scrutinised in much detail. In contrast to this limited approach, in this thesis I shall be examining Jackson's *entire* oeuvre, and not just those texts that have been deemed suitably "literary" and therefore deserving of critical notice – the first study of Jackson since Lenemaja Friedman's inevitably dated *Shirley Jackson* (1975) to do so.<sup>1</sup> One of my intentions in this thesis is to therefore stress the cohesive nature of Jackson's entire body of work – and to illustrate the fact that far from being a rather disjointed assemblage of obviously commercial and more respectable, "literary" texts, Jackson's oeuvre, when considered in its entirety, in fact displays a compelling consistency of vision.

In addition, I shall also suggest that Jackson's writing interacted with the pressures and contradictory tensions of life in 1950s America to an extent that has never before been recognised. Whilst previous critical readings of her work have tended to approach her fiction from feminist, psychoanalytic, and, most recently, post-modern perspectives, the extent to which the social, cultural and historical contexts of the 1950s have manifested themselves in her work has yet to be explored. As a result, Jackson's writing has been treated like it existed in a kind of cultural vacuum, as though it had never engaged with the vicissitudes of the complex and often deeply troubled historical period in which it was created.

It is my contention that Jackson's work actively embodies many of the preoccupations and anxieties that lay at the heart of 1950s cultural ideology. Although

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<sup>1</sup> Whilst Darryl Hattenhauer has recently published a full length study of Jackson's fiction entitled *Shirley Jackson's American Gothic* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2003), he focuses upon her novels and short stories, and omits any sustained mention of the domestic humour.

she rarely confronted the most pressing social, political or gender issues of her era *directly*, Jackson's writing, as we shall see, nevertheless displays her preoccupation with many of the most major concerns of post war American society. Recognising this fact will not only enable us to view Jackson's work in an entirely new light, but will also, I shall argue, provide more proof of her unjustly neglected status as one of the most talented and insightful mid-twentieth century American writers.

It is important to stress that this thesis is concerned with exploring Jackson's alignment within her age – not the age itself. I shall be exploring the *contexts* in which in work can be located rather than just one historicized setting. This is by no means an attempt to present a thorough historical or sociological analysis of American life during the 1950s: Jackson's writing will always be the prime focus of attention. The historical, cultural and sociological information presented here should therefore be seen as a means of probing Jackson's work from a previously overlooked perspective, rather than the locus of attention in its own right.

The best way in which to illustrate the nature of my approach is to give a brief glimpse of the content of the study itself. This thesis consists of five chapters. Each chapter examines Jackson's writing in relation to a specific cultural or historical preoccupation(s). For instance, in Chapter One, (which will serve both as an introduction to Jackson's work and to the cultural and historical context of 1950s America), I will examine her fiction in relation to that produced by the decades most famous writers of horror and science fiction – Ray Bradbury, Richard Matheson and Robert Bloch. Chapter Two will explore Jackson's depiction of the home in relation to three main topics: the first of these being the astoundingly fast development and nature of suburban life in post-war America. Much of this chapter will focus upon Jackson's most neglected novel, her debut *The Road Through the Wall*. I will argue

that in this text Jackson anticipated the wave of suburbia inspired fiction, sociological commentary and journalism that emerged during the 50s and early 1960s. I will then stress the traditional roots of her work, outlining a brief history of the gothic house in fiction and discussing Jackson's reconfiguration of these old generic codes to reflect the anxieties of the modern age. I will conclude by examining Jackson's depiction of the home in relation to the domestic ideologies of the era. Chapter Three discusses Jackson's recurrent portrayals of female mental illness within the context of the 50s resurgence of interest in mental illness and psychiatry, whilst Chapter Four will explore Cold War paranoia, apocalyptic anxieties and premillenarianism in relation to several of Jackson's novels and stories, but most particularly *The Sundial* (1958). In Chapter Five I will undertake a detailed discussion of Jackson's two volumes of domestic humour, *Life Among the Savages* and *Raising Demons* in the context of both the oppressive nature of contemporary demands made upon American women and their relationship to the rest of Jackson's writing.

Finally, I will conclude by arguing that the diverse nature of Jackson's writing should be celebrated, rather than criticised. In the conclusion I also compare Jackson's career and literary afterlife with that of a significant near contemporary – Sylvia Plath. As the now most famous American woman writer of the 1950s, Plath presents an illuminating contrast against which to evaluate Jackson's status. Plath, who counted Jackson amongst her literary role models, died a virtual unknown, and yet in the succeeding decades attained a visibility achieved by very few authors – as much due perhaps, to her complex and ultimately tragic personal life as to her poetry. Jackson, by way of contrast, died at the height of her literary fame (amongst many other honours, *Time* magazine proclaimed *We Have Always Lived in the Castle* [1962] one of the ten best novels of the year) – yet in the years following her demise her writing

gradually became more and more neglected, save when mention was made of the two texts for which she had always been most recognised – “The Lottery” and *The Haunting of Hill House*. By comparing the reception latterly afforded these two literary women, both of whom dramatised in their work the pressures and anxieties experienced by women in post-war America, I shall be able to suggest some reasons why Jackson has been unjustly overlooked, and conclude my discussion of the manner in which her work subtly dramatised many of the most significant fears and preoccupations of her era.

Ultimately, it is hoped that this thesis will allow Jackson’s writing to be considered from an illuminating new perspective. Whilst the greater part of her fictional output has for many years been overlooked, or, when discussed at all, approached from within a predetermined set of critical frameworks, this study will explore her work from a new perspective, one which shall hopefully show that Jackson’s work has a great deal more to say about the cultural and historical contexts of 1950s America than has previously been acknowledged. It is only by opening up this, and other fresh avenues of critical exploration that we can begin to truly appreciate the nature of Shirley Jackson’s literary achievement.

## Chapter One: Shirley Jackson and American Horror fiction during the 1950s.

In this chapter, I shall discuss Shirley Jackson's work in relation to American horror fiction during the 1950s. It is widely acknowledged, both within and outside the genre, that in *The Haunting of Hill House* (1959),<sup>1</sup> Jackson produced one of the most significant horror novels of the twentieth century. That text has become an acknowledged classic of modern horror, the benchmark that every subsequent haunted house novel has been indebted to in one way or another, to the extent that these days it is a given that disturbances within any "haunted house" are as much a product of the neuroses of those who inhabit the building as they are of some malign supernatural force.<sup>2</sup>

The novel's influence upon the genre has been significant. For instance, in his influential survey of the genre, *Danse Macabre*, Stephen King lavishly praised Jackson's use of "quiet" horror and proclaimed it one of the best supernatural novels of the past century.<sup>3</sup> Similarly, in the introduction to *Horror: 100 Best Books*, an anthology in which modern genre luminaries were asked to write a short piece about the novel that has influenced them most, the editors noted that *Hill House* proved one of the most popular choices.<sup>4</sup> The significance of Jackson's contribution to the supernatural tale has never therefore been in any question: it is largely because of this contribution that *Hill House* was, and remains, her best-known novel. The irony is that the ostensibly supernatural subject matter of *Hill House* was quite unusual for

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<sup>1</sup> Shirley Jackson, *The Haunting of Hill House* (1959; London: Penguin, 1987). Hereafter shortened to *Hill House* for convenience's sake.

<sup>2</sup> See Stephen King's *The Shining* (1977), *The House Next Door* (1979) by Anne Rivers Siddons, Robert Marasco's *Burnt Offerings* (1973), or Mark Z. Danielewski's *The House of Leaves* (2000) for proof of Jackson's influence upon the direction that the fictional haunted house took in the latter half of the twentieth century.

<sup>3</sup> Stephen King, *Danse Macabre* (1981; London: Macdonald, 1992) 306.

<sup>4</sup> Stephen Jones and Kim Newman eds, introduction, *Horror: One Hundred Best Books* (London: New English Library, 1992) ix.

Jackson: her work was typically of a much more realist slant. Feted by horror enthusiasts for her accomplished reconfiguration of the classical ghost story, Jackson made an equally significant, though far less frequently acknowledged, contribution to the development of the modern day horror story. Whilst more obviously genre-based, populist writers such as Ray Bradbury, Richard Matheson and Robert Bloch have long been enshrined as the pioneers of this fictional form, the role that Jackson played in its development has, for a number of reasons, been largely overlooked – a fate that, as the remainder of this thesis shall demonstrate, has befallen Jackson’s work much more frequently than is deserved.

This chapter will serve both an introduction to Jackson’s fiction and to the literary and cultural contexts in which she operated. It will discuss her work overall, rather than focus upon any one text or theme: more detailed and specific discussion of individual texts will take place in the chapters that follow. As I have stated in the introduction, my approach to Jackson in this chapter, as in the remainder of this thesis, will be grounded in the cultural and historical context of America during the 1950s. However, before locating Jackson’s fiction within the framework of her fellow 50s horror writers, I will open this chapter by attempting to outline, for the purposes of this project at least, the meaning of the terms “horror” and “gothic,” since the two terms will be used so frequently that would be foolish not to attempt their definition, and also since part of my intent in this chapter is to try and establish to what category, if any, it can be said that Jackson’s work belongs. I will continue by firmly indicating the historicist nature of my approach – my next task will be to establish the factors that helped fuel the 1950s horror boom, and briefly discuss the transition from the “cosmic” horror that dominated the genre during the 1930s to the realist, psychological approach that characterised 50s horror fiction. I will discuss the social

and cultural factors that fuelled the 50s boom and its development, and introduce the notion – to be explored in greater detail in later chapters – that the decade was a time of immense change, change that generated the fear and unease that writers such as Jackson articulated in their work. Next, I will outline the genre’s most prominent themes and preoccupations and discuss the manner in which the three of the most important horror writers of the period reflected these preoccupations in their work. I will then go on to discuss the fact that Jackson’s fiction displays many of the same characteristics. Finally, I shall conclude outlining some of the reasons why the true nature of Jackson’s contribution to the horror genre, and indeed, the significance of her work in general, has been so overlooked.

However, before examining these issues, we must first attempt to carve out some sort of definition of the terms “gothic” and “horror”. After all, it is impossible to satisfactorily answer the question of whether Jackson can most accurately be termed a “horror” or a “gothic” writer unless one has first come to some sort of understanding of the specific meaning and provenance of the terms themselves. This task is by no means straightforward. The difficulty arises mainly because the terms have been intertwined for so long that disentangling them is frequently a fruitless process: one which I have no desire to get caught up in for too long. Accordingly, I’ll try to make my examination of the issue brief, by first giving some idea of why horror and the gothic are so tied up with one another, and secondly discussing the establishment and development of the American gothic.

In his essay “Horror Fiction: In Search of a Definition”(2000) (one of many on the subject), Clive Bloom provides some idea of the complexity of the issue when he notes that there exists “a multiplicity of apparently substitutable terms to cover the same thing – gothic tale, ghost tale, terror romance, gothic horror...it becomes clear



that while “horror” and “gothic” are often (if not usually) interchangeable, there are, of course, gothic tales that are not horror fiction (i.e. *Rebecca*) and horror tales that are not gothic.”<sup>5</sup> The evolution of the modern horror genre began with the emergence of the classic gothic tale during the latter half of the eighteenth century, a type of literature that Victor Sage has defined as “a specialised form of the historical romance, a form of fantasy about past history and alien cultures which has meaning for its present audience through a variety of cultural and historical reflexes.”<sup>6</sup> The gothic mode would substantially evolve over the decades, undergoing major transformations following its introduction to America, and then again during the latter half of the twentieth century. Because horror is an offshoot of the gothic, many of its most distinctive settings and patterns therefore had their beginnings in Romanticism and the gothic. Indeed, one of the most familiar devices of later, and in particular, nineteenth century gothic fiction – the invasion of the irrational, of the threatening and repulsive “other” into the apparently calm and ordered milieu of the everyday word – would become the horror genre’s most powerfully recognisable theme.<sup>7</sup> It’s a type of fiction “defined not by its content but by its presumptive effect – which is why it so readily overlaps with other genres which are defined by their content<sup>8</sup>” – (genres such as the gothic, fantasy and Science Fiction, in particular). It is significant that the horror genre, defined as it is by its reliance upon narratives of invasion, expulsion, and profound unease should have become the most prominent gothic mode in the late twentieth century. The so-called horror ‘boom’ that reached its zenith in the 1970s and 80s is probably most associated with the immense commercial and cultural

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<sup>5</sup> Clive Bloom, “Horror Fiction: In Search of a Definition” *A Companion to the Gothic*, ed. David Punter (Oxford: Blackwell, 2000) 13.

<sup>6</sup> Victor Sage, *The Gothick Novel: A Casebook* (London: Macmillan, 1990) 17.

<sup>7</sup> “Horror in Science Fiction,” *The Encyclopaedia of Science Fiction*, 1993 ed.

<sup>8</sup> “Horror in Science Fiction.”

impact made by Stephen King, but its most frequent concerns can be traced back to the emphasis upon manmade, everyday horrors that first emerged in the 1950s.

In order to fully appreciate the direction that American horror and Gothic fiction took during the 1950s, we must first come to some understanding regarding the meaning of the term “American Gothic”. As a genre, the Gothic of course originated in Europe, and had its beginnings in the imaginative possibilities and social uncertainties of the “Romantic” period. Romanticism, and its dark offspring the Gothic created a compelling counterweight to Augustan values of order and rationality: they were powerful reminders that however convincing the façade of human reason, passion, violence and chaos were never far from the surface of everyday events.

Though only a decade or so passed between the publication of the novels of Anne Radcliffe and Matthew “Monk” Lewis and the appearances of the first American Gothic romances clear differences between the two Gothic strains soon appeared.<sup>9</sup> Indeed, as many commentators have pointed out, it seems somewhat contradictory that the Gothic should have taken root in the United States at all. As Eric Savoy has put it, whilst the Gothic “has stubbornly flourished in the United States,” its cultural role nevertheless seems “entirely paradoxical.” After all, “an optimistic country founded upon the enlightenment principles of liberty and ‘the pursuit of happiness,’ a country that supposedly repudiated the burden of history and its irrational claims, has produced a strain of literature that is haunted by an insistent, undead past, and fascinated by the strange beauty of sorrow.”<sup>10</sup> The European Gothic had been characterised by its reliance upon the old world structures of castles and ruins and

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<sup>9</sup> Leslie Fiedler, *Love and Death in the American Novel* (Normal, Illinois: Dalkey Archive Press, 1997) 143.

<sup>10</sup> Eric Savoy, “The Rise of the American Gothic,” *The Cambridge Companion to Gothic Fiction*, ed. Jerome Hogle (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002) 167.

underground passages, and had been fuelled by the continent's religious divisions and rigid social hierarchies. Even the very word "Gothic" had medieval, barbaric connotations. Why would a type of literature which seemed to be so rooted in these old world structures take hold so quickly and immovably in a young, forward looking nation that had been founded in order to escape from these very characteristics? The answer lies at the dark heart of American history.

The success of the American gothic begins to make sense when one recalls that the so-called "American Dream" of an egalitarian, progressive, aggressively optimistic nation was founded upon someone else's nightmare. The American nation came into existence because of the deaths – through war, disease, and a general policy of cultural genocide – of millions of indigenous people. The almost complete wiping out of thousands of years of native history and culture was swiftly followed by the kidnapping and enslavement of millions of Africans whose forced labour on the farms and cotton fields of the country was a major factor in the establishment of a viable national economic base. The white "land of opportunity" was, for the slaves, a place of death, imprisonment, and systematic exploitation: for the Indians, killed in their thousands, penned into reservations on what had been their own land, and ravaged by European diseases they had no immunity towards, the situation was equally intolerable. What's more, one must also remember that America was in its early years a vast social and political experiment, an ambitious and dangerous attempt by liberal idealists to create a present day utopia, "a laboratory of enlightenment ideals in action,"<sup>11</sup> informed by the revolutionary principles of radical thinkers like Tom Paine. As with every great experiment, there lurked the possibility of catastrophic and costly failure. What of the dangers inherent in entrusting the future of American society to

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<sup>11</sup> A. G. Lloyd-Smith, *Uncanny American Fiction: Medusa's Face* (London: Macmillan, 1989) 109.

the undisciplined and frequently ill-informed rule of the majority? Revolutionary France's descent into butchery and chaos was still a recent memory, and the fear that history might repeat itself must surely have weighed heavily upon the fledgling nation's collective conscience. The very process of becoming an American itself gave rise to a sense of powerful dislocation, for it necessitated a process of physical and emotional dislocation from one's European, "old world" past. What then was left? It's a question that De Crevecoeur attempted to answer in his *Letters From an American Farmer*: "What then is the American, this new man? He is either a European, or the descendant of a European, hence that strange mixture of blood, which you will find in no other country...the American is a new man, who acts upon new principles: he must entertain new ideas and form new opinions."<sup>12</sup> Given these circumstances, it is hardly surprising that the gothic, a strain of literature characterised by its commitment to revealing the effects of dislocation and the chaos beneath apparent order, the dark passions that pulse beneath "enlightened" intellect should have soon become the most readily established and influential variety of national literature. America and the gothic were made for one another.

The genre's most important role was to expose the bloody contradictions that lay at the heart of the most pervasive (and misleading) national myth: that America was a land that offered happiness, justice and equality to all. By revelling in the unacknowledged guilt and anxiety buried deep in the national psyche, writers operating in the gothic mode were able to delve beneath the surface façade of optimism and progress and acknowledge in fictional form the unpleasant but fundamental truths about their country that had been tactfully ignored by "polite" society. This function, as Eric Savoy has noted, elevates the gothic beyond the realms

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<sup>12</sup> J. Hector St. John De Crevecoeur, "Letters from an American Farmer: Letter III: What is an American?" *The Norton Anthology of American Literature to 1820*, (New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 2003) 660.

of simple entertainment: “If early American Gothic was therefore bent perversely on dismantling the complacencies of ideological investment in human perfectibility through tales of the perverse, it turns out that its mission was a kind of political engagement rather than just escapist storytelling.”<sup>13</sup> Just as the early American gothic often exposed the dark underbelly of the nation’s apparently progressive, enlightened principles, Shirley Jackson’s 1950s fictions (and those of many of her contemporaries in the horror genre) reflected and commented upon the powerful undercurrents of anxiety and unease caused by the rapid political, technological and social changes of the post-war period. Jackson, like many of the decade’s most prominent horror writers, was the latest in a long line of authors such as “...Charles Brockden Brown, Edgar Allan Poe, Henry James, Nathaniel Hawthorne and Emily Dickinson...all of [whom] refuse the complacent, progressive ideology of their native country.”<sup>14</sup>

However, the Gothic strain would not take firm root in American soil without first undergoing some significant transformations. The process of generic transplantation was not without its problems. Foremost amongst these was the fact that the most notable conventions of the Gothic form were clearly ill suited to the moral, intellectual and physical landscape of the New World. Leslie Fiedler pinpointed a key factor in the development of the genre in America when he posed this question: “In Europe, Gothic was invented to deal with the past and with history from a typically Protestant and enlightened point of view. But what could one do with the form in a country which (however Protestant and enlightened) had never had a proper past or history?”<sup>15</sup> After all, the imaginative appropriation of Europe’s feudal past had provided many of the most important settings, props and characteristics of the genre. As Theresa Goddu has put it, the American gothic “represented a historical mode

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<sup>13</sup> Savoy 175.

<sup>14</sup> Savoy 180.

<sup>15</sup> Fiedler 144.

operating in what seemed to be a historical vacuum.”<sup>16</sup> It seemed clear that in order to overcome the inevitable shortcomings of the European formula, the American gothic had to look to its own landscape for inspiration. The imaginative exploitation of four indigenous features in particular would prove vital to the establishment of the local strain. These were the frontier, the Puritan legacy, race, and the consequences of political utopianism.<sup>17</sup>

America may have lacked castles, tombs and other old-world relics, but what it did have was something to replace them with – thousands of miles of virtually untouched wilderness. To the earliest European settlers, it was everything the “New World” promised in their own mythology was supposed to be – vast, mysterious, and productive. All was not as it seemed however: for a start, the New World was “neither new, nor virgin, nor unsettled.”<sup>18</sup> God had apparently neglected to mention the presence of sitting tenants before ushering the Puritans onto their new property. The Indians would become, in the settler’s eyes, the snakes that lurked menacingly in the new Garden of Eden; servants of Satan sent to terrify them from their path, the elusive and menacing “other” that lurked behind every tree and rock. The battle between civilisation and wilderness, settler and Indian, Christian and “heathen,” order and chaos contained within this experience would present a rich imaginative resource for the creation of a distinctively *American Gothic* style.

In addition, the Puritan imagination would prove vitally important to the genesis and development of the genre in America. Theirs was already a profoundly Gothic mindset; one grounded in the notion that everything around them was ripe for interpretation as yet another manifestation of the ongoing battle between good and

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<sup>16</sup> Theresa Goddu, *Gothic America: Narrative, History and Nation* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1997) 9.

<sup>17</sup> Lloyd-Smith 109.

<sup>18</sup> Malcolm Bradbury and Richard Ruland, *From Puritanism to Postmodernism: A History of American Literature* (London: Routledge, 1991) 13.

evil. The arrival on American soil was a sign of God's providence: the inconvenient and terrifying presence of the Indian population a daily reminder that Satan was everywhere. Whilst the imaginative resource provided by the European past did not represent an appropriate source of inspiration for writers seeking to forge an independent literary tradition, the Puritans in all their narrow minded, doom-laden grandeur more than compensated. Here was a distinctively America past, one which, as Nathaniel Hawthorne in particular was to discover, lent itself readily to fiction. As a consequence, many of the preoccupations and attitudes most associated with the Puritans – an emphasis on guilt and damnation, the struggle of the individual to overcome the evil imbedded in the human soul, predestination, the dangers of fanaticism, self righteousness, and claustrophobia – would become distinctive themes not only in Gothic fiction, but in American literature as a whole. The fact that such themes also feature frequently in the fiction of Shirley Jackson also testifies to their profound impact upon the American psyche.

As previously indicated, race would also become one of the most important topics in the American Gothic, particularly in the work of writers such as Poe and Melville, and in the twentieth century the fiction of Southern writers like Faulkner and O'Connor – taking the central position that class and social division had occupied in the European strain. As Toni Morrison has argued, “there is no romance free of what Herman Melville called ‘the power of blackness,’ especially not in a country in which there was a resident population, already black, upon which the imagination could play: through which historical, moral, metaphysical, and social fears, problems and dichotomies could be articulated.”<sup>19</sup> The moral difficulties and dramatic possibilities which slavery represented would greatly enrich the nation's creative possibilities, and

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<sup>19</sup> Toni Morrison, *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1992) 37.

helped create “a fabricated brew of darkness, otherness, alarm and desire that is uniquely American”.<sup>20</sup>

Finally, just as the original Gothic was informed by the political turmoil that swept the European continent during the 1790s, the American variety was also frequently reflect the political preoccupations of the time. Novels such as Charles Brockden Brown’s *Wieland*<sup>21</sup> (1798) “raised doubts about the ability of individuals to govern themselves in a full fledged democracy.”<sup>22</sup> Similarly, Brown’s *Arthur Mervyn* (1799) and George Lippard’s lurid melodrama *Quaker City* (1844) saw the beginnings of a deep-seated American concern about the increasing corruption, crime and pestilence of the nation’s cities. Significantly, both novels are set in Philadelphia, America’s first capital, whose very name (meaning “City of Brotherly Love”) epitomised the high-minded liberal idealism with which the nation itself was established. In the gothic texts that appeared ever more frequently after the eighteenth century we find reflected the growing fear amongst Americans that, somewhere along the path to equality, justice and fraternity, they had taken a very wrong turn. It’s very fitting therefore that Brockden Brown, the man considered by many to have been the first truly important American writer should have operated most successfully in the gothic mode. Despite occupying what Nathaniel Hawthorne memorably described as “an obscure and shadowy niche” in the “Hall of Fantasy,”<sup>23</sup> Brown, more than any other writer can be said to have begun the process of establishing a distinct American literary tradition. Brown’s realisation that the preoccupations and props of European convention were ill-suited, and indeed, ridiculous when situated in the American context would prove

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<sup>20</sup> Morrison 52.

<sup>21</sup> Charles Brockden Brown, *Wieland: Or, the Transformation*. (1798; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994).

<sup>22</sup> Savoy 176.

<sup>23</sup> Nathaniel Hawthorne, “The Hall of Fantasy,” *The Works of Nathaniel Hawthorne, Centenary Edition, vol. X* (Kent: Kent State University Press, 1974) 173-4.



vitaly important to the development of the American gothic, as would his insistence upon using instead America's own landscape and circumstances as a source of inspiration – another step taken from cultural colonisation and towards an independent imagination. From its very arrival in the New World therefore, the gothic has evinced a strong engagement with the very idea of America and what it means to be “American”. It's an engagement with political, cultural and social issues that would be continued in the twentieth century, particularly in the work of writers such as Shirley Jackson.

Perhaps the most significant use of the term “American Gothic” in the twentieth century, and certainly the one most relevant to Jackson, is its “reappearance as a description of a certain kind of American Fiction” whose main practitioners are said to be James Purdy, Joyce Carol Oates, William Faulkner, and Flannery O'Connor.<sup>24</sup> Irving Malin defined the so-called “New American Gothic” in some detail in 1962:

New American Gothic is close to Poe and far removed from Howells. It believes that the psyche is more important than society...that the disorder of the buried life must be charted. ... New American Gothic uses grotesques who love themselves so much they cannot enter the social world except to dominate their neighbours...the family is crucial in New American Gothic...it dramatises the conflict between private and social worlds, ego and superego...order often breaks down: chronology is distorted, identity is blurred, sex is twisted, the buried life erupts. The total effect is that of a dream.<sup>25</sup>

In New American Gothic, Malin continues, writers may make use of the old props and situations of the classical Gothic - “the haunted castles, the voyage into the forest, and the reflection” but whereas Walpole, Lewis and Radcliffe “do not use these images in any psychologically acute way: they remain mere props...the inheritors of the old

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<sup>24</sup> Punter 3.

<sup>25</sup> Irving Malin, *New American Gothic* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1962) 6-9.

Gothic regard these images as ‘objective correlatives’ of the psyche.”<sup>26</sup> Thus, in a process initiated by gothic innovators such as Brown, Hawthorne and James, the “haunted castle” on the New American Gothic functions as “the metaphor of confusing narcissism, the private world.”<sup>27</sup> Though the “New American Gothic” consists primarily of texts that don’t immediately seem to have a great deal in common, they do tend to deal with “landscapes of the mind, settings distorted by the protagonist’s psychological obsessions” which tend to immerse the reader in the disturbed psyche of the main character. Violence, decay and degeneration are all primary themes, and the American South is the most common setting.<sup>28</sup> Shirley Jackson’s fiction, as I shall establish in Chapter Five, has a great deal in common with such texts: in particular, her use of setting to reflect the mindset of her disturbed heroines, their self obsession and hysteria, and her tendency to immerse the reader in the distorted worldview of characters such as Merricat Blackwood (*We Have Always Lived in the Castle*<sup>29</sup>) and Eleanor Vance (*Hill House*).

Yet Jackson, as this chapter will demonstrate, can also be categorised as a horror writer – a designation that by and large eludes her fellow practitioners of the New American Gothic, perhaps with the exception of Oates. This is partly because of her willingness, most obvious in *Hill House*, and many of her short stories, to employ implied supernaturalism and the fantastic in her work. However, Jackson’s status as a horror writer owes even more to her profound awareness of the history and development of Gothic literature, and her willingness to reinvent the most familiar, and therefore, most clichéd devices of the genre – the haunted house, the sensitive

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<sup>26</sup> Malin 80.

<sup>27</sup> For a useful discussion of Jackson’s work in relation to Malin, see “Chambers of Yearning: Shirley Jackson’s use of the Gothic” by John G. Parks, *Twentieth Century Fiction* 30 (1984): 15-29.

<sup>28</sup> Punter 3.

<sup>29</sup> Shirley Jackson, *We Have Always Lived in the Castle. The Masterpieces of Shirley Jackson* (1963; London: Robinson, 1996). Hereafter shortened to “*Castle*”.

young heroine, the isolated aristocratic family – in order to embody the anxieties and preoccupations of 1950s America. Simply put, Jackson has as much – or even more – in common with Walpole, Poe, James and later, Matheson and Bloch, as she does with Faulkner and O'Connor. Indeed, as Darryl Hattenhauer has pointed out in the most recent full length study of Jackson, the fact that “she cannot be inserted into the myth of Southern Gothic, which holds that American Gothic is not of the dominant culture but of the South” is one reason why Jackson has been overlooked.<sup>30</sup> Yet as we shall see, her fiction, overwhelmingly preoccupied as it is with breakdown, dislocation, isolation and cruelty, embodies one of the predominant directions that both Gothic and horror would take in the twentieth century - the “shift to the internal, to the isolated psyche” and the increasing tendency to locate horror “in the subconscious, in inner space – not in the guilt of past fictions.”<sup>31</sup>

Prior to the 1950s, and the arrival of Bradbury, Matheson, Bloch and Jackson, the most significant twentieth century American horror writer was H.P. Lovecraft, whose florid tales of “cosmic” horror would eventually spawn their own influential cult, or “mythos”. Before Lovecraft however, there emerged a writer whose work partly anticipated the directions that American horror would take in following century – Ambrose Bierce. S.T. Joshi has claimed that Bierce is the writer with whom Jackson has most in common – stating that that the generally bleak worldview that informs all of her writing is “akin to the cheerless and nihilistic misanthropy of Bierce,” and that “it is because Shirley Jackson so keenly detected horror in the everyday world, and wrote of it with rapier sharp prose, that she ranks as a twentieth century Bierce”.<sup>32</sup> As I shall discuss in much more detail in Chapter Four, Jackson’s less than

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<sup>30</sup> Darryl Hattenhauer, *Shirley Jackson's American Gothic* (New York: State University of New York Press, 2003) 7.

<sup>31</sup> “The Modern Masters 1920-1980,” *Horror: A Core Collection and Reference Guide*. Marshall Tymms, ed. (London: R.R. Bowker, 1981).

<sup>32</sup> S.T. Joshi, *The Modern Weird Tale* (Jefferson: McFarland and Company, 2001) 13.

complimentary opinion of human nature does have much in common with Bierce's pessimism, and it is true that the short fiction of both writers is notable for its economy and precision. However, Jackson differs from Bierce in at least one highly significant aspect: as David Punter has observed, "Bierce gives his reader almost nothing to compensate for the absence of developed character."<sup>33</sup> Unlike Poe, for whom brevity was "supplemented by intense (momentary) involvement with the psychological state of the protagonist" Bierce had no interest in the mindset or deeper motivations of his characters: events happen, usually culminating in death, and that, it is strongly implied, is that. Bierce's lack of interest in the workings of the mind contrasts strongly with Jackson's fascination with aberrant and extreme mental states: for her, psychology and character, if not the outright impetus for a story or novel, are always the focuses of attention. This crucial difference in approach means that while Bierce and Jackson share, as Joshi suggests, a similarly grim worldview, they are by no means alike in every respect. Nevertheless, his work, informed as it was by the horrors of (the civil) war and suffused with a bitterly sardonic wit represents an important antecedent to much of the horror fiction produced by American writers during the latter half of the twentieth century.

Like Hawthorne, Jackson, and in more recent years, Stephen King, H.P. Lovecraft's fictions are situated in New England – a region that has helped shape American horror fiction in much the same way that the history and culture of the southern states influenced the New American Gothic. Lovecraft's New England was self-consciously mythic, "poised between the terrors of the cosmos on the outside and the viscous symbols of psychological horror on the inside."<sup>34</sup> His importance lies in his creation of a distinct, influential offshoot of modern horror fiction, an offshoot that

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<sup>33</sup> Punter 37.

<sup>34</sup> Mark Jancovich, *Rational Fears: American Horror in the 1950s* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1996) 94.

survives to this day as a virtual genre of its own – the Lovecraftian tale.<sup>35</sup> The so-called “Cthulu Mythos” was the organising principle behind most of Lovecraft’s better known stories: in contrast to the direction that horror fiction would take in the 50s, his “terrors where not those of within, but entirely those of the unintelligible outside, of the individual cramped by alien encroachment.”<sup>36</sup> Though he has remained a highly significant figure in modern American horror, a key early influence upon writers such as Bloch and Bradbury, who emerged in the generation after his death, and more recently, modern genre notables such as Ramsey Campbell and T.E.D. Klein, Lovecraft’s archaic style and old fashioned preoccupations would soon be superseded by a new mood in horror. The real life terrors of World War Two would have an immense impact upon the genre. As David J. Skal has put it, “earlier, horror came from the irrational and ungodly encroaching from without – post war stories increasingly show horror arising from aspects of life normally associated with security and stability”<sup>37</sup> – horror would increasingly come from the everyday and the seemingly ordinary.

In the post war era, the mythologies that horror fiction had previously been founded upon underwent a radical shift.<sup>38</sup> The fear that had for generations been aroused by the old bogeymen – Dracula, Frankenstein’s monster, and the Mummy – had been neutralised by the awareness that no fictional or filmic fiend could ever top the evils perpetrated by humans themselves. After all, “a world forced to contend with the war’s very real legions of the dead and the unalleviated apprehensions of the dawning nuclear age demanded horrors that where more believable, rather than more

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<sup>35</sup> Perhaps the most disturbing aspect of Lovecraft’s fiction is not his eerie evocation of nameless terrors, but rather the fact that, as David Punter and others have noted, the “terms he applies to his invading non-human monstrosities are precisely the same as those in which he describes members of all American ethnic groups with the exception of East coast ‘old Americans.’”

<sup>36</sup> Punter 38.

<sup>37</sup> David J. Skal, *The Monster Show: A Cultural History of Horror* (London: Plexus, 1994) 201.

<sup>38</sup> “Contemporary Horror Fiction 1950-1998,” *Fantasy and Horror* 1999 ed.

fantastic.” As a result, from the mid 1940s onwards, horror fiction increasingly assumed forms that embodied the most powerful anxieties of twentieth century life. The result of this paradigm shift was the trend towards exploring horrors of a more human scale that can be found in most post-war horror fiction.<sup>39</sup> Stephen King, whose own fiction was profoundly influenced by this movement towards the every day and the ordinary, has remarked in an interview, “My idea of what a horror story should be [is that] the monster shouldn’t be in a graveyard in decadent old Europe, but in the house down the street”<sup>40</sup> - a notion, that as S.T. Joshi notes, was evolving in the generation just prior to his “with writers such as Bradbury, Jackson and Matheson.”<sup>41</sup> I shall now examine the relationship between Jackson and the most prominent writers of horror fiction during the 1950s in order to further explore Joshi’s assertion and to further illustrate the extent to which the anxieties and preoccupations in her work are evident in the more obviously “genre” fictions of horror writers who were writing at the same time.

The path towards greater credibility in horror during the 1950s and after was prefigured by Ray Bradbury’s short fiction of the previous decade. Bradbury is today best known as a Science Fiction/Fantasy writer – the author of classics such as *The Martian Chronicles* (1950) and the famous anti-censorship parable *Fahrenheit 451* (1951) – but the horror stories he wrote for the pulps early in his career are amongst his finest work. Bradbury’s Science Fiction, influential as it has been, is often more allegorical than anything else: like Stephen King, the factors that serve to give his work its power – the repeated use of the romanticised small town setting, the preoccupation with the childhood and the past (in Bradbury’s case, the 1930s), can

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<sup>39</sup> “Contemporary Horror Fiction 1950-1998,” *Fantasy and Horror* 1999 ed.

<sup>40</sup> Joshi 63. Which is precisely what King does in ‘*Salem’s Lot* (and, indeed, almost everything he’s ever written) - literally move a decadent, ancient vampire from Europe to the house down the street in an ordinary New England town, with predictably nasty results.

<sup>41</sup> Joshi 63.

also be the greatest flaw. Bradbury's S.F. was often vague, mawkish and overly sentimentalised – characteristics generally missing from his horror stories, which are amongst the best the genre has to offer. The tales collected in *Dark Carnival* (1947) and *The October Country* (1955) show that whatever his later reputation, Bradbury was at heart a writer of the macabre rather than the Science Fictional. As Mark Jancovich has observed, "Bradbury is at his best when at his most nightmarish."<sup>42</sup>

Like much of Jackson's output, Ray Bradbury's horror fiction was frequently set in quiet, rural communities. The small town Midwest, where he spent his childhood, would serve much the same function as Jackson's New England, though it must be said that Bradbury's Illinois settings are generally depicted with a sentimentality and romanticism that is quite different from the claustrophobic, insular, frequently sinister rural backdrops employed by Jackson. Bradbury's Midwest is, as in his famous novel *Something Wicked This Way Comes* (1962) most often a mythic, idealised place violated by unfathomable evil in its midst: in Jackson stories such as "The Lottery" and "The Summer People" and *Castle*, evil is usually seen as much as a product of the region itself as it is of the (frequently) disturbed souls that dwell there.

Bradbury was a democratising influence upon the genre, and helped liberate horror fiction from the "Gothic recrudescences"<sup>43</sup> of the pulp magazines and the traditional supernatural menaces that had previously dominated the form. As was the case with Jackson (who, *Hill House* aside, very rarely featured the paranormal in her work), many of Bradbury's best horror tales "feature no supernatural element, only seemingly ordinary people revealing extraordinary antisocial tendencies" and though there are occasional ghosts and vampires in his work, "the bulk of his stories illustrate how everyday life can throw up a dark side as unsettling and more convincing that

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<sup>42</sup> Jancovich 99.

<sup>43</sup> "Contemporary Horror Fiction 1950-1998," *Fantasy and Horror* 1999 ed.

anything the usual monsters had to offer.”<sup>44</sup> For instance, the process of creating a family becomes fraught with danger in the chilling story “The Small Assassin,” in which a pregnant woman suddenly decides that the child in her womb is a malevolent being intent upon her destruction.<sup>45</sup> Her fear becomes even more intense after she gives birth – as she asks, “Does a baby know the difference between right and wrong?” but her husband and psychiatrist dismiss her steadily escalating anxieties as post-natal depression. It is only after her death that they come to believe the terrible truth: the child is a malign anomaly, an evolutionary mutant with physical and mental abilities far beyond that of any normal child, but with the instinctive drive for self – preservation that dominates any infant. After all, it is suggested, “...what is there in the world more selfish than a baby? Nothing!”<sup>46</sup> The story ends with the initially sceptical psychiatrist, now the only adult left alive, prowling around the child’s home with a scalpel, determined to end its brief but terrible life once and for all. In Bradbury’s story, the result of the post war baby boom means death, not fulfilment for the happy and ambitious young couple we see at the tale’s outset.

Bradbury explores the dark underbelly of small town life in “The Handler,” a gruesome tale in which we find out that the mild mannered, timid local mortician has been expressing his frustration and hatred for his fellow citizens in a very gruesome manner – by violating their corpses before burial. Each of his victims is defiled in a

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<sup>44</sup> “Contemporary Horror Fiction 1950-1998,” *Fantasy and Horror* 1999 ed.

<sup>45</sup> Interestingly, Bradbury’s near contemporary Richard Matheson (about whom we shall be hearing more shortly) wrote a similarly themed story, in which a pregnant woman discovers that she is carrying not an unborn child, but an alien invader – a very literal depiction of the ‘enemy within’ motif that dominated so much horror and S.F of the 1950s, and which, like the 1956 shocker *The Bad Seed* represents a significant precursor to the wave of ‘evil child’ movies (*Rosemary’s Baby*, *The Omen*, *The Exorcist*, and my personal favourite, Larry Cohen’s *It’s Alive*, about a mutant killer baby on the loose in Los Angeles) that emerged during the 1970s. This trend in horror is undoubtedly related to cultural anxieties about the effect that the massive post-war “baby boom” was having upon American society: the boom really took off during the 50s whilst these children became teenagers and young adults during the late 60s and 1970s, the point at which “evil child” movies again became popular.

<sup>46</sup> Ray Bradbury, *The Small Assassin* (St Albans: Panther, 1976) 23.



manner that the mortician thinks is appropriate to their behaviour in life – a confirmed racist, for instance, is injected with ink, instead of embalming fluid, and so turns black: a life long spinster goes to her eternal rest accompanied by the carefully selected (though never explicitly specified: this was still the 1950s after all) body parts of a local man, and so on. The “handler’s” comeuppance takes place in a very E.C. comics manner, as befits such a gruesome tale: an old man who has mistakenly been pronounced dead is wheeled into the morgue, where he regains consciousness and becomes aware of what has been going on for years: his stunned reaction reflects the betrayal and shock Bradbury’s small town protagonists often feel when confronted with evidence of such concrete evil in their midst: “To think that this has been going on in our town all these years and we never knew. The things you did to people!”<sup>47</sup> Though dispatched by the villain, with his dying words the old man calls upon the corpses that surround him to rise up and take revenge upon their violator – and the story ends with the discovery that the mortician has mysteriously been torn limb from limb... As well as graphically illustrating Bradbury’s accomplished ability to find evil in the everyday, the story also neatly anticipates the real life case of Wisconsin farmer Ed Gein – a “harmless” rural eccentric who murdered two women in the 1950s, and was found to have systematically robbed local graves for years in order to procure trophies and adornments for his squalid home. It’s interesting to note that Gein’s crimes upon the dead seem to have much more impact upon the public consciousness than those he committed upon the living: necrophilia and grave robbing still inspire much more disgust than the usual murder, despite the fact that the ‘victims’ of these particular acts are hardly in a position to object.<sup>48</sup>

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<sup>47</sup> Ray Bradbury, “The Handler” *The Small Assassin*, 142.

Bradbury's use of the small town milieu continued in "The Man Upstairs,"<sup>49</sup> an odd variation on the vampire story, in which a small boy decides that there is something *very* suspicious about the mysterious new boarder in his grandmother's lodging house. Shortly after his arrival, a spate of brutal murders begins, and the all-American boy becomes increasingly convinced of the lodger's inhuman nature. He eventually takes a knife to the stranger while he sleeps (like a true vampire, the man never leaves the house during the day). The boy finds not human internal organs, but rather a bizarre profusion of oddly constituted coloured shapes – and the otherworldly nature of the invader is powerfully confirmed even as his threat to the peacefulness and tranquillity of the town is ended. However, there is no such restoration of order in the brutal story "The Smiling People," told from the distorted point of view of a deeply disturbed man who grows increasingly unable to tolerate the demands of his large family. At the end of the tale, the reasoning behind the story's seemingly innocuous title becomes chillingly clear. The local sheriff and his deputies, having heard reports of a disturbance, forced their way into the family home and discover that the protagonist has brutally murdered the entire household – and we realise that the "smiling" family he has described to us all lie dead, their throats slashed open with a carving knife.

As is perhaps to be expected in a writer that learned his trade writing for pulp magazines, Bradbury often indulged in his weakness for horror-comic shock endings, as seen previously in the ironic revenge-from-beyond-the-grave conclusion of "The Handler". Perhaps the finest of his shock-endings takes place in "The October Game," which has one of the most gruesome, and most memorable denouements of any 50s horror tale. The set up is characteristically simple: it is Halloween, and a feuding

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<sup>49</sup> Bradbury, "The Man Upstairs," *The Small Assassin*.

professor and his wife are hosting a seasonal party for the children of the neighbourhood. The wife has demanded a divorce, and announces her intention to seek sole custody of the couple's only child, a young daughter. Her spouse does not react well to the suggestion. Nevertheless, the party must go ahead. The evening progresses, and a party game commences – the lights are switched off and a series of harmless foodstuffs are passed round the assembled group of kids in order to vividly represent various body parts of an “evil” witch – peeled grapes as eyes, spaghetti for intestines, etc. Halfway through the game, the scientist's increasingly uneasy wife notices that their daughter seems to have disappeared and connects it with the disturbing verisimilitude of the “witches” body – and comes to a horrific realisation. Her estranged husband has murdered their child in a gruesome act of revenge and put her corpse to use in the party game. The story ends as the wife screams at another adult who is about to put the lights on in order to aid the search for the ‘missing’ child to let the room remain dark – but it's much too late... In this bloody variation upon the traditional Halloween tale, evil lies not with the witches, ghosts and goblins of popular tradition, but in the family, and with a deeply disturbed father who will do *anything* to prevent his wife from taking possession of their only child. This locating of horror with the family, the domestic sphere is, as we shall see, an important characteristic of Jackson's work and of 50s horror fiction in general.

Many of Bradbury's “Science Fiction” stories have similarly nightmarish endings: as happened again and again during the 50s, the boundaries between SF and horror at times seem non-existent in his work, of which it can perhaps most accurately be said that many of his tales are not so much S.F. as they are horror tales in an S.F. setting. Yet even in outer space Bradbury pursues his favourite theme of horror within the seemingly familiar and everyday. In “Mars is Heaven” (also known as “The Third

Expedition”) a group of wary astronauts land on the red planet only to discover a welcoming world that is identical to that of their childhood, and which appears to be peopled by their departed loved ones. Lulled into a false sense of security by the warmth and familiarity of their surroundings, the protagonists unthinkingly accept this world’s hospitality – and are brutally murdered that night by their “closest relations”: they have fallen into a deadly trap.<sup>50</sup>

Much of Shirley Jackson’s work is peopled with those defined as “outsiders”: the Blackwood sisters in *Castle*, poor, lonely Eleanor Vance in *Hill House*, alienated, disturbed teenager Natalie Waite in *Hangsaman* (1951)<sup>51</sup> and many, possibly most of the women who appear in her short stories. It is always clear that Jackson’s sympathies lie not with society but with those who find themselves (by choice or for other reasons) excluded from “normality”. Bradbury’s work is similarly sympathetic towards those defined as outsiders or aliens<sup>52</sup>: the crucial difference of course being that Bradbury’s “aliens” are often genuinely otherworldly. He frequently depicted isolated protagonists who are pitted against the injustice and conformity of a totalitarian state: the most famous example of this being in *Fahrenheit 451*, which focuses on a state that is any bibliophile’s worst nightmare – a place where books are outlawed. Bradbury’s protagonist, Montag, begins the novel as a ‘fireman’, whose job is not to put out fires but rather to destroy books. During the course of the novel, Montag’s beliefs gradually change, and he moves from a position of an insider (who defends his society from the threat posed by literature) to that of an outsider (who is hunted down by the forces of authority.)<sup>53</sup> This is “one of Bradbury’s most dark, nightmarish and horrific fantasies...the normal world is presented as a nightmare

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<sup>50</sup> Jancovich 100.

<sup>51</sup> Shirley Jackson, *Hangsaman* (London: Michael Joseph, 1951).

<sup>52</sup> Jancovich 100.

<sup>53</sup> Jancovich 100.

while those defined as ‘anti-social deviants’ are presented as sympathetic and attractive people.”<sup>54</sup> As happens so often in Jackson, the “abnormal” perspective is shown to have much more merit than that encouraged by the rest of society.

This belief also runs strongly through the work of Richard Matheson, who has been described as “the most influential writer to follow Bradbury’s lead.”<sup>55</sup> Matheson’s first published story “Born of Man and Woman”<sup>56</sup> is typical of this trend: told from the perspective of a hideously deformed, horribly abused mutant child who has been confined in the basement of the family home since birth, it manages to be both deeply poignant and quite disturbing: as would happen so often in the rest of Matheson’s fiction, our sympathies lie firmly with the persecuted outsider rather than the representative of “normality” – a situation that, as we shall soon see, is replicated again and again in Shirley Jackson’s fiction as well.

Although Bradbury was undoubtedly an important force in American horror, Matheson’s contribution to the genre is even more significant. In setting so much of his fiction as taking place in the recognisably “real” world he indicated the direction that horror would take in the latter half of the twentieth century. The most prominent horror novelist of the present age, Stephen King, has even declared “...the author who influenced me the most as a writer was Richard Matheson.”<sup>57</sup> Whereas much of Bradbury’s fiction was situated in outer space or in an idealised, nostalgic version of 1930s small town America, Matheson usually set his novels and stories in an obviously contemporary, often urban, 50s milieu. He was much more concerned with exploring the specific anxieties and preoccupations of the present than the idealised past (or future): as Mark Jancovich has noted, “while Bradbury’s characters seem to

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<sup>54</sup> Jancovich 113.

<sup>55</sup> “Contemporary Horror Fiction 1950-1998,” *Fantasy and Horror* 1999 ed.

<sup>56</sup> Richard Matheson, “Born of Man and Woman,” *Born of Man and Woman* (London: n.p. 1956) 1-8.

<sup>57</sup> Cover notes, Richard Matheson, *I Am Legend*, Science Fiction Masterworks (1954: London: Millenium, 1999).

be the products of turn-of-the-century, rural, middle-American small towns, Matheson's characters are usually defined in relation to suburban domesticity and corporate employment."<sup>58</sup>

Though Matheson was initially thought of as primarily a writer of Science Fiction, he was from the 1960s onwards recognised as one of the most significant modern creators of terror and fantasy in both fiction and film.<sup>59</sup> Much of Matheson's reputation is due to his influential and somewhat prolific production of scripts for television and film. He contributed no less than fourteen episodes to the original run of the famous genre T.V show *The Twilight Zone*, and, beginning with an adaptation of his own novel *The Incredible Shrinking Man* (1956), he wrote many film scripts, including several of Roger Corman's Poe adaptations (including *The Pit and the Pendulum*, *The Masque of Red Death* and *The Raven*) and the acclaimed television movie *Duel* about an innocent motorist being terrorised by a malevolent, never seen trucker, which marked fledgling director Stephen Spielberg's auspicious debut.

Matheson is the contemporary whose preoccupations and principal themes, as I shall demonstrate, most closely resemble those of Shirley Jackson's fiction. His overriding theme, the one that recurs over and over in his work, is paranoia, be it depicted in a horror or S.F framework: as Matheson himself has acknowledged of his 50s output, "my theme in those years was of a man, isolated and alone, and assaulted on all sides by everything you could imagine"<sup>60</sup>: but unlike Lovecraft's treatment of the same notion, the threat in Matheson's fiction, as in Jackson's, comes not from cosmic forces "but from the commonplace clutter of everyday life." In Chapter Three, which focuses upon the depiction of a madness and mental illness in Jackson's fiction,

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<sup>58</sup> Jancovich 131.

<sup>59</sup> "Richard Matheson," *The Science Fiction Encyclopaedia*, 1993 ed. 585.

<sup>60</sup> Quoted in Douglas Winter, *Faces of Fear: Encounters with the Creators of Modern Horror* (London: Pan, 1990) 40.

I shall discuss Matheson's use of paranoia and insanity and its relationship to Jackson in much more detail: at the same time, I will also be discussing several of Matheson's most prominent short stories from the period. In this chapter therefore, my discussion of Matheson will focus instead upon discussion of the three horror novels he wrote during the 50s: *I Am Legend* (1954), *The Incredible Shrinking Man*<sup>61</sup> (1956) and *Stir of Echoes*<sup>62</sup> (1958).<sup>63</sup>

As any brief comparison of their fiction proves, Jackson and Matheson have the same basic preoccupations – paranoia, entrapment, domesticity, neurosis, isolation, the redefinition of the meaning of the terms “normal” and ‘abnormal’ and the exploration of the dark side of American society during the 1950s. Equally significant is the fact that both also had a strong awareness of the conventions and traditions of the horror genre, and were able to reconfigure these elements in order to reflect the anxieties and preoccupations of their own age. Jackson reinvented the hackneyed old genre device of the haunted/gothic house in *Hill House* and *The Sundial*<sup>64</sup>: in *I Am Legend*, Matheson created a powerful, and notably modern variation upon the traditional vampire tale – notable instances in which both authors built something quite new out of the oldest and most apparently familiar of genre materials.

Though ostensibly set in the years 1976-79, *I Am Legend*<sup>65</sup> was written in 1954 and is very much a product of the 1950s. The novel is part post-apocalyptic fantasy, part paranoid horror: yet it is, like the other Matheson novels I shall discuss, as much a tale of 50s masculinity in crisis as it is the sum of its genre parts. The basic plot is fairly

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<sup>61</sup> Richard Matheson, *The Incredible Shrinking Man* (1956; London: Corgi, 1963)

<sup>62</sup> Richard Matheson, *Stir of Echoes* (1958; London: Boxtree, 2000).

<sup>63</sup> All three of which were made into films at one time or another: *I am Legend* in 1964 as *The Last Man on Earth* and again in 1974 (with Charlton Heston representing the last vestiges of normality) in a rather ham fisted fashion in *The Omega Man*; *The Incredible Shrinking Man* was transferred to celluloid in 1957 by genre stalwart Jack Arnold, and *Stir of Echoes* was competently filmed in 1999.

<sup>64</sup> Shirley Jackson, *The Sundial*. (1958; New York: Ace Books, n.d.)

<sup>65</sup> Hereafter shortened to *Legend*.

straightforward: it is 1976 and Richard Neville is the only human left alive in a world of ravenous vampires. Matheson employs a fairly standard Science Fiction rationale to explain how this terrible state of affairs came to pass: we find out that some sort of war broke out, which resulted in the (probable) use of nuclear weapons and the unleashing of a devastating type of germ warfare which turns the population into vampiric mutants who shun the daylight and crave human blood. Neville, by some fluke of biology or luck, remains unaffected by the plague, and is helpless to do anything as his wife, daughter, and the rest of the world die and are reborn as creatures of the night. He spends his days roaming the deserted streets in the search for ever dwindling supplies and killing sleeping vampires, while his nights are spent barricaded inside his fortified suburban home, fending off the relentless wave of attacks that occur as soon as the sun sets.

Much of the novel's interest lies in the fact that Neville lives a life that is a horrific parody of that experienced by the typical middle class male of the 50s. He is the epitome of conservatism and conformity: clinging to routine and to the habits that defined his pre-plague existence despite (and probably because of) the fact that the world around him has profoundly changed. He still lives in the same suburban home that he inhabited with his family, despite the fact that he is under constant attack there, and has had to burn down the houses on either side to prevent vampires from leaping onto his roof. His home has become a fortress, fortified with planks, stakes and garlic, filled with freezers full of stockpiled food and powered by a generator. He insists upon driving the quintessential family car – a station wagon – in spite of the fact that his family is long dead and spare parts are becoming increasingly difficult to find. He still shops at Sears, and even smokes a pipe in the evenings – all that is lacking is a warm pair of slippers and a martini lovingly prepared by his wife



(obviously not an option, but by way of compensation, Neville has installed a bar in the living room). In addition, as Mark Jancovich has pointed out, “even his task of making stakes to kill vampires is reminiscent of the work-shop carpentry which became a popular pastime for the 1950s middle-class males who were concerned to prove the masculine skills absent from their office jobs.”<sup>66</sup> We are told that wood working “gave him something to lose himself in,”<sup>67</sup> as though he were unwinding after a hard day at work in the office. Even Neville’s vampiric nemesis is notably suburban: the attacks upon his home are led by vampire Ben Cortman, his (former) next door neighbour, and Neville spends much of his time trying to find the place where Cortman sleeps during daylight so that he can be dispatched – friendly neighbourly rivalry having become a deadly clash of wits. So despite the obviously improbable nature of the premise, the novel, through the steady accumulation of apparently mundane detail, and the constant detailing of Neville’s careful routine, remains firmly rooted in the actual and the everyday. Richard Matheson has stated as much in an interview when he declared that “to me, fantasy is best done in strictly realistic terms”<sup>68</sup> and it is true that in its own way, this is as much a novel exploring masculinity and suburban life as it is a tale of terror – just as *Hill House* and *Castle* function as “ghost” story and modern gothic respectively, yet at the same time examine the themes of female madness and contemporary notions of domesticity.

Indeed, the obsessive, almost loving detailing of domestic routine amidst bizarre and indeed dangerous circumstances links both *Legend* and *Castle*, both of which focus upon protagonists for whom any deviation from routine is abhorrent. The Jackson novel is told from the distorted perspective of a deeply disturbed young woman, Merricat Blackwood, who resorts to murder then arson in order to ensure that

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<sup>66</sup> Jancovich 149.

<sup>67</sup> Matheson, *Legend* 44.

<sup>68</sup> Winter 40.

the domestic idyll established by her sister Constance is protected. For Merricat, any departure from the habits they have established in the years since the (not so mysterious) mass poisoning of the rest of the Blackwood clan is terrifying and unacceptable: a deeply wounding personal assault. Whilst Merricat's obsessive attention to domestic detail is largely due to her psychosis, Neville's is ultimately a means of ensuring survival, both mental and physical. If he is to protect his home and his life, he must board up his house afresh each day, whittle dowelling rods into stakes and protect the generator that is his only source of power. Similarly, in a world without doctors and dentists, even the apparently simple acts of eating well-balanced meals and flossing before bedtime become of vital importance. Routine is also Neville's way of staying sane in an insane world, for despite his assertion early in the novel that "a man could get used to anything if he had to,"<sup>69</sup> as time passes he becomes more and more prone to loneliness and depression. The unthinking repetition of everyday tasks is, in these circumstances, a lifesaver.

Another similarity between *Legend* and Jackson's fiction lies in the fact that they both share an interest in the effects of entrapment upon their protagonists. In *Sundial* and *Castle*, Jackson wrote about families confined to their own homes – in *Sundial*, because the protagonists are barricading themselves in because they believe the end of the world is imminent: in *Castle* because the Blackwood sisters are figures of fear and hatred in the rural community in which they live. The opening chapter of *Castle* details Merricat's tense final shopping trip into town, during which she feels constantly under threat from hostile locals: the enmity that exists between the two factions, though partly a product of Merricat's paranoid delusions, is obvious. Neville's paranoia is entirely justified: he must complete all of his forays into the

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<sup>69</sup> Matheson, *Legend* 10.

outside world before sundown, lest his former neighbours eat him. As he puts it himself, he is “a weird Robinson Crusoe, imprisoned on an island of night surrounded by oceans of death.”<sup>70</sup> Interestingly, the Crusoe analogy is one that arises in Jackson’s fiction as well: as the feuding Halloran family prepare themselves for the end of the world, the eldest Halloran, invalided and ineffectual patriarch Richard, begins to read the Defoe novel as part of his preparation for life in the primitive new world they anticipate.

One of the principal themes of both novels therefore is the exploration of the effects that sustained confinement in the family home have upon their respective protagonists. It was a motif that both Matheson and Jackson would explore again and again. As the next chapter will demonstrate, three of Jackson’s completed novels focus upon protagonists who are, for one reason or another, unable to leave their homes: Matheson’s follow up to *Legend*, *The Incredible Shrinking Man* (1956), is to a large extent taken up with the diminutive hero’s attempts to escape from his own basement. In addition, both writers have explored the theme in a more abstract fashion throughout their entire oeuvre: characters are also trapped by the demands of their families, in Matheson’s fiction, by corporate jobs, by loneliness and isolation, and frequently, in both cases, by mental illness and paranoia.

There is however one crucial difference to consider when discussing the *physical* confinement of Matheson and Jackson’s characters: although Neville could have moved his home elsewhere, he still has no choice but to remain inside at night lest he be killed: his entrapment is a necessity. Contrastingly, the imprisonment of Jackson’s heroines is generally self-imposed, and due more to their own neuroses than any truly dangerous outside force. Merricat and Constance Blackwood have shut themselves off

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<sup>70</sup> Matheson, *Legend* 77.

from the outside world, but although they aren't exactly popular in the local village, they still have friends, who visit every week in an attempt to coax them outside: after six years of isolation, there really is no practical reason to stay inside. Similarly, in *Sundial* the Halloran clan have shut themselves away because they think they are amongst the elect few who will survive the coming apocalypse: and *Hill House's* Eleanor Vance is unable to leave not because of any outside force, but rather because of her own susceptibility to the house's evil influence. In both *Legend* and *The Incredible Shrinking Man* therefore, Matheson's men have found themselves *forced* into hiding by circumstances beyond their control: Jackson's heroines more typically *shut* themselves away from the world. Accordingly, whilst Neville is crippled by loneliness, and ultimately betrayed by his own longing for human (specifically female company), one imagines that Merricat Blackwood would quite enjoy being the last person on earth, as long as she had her beloved sister Constance by her side.

The conclusion of *Legend* emphasises one of Matheson's favourite themes: the overturning of conventional assumptions about normality and abnormality. Captured by a mob of mutants who have been able to control the course of their disease, and so retain some vestige of their humanity, Neville suddenly realises that he is now part of a world "that was theirs and no longer his."<sup>71</sup> He is now, according to the female mutant that engineered his capture "the last of the old race."<sup>72</sup> Neville's previously black and white perceptions of the world undergo a seismic shift as he realises "I'm the abnormal one now. Normality was a majority concept, the standard of many and not the standard of just one man."<sup>73</sup> As a result of this revelation, he willingly accepts the necessity for his own destruction: "he knew that like the vampires, he was

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<sup>71</sup> Matheson, *Legend* 153.

<sup>72</sup> Matheson, *Legend* 157.

<sup>73</sup> Matheson, *Legend* 160.

anathema and black terror to be destroyed.”<sup>74</sup> In *Castle*, Jackson similarity overturns our assumptions about what constitutes the normal and the abnormal: as a contemporary reviewer noted, it “manages the ironic miracle of convincing the reader that a house inhabited by a lunatic, a poisoner, and a pyromaniac is a world more rich in sympathy, love and subtlety than the real world outside.”<sup>75</sup> That novel, like *Legend*, also concludes with the invasion of an angry mob: the crucial difference being that unlike Neville, the Blackwood sisters refuse to surrender to society, and continue to live in much the same fashion, albeit within the now blackened ruins of their once fine house. It is interesting to note however that both Neville and the Blackwoods willingly embrace their outsider status at the conclusion: Neville recognises that he will become part of the mythic history of the new society and declares “I Am Legend”: whilst Jackson’s protagonists ultimately embrace their status as “witches” in order to inspire fear in any would be interlopers and maintain their unorthodox sanctum.

Matheson’s depictions of everyday life suddenly transformed into a terrifying battle for survival continue in the two other genre novels he wrote during the 1950s: *The Incredible Shrinking Man*<sup>76</sup> and *Stir of Echoes*. Like *Legend*, both novels focus upon a suburban everyman whose peaceful existence is violated by freakish happenstance: in the former, accidental exposure to radiation that reduces the protagonist’s height by one seventh of an inch a day; in the latter, an impromptu amateur hypnosis session that awakens the main characters latent psychic abilities. *Shrinking Man* is perhaps the apotheosis of Matheson’s ability to make the familiar terrifying: the novel opens with a tense description of the protagonist, Scott Carey’s

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<sup>74</sup> Matheson, *Legend* 160.

<sup>75</sup> Anon, “Nightshade Must Fall,” *Time* 21 Sep. 1962: 93-94.

<sup>76</sup> Richard Matheson, *The Incredible Shrinking Man* (1956; London: Corgi, 1983). Hereafter shortened to *Shrinking Man*.

violent running battle with a domestic spider many times his own size. As in *Legend*, the narrative veers between past and present, detailing both Carey's current battle to survive whilst trapped in the newly hostile environs of his own basement, and the story of how this unfortunate state of affairs came to pass. Although Carey's confrontation with the spider is the most dramatic example of his new and terrifying relationship to the world around him, just as horrifying are the catalogue of setbacks and everyday humiliations that make up his daily existence. For Carey, life has become an endless series of degrading and frightening incidents. As his size diminishes, so does his influence within his own household. His wife, though initially sympathetic, soon begins to unconsciously treat him like a little boy, and refuses to continue their sexual relationship. He is unable to work and becomes unable to maintain the financial security of his family, one of the most important tasks of the 1950s middle class male: the only way he can now provide for them is by capitalising upon his freakish physical state. As happens in *Legend*, Carey's vulnerability to inappropriate feminine charms illustrates how far he has fallen. He becomes hopelessly obsessed with the frumpy teenager who has been hired to baby-sit and spends much of his time spying on her. Most humiliating of all, his young daughter refuses to accept his authority and ultimately tries to play with him as though he were a doll: "To her he'd stopped being a father and had become an oddity."<sup>77</sup> The freak reduction in size has comprehensively emasculated Carey, who is longer able to fulfil the role that society demands he fulfil, a role as rigid and in many ways as demanding as that asked of the typical housewife. The novel is therefore as much a dramatisation of the greatest fear of the 1950s man: for it suggests that masculine authority is a great deal more fragile than it seems, due more to size and strength than

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<sup>77</sup> Matheson, *Shrinking Man* 175.

it is to the innate order of things: take these factors away, Matheson argues, and the patriarchal figure loses all power in his own home. Significantly, Carey only begins to regain any sense of self respect when he is forced to literally battle for his survival in the now vast and primitive surroundings of his basement, so much so that, even as he faces apparent negation, he is able to reflect with pride upon the fact that he had spent his final days “fighting a good fight”<sup>78</sup>: manhood is regained not in the domestic sphere, but in the brutal struggle against insurmountable odds.

In *Stir of Echoes*, executive Tom Wallace is hypnotised by his young brother-in-law and suddenly becomes aware of an entire world beyond that which he had previously perceived. It is a terrifying and disorientating experience:

Something was rising in me. As if I were a vessel into which was being poured alien cognisance. I felt things, sensed things – things I couldn’t understand, things I couldn’t even clearly see; shards of strange perception.<sup>79</sup>

Within days, Wallace’s perceptions of the suburban neighbourhood he had previously seen as friendly and welcoming have radically changed. He is suddenly able to see beyond the veneer of politeness and sociability his neighbours have erected, and in several cases senses a terrifying darkness beneath. Wallace soon discovers that “On one side we have a wife who kicks the guts out of her husband. On the other we have an adulterer and a drudge.”<sup>80</sup> Then he sees the ghostly figure of a woman in his house and begins to suspect that an even worse crime has taken place under his very nose. He is so shaken by what he detects that he begins to wonder, “Maybe we’re all

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<sup>78</sup> Matheson, *Shrinking Man* 186.

<sup>79</sup> Matheson, *Stir of Echoes* 24.

<sup>80</sup> Matheson, *Stir of Echoes* 69.

monsters underneath.”<sup>81</sup> The neighbourhood itself takes on a frightening aspect, for Wallace’s abilities make him realise that nothing is what it seems:

The neighbourhood was two creatures. One presented a clean, smiling countenance to the world, and beneath maintained quite another one. It was hideous, in a way, to consider the world of twists and warps that existed beneath the pleasant setting of Tulley Street.<sup>82</sup>

As the novel progresses, Wallace eventually discovers the truth behind his disturbing vision and is able to unveil the murderer in his neighbourhood’s midst. However, even though the crime is solved and he is able to rid himself of the psychic powers that have plagued him, nothing can ever be the same again – ‘order’ can never be fully restored. He has penetrated the veil of the everyday and discovered the rot and darkness that lies beneath: in typical Matheson fashion, his most disturbing discovery is the realisation that, contrary to what he had earlier suspected, “There were no monsters here, just...human beings.”<sup>83</sup>

Matheson’s examination of the sinister secrets beneath the outwardly placid façade of an average suburban neighbourhood in *Stir* links the novel to Jackson’s take on the same subject in her overlooked debut *The Road Through The Wall* (1949)<sup>84</sup>. Jackson’s novel depicts the gradual disintegration of an affluent, “all-American” neighbourhood situated in a middle-class suburb of San Francisco, a collapse caused by the consistently amoral behaviour of its residents. By the novel’s conclusion, one neighbourhood child has died and the teenage boy accused (probably unfairly) of involvement in her death has killed himself: the community’s culture of parental and moral neglect has had terrible ramifications. In addition, the veneer of respectability

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<sup>81</sup> Matheson, *Stir of Echoes* 39.

<sup>82</sup> Matheson, *Stir of Echoes* 104.

<sup>83</sup> Matheson, *Stir of Echoes* 180.

<sup>84</sup> Shirley Jackson, *The Road Through the Wall* (1948; Toronto: Popular Library, 1975)



and decency that has previously existed has gone and it is clear, as in *Stir of Echoes*, that the residents can never view themselves or their neighbours in the same blinkered light ever again.

In a similar vein, Jackson also wrote “The Beautiful Stranger,”<sup>85</sup> an accomplished, delicate and disturbingly vague short story that functions both as horror story and as a critique of the damaging effects of the suburban lifestyle. In *Legend* and *Stir of Echoes*, Matheson turned his suburban neighbourhoods into nightmarish landscapes full of danger and dark secrets in which his embattled males must struggle to survive: in “The Beautiful Stranger”(1946), Jackson transforms the same territory into a disorientating dreamscape that eventually engulfs her vulnerable heroine. Whilst Matheson’s heroes struggle to stay sane in a world that has changed beyond all recognition, Jackson’s housewife accepts the sudden intrusion of strangeness in her life and ultimately surrenders to it. As in virtually every Jackson story, “The Beautiful Stranger” focuses upon a female protagonist, on this occasion a housewife who suddenly, inexplicably decides that the man who has returned from a business trip is, despite all appearances, not her husband.<sup>86</sup> The opening line perfectly captures the suddenness and the inevitability with which the everyday can suddenly become threatening in Jackson’s work: “What might be called the first intimation of strangeness occurred at the railroad station.”<sup>87</sup> Though at first disturbed, the unnamed heroine soon grows used to the “stranger” and even comes to prefer him to the original. There is the suggestion, never explicitly expanded upon, that her “husband” may in fact be a ghost, or a figment of her lonely imagination, but the housewife

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<sup>85</sup> Jackson, “The Beautiful Stranger,” *Come Along With Me* (1966; New York: Penguin, 1968) 58-66.

<sup>86</sup> Written in 1946, the story also anticipates Jack Finney’s S.F/Horror classic *Invasion of the Body Snatchers* (1954), which features several scenes in which seemingly rational people suddenly decide that those closest to them have been ‘replaced’ by identical, yet different copies. Unlike the vague uncertainties of the Jackson story, the protagonist’s unease in *Body Snatchers* is famously justified by the revelation that a sinister alien plot is to blame.

<sup>87</sup> Jackson, “The Beautiful Stranger,” 58.

seems not to care what he is. Soon, the “stranger” leaves the family home to go on another trip: the protagonist spends all day looking for a suitable present to give him when he returns. However, when she attempts to find her way back home, she realises that she has become severely, perhaps catastrophically disorientated:

The evening was very dark, and she could see only the houses going in rows beyond them and more rows beyond that, and somewhere a house which was hers, with the beautiful stranger inside, and she was lost out here.<sup>88</sup>

Whilst it demonstrates Jackson’s ability to turn contemporary issues such as the growth of suburbia and the effects of the rigid separation of gender roles upon society – women were expected to be housewives, men were expected to have careers that funded the domestic sphere – the story also highlights two of the principal differences between her approach and Matheson’s. First of all, there is the obvious fact that while Jackson dramatised specifically female fears about the constraints and demands of 50s society, Matheson was doing the same for men; and secondly, the fact that the horror that occurs in her fiction is generally never explained: it simply happens. Although Jackson’s novels, as I shall discuss in Chapter Three, most typically focus upon women whose grasp of reality is from the outset, shown to be less than absolute, her short stories more often feature ‘ordinary’ women whose world suddenly, shockingly changes. However, whereas radiation, germ warfare, and hypnosis (devices all indicative of contemporary fears about nuclear power, the apparently unchecked progress of modern science and technology, and popular psychology) are the rationally explained catalysts for change in Matheson’s novels, Jackson seldom provides an explanation, rational or otherwise, for the disorientation and unease of her protagonists.

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<sup>88</sup> Jackson, “The Beautiful Stranger,” 65.

It is the sudden coalescence of inner anxieties and neuroses that pulls the rug out from under the typical Jackson female rather than the unavoidable, inescapable outside forces that generally terrorise Matheson's men, which means that the transition from the everyday to the horrific is even more unexpected and perhaps more disturbing in her work than in his. After all, it takes very little to provoke the circumstances that can make the life of a Jackson heroine horrifying: the simplest situations can have terrifying ramifications. A report that the family dog has been seen killing chickens makes a housewife look at her children and the rural community in which they live in an entirely new (and disturbing) light ("The Renegade"), an office errand turns into a paranoid pursuit ("Nightmare"), the simple act of overstaying in one's holiday home has terrible consequences for an elderly couple ("The Summer People"), a trip into New York to see a dentist leads to a descent into inexplicable madness ("The Tooth"), and, most famously, the drawing of lots in a town square climaxes in a brutal act of human sacrifice ("The Lottery"). As discussion of Matheson's genre novels has indicated, this kind of "irrational" slide into nightmare is replaced in his work by the use of stock genre devices such as germ warfare and accidental exposure to radiation. However, it must be said that many of Matheson's own short stories from the period share Jackson's tendency to present the reader with scenarios that eschew 'rational' explanation, as well as her fascination with the workings of the mind. Though Jackson was fortunate enough to be able to transcend the limiting categories of genre and become accepted as "literary" in a way that Matheson (unlike Bradbury) never quite accomplished, both fascinate because of the (frequently similar) ways in which they were able to translate the decade's uneasiness with social change, destructive technology, conformity and domesticity into accomplished tales of horror, disorientation and paranoia. They also illustrated the

direction which American horror fiction had taken in the decades since Lovecraft penned his stories of invasion by nightmarish “others”: now, the real threat came from within, not from without. It was a sentiment embraced by their contemporary Robert Bloch, who claimed to have realised “as a result of what went on during World War Two and of reading the more widely disseminated works in psychology, that the real horror is not in the shadows but in the twisted little world inside our own skulls.”<sup>89</sup>

Though Bloch began his career writing in the Lovecraftian tradition, by 1950 he had, like Bradbury, distanced himself from this kind of fiction.<sup>90</sup> From then on, Bloch’s writing most often focused upon the dramatic possibilities of unconventional or aberrant mental processes. In his work, to an even greater extent than is evident in the fiction of his genre contemporaries, the “dark corners of the human mind generally supplant the supernatural.”<sup>91</sup> As Mark Jancovich has noted, Bloch’s fiction displays a “far greater interest in psychology, psychiatry and psychoanalysis than can be found in either Bradbury or Matheson.” Though his most famous early story “Yours Truly, Jack the Ripper”<sup>92</sup> (1949) climaxes with a paranormal twist (the revelation that the narrator, a psychiatrist who has been helping the authorities track down a modern day Ripper is in fact himself the immortal original murderer), this element of supernaturalism was the exception rather than the rule. In much the same way in which Jackson used obvious mental illness as the starting point for no less than three of her novels (*Hangsaman’s* Natalie Waite is schizophrenic, Elizabeth Richmond of *The Bird’s Nest* suffers from multiple personality disorder, and Merricat Blackwood in *Castle* is obviously psychotic) – not to mention the more subtle, but

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<sup>89</sup> Winter 27.

<sup>90</sup> As a teenager, Bloch corresponded with Lovecraft regularly. The hero of Lovecraft’s story “The Haunter in the Dark” was even named ‘Robert Blake’ in his honour. Winter 27.

<sup>91</sup> Winter 202.

<sup>92</sup> Jackson also wrote a Ripper story, titled, rather unoriginally, “Jack the Ripper,” though it was never published. In typical Jackson fashion, the ripper in her story is a family man who goes home to his wife after butchering his latest victim. Jackson, *Just an Ordinary Day* (New York: Bantam, 1996).

omnipresent *strangeness* and psychological vulnerability of the heroines of her other novels – Bloch focused again and again upon protagonists who suffer from some kind of severe psychological malady. Norman Bates was by no means a once off: Robert Bloch had been writing about deranged killers for almost a decade before the film version of *Psycho* brought him widespread (and lasting) prominence. Indeed, his interest in psychology is so strong that I shall leave further discussion of his fiction to Chapter Three of this thesis, which examines the topic of mental illness and popular interest in the workings of the mind during the 1950s.

Before concluding my discussion of horror fiction during this decade, it is important to stress the fact that Bradbury, Bloch, Matheson and Jackson were not the only notable writers of horror fiction during the fifties, and by no means the only genre figures to transform contemporary anxieties into fictional form. For example, Fritz Lieber also critiqued suburbia and the dangers of mindless conformity in his story “The Sinful Ones” (1953), in which the tidy order of everyday life literally constitutes a zombie-like oblivion. The hero and heroine suddenly “awaken” from their routine lives to discover that (as in the 1999 film *The Matrix*) the world is actually full of mindless automatons like their former selves, locked into a bland, conformist existence. For a while, they revel in the possibilities presented by a world of absolute freedom – but soon discover that others who have awoken from their mindless state have decided to express their new found autonomy and liberation by carrying out brutal acts of torture and murder. The remainder of the story details the protagonists’ struggle to escape the deadly attentions of their fellow libertines. The manner in which Lieber equates “normality” with mindlessness and suggests that reality is not what it seems also found frequent expression, as we have seen, in the work of his fellow horror and S.F writers. Lieber also depicted darkness and evil in a

respectable suburban setting in his novel *Conjure Wife* (1953), in which occultism and magic is rife amongst the faculty wives of a prominent university. Its depiction of witchcraft in a modern setting anticipates (in a much less subtle fashion) Jackson's use of the same conceit in *Castle*.<sup>93</sup>

Similarly, Charles Beaumont, who, like Matheson was a major contributor to *The Twilight Zone*, often produced stories set in suburban neighbourhoods and quiet Middle American towns that seethed with unacknowledged tension. His characters were "typically placid, seemingly normal people who are unable – or perhaps unwilling – to acknowledge that their smouldering dissatisfaction with the ordinary state of things is nurturing potentially dangerous neuroses."<sup>94</sup> It is a description that could easily be applied to the typical Jackson heroine, who most often harbours a seldom expressed, yet powerful dissatisfaction with her lot and longs for change in her humdrum life – a trait most poignantly realised in the character of *Hill House*'s Eleanor Vance, whose desire for a fulfilling new life is so strong that it leaves her dangerously susceptible to the house's malevolent influence. Beaumont also depicted the nightmarish transformation of the American dream in his story "The New People," which, like *Conjure Wife* features black magic and human sacrifice within the confines of an elite suburban community, and in tales such as "The Dark Muse", "The Hunger" and "Miss Gentibelle" explored the ramifications of his era's culture of sexual hypocrisy and repressed sexuality. His dark fantasies "like Matheson's paranoid cautionary tales, demonstrate the uneasiness with the unremarkable that typifies post-war horror fiction."<sup>95</sup> It is this uneasiness, the consistent intrusion of the

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<sup>93</sup> Jackson was a faculty wife herself – her husband was the literary critic Stanley Hyman - and as we shall see in Chapter Five, she was said by her publishers, rather facetiously, to be the "the only practicing witch in New England". It is not known whether she used her alleged powers to advance her husband's career.

<sup>94</sup> "Contemporary Horror Fiction 1950-1980," *Fantasy and Horror* 202.

<sup>95</sup> "Contemporary Horror Fiction," *Fantasy and Horror* 202.

sinister into the everyday that happens so frequently in Jackson's fiction that clinches her standing as writer of contemporary horror fictions to rank alongside Bradbury, Matheson and Bloch, et al. Though the posthumous anthology made up of her unpublished and previously uncollected stories is ironically entitled *Just An Ordinary Day* (1996), as the editors of that tome (her own children) well knew, in reality there was seldom "just an ordinary day" in Jackson's uncertain universe.

Why then, when Jackson shares so much with the most prominent writers of 1950s horror, has her contribution to the genre, (*Hill House* and "The Lottery" aside) been so ignored, particularly by non-genre critics? Part of the explanation for this omission lies in the fact that, unlike most genre writers during the 50s, Jackson was far more prominent as a mainstream, literary writer, than as an author of horror or S.F. tales. "The Lottery", like many of her other stories, was originally published in *The New Yorker* (though the fact that it attracted an unprecedented number of complaints suggests that while Jackson may have been ready to publish in the mainstream, the mainstream may not have been ready for her): Jackson was a respected "literary" writer who achieved quite an amount of recognition and respect during her brief lifetime.

In addition, she must also be one of the very few writers of horror tales to have simultaneously penned cheery domestic skits for the lucrative women's magazine market. It is understandably difficult to imagine Bloch or Matheson diversifying in the same manner. The fact that Jackson didn't belong to the (obviously male) horror fraternity is also important. She only ever published one story ("One Ordinary Day with Peanuts") in a genre magazine (*Fantasy and Science Fiction*, January 1955), and was never part of the horror or fantasy community in the way that writers such as Matheson and Bradbury were. And, though it seems somewhat churlish to point this

out, it must be said that Jackson's writing was generally much more accomplished and a great deal more commercially and critically successful than most stories written by horror writers at that time. Part of this was undoubtedly due to the fact that so many of these writers were writing for pulp magazines and publishers that demanded a certain kind of slick, unsubtle writing. One only has to read the early stories of Bloch and Matheson to realise that genuine depth was often been sacrificed to the expediencies that demanded a certain amount of violence, gore or a "shock" ending. Bloch's lifelong predilection for writing stories whose conclusion was telegraphed to the reader by groan-worthy puns is a result of this early conditioning. Because Jackson achieved mainstream success so early in her career, she was to an extent able to avoid the constraints of marketplace demands. After 1948, and the impact made by "The Lottery," Jackson didn't have to go to the nation's magazines: they came to her. It's also likely that her subtle, vague, and decidedly gore free exercises in quiet terror would have been accepted by pulp magazines more interested in violence and shock value than in Jackson's stories of understated unease. Even today, with the frequent appearance of "classic" horror anthologies, it is quite rare to come across a reprinted Jackson story: I myself have only come across three such instances despite having browsed through dozens of relevant texts. The sheer unlikelihood of coming across a Jackson story within a horror context must therefore also be seen as possible cause (and reflection of) her usual omission from the list of horror greats, save when haunted houses are mentioned.

Unfortunately, Jackson's marginalisation within the horror genre is typical of her treatment in general. Time and time again the scope and significance of her contribution to American literary culture during the 50s and after has been overlooked. Jackson's diversity – her ability to work within a variety of fictional



modes at once, and to garner both critical respect and commercial success at the same time – may have made her one of the most prominent writers of her time, but after her death she would be penalised for these same qualities. Mainstream critics wary of her apparently effortless versatility and popularity in quarters not usually afforded much respect (i.e. amongst horror fans and the readers of the most prominent women’s magazines of the day) found that the breadth of Jackson’s work frustrated their attempts to neatly categorise her. Rather than attempt to broaden their own critical horizons, they tended to either ignore Jackson or instead label her a “minor” writer whose work, whilst undeniably accomplished, was nevertheless probably unworthy of sustained examination. Even Jackson’s position within the genre in which she is most venerated is due to a narrow-minded focus upon just two of her texts, the same two texts that she is more generally known for. It’s a categorisation just as confining as that afforded her work by the literary mainstream, especially since much of the rest of her fictional output displays significant engagement with the issues confronted by more prominent, *male* horror writers of the 50s.

There also exists the very real question of actually gaining access to Jackson’s writing in the first place. It’s naturally difficult for critics and general readers to appreciate the scope of Jackson’s fiction if they have no easy way of getting access to the vast majority of texts. As Darryl Hattenhauer has also noted, “her best writing is only available in out-of-the-way editions...out of print are the major press editions of *The Sundial*...and *Hangsaman*...[whilst] *The Bird’s Nest* is readily available only in an anthology, *The Magic of Shirley Jackson*, which is in print but rarely stocked...the only two novels in print and readily available in bookstores are *The Haunting of Hill House* and *We Have Always Lived in the Castle*, but they have been misread as literal

minded endorsements of witchcraft and the paranormal.”<sup>96</sup> In Ireland, and, I suspect, much of the rest of the world as well, the situation is even worse: the only Jackson texts I have ever come across without recourse to the internet are a tie-in edition of *Hill House* released to capitalise upon the 1999 film adaptation and, once, an anthology comprising of *The Lottery and other Stories*, *Hill House* and *Castle*. Given these conditions, it's hardly surprising that Jackson has been so comprehensively overlooked except by those who have gone out of their way to explore her legacy.

The manner in which Jackson has been marginalized since her death in 1965 also helps explain why no one has previously thought to look at her work in relation to the cultural and social contexts of the 1950s. This oversight is partially due to the fact that when Jackson is discussed at all, it is generally in relation to her status as a writer of Gothic fiction, (even though her use of New England rather than Southern settings and preoccupations has meant that she has often been excluded from this grouping as well). As my discussion of New American Gothic has indicated, one of the major characteristics of the genre is taken to be its obsession with the disturbed interior and familial world of its protagonists – which naturally meant that critics have tended to focus upon the internal, psychological mechanisms of such texts, rather than the anxieties and influences of the outside world. It is only in recent years that critics such as John Lance Bacon (who has written on O'Connor and Cold War Culture) have realised that despite the apparently overwhelming interiority of such texts, they do display a consistent engagement with the societal and cultural contexts in which they were created.

It is also possible that the fact that the 50s themselves are sometimes seen as a rather dull, unexciting decade, sandwiched as they are between the turmoil and

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<sup>96</sup> Hattenhauer 8.

carnage of the Second World War and the immense societal upheavals of the sixties and seventies, has contributed to this oversight. In the popular mindset, the decade is generally portrayed as a time of bland conformity and family values when very little happened: a time that is often nostalgically reduced to a simplistic and misleading set of cultural equations, usually consisting of Marilyn Monroe, fear of the bomb, retro diners, monster movies, shiny cars, the baby boom, suburbs and wide skirts. It's not for nothing that the conflict in Korea is often referred to as the "forgotten" American war. Perhaps this reductive, misleading notion of the decade itself has meant that critics have simply overlooked the connection between contemporary events and Jackson's writing. In this they are perhaps aided by her work itself, which is notable for its lack of *overt* reference to the decade in question. Whilst recognisably mid twentieth-century – Jackson's heroines often have cars, well stocked refrigerators, trips to New York city, smoking habits and lots of children – she almost never provides any idea of the time in which her fictions are taking place. Unlike Stephen King, whose popularity is due in part to his insistence upon providing identifiable cultural signifiers for his readership – his products all have brand names, his characters listen to specific songs, drive particular models of cars, and tend to exist within particular time periods – Jackson's work is set in a non-specific time which has undoubtedly influenced the way in which her work has latterly been received. Yet true understanding of Jackson's worth only becomes clear when we have looked at her fiction from *every* angle, not just the ones that seem most obvious. As one of the genre's most accomplished and versatile practitioners, Shirley Jackson realised that horror could often be at its most potent when it had been reduced to its simplest and most realistic form. If only for this reason, she deserves to be acknowledged as one of the most significant American horror writers of the 1950s.

## Chapter Two: “What Place Would be Better For Us Than This?” The Haunted Home in Shirley Jackson’s Fiction.

Even the most cursory glance at Shirley Jackson’s fictional output provides some indication of the importance that houses – and by extension the home – had in her work. Of Jackson’s six completed novels, three are situated in distinctively gothic mansions as significant to their texts as any other (human) character. It is due to more than simple setting that these novels are generally referred to as her “house” novels: for Jackson, “houses – at least her fictional houses – were like people. They not only reflected the egos and foibles of their original owners, who often had unusual tastes, but they also exerted a mysterious force of their own.”<sup>1</sup> It is that “mysterious force” that so enthralled Jackson and shaped her fiction: the grip that a house can have over the imagination – or actions – of its inhabitants.

In this, I will discuss the significance of houses and the home in Jackson’s fiction by placing her work within three different contexts. First, I will examine Jackson’s depiction of suburban life in her generally overlooked debut novel *The Road Through the Wall* (1948). Then I will discuss the long line of literary haunted/gothic houses to which her work belongs and locate Jackson’s position within that tradition. Finally, I shall look at Jackson’s homes in relation to the conflicting attitudes towards domesticity and family experienced by many women during the 1950s despite the compellingly domestic social ideology of the era.

Shirley Jackson is today generally known (when she is recognised at all) first as the infamous author of “The Lottery”(1948) and then as the creator of Hill House, surely one of the most influential haunted houses in modern supernatural fiction. Partly because of its intrinsic merit as a literary text, and its iconic standing within the

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<sup>1</sup> Lenemaja Friedman, *Shirley Jackson* (Boston: Twayne’s U.S. Authors Series, 1975) 132.

horror genre, and partly because of the inevitable attention drawn to it by two film adaptations,<sup>2</sup> *The Haunting of Hill House*<sup>3</sup> (1959) remains Jackson's most visible full-length work. The enduring status of this novel is, I would suggest, due as much to our fascination with the notion of the haunted house as it is to the quality of Jackson's writing.

There is something about the idea of our homes being invaded by the unknown that, given the right circumstances, can raise the hackles of even the most hardened sceptic. There are few amongst us who can deny never having suppressed a momentary shudder at entering an unfamiliar room in darkness, or upon hearing someone – or something – moving about in the attic above us in the dead of night. The simple power of such events to chill us so deeply, even when we're fully aware that there has to be a rational explanation, attests to the importance we place upon the security, and the inviolate nature of our homes. In practically every human society since recorded history began, the location and design of the place in which one chooses – or is assigned to live in – provides an immediate insight into their social status, family structure, and income. As Kenneth T. Jackson has pointed out, "Housing is an outward expression of the inner human nature: no society can be fully understood apart from the residences of its members."<sup>4</sup> We describe our homes as our "castles" in part because of the connotations of strength, security, and safety that phrase conjures up: we proclaim that home is where the heart is, the one place to which we should feel that we truly belong and are welcome in. Which is why any

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<sup>2</sup> The remarkably faithful 1963 film version, *The Haunting*, directed in wonderfully atmospheric black and white by Robert Wise, is deservedly considered a classic of the supernatural horror film genre. By way of contrast, the 'action-packed' 1999 remake – also entitled *The Haunting* – leans more towards gory special effects than the subtle chills of its predecessor.

<sup>4</sup> Kenneth T. Jackson, *The Crabgrass Frontier: The Suburbanization of the United States* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985) 3.

perceived violation of this sanctuary seems so wrong – because to such a large degree, our homes serve as an extension of ourselves.

Shirley Jackson understood only too well the power exerted over us by our living spaces, our homes, and, it was, as I shall examine, a realisation she would put to frequent and effective use – and not only in the three novels that feature recognisably gothic mansions. Jackson sketched out scenes of despair, escalating unease, terror, and anxiety and longing in cramped city apartments, cosy New England farmhouses, neat suburban neighbourhoods and crumbling ruins. Her houses are not necessarily haunted by ghosts, but rather by the psychological, familial and cultural anxieties of the people who inhabit them. As Emily Dickinson memorably put it –

One need not be a Chamber – to be Haunted –

One need not be a House –

The Brain has Corridors – surpassing

Material Place –<sup>5</sup>

Jackson too knew that the inner recesses of the mind could be infinitely more disturbing – and revealing than supernatural pyrotechnics, so what she often did was transpose these anxieties to the four walls surrounding her characters.

It is for this reason that Shirley Jackson's haunted houses are generally looked at from a psychoanalytical/psychological critical viewpoint, as in Judie Newman's article on *Hill House*: "Shirley Jackson and the Reproduction of Mothering," Mark Jancovich's chapter on "Maternal Dominance in Hill House" or the article "Whose Hand Was I Holding? Familial and Sexual Politics in Hill House" by Tricia Lootens.

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<sup>5</sup> Emily Dickinson, *The Complete Poems of Emily Dickinson*, ed. Thomas H. Johnson (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1998) 333.

In addition, the vast majority of critical work on the obvious significance of the home/house in Jackson's work is confined to the eponymous Hill House, and thereafter to the two other obvious 'house' novels in the Jackson oeuvre – *The Sundial*<sup>6</sup> (1958) and *We Have Always Lived in the Castle* (1963).<sup>7</sup> It is my intention to follow a different critical path. In the following chapter, I will argue that the hitherto overlooked cultural context in which these (and other) Jackson texts were produced is as significant as the evident ease with which such works lend themselves to more abstract analysis.<sup>8</sup> Jackson's preoccupation with living spaces went beyond the psychological (and indeed, the supernatural) – although they are both important facets of her work. Her fascination was, as I shall demonstrate, cultural as well – prompted to a significant extent by the anxieties and fixations of post-war American society.

My key objective in this chapter is to illuminate the previously ignored links between Jackson's obvious preoccupation with houses and living spaces and the enormous changes in American living and domestic patterns that took place during the post-war period. By doing this, I hope to demonstrate in a practical way that my approach to Jackson is informed by the cultural and social context of the era in which her fiction was produced. To that end, I will begin my examination of the significance of the home in Jackson not by taking the usual route and immediately embarking upon a discussion of her three obviously gothic mansions, but by referring instead to Jackson's early, overlooked treatment of a very 1950s preoccupation: suburbia.

Whilst Shirley Jackson rarely dealt directly with contemporary social issues (a trait entirely in keeping with her position as a key practitioner of the inner-focused New

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<sup>6</sup> Shirley Jackson, *The Sundial* (1958; New York: Ace Books, n.d.). Hereafter shortened to *Sundial*.

<sup>7</sup> Shirley Jackson, *We Have Always Lived in the Castle* (1963; London, Robinson, 1996). Hereafter shortened to *Castle*.

<sup>8</sup> I shall look in some detail at Jackson's understanding and use of psychology in Chapter 3.

American Gothic), her first novel, *The Road Through the Wall*<sup>9</sup> (1949) is a notable attempt to comment in fictional form upon the ongoing post-war debate about the effects that suburbanization was having upon American society. Although written in the late 1940s, and set a decade earlier, a good ten or fifteen years before the post-war housing boom made suburban existence an attainable facet of the American dream, the novel nevertheless anticipates many of the most prominent themes and preoccupations found in the suburban literature and heated critical debates of the nineteen fifties.

*Road* is the only Jackson novel to have a California setting (everything else is situated in the New England landscape Jackson would inhabit for most of her adult life). It is also the only Jackson text in which both the location (a suburb of Cabrillo, thirty miles from San Francisco) and the date (Summer 1936) in which the events described take place are specifically mentioned. This exactness, highly unusual in Jackson's work, is probably due to the fact that *Road* is her most obviously autobiographical text. Pepper Street, the sheltered middle class enclave in which all of the text's action takes place, is modelled after the author's own childhood residence, the well-to-do San Francisco suburb of Burlingame. Like its fictional counterpart, Burlingame was "a clean, secure enclave of wasp homogeneity set far enough away from the city to be safe from any stray urban influences."<sup>10</sup> Both neighbourhoods, in addition, sit next to, yet separated from enclaves of even greater wealth and exclusivity – Jackson's childhood home was situated right next to a vast green that marked the end of their well off neighbourhood and the beginning of one that was "monstrously rich": Pepper street has the titular wall marking the boundary between mere affluence and true wealth. The removal of this wall half way through the text

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<sup>9</sup> Shirley Jackson, *The Road Through The Wall* (1948; New York: Farrar Straus, 1975).

<sup>10</sup> Judy Oppenheimer, *Private Demons: The Life of Shirley Jackson* (New York: G.P. Putnam's Sons, 1988) 16.



symbolically marks the point at which their self-satisfied, materialistic way of life begins to begin to fall apart. The novel opens with an impeccably detailed, map – like prologue in which Jackson methodically describes the layout, homes, and residents that inhabit her fictional suburb. We are told of the men of the neighbourhood that:

They all lived on Pepper Street because they were able to afford it, and none of them would have lived there if he had been able to afford living elsewhere, although Pepper Street was charming and fairly expensive and even comfortably isolated.<sup>11</sup>

Jackson's precise locating of each home along the street, and her descriptions of the makeup, defining characteristics and social status of each of the families and their respective home lends authenticity to the narrative, and "again testifies to Jackson's knowledge of and interest in houses."<sup>12</sup> We are soon made aware that there is a well-defined social hierarchy in place on Pepper street: the Desmonds, who "had lived on Pepper street longer than anyone else" are at the apex of this hierarchy, the "aristocracy"<sup>13</sup> of the neighbourhood, and clearly destined to move up in the world. Their young daughter, Caroline, introduced casually in the prologue, becomes a key figure in the novel's tragic climax. Other families include the Byrnes, a Catholic family, Mrs Mack, a crazy old woman who reads the bible to her dog, feeds him at the table, and punctuates the text with her ominous biblical commentary; The Roberts family (comprising the philandering Mike Roberts, his nagging wife, and their three children); the Ransom-Jones household, in which the wife and her invalid sister jealously vie for the husband's attention; the Perlmans, the only Jewish family on the block, the Merriam's, whose only child Harriet forms a friendship with the Perlmans' daughter; the Donalds and their three children (including Todd, another ultimately key

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<sup>11</sup> Jackson, *The Road* 5.

<sup>12</sup> Friedman 79.

<sup>13</sup> Jackson, *The Road* 5.

figure in the narrative), and the succession of working-class families who inhabit the run-down house at the end of the street. Before the story proper even begins therefore, we have been introduced to the location and characters that will inform the narrative. During the course of the novel, Jackson exposes the private lives and often-twisted relationships between the individuals and amongst the various households on the block. The street functions as a microcosm of affluent, white, middle-class suburban life, just as the settings of later books like William H. Whyte's *The Organisation Man* (1957) and the short stories of John Cheever functioned as a commentary upon the effect the massive growth in post war suburbia had upon the lives of its inhabitants.

Jackson soon shows us that the outwardly pleasant, civilised folk who live in her suburb are really anything but. The poorer, working class families who move in and out of the shabbiest house on the block are treated at best with patronising condescension, and at worst with contemptuous disdain. Similarly, a good-natured high school girl who briefly works for the Roberts family is ill-treated both by her employers and the rest of the neighbourhood. Racial prejudice is another unspoken feature of Pepper Street: when fat, lonely teenager Harriet Merriam forms her first real friendship with Marilyn Perlman, who is Jewish, her mother soon forbids all further contact between the girls. The Perlmans don't even receive an invitation to the lavish garden party that takes place towards the end of the novel. A Chinese man who strikes up a conversation with some of the children soon becomes a figure of fearful fascination and cruel teasing.

Much of the story focuses on the relationships between the various children and teenagers in the area. Their behaviour unconsciously echoes that of their narrow-minded, materialistic parents. They too have a strict social hierarchy and the weakest

members of the group are bullied mercilessly. Todd Donald, an awkward 13 year old who is completely overshadowed by his athletic older brother and sneering, indifferent sister, is at the bottom of the social ladder, alternatively mocked and ignored by everyone – even his own parents – until he becomes the tragic centre of attention at the novel’s climax. Whilst the adults tend to hide their feelings (at least until behind closed doors) their children are often openly cruel to one another. But really, their elders are no better: Mrs Roberts is shrewish and paranoid, her husband a serial adulterer; Harriet’s mother makes her daughter burn her private writings, belittles her husband, and ends her child’s only friendship; the Desmonds are smug and materialistic; the street’s spinster, Miss Fielding, refuses to help anyone else in case her dreary, routine existence is interrupted; and Todd’s parents ignore the isolation and unhappiness of their youngest child.

The removal of the wall that separates Pepper Street from the far more prosperous enclave beyond is the key turning point in the text. As Lenemaja Friedman points out, “there is something safe about the wall: it offers protection and ensures the social stability of the neighbourhood. And, when it becomes clear that outside forces, belonging to the estates enclosed therein, plan to tear down part of the wall, people feel threatened and would stop the project if they could.”<sup>14</sup> The construction work is an unsettling, disturbing influence, bringing workmen, dust, and noise into the previously calm suburb. The residents are uncomfortably aware that once the road through their precious wall is completed, life in Pepper Street will never be the same again.

The text refuses to be confined to one character or even one family for very long. Jackson constantly cuts back and forth between the various protagonists, in a style

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<sup>14</sup> Friedman 84.

that is intentionally panoramic but has the knock on effect of never letting the reader get to really know and understand the characters. There are several different plot strands at work: Harriet Merriam's relationship with her overbearing mother and her new friend Marilyn; Todd Donald's doomed attempts to endear himself to his family and to the rest of the youngsters in the neighbourhood; Mike Roberts' philandering ways; the departure of the working class Martin family and the arrival of the dysfunctional Terrells; the relationships between the women who assemble every week to sew and gossip; and the games and bullying that take place amongst the street's youngsters.

The novel climaxes with an ambiguously un-detailed accident – or perhaps crime – that shakes the community to its complacent foundations. At the end of a neighbourhood garden party, Mrs Desmond suddenly realises that Caroline, her three year old, is missing. Soon, the child's anxious father has visited each home; characteristically, Miss Fielding again refuses to offer any assistance in a time of crisis. As evening approaches, the sense of urgency and foreboding amongst the residents increases: the local men are organised into a search party, whilst the women and children huddle together in expectation of disaster. The prevailing mood amongst the crowd is said by Jackson to be one of "keen excitement"; they are connoisseurs of other people's misery:

...No one really wanted Caroline Desmond safe at home, although Mrs Perlman said crooningly behind Marilyn, 'The poor, poor woman' and Mrs Donald said again, 'If only we'd known in time'. Pleasure was in the feeling that the terrors of the night, the jungle, had come close to their safe lighted homes, touched them nearly, and departed, leaving every family safe but one.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> Jackson, *Road* 206.

A visibly agitated Todd Donald appears at the Byrne house saying that he needs money and pleading for someone to buy his bicycle, and, as is usual, is told to go away. Towards nightfall, his absence is finally noticed, and a terrible suspicion begins to form in the minds of the waiting crowd: an anguished Mr Desmond cries out “what has he *done* to my little girl?” The body of his child is discovered at a nearby creek: her clothes are muddy, and an ominously blood stained rock sits nearby. The unfortunate Todd, unaware of the unfolding drama and the extensive search now underway for him, simply goes home, and finds himself being interrogated by a terrifying policeman: “Tell us how you killed that little girl...listen sonny, we’re going to put you in jail.”<sup>16</sup> The terrified boy is left alone for a while to consider his “crime”: by the time the police return he is dead, having killed himself.

In typical Jackson style, the extent of the boy’s involvement – if he is involved at all – in Caroline Desmond’s death is never made clear. The death may have seemed suspicious, we are told, but the child could just as easily have fallen over, and a minority of neighbours think that the offending rock was too heavy for a young boy to have lifted anyway. Ultimately, it is up to the reader to decide: what really matters is that for the residents of Pepper street, the worst case scenario – one child murdering another – is all too easy to believe: they are determined to think the worst of one another at the expense of humanity and reason.

*Road* is, as Judy Oppenheimer has observed, “a book remarkable for its smooth style, its unpleasant view of suburbia, and the amazing fact that it features not even one likeable character in a cast of many.”<sup>17</sup> In that final respect, Jackson’s debut novel has much in common with *Sundial*, another sour tale in which a large cast of isolated protagonists reveal their twisted, self obsessed natures. For Jackson, this first novel

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<sup>16</sup> Jackson, *Road* 213.

<sup>17</sup> Oppenheimer 17.

was a way of writing out of her system her disapproval of the sheltered, exclusive, and materialistic surroundings in which she spent much of her childhood. She had after all grown up in “the sort of neighbourhood that would be celebrated again and again on T.V, thirty years later, as a fit setting for happy W.A.S.P. families.”<sup>18</sup> But as in so much of her work, Jackson was compelled to look beyond the brittle façade of her suburban neighbourhood, to the prejudice, cruelty, and class divisions beneath.

Published in 1948, *Road*, although largely overshadowed by Jackson’s later work, and by no means her most accomplished novel, is nevertheless significant in several respects. First of all, the novel showcases Jackson’s ability to combine the everyday with gothic incident in what would become her trademark style. According to Jackson, the recurring theme in all she wrote was her “insistence upon the uncontrolled, unobserved wickedness of human nature.”<sup>19</sup> Hence her creation of “a middle class neighbourhood where individuals attempting to progress according to their own limited visions were destroyed by their own wickedness.”<sup>20</sup>

Another significant aspect of the novel is the way in which it reflects Jackson’s lifelong interest in houses, and in the psychological effect one’s living environment can have. The wall that physically separates Pepper street from the rest of the world is representative of the selfishness, materialism, and narcissism of the people within: they are literally unable to see much beyond their own back yards.<sup>21</sup> Parents and children, husbands and wives, next-door neighbours are all unwilling – or unable – to listen to one another, or to engage at a level deeper than insincere friendliness or outright bullying. Interestingly, this type of self-containment – of distance from the

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<sup>18</sup> Oppenheimer 16.

<sup>19</sup> Quoted in Oppenheimer 125.

<sup>20</sup> Oppenheimer 125.

<sup>21</sup> As we shall see later on in this chapter, physical boundaries such as walls and gates frequently isolate the Jackson protagonist from the real world, and find reflection in the psychological containment and self-obsession of such characters.

realities and responsibilities of the “real” world – was an aspect of the post-war suburban lifestyle that frequently aroused the ire of disapproving social critics.

Which brings us to what is probably the most significant – and yet overlooked – characteristic of the novel: the way in which it anticipates the most salient issues and themes of the debates about suburbia that raged in American society through out the 1950s. Written just as the suburban housing boom was getting underway, the novel, although set in 1936, nevertheless articulates a jaundiced view of suburban life that had much in common with the wave of similarly themed literature that materialised twenty years later.

According to historian William H. Chafe, “rarely has a society experienced such rapid or dramatic changes as those which occurred in the US after 1945”<sup>22</sup> – the period in which Shirley Jackson’s professional writing career began. One of the most significant of these changes was the immense housing boom. Millions of G.I.’s returning from the war in Europe and the Pacific had been promised homes of their own, homes far removed from the crowded, ill-equipped apartments available in the nation’s cities. Each veteran was accordingly pledged two thousand dollars towards housing costs, and construction soon began on a series of vast new housing developments. One of the earliest – and most famous of these – was Levittown, strategically built between New York and Pennsylvania in order to facilitate commuters. Seventeen thousand homes sprang up in the midst of the New Jersey countryside in what seemed an astonishingly short amount of time, all built to a similar basic formula in order to speed construction, and in many cases already furnished with all the mod cons. In what would prove one of the most astounding

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<sup>22</sup> William Chafe, *The Unfinished Journey: America Since World War Two* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999) 111.

migrations in history, Americans flocked to such new communities in ever increasing numbers.<sup>23</sup>

In the post-war era, the marriage rate doubled: inevitably a baby boom followed, and these developments further fuelled the incredible spread of suburbia – a population growth of 29 million in just ten years meant a lot more families to house. Consequently, between 1948 and 1958, there were eleven million suburban homes: 83% of all population growth during the fifties took place in the suburbs. By 1970, they would house more people than either cities or farms.<sup>24</sup> Behind the dry statistics lay the inescapable reality of the situation: that the basic living pattern of American society was undergoing a series of seismic shifts. Almost overnight, a new community could come into being. Bulldozers and construction crews invaded the countryside: the cities saw their populations drop dramatically. Those who dreamt of the good life fled to the promised land of suburbia: people unwilling – or unable – to afford such a move were all too often left in increasingly poverty stricken and derelict inner cities. In the suburbs, occupants felt able to “retreat into the private world of the family,” yet were at the same time part of a frequently close-knit new community that explicitly encouraged co-operation and volunteerism.<sup>25</sup>

Inevitably, as with every other dramatic change, there were those who condemned suburbia and all that it was held to represent. The most common complaint levelled at these new housing developments was that they encouraged mind-numbing conformity in their residents: to many cultural commentators, the suburbs became symbolic of what they imagined to be the most oppressive aspects of 50s life – sameness, blandness, mindlessness and materialism. Suburbanites were frequently portrayed as

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<sup>23</sup> Chafe 120.

<sup>24</sup> James Patterson *Grand Expectations: The United States, 1945-1974* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996) 331.

<sup>25</sup> Roger Silverstone, *Visions of Suburbia* (London: Routledge, 1997) 5.



the ultimate conformists: and suburbia as a very real threat to the “individualism” of the American people.<sup>26</sup> In his book *The City in History*, Lewis Mumford heaped scorn upon the new developments surrounding every American city, citing “a multitude of uniform, unidentifiable houses, lined up inflexibly, at uniform distances, in a treeless communal waste.... conforming in every outward and inward respect to a common mould, manufactured in the central metropolis.”<sup>27</sup> Mumford’s bitter analysis was by no means unique: during the 1950s and 60s a slew of similarly jaundiced critiques of suburbia secured its status as a topic of heated intellectual debate.

Interestingly, many of the most vitriolic critical attacks on the suburban lifestyle were as tinged with gothic horror as anything Jackson ever wrote. *The Crack in the Picture Window*<sup>28</sup> (1957), by John Keats, was perhaps the most hysterical analysis of all: in his best-selling diatribe, Keats described the suburbs as “fresh-air slums” and likened their rapid proliferation to “identical boxes spreading like gangrene.”<sup>29</sup> His attack described a nightmare of ill-advised post war housing development, development that laid waste to the landscape and resulted in millions of tacky, “jerry-built” homes in which everything will soon fall apart. The residents of these prefabricated cages are rather unkindly characterised as “John and Mary Drone”, mindless automatons unable to think for themselves, and only able to consume.<sup>30</sup> Suburbia not only ruined the countryside and fatally depleted the cities, critics such as Keats would argue, in accordance with other national bestsellers such as *The Split Level Trap* (Dick Gordon, 1960), which claimed to be “an intensive scientific study of emotional problems in a typical section of American suburbia,” it was also extremely

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<sup>26</sup> Patterson 336-338.

<sup>27</sup> Lewis Mumford, *The City in History* (1961; London: Penguin, 1991) 486.

<sup>28</sup> John Keats, *The Crack in the Picture Window* (Boston: Houghton, 1957).

<sup>29</sup> Cited in Scott Donaldson, *The Suburban Myth* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1969) 7.

<sup>30</sup> Donaldson 7.

damaging to the family.<sup>31</sup> The long hours and endless commuting of the typical suburban father meant that such neighbourhoods were full of lonely, depressed housewives left in charge of a houseful of unruly children: such a recipe, it was sweepingly stated, was resulting in a massive increase in psychological and emotional problems: just one of the many hidden hazards of suburbia.

Commentary on the issue was by no means confined to critics and journalists: it was also a frequent topic of contemporary fiction. Popular novels such as *Revolutionary Road* by Richard Yates (1961), *Peaceable Lane* by Keith Wheeler (1960); *Leave Me Alone* by David Karp (1957) and *The Blind Ballots* by George Mann (1962), were all negative portrayals of the suburban experience: books in which those who refuse to conform to their communities' standards are ostracised, families fall apart, and a dark underbelly of hypocrisy, prejudice and mindless materialism is exposed. In a similar, albeit more literary vein, prominent mid century writers such as John Updike (*Couples*, *Rabbit Run* and *Rabbit Redux*) and John Cheever (in stories such as "The Country Husband") also produced less than complimentary portraits of a soulless existence, in which the typical male is an emasculated, bitter office worker, as trapped in marriage and home as much as he is in unrewarding employment.

As Herbert J. Gans wrote in his landmark 1967 study *The Levittowners*, "in unison the authors [of the time] chanted that individualism was dying, suburbanites were miserable, and the fault lay with the homogenous suburban landscape and its population."<sup>32</sup> As more balanced commentators have since pointed out, such criticisms tended to ignore the fact that most of the Americans who migrated to suburbia in the post war era were in fact perfectly happy with their new homes, which were usually a great improvement over cramped, overcrowded city apartments. After

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<sup>31</sup> Donaldson 122.

<sup>32</sup> Cited in Joel Garreau, *Edge City* (New York: Doubleday, 1997) 268.

all, the “young families who joyously moved into new homes were not concerned about the problems of inner cities or the snobbish views of Mumford and other cultural critics”: whatever the perceived cultural failings of the suburbs, they provided America’s growing population with badly needed, swiftly erected, and cheaply built living spaces.<sup>33</sup>

The prodigious outpouring of journalism, fiction and sociology on suburbia during the 1950s was all part of a concerted effort to define where exactly the suburbs fit into the larger social scheme of things.<sup>34</sup> The many negative portrayals of suburbia that appeared were perhaps motivated as much by fear at the unprecedented pace at which American society was reinventing itself: suburbia was one of the most obvious manifestations of the way in which the traditional family and work patterns of the nation were changing. The accusations of mindless conformity and materialism levelled at the residents of these new neighbourhoods ignored the fact that such symptoms were as much a result of the incredible economic boom and rapid rise in living standards as they were of the suburban environment itself. And yet all too often, suburbia itself was blamed for the sudden and undesirable change in the national character, as though the enclaves themselves had exerted some sort of mysterious force over their unwitting inhabitants. For many cultural commentators during the 1950s, the suburban development had become a genuine evil; its inhabitants alienated, depersonalised zombies, and its cosy, cheap houses as disturbing in their own way as any haunted castle.

In her measured, panoramic portrayal of the hypocrisy and subtle nastiness of an earlier incarnation of suburbia, Jackson had prefigured by several years many of the themes more famously explored by a succession of later writers. Her careful use of

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<sup>33</sup> Kenneth T. Jackson, *The Crabgrass Frontier* 244.

<sup>34</sup> Garreau 267.

gothic incident and tone is especially restrained – and all the more effective – when compared to the hysterical and often downright unlikely denunciations of others. The way in which suburbia itself was often cited as the root of all evil seems all the more simplistic when contrasted with Jackson’s treatment of the subject. Her love of eighteenth century novels would, as in several of her other novels, prove an important influence upon her portrayal of the suburban lifestyle. The Augustan insistence of a “pattern precariously imposed upon the chaos of human development” was for Jackson aptly paralleled by the regimented neighbourhoods of the suburbs, which in her text represent “a human and not very rational order struggling inadequately to keep in check forces of great destruction, which may be the devil and may be enlightenment.”<sup>35</sup> The residents of Pepper Street are undone because of their own innate wickedness, not necessarily that of their environment. The sheltered, exclusive, enclave in which they live is a perfect metaphor for their narrow minds and self absorption: the wall a physical representation of the prejudice and hatred they all harbour within their hearts. Pepper Street may look edenic, but as in the biblical garden, sin lurks within the picturesque façade.<sup>36</sup>

Over a decade after the publication of her debut novel, Jackson would create Hill House, a place “born bad,” imbued with a malevolent intelligence all of its own; but in *Road* she made certain that the reader was in no doubt as to where the true evil in Pepper Street lies: in the hearts of its hypocritical residents. The houses themselves are not haunted, but the people inside certainly are. Shirley Jackson was both an innovator and a traditionalist. An innovator in as much as she anticipated the wave of suburban related fiction that would flood the American literary market place during

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<sup>35</sup> Oppenheimer 18.

<sup>36</sup> Joan Wylie Hall’s article “Fallen Eden in Shirley Jackson’s *The Road Through the Wall*” (one of very few critical essays on this novel) furthers this contention by claiming that *Road* contributes to a prominent theme of much Californian literature: the loss of innocence in the eden of the final American frontier. See *Renascence* 46.4 Summer (1994): 261-70.

the 1950s; a traditionalist because she was able to fuse the anxieties and issues raised by the contemporary suburban debate with her own uniquely gothic sensibility. She looked forward to the future of the American housing situation, and to the criticisms that would be levelled at the suburban sprawl (then in its infancy); yet was simultaneously able to combine it with the sensibilities of an earlier, more gothic era. In *Road*, Jackson was also contributing to the long-standing tradition of Gothic fiction that focuses on houses, castles, and living spaces in general. Her deep interest in the psychological and emotional effects of one's living environment, whilst to a large extent prompted by the societal circumstances under which her fiction was produced, has always also been a significant theme of the gothic. Initially, the relationship between the tree lined avenues of middle class suburbia and the gothic seems a tad incongruous, but as Jackson (and a great many other writers operating in her tradition) would prove, the combination of these two apparently irreconcilable elements can result in a potent cocktail of everyday terror. It is a relationship that Edith Wharton (frequent producer of classic supernatural tales herself) made forcefully apparent in her short story "All Souls" (1937), when she had one of her characters remark that:

I read the other day in a book by a fashionable essayist that ghosts went out when the electric light came in. What nonsense! ...As between turreted castles patrolled by headless victims with clanking chains and the comfortable suburban house with a refrigerator and central heating where you feel as soon as you're in it that *there's something wrong*; give me the latter for sending a chill down the spine.<sup>37</sup>

Here, as early as 1937, Wharton was pointing out that the *apparent* disparity between the placid exterior of a comfortable, modern suburban home and the supernatural (or gothic) incident in fact renders any such disturbance all the more disconcerting. The

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<sup>37</sup> Edith Wharton, *The Ghost Stories of Edith Wharton* (1937; London: Constable, 1975) 106.

relevance of Wharton's observation here is two fold. Firstly, she helps establish suburbia as a valid gothic site, and secondly, she draws attention to the inescapable link between the gothic and architecture – and to the tradition that exploits that link, a tradition that Jackson was very much a part of. It is a relationship that Kate Ferguson Ellis explicitly links to domesticity and the home: “Focusing on crumbling castles as sites of terror, and on homeless protagonists who wander the face of the earth, the gothic, too is preoccupied with the home. But it is the failed home that appears on its pages, the place from which some (usually “fallen” men) are locked out, and others (usually “innocent” women) are locked in.”<sup>38</sup>

In the following section, I will discuss the ways in which Shirley Jackson's gothic mansions represent twentieth century reconfigurations of the traditional gothic house. Jackson's overlooked depictions of suburbia illustrate one way in which she was able to engage contemporary American concerns within a gothic framework. Similarly, her consistent reinventions of the gothic house indicate her appreciation of the codes of the old fashioned gothic and her ability to update those conventions in a manner that reflected both her own recurring preoccupations and those of the post war United States. In order to appreciate the relationship between Jackson's “house” fiction and the grim castles and abbeys of the old-fashioned, stereotypical gothic novel, we must first take a brief look at the use and significance of the house (and the home) in gothic fiction. From its earliest manifestations, the gothic has been intimately related to buildings and architecture – castles, crypts, abbeys, mansions and chateaux: all are as much features of the genre as the obligatory scheming male villain and sensitive young heroine. As Frederick S. Franks has stated, “from its beginnings, the gothic

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<sup>38</sup> Kate Ferguson Ellis, *The Contested Castle: Gothic Novels and the Subversion of Domestic Ideology* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1989) ix.

asserted itself as the literature of collapsing structures, evil enclosures, forbidden feelings and suppressed chaos.”<sup>39</sup>

Robert Donald Spector has pointed out “the gothic novel did not originate in a sudden impulse from a single individual.”<sup>40</sup> Rather, the 18<sup>th</sup> century saw a series of related developments in other arts and forms of literature, developments that both foreshadowed and paralleled the more literary manifestations of the “gothic” impulse. One such manifestation was the new wave of fascination with gothic architecture that emerged during that period. Even before gothic revivalist elements came to dominate British architecture, there were signs of a resurgence of interest in this mode of design: Inigo Jones, John Vanbrugh and Christopher Wren all occasionally designed structures in this style, and “gothic” ruins became a fashionable addition to many a noble English garden. This trend towards gothic elaboration would continue well into the nineteenth century. In the form of the many eccentric and imaginatively wrought buildings it spawned, gothic architecture became a concrete expression of the era’s nostalgic interest in an (idealised) antiquarian past.

It was gothic architecture which indirectly inspired the writing of the text which kick-started the gothic as a literary genre. As Devendra Varma has said, *The Castle of Otranto* (1764) opened the floodgate of “gothic” tales.<sup>41</sup> *Otranto*’s author, Horace Walpole, developed a life long interest in the “gothic” past and proved an enthusiastic collector of artefacts and information pertaining to the middle ages. His overriding interest— or perhaps one should say obsession— was given outward expression from the late 1740s onwards as he progressively gothicised his mansion, the legendary

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<sup>39</sup> Frederick S. Franks, “The Early and Later Gothic Traditions” *Fantasy and Horror* ed. Neil Barron (Lanham: Maryland, Scarecrow Press, 1999) 6.

<sup>40</sup> Robert Donald Spector, *The English Gothic: A Bibliographic Guide From Horace Walpole to Mary Shelley* (London: Greenwood Press, 1984) 6.

<sup>41</sup> Devendra Varma, introduction, *The Castle of Otranto* by Horace Walpole (1764; London: The Folio Society, 1976) 12. Hereafter known as *Otranto*.

“Strawberry Hill”. As Devendra Varma has put it, in Strawberry Hill, Walpole had “reconstructed gothic romance in brick and mortar.”<sup>42</sup>

It is not all together surprising that immersed as he was in a world of his own creation, Walpole should have in 1764 had a bizarre dream in which he envisioned a gigantic hand encased in armour at the top of his staircase. What is unusual is that he sat down and wrote a book about it. *The Castle of Otranto* as the resulting text was known, became wildly popular with the audience of the day and helped bestow upon its creator the label “Father of the Gothic”. Walpole’s extensively renovated home – the physical embodiment of his gothic obsession – had, in a strangely apt case of architecture begetting fiction, inspired the literary representation of that obsession.

In *Otranto*, Walpole gave the gothic tale a form and a fashion by combining historical background with supernatural machinery.<sup>43</sup> The text featured many of the ingredients that would soon become the almost stereotypical constituents of the genre: the reassuringly distant setting in a foreign land; a preoccupation with chivalry and the restoration of the rightful heir to his aristocratic seat; pathetic heroines and a steadfast hero wrongfully denied the privileges of his noble birth, supernatural incident, a suitably depraved villain, and, of course, the titular castle, with its network of hidden passages and dank dungeons.

Walpole’s commercial success inevitably inspired other writers to try and ape his efforts by producing their own gothic texts, some being more accomplished (and more original) than others. As the genre grew in popularity, and particularly during the gothic boom of the 1790s, writers whose abilities matched (and surpassed) Walpole’s would help nurture the genre towards new levels of sophistication. Notably, many of these authors were women – such as Charlotte Smith, Anne Radcliffe, and Sophia Lee

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<sup>42</sup> Devendra Varma, *The Gothic Flame* (New Jersey: Scarecrow Press, 1987) 14.

<sup>43</sup> Varma, *The Castle of Otranto* 39.



– and a difference between the type of gothic text produced by male and female writers soon became apparent. Whilst it would take many more lines than I am willing to devote here to the subject to discuss the exact nature of those differences, it is relevant to note that contrasting male and female authored depictions of the home and domesticity emerged.

In fact, in her discussion of the relationship between the contemporary idealization of the home and the popularity of gothic fiction with 18<sup>th</sup> century female readers, Kate Ferguson Ellis suggests that the main difference between the “male” and “female” gothic lies in their conflicting representations of the home. In the 18<sup>th</sup> century (as in 1950s America) a well regulated home was an outward sign of male competence and trustworthiness; the thing that most distinguished the middle-classes from the untidy lower orders, and the rallying point from which criticism against the excesses of the aristocracy could be launched. The home, as in Jackson’s fiction, and as in the 1950s general consciousness, was therefore a great deal more than a place to live: it was reflection of the lifestyle, status and wealth of its owner.

The 18<sup>th</sup> century middle-class idealization of the home theoretically protected the women contained within from arbitrary male control, but in actuality provided very little real protection against male anger.<sup>44</sup> Hence, Ellis continues, the popularity of female-authored gothic fiction with female readers: for it represented a type of literary wish fulfilment. In the feminine gothic, the heroine exposes the villain’s usurpation and thus reclaims an enclosed space that should have been a refuge from evil, but instead has become the very opposite, a prison – hence the hundreds of (ultimately triumphant) gothic heroines literally unable to escape the domestic sphere because of the greed and cunning of villainous male usurpers. As I shall soon demonstrate,

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<sup>44</sup> Ellis x.

Shirley Jackson's modern brand of the Feminine gothic, whilst dealing with many of the same issues as her 18<sup>th</sup> century forbears, differs in that there is rarely such a satisfying (even if unlikely) restoration of order and peace through female intervention: hers is inevitably a much more pessimistic and complex world view, and one that has much to say about both Jackson's world view and the status of women in mid twentieth century America.

But whatever the changes made to the original blueprint, the imposing shadow of the old-world castle still played an important role in the gothic, whether in its original form or in the shape of the many sinister Abbeys, convents, chateaux, mansions and great houses it had evolved into. By making the castle the centrepiece of his gothic tableaux, the stage upon which his unlikely melodrama would be played out, Walpole had ensured that "the principal engine of the gothic plot would be an inlaid system of architectural contraptions, acoustical effects installed throughout the gothic castle...where inanimate objects behaved in human ways."<sup>45</sup>

It is not difficult to see why the castle should have presented so many fertile imaginative possibilities to the early practitioners of the gothic. Besides the obvious attractions a dark, isolated, and imposing building had for a genre that was largely concerned with frightening or thrilling its readers, the castle also offered, as Devendra Varma points out, a number of other pleasing elements. In the 18<sup>th</sup> century, just as today, the castle was traditionally associated with childhood stories of magic. After all, the Gothic romance is itself a sort of adult fairy tale. In addition, an "antique edifice" satisfied the readers craving for something strange, emotional and mysterious. Just as important as its fantastic and emotional resonance is what the castle symbolises in its most practical form: it is, first and foremost an image of

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<sup>45</sup> Franks 7.

physical, political and social power: a looming citadel that overlooks the fragile homes of the subjects it dominates, both isolated from and yet inseparable from the landscape that surrounds it. As the frequent appearance of ruins in the gothic novel testifies, “even when presented in decay, the castle is majestic and threatening.”<sup>46</sup> Given its commanding, inspiring presence, it is not surprising that the castle – or some variation or updating thereof – so often represents the focal point of the traditional gothic romance.

Although the European gothic form would undergo many reconfigurations and developments in the years following Walpole’s auspicious debut, many of those original constituents would survive as defining characteristics of the new genre. It was not until the form was transported to the radically different social and political landscape of America that it would undergo a major change of direction, and the architecture that propped up the form would also undergo a major overhaul. The gothic castle would have to be replaced. But by what?

In the New American gothic the family home would replace the gothic castle as the central source of terror. The intense, even claustrophobic focus upon the family (or pseudo family) that informs so much of Jackson’s work (a literary trait that informed much more than the Gothic genre in American fiction) is rooted, as are so many other American obsessions and neuroses, in the nation’s Puritan past. When the Puritans landed in New England during the early seventeenth century, they brought more with them than a strong belief in their own exceptionalism and the conviction that they were God’s chosen people. The intention of those early pilgrims/colonisers was to create a New Jerusalem for a New World, the fabled “city upon the hill” that would stand as both an inspiration and a reproach to the rest of mankind. They

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<sup>46</sup> Varma, *The Gothic Flame* 17.

perceived their fledgling settlements as part of “this great household upon the earth” – a household in which they, as God’s favoured children would have both the great privilege and substantial responsibility of creating a perfect society on earth.

John Winthrop, governor of the first New England colony, established the central importance to the early colonisers of the communal/family bond in his famous shipboard sermon “A Modell of Christian Charity,” in which he pointed out what the colony should be, and outlined the manner of the colonist’s necessary cooperation.<sup>47</sup> For Winthrop – and indeed, for much of his flock - the familial bond would become the guiding analogy of American life.<sup>48</sup> To the Puritans and their descendants, camped in their claustrophobic and insubstantial settlements, newcomers to a land they coveted but did not understand, surrounded by enticing yet deeply threatening swathes of thick forest (in which lurked unsurprisingly hostile native peoples the newcomers regarded as servants of the devil), home, and their families – including the extended families their communities represented – must have seemed like the only trustworthy elements of this strange new world. As a result, “a particularly intense degree of insecurity, compressed into a domestic setting, became the hallmark of Puritan experience and writing.”<sup>49</sup> The same could be said of much of Shirley Jackson’s fiction, and indeed that of the American gothic in general.

The European gothic had generally been anti domestic – it had rejected safety and security; its protagonists (M.G. Lewis’s Monk, Beckford’s villainous Caliph Vathek, Frankenstein’s misshapen creature) were usually excluded from family life, subverted its structures (like Manfred and other usurpers), or had the ruthlessness/self sufficiency to exist unencumbered by family ties (as with vampires or Melmoth the

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<sup>47</sup>Cited in Douglas Anderson, *A House Divided: Domesticity and Community in American Literature* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999) 9.

<sup>48</sup> Anderson 9.

<sup>49</sup> Anderson 9.

wanderer).<sup>50</sup> The American gothic instead went in the opposite direction, and became family centred. Indeed, much of American fiction in general would display an extremist veneration of the family (a process of idealisation we see employed again to particular effect during the 1950s). But as the American gothic would so often demonstrate, home was not always the safest place to be in. Home may have provided shelter from the terrors and uncertainties of the outside world, but once inside, what was there to prevent the family from tearing themselves (and each other) to pieces? The “isolated Puritan country household” had replaced Europe’s “brawling and childish and quite deadly mud castle household” as a locus of horror.<sup>51</sup> Many of America’s most important writers deployed gothic excess in order to represent “domesticity’s extreme horrors.” A significant early example of this trend is found in *Wieland* (1798) by Charles Brockden Brown. Brown, though by no means the popular success that his thematic successors Hawthorne and Poe were, is nevertheless a founding figure in the genre: the writer who first undertook the process of transatlantic conversion vital to the establishment of a distinctively *American Gothic* tradition. Inspired by a real life case, in *Wieland*, Brown told in the epistolary method the story of a man urged by mysterious (but rationally explicable) voices to murder his entire family.<sup>52</sup> Brown’s thematic heir, Hawthorne, also successfully replaced the

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<sup>50</sup> Richard Davenport Hines, *Gothic: 400 Years of Excess, Horror, Evil and Ruin* (London: Fourth Estate, 1998) 267.

<sup>51</sup> Hines 267.

<sup>52</sup> Family massacres also occur frequently in Jackson’s work. Merricat’s poisoning of (almost) the entire Blackwood family, in *Castle*, the arrest and acquittal of her sister Constance, and the subsequent notoriety of the sisters is prefigured in *The Sundial* during an intriguing interlude in which Jackson gleefully describes a famous local murder case. A well bred young woman from the village, we are told (in a case clearly based upon that of that America’s most renowned 19<sup>th</sup> century (accused) murderess Lizzie Borden), had one day bludgeoned her entire family to death with a hammer yet subsequently been cleared of the grisly crime by a jury unwilling to believe that a pleasant young girl would be capable of such a thing. Following the acquittal, the woman retired to the family home to live out the rest of her long life in extreme seclusion; after her death (in old age) the murder house becomes a prominent local tourist attraction, complete with guided tours of the crime scene. This anecdote has nothing to do with the actual narrative, but forms an interesting addition to a novel which both begins and ends with one family member accused of murdering another.

castles of the European gothic with home grown surroundings. His second novel, *The House of the Seven Gables* (1851), was a claustrophobic romance set in a crumbling mansion that successfully acts as a native substitution for the hackneyed settings of the European Gothic. The house is a “crazy, creaky, dry-rotted, dark and miserable old dungeon”.<sup>53</sup> Like many a gothic text before it, the plot hinges upon the usurpation of land: the house with many gables stands on stolen ground. (This by now familiar device takes on renewed significance when one considers that the American nation was itself founded upon land stolen from the original occupants). The book features a wealth of gothic devices. Besides the wrongful dispossession, vengeful curse, and rotting, labyrinthine<sup>54</sup> house there are also ghosts, unlawful incarceration, trances and visionary seers, rapping spirits, and an old portrait that occasionally comes to life.<sup>55</sup> The inequities of the past are finally resolved, in true romance fashion, by the coming together in marriage of the two warring families who dominate the book. We know that true conciliation has come about when the survivors of both families turn their backs upon the diseased house (symbol of all that was wrong and unjust about the past) and decide to live together in pastoral harmony.

In Poe’s short story “The Fall of the House of Usher,” the link between family and house is rendered even more significant by his depiction of a family and a house which actually share a single, indissoluble identity.<sup>56</sup> Here, the very word “house” has two distinct but related connotations: the word relates both to the collapsing physical buildings and the dwindling Usher family line as well. In Poe, as is the case from Walpole to the modern gothic, “pace and space exhibit a malign influence and

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<sup>53</sup> Nathaniel Hawthorne, *The House of the Seven Gables* (1851; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991) 360.

<sup>54</sup> I shall discuss the recurring device of the ‘labyrinthine’ or ‘maze-like’ house again in some detail when I begin my examination of Jackson’s gothic mansions.

<sup>55</sup> Hines 282.

<sup>56</sup> Hines 267.

mobility and are mentally stronger than their human counterparts.”<sup>57</sup> The relationship between master and house is such that as what is left of Roderick Usher’s sanity disintegrates, the building does as well. The use of architecture symbolically to parallel the mental state of those who reside within – as seen at work in Brown and Poe – is an approach that would be used again and again in the American Gothic, particularly as the genre underwent a renaissance/reconfiguration during the 1940s, 50s and 60s. In what would become known as the Southern Gothic, the image of the mansion set in the middle of the plantation would become a central trope. The title of Faulkner’s novel *Absalom, Absalom!* (1935) was originally to be *The Dark House* – a fitting name for a book concerned to such a large extent with the tale of slave owner Thomas Sutpen, and the mansion for which he had “overrun suddenly the hundred square miles of tranquil and astonished earth and dragged house and formal gardens violently out of the soundless Nothing and clap them down like cards upon a table...”<sup>58</sup> Nothing captured the degeneracy and despair of the post civil war south more aptly than the image of the plantation mansion: once a proud symbol of wealth and power built on the exploitation of slaves, latterly the shameful epitome of all that the south felt it had lost in defeat. Faulkner’s fellow southerner O’Connor captured that strange mixture of resentment and longing the antebellum mansion represented in the story “Everything That Rises Must Converge” (1956).<sup>59</sup> Julian, the arrogant protagonist, we are told, “never spoke of it without contempt or thought of it without longing”<sup>60</sup> (‘it’ being his family’s lost plantation). As I noted in Chapter One, Irving Malin had this to say about the differences between the “old” and “new” Gothic styles:

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<sup>57</sup> Franks 7.

<sup>58</sup> William Faulkner, *Absalom, Absalom!* (1935; London: Vintage, 1995) 8.

<sup>59</sup> Flannery O’Connor, *Everything That Rises Must Converge* (1956; London: Faber and Faber, 1985) 17.

<sup>60</sup> O’Connor 7.

In old Gothic we encounter the haunted castle, the journey into the forest, and the reflection. Walpole, Monk Lewis, and Mrs Radcliffe do not use these images in any psychologically acute way: they remain mere props. But the inheritors of old Gothic regard these images as “objective correlatives” of the psyche.<sup>61</sup>

In other words, in the modern Gothic, a house is generally much more than a house: rather, it can be taken to have a direct connection with the psychological landscape of the persons who inhabit it. Whilst this point is undoubtedly relevant (to a different extent in each case), I believe that when critics usually discuss Jackson’s gothic houses – and particularly so in the case of the *Hill House* – there is always the danger that in examining the obvious and well-crafted relationship between house and mind, they overlook less obvious connections that are just as valid. In a later chapter, I shall discuss Jackson’s use and understanding of psychology in some detail, but for the moment, I prefer to take a different tack. Shirley Jackson’s three distinctive gothic mansions represent, in part at least, progressive attempts to combine the prototypical gothic setting with the psychological acuteness, cultural anxieties and subtle self-awareness of twentieth century fiction.

The fact that Jackson wrote her three “house” novels one after the other – producing *Sundial* in 1958, *Hill House* in 1959, and *Castle* (her final full length text) in 1963 – suggests that she was, albeit in a somewhat different way in each case, trying to grapple with the same recurring preoccupations. Her earliest “house” novel, *Sundial* is an explicit homage – and in places, satirical reworking of – the haunted houses of 18<sup>th</sup> century England.<sup>62</sup> The house in this text has a unique function in that it

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<sup>61</sup> Malin 79.

<sup>62</sup> Because *Road* focuses more on a neighbourhood than the characteristics of the houses within, I have decided not to class it as a “house” novel.



serves as a modern day Ark for its unworthy inhabitants.<sup>63</sup> The novel begins with the funeral of Lionel Halloran, heir to family home, and with the accusation that his mother had pushed him downstairs so that she could inherit the property instead. The house, we are told in the opening paragraph, was “now indisputably Mrs Halloran’s.”<sup>64</sup> Shortly after the funeral, whilst strolling in the elegant gardens that surround the house, his Aunt Fanny receives word from her dead father (builder of the house) that the end of the world is on its way and that only the inhabitants of the house will survive – “tell them in the house that they will be saved. Do not let them leave the house.”<sup>65</sup> Though understandably sceptical at first, the dramatic appearance of a snake from out of thin air convinces everyone that the end is indeed nigh, and they embark upon their (frequently comedic) preparations for the apocalypse. The Halloran family (Mrs Halloran, her invalid husband Richard, daughter in law Mary Jane, and granddaughter and heiress Fancy) reside in the house with a growing cast of bickering hangers on: Essex the librarian, Miss Ogilvie the governess, Mrs Willow (a friend of the family) and her two daughters, a captain whom they pick up along the way, and Gloria Desmond, a distant cousin and the only vaguely likable character in the novel. They spend the rest of the summer stockpiling supplies, preparing to barricade themselves in, and jockeying for position in the new world they believe they will found: Mrs Halloran appoints herself Queen in advance. However, her dreams of absolute authority are ended on the eve of the great storm that they have been told will destroy the old order: she too is found dead at the bottom of the staircase, the reader’s chief suspect her malevolent grandchild Fancy. The novel ends there, the reader left wondering, like the protagonists, if the world is about to end.

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<sup>63</sup> Friedman 106.

<sup>64</sup> Jackson *Sundial* 1.

<sup>65</sup> Jackson *Sundial* 28.

As Lenemaja Friedman points out, the novel has much in common with the haunted houses of the 18<sup>th</sup> century Gothic, and again owes much to the Jackson's interest in the literature of that period.<sup>66</sup> Many of the features of the house and estate, including the sundial, are ones that had been popular in eighteenth century England: the grotto, the muddy lake complete with hostile swans, formal gardens, pagoda, maze, oriental summer house, rose garden and marble statues.<sup>67</sup> Here also, as in many 18<sup>th</sup> century Gothic novels, there are mysterious deaths, portentous omens and supernatural occurrences with no attempts at rationalisation: portraits that fall from the wall, magical snakes, ghostly gardeners and ominous storms. There is even an overt reference to the most legendary real life gothic mansions, when we are informed that the grotto inside the grounds had been suggested by an architecture student "carried away in a kind of Strawberry Hill intoxication."<sup>68</sup> Though invested with a powerful strain of ominous foreboding, and featuring frequent flashes of sardonic Jackson wit (it is her most satirical work), *Sundial* is the weakest of the house novels. The tantalising inconclusiveness that aptly concluded so many of her short stories fails to work convincingly here: instead, the reader is left frustrated by the lack of resolution, and surprised by the abruptness with which the story concludes. As in *Road*, the fact that there are also so many characters, only a few of whom display any redeeming qualities at all, also works against the novel: it is difficult to feel much for a house full of such disagreeable people.

In contrast to the savage wit and frequent comedy of *Sundial*, Jackson's next (and most influential) novel was *Hill House*. Whilst not without its own humorous touches, *Hill House* is an altogether more serious text, Jackson's (successful) attempt to create a modern day haunted house. Whilst all three gothic mansions are significant within

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<sup>66</sup> Friedman 105.

<sup>67</sup> Friedman 105.

<sup>68</sup> Jackson, *Sundial* 108.

their texts, *Hill House* is the most significant of all: a house “born bad” and imbued with so much maliciousness and malign intelligence that it functions as a character in its own right. The plot is simple (one used by countless other horror novels and films since). Dr Montague, an academic interested in the paranormal, assembles a small band of psychically sensitive researchers in a notorious house. He hopes scientifically to prove the existence of ghosts: what they find in *Hill House*, whilst unquantifiable, exceeds their wildest nightmares. Jackson’s brilliance lies in making this a psychological haunted house novel: there are none of the over-the-top theatrics or gaudy effects of the traditional haunting.

The house appears to single out the most vulnerable (and receptive) member of the group for special attention. The relationship between lonely, frustrated Eleanor Vance, and the monstrous *Hill House* is the heart of the novel, which progresses with chilling inevitability towards a devastating climax, in which the deluded Eleanor kills herself (or is perhaps killed by the house) so that she will remain there forever. If *Sundial* was Jackson’s homage to the old fashioned gothic house, *Hill House* is her triumphant reinvention of the form for a modern age: the book against which every successive haunted house would be measured, a text in which character and psychology dominate over shock tactics and portentous symbolism.

Following the subtle chills of *Hill House*, it is hardly surprising that Jackson’s next novel, *Castle*, whilst still a text in which the house is of central importance, is a carefully wrought, character-driven piece eschewing (possibly) supernatural events altogether in favour of an insightful exploration of teenage psychosis. Whilst reading the three novels alongside each other, it is easy to spot the parallels that arise again and again. Most obviously, all three novels are set in and around large, imposing country mansions, in which most of the action takes place. These mansions – the

Halloran house, Hill House, and the Blackwood Mansion – are all fenced or walled off from their surrounding areas. Hill House, we are told, has an “ominous gate” (locked at night to make sure that no one tries to leave): the eccentric Blackwood sisters never leave their gate unlocked (until their house burns down, and renders such precautions unnecessary), and the Halloran property (like Pepper Street in *Road*) is securely walled off, “distinguished from the rest of the world by a stone wall, so that all inside the wall was Halloran, and all outside was not.”<sup>69</sup> Like the stereotypical haunted castle, sitting in malevolent isolation atop a craggy mountain peak, Jackson’s gothic mansions are both part of yet irrevocably removed from their surroundings: dominating presences, yet literally barricaded away from the villages around them. “The people of the village have always hated us” comments Merricat Blackwood in the opening pages of *Castle*, as she describes her brief but tension filled foray into the “grey” local village, with its “dirty little houses” for supplies.<sup>70</sup> It is an observation that could equally be applied to the strained relationship between the Halloran clan and the locals for whom they host a hedonistic, patronising farewell party,<sup>71</sup> or the frosty reception received by Eleanor Vance in the opening chapter of *Hill House* when she stops for coffee in the “disorderly,” “crooked” and “broken” village of Hillsdale.<sup>72</sup> Furiously resented by the villagers whose surroundings they dominate, the residents of Jackson’s big houses have clear similarities to the aristocrats of earlier Gothic texts: indeed, in *Sundial* and *Castle*, the families in question consciously think of themselves as being above the “locals”. The Blackwood family (or rather, their survivors), previously envied for their wealth, and their ownership of the finest house in town, are by the novel’s beginning also feared and hated: towards the end of

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<sup>69</sup> Jackson, *Castle* 411.

<sup>70</sup> Jackson, *Castle* 401.

<sup>71</sup> Jackson, *Sundial* 171-175.

<sup>72</sup> This scene has clear echoes of the episode, early in *Castle*, when Merricat stops for coffee in the local diner, only to be expelled from the premises by the powerful hostility of one of the local men.

*Sundial* we find out that the Halloran house (like so many other classic gothic houses) is built on land stolen from the local people.

As in *Road*, there is a recurring undercurrent of class tension and mutual resentment in all three house texts, an undercurrent as strong as that in any 18<sup>th</sup> or 19<sup>th</sup> century gothic text. The country house is in its own way as potent a symbol of power and wealth as any castle; the “power houses of a ruling class” as Richard Davenport Hines characterises the 19<sup>th</sup> century British variety.<sup>73</sup> The country mansion is where the squire or lord traditionally resided, a figure whose wealth was based upon the rent and labour of his tenants. The house in such cases functioned as both headquarters and showcase: an intimidating symbol of power whose very solidity gave an illusion of permanence, and a visible reminder of the wealth and taste of its occupier. The psychological and social import of such a building is given a unique resonance when transported to the colonial landscape of America, which is partly why the feature of the antebellum plantation house recurs with such frequency in the southern gothic. However, it is worth bearing in mind that Jackson’s habitual New England landscape – rarely explicitly located, but always implied – is the place where the British colonies in America were first established. Jackson’s gothic mansions are clearly intended to represent modern day versions of the traditional gothic castle; generic clichés reconfigured for a new age, and created with a strong awareness of (and willingness to adapt) the generic codes that lend them such resonance in the first place.

Just as the denizens of *Otranto*’s castle look up to find a giant armour encased fist at the top of the staircase, and the beleaguered tenants of Hawthorne’s *House of the Seven Gables* have to put up with moving portraits, deadly curses and the like, so too Jackson’s mansions play host to a wealth of supernatural and psychic incident. In

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<sup>73</sup> Hines 63.

*Sundial*, foremost amongst these are Aunt Fanny's mysterious revelations from her dead father (the reason why the inhabitants decide to prepare themselves for the apocalypse), Gloria Desmond's psychic visions, warm statues, moving portraits, little Fancy's voodoo dolls, and a snake that appears and vanishes just in time to convince the sceptical family of Fanny's veracity.<sup>74</sup> *Hill House*, as one would expect in a novel about supernatural incident, set in an a house that is emphatically "not sane," is no stranger to unexplained phenomena either: mysterious rappings, ghostly hand holding, psychic premonitions and uncontrollable compulsions all happen in the short space of time that Eleanor and the others reside there, although deciding which occurrences are caused by the house, and which are imagined or unconsciously caused by Eleanor herself is left to the reader. Although there are is no supernatural incident *per se* in *Castle*, Merricat and Constance do exist as modern day witches – Constance with her extensive knowledge of botany and poisons, the psychopathic Merricat with her familiar (Jonas, her cat), her belief in the power of everyday objects, and her obsessive need to erect and bury protective totems around the Blackwood property:

All our land was enriched with my treasures buried in it, thickly inhabited just below the surface with my marbles and my teeth and my coloured stones, all perhaps turned to jewels by now, held together under the ground in a powerful taut web which never loosened, but held fast to guard us.<sup>75</sup>

Unusual architecture is another notable link between *Hill House* and *Sundial*, albeit to differing effect in each text. The Halloran mansion, like Hill House, has been built by a rich man for his wife: in each case, the wife in question dies before ever

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<sup>74</sup> The murderous Merricat Blackwood is clearly a near relative of Fancy, about whom we are told that "Not a servant, or an animal, or any child in the village near the house would willingly go near her" (Jackson, *Castle* 33), and who emerges at the novel's conclusion as the chief suspect in her grandmother's death.

<sup>75</sup> Jackson, *Castle* 436.

having seen the house (tragedy therefore mars each building from the outset). The Halloran mansion has been built to the specifications of exact mathematical perfection – all according to the first Mr Halloran’s exact requirements (it is he who communicates from the great beyond with his daughter, Aunt Fanny). The right wing has twenty windows, as does the left: the second and third floors both have forty two windows across; 106 thin pillars hold up the balustrade on the left, and the same on the right. All elements of house and garden are perfectly balanced, save for the titular sundial, set badly off centre in the lawn.

Hill House is in many respects the architectural and temperamental opposite of the Halloran mansion. It is a house in which we are informed “clashing disharmony”<sup>76</sup> predominates, a place “born bad”, in which “every angle is slightly wrong.”<sup>77</sup> Built in a pattern of interlocking concentric spirals (a conceit echoed in the text’s structure, which begins and ends with almost the same words, and with the certain knowledge that had the house *not* been haunted at the outset, it definitely was now), its unorthodox design has rendered it “a masterpiece of architectural misdirection.”<sup>78</sup> Hill House consequently disorientates, confuses, and clouds the minds of all who enter it: it is quite possible to enter a room and then be unable to find the door – a strange testament to its chief architect, Hugh Crain, whom we are told “built his house to suit his mind.” The labyrinthine nature of Hill house is nothing new in the genre: as David Punter points out, “the Gothic house/castle has always been without a total plan: *Udolpho* and the *House of the Seven Gables* are equally of doubtful extent and shape,

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<sup>76</sup> Jackson, *Hill House* 58.

<sup>77</sup> Jackson, *Hill House* 105.

<sup>78</sup> Jackson, *Hill House* 106.

no matter how solid their details might appear”<sup>79</sup> – this inability to map the gothic house, Punter continues, is a reflection of their metaphorical nature.<sup>80</sup>

Although Jackson suggests (as did fellow exponent of the New England Gothic, H.P. Lovecraft) that prolonged exposure to a house built entirely without right angles might in itself be enough to induce madness, she also implies in *The Sundial* that a building erected to specifications of extreme rationality might also have the same end result. Whilst being introduced to the mathematical perfection of the Halloran mansion, we are told that the sundial, skewed and jarring as though its imprecision may be in the midst of such exactitude, is nevertheless a necessary addition, the flaw that throws its surroundings into sharp focus, a permanent reminder of the perpetually imperfect state of human nature. For Orianna Halloran, self-appointed ruler of the house (and Queen of the new world they believe they will inherit), it is “a point of human wickedness: it is a statement that the human eye is unable to look unblinded upon mechanical perfection.”<sup>81</sup>

Ultimately, although in many respects it could be said that *The Sundial* is a rehearsal for *Hill House*, there is one crucial difference between the two texts. *Sundial* concerns a perfect house – and the dream of a perfect society in a new world – both of which are condemned by the greed and ignorance, the sheer human weakness of the people who inhabit them. In that respect, *Sundial* has much in common with Jackson’s depiction of superficially idyllic suburban life in *Road*. *Hill House*, by way of contrast, is a house born evil – a monument to irrationality – that has the power to disorientate and even drive insane those who are vulnerable enough to fall under its

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<sup>79</sup> Punter 174.

<sup>80</sup> The notion of the unquantifiable house is taken even more extreme levels in the recent novel *The House of Leaves*, by Mark Z. Danielewski (London: Anchor, 2000). In this post-modern take on the haunted house tale, as the residents of the house in question nervously explore the vast, dark cavern that has suddenly appeared in one of their hallways, the text itself undergoes various jarring typographic shifts that both parallel and reproduce the characters fear and disorientation.

<sup>81</sup> Jackson, *The Sundial* 14.



spell. In this text, it is the house itself that is evil, not the people within. Eleanor's great failing is her psychological vulnerability, and not any inherent wickedness on her part, which is why she remains one of Jackson's most poignantly affecting characters.

Although the basic narrative formula of all three texts is much the same - an isolated group of people (isolated geographically, emotionally, and psychologically) assemble in an imposing mansion to await some cataclysmic plot development (the end of the world/supernatural incident, madness and suicide/arson and attack by an angry mob): and certain recurring character types show up in each - (the invalided old man, the malevolent girl child, dissolute, ambitious young men, dead but still powerful patriarchs, hostile villagers), execution and intent vary significantly in each text. *Sundial* is an overt homage to the 18<sup>th</sup> century Gothic: *Hill House* a reinvention of the ghost story for the twentieth century: and *Castle* a carefully crafted tale of adolescent psychosis. Each stands as a significant text in its own right, a reflection of Jackson's obvious fascination with the notion of the Gothic house, yet there is no sense of repetition. Rehearsal perhaps, particularly in *Sundial*, but never repetition.

Perhaps the most significant similarity of all between the three texts is that each novel ends with the protagonists either having wilfully barricaded themselves inside, or having otherwise become imprisoned within - whether because of their own fear, or the hostility of others. "Home" as we shall see, is not something one can easily escape in Jackson's fiction - and even if escape is possible, the price is frequently (female) madness.

In both *Sundial* and *Castle*, home serves as a refuge, a shelter from the hostility and uncertainties posed by the world outside. By the conclusion of both texts, the sense of otherworldly isolation and detachment from reality caused by the

geographical (and psychological) isolation of the protagonists has become all encompassing: home is literally all there is for these characters now. *Sundial*, for example, concludes tantalisingly as the bickering residents await the apocalypse from their boarded up home, base of operations for the predicted new world: the home as both gothic tomb and post apocalyptic bomb shelter. Because we are never quite sure if Aunt Fanny's revelations are true, or emanations from her own subconscious – and because the text itself is often so evasive, and ends just as the most interesting events are predicted to unfold, we have the strong suspicion that the protagonists may be waiting for the end for quite some time. *Castle* concludes in similar fashion, as Constance and Merricat hide themselves (this time for good) in the blackened shell that was once their fine home. Although the novel ends with a declaration of contentment with their lot – Merricat joyously announces, “Oh Constance, we are so happy”<sup>82</sup> – we are nevertheless left on a note of distinct unease. Merricat's skewed perspective and beguilingly insane narrative voice have prompted in us an unlikely note of empathy, but can we really believe that the sisters will last long living in a shell of a house, depending upon the fearful offerings of their former victimisers for sustenance? Merricat, as we already know, is happy, but then that is because her dream of complete isolation from the world has come true – they are finally as good as “living in the moon.”<sup>83</sup> But what of Constance, who has once again sacrificed all chance of a normal life, her freedom, and probably her sanity in order to be with her deranged sibling? The fact that they are living in the manner that our insane narrator had dreamed of all along is a telling sign. Their aversion to the world outside their home is such that they are willing to live without daylight rather than let anyone look inside – lurking inside the charred remains of their kitchen, as Constance does her

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<sup>82</sup> Jackson, *Castle* 531.

<sup>83</sup> Jackson, *Castle* 519.

best to re-establish the domestic routine so lovingly described in the earlier sections of the novel.

Entrapment within the Gothic mansion also furnishes the conclusion of *Hill House*. Eleanor's powerful desire for a home of her own is cruelly fulfilled. At the novel's end, she finally surrenders what is left of her free will and identity and succumbs to the malign embrace of Hill House by – perhaps intentionally, though we cannot be sure – killing herself in the driveway. The horrifying truth of Eleanor's fate is made clear when, even as she hurtles towards the fatal tree, she shakes off the house's influence long enough to experience a moment's panicked clarity – and asks “Why am I doing this? Why? Why don't they stop me?”<sup>84</sup> The final paragraph of the novel is identical in almost every aspect to the first – except for the calculated omission of the words “Hill House stood *by itself*” (my italics). The implication is that the house no longer stands alone, that it has been joined by something – or rather someone – else...the unfortunate Eleanor Vance.

The fact that each of Jackson's gothic mansions has definitively – and indefinitely – enclosed its inhabitants by the conclusion of their respective texts is one of the most significant aspects of Jackson's treatment of “home” and domesticity. This recurring conclusion is due to three principal factors. First, there is the sense of isolation and enclosure that occurs in each house is in part a reflection of the narcissism and inward-looking nature of the classic New American Gothic protagonist – the “haunted castle” says Irving Malin, is a metaphor for confining narcissism, for the private world.<sup>85</sup> Like the first Mr Halloran, each set of characters establishes a “world of their own” within the confines of their house – all marked by a disdain/ fear of the

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<sup>84</sup> Jackson, *Hill House* 246.

<sup>85</sup> Malin 80.

exterior universe. It's another instance of the home acting as a metaphor for psychological space within the Gothic genre.

Secondly – though I have no wish to exalt biography at the expense of critical examination – it seems obvious that the enclosed existence of Jackson's characters to some extent reflects the author's own severe agoraphobia. The fact that a woman frequently unable to leave her own home concluded three major novels with her protagonists unwilling – or unable – to leave *their* houses – cannot be entirely unrelated. Finally (and this contention forms the basis of the remainder of this chapter) I believe that the texts reflect the fact that throughout Jackson's work there exists two conflicting, but interrelated views of the home (and by extension, domesticity) – as a trap, a place from which there can be no escape, and as an edenic place of safety and retreat.

These contradictory attitudes towards the home are clearly linked to the similarly conflicted emotions held by many women during the 1950s, who were expected by the cultural consensus to live their lives according to the prescriptive domestic ideology of the era. But what were the factors that helped inspire this ideology in the first place? The simple fact that 1950s America saw a time of unprecedented growth in the number of families was an important element. The post-war marriage rate was more than twice that of the preceding decade: the inevitable baby boom that followed caused a population increase of 30 million during the decade.<sup>86</sup> In the ever-expanding environs of suburbia, sex roles were polarised as never before, as commuting city-bound fathers left home at daybreak, whilst their wives held down the fort at home and took care of house and children. Suburbia was the most consequential

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<sup>86</sup> Chafe 123.

development for housewives in the 1950s.<sup>87</sup> As Glenna Matthews has noted, suburban housing patterns reinforced a woman's isolation from the world of adults, whilst the percentage of her day spent chauffeuring other family members about increased exponentially. As a locale for the stay at home housewife, suburbia was often a less than stimulating environment.

Such an existence – spent in the home, devoted to fulfilling the needs of husband and children – was perceived by a powerful body of opinion makers as the complete embodiment of the American woman's highest dreams.<sup>88</sup> As Betty Friedan would famously argue, this 'feminine mystique' established the suburban housewife as "the dream image of the young American woman, and the envy, it was said, of women all over the world...she was healthy, beautiful, educated, concerned only about her husband, her children, her home. She had found true feminine fulfilment...this mystique of feminine fulfilment became the cherished and self-perpetuating core of contemporary American culture".<sup>89</sup>

This dogma of domestic idealism was reinforced in practically every aspect of popular American culture. For instance, women's fashions – of which the tightly cinched in waist and bouffant skirt were the defining trends of the decade – hadn't been so confining and impractical since the nineteenth century.<sup>90</sup> American movies celebrated a male culture of individualism and strength – exemplified in rugged lone heroes played by actors such as John Wayne and Gary Cooper – whilst the leading female movie stars were non-threatening sex kittens like Monroe and Mansfield, or cheery girls-next door like Doris Day. They were very different role models indeed from the sassy, sharp career girls that had dominated the movie screens during the

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<sup>87</sup> Glenna Matthews, *Just a Housewife: The Rise and Fall of Domesticity in America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989) 212.

<sup>88</sup> Chafe 121.

<sup>89</sup> Friedan, *The Feminine Mystique* (London: Victor Gollancz Ltd, 1963) 18.

<sup>90</sup> Patterson 361.

40s. Another popular culture medium that reinforced the status quo was the women's magazines of the decade. As Friedan later emphasised, these magazines printed story after story extolling the unassailable virtues of motherhood and domesticity. In such tales, the man was the undisputed head of the household, the career woman an evil (but lonely) schemer who had missed out on the much more satisfying blessings of love and marriage.<sup>91</sup> The fledgling medium of television too contributed to the ideal that women were expected to live up to. In just about every facet of American culture, women saw reflected back at them an idealised vision of womanhood and domesticity that they were being urged to personify in every day life.

Elaine Tyler May describes the immediate post-war period as one dominated by the "reproductive consensus" – a dominant cultural ideology in which the baby boom, the idealisation of home and child rearing, and attacks on feminists all marked a period notable for its strong reaction against the advances American women had made in earlier decades.<sup>92</sup> The inevitable consequence of this consensus was that any woman who found herself unsatisfied with her culturally prescribed role had to have something seriously wrong with her. Why else would she reject the dream lifestyle of the American housewife? If, as Betty Friedan wrote in 1963, a woman had a problem in the 50s, she knew that something must be wrong with her marriage or herself, for "other women were satisfied with their lives...What kind of woman was she if she didn't feel this mysterious fulfilment waxing the kitchen floor?"<sup>93</sup> For the women who did find themselves thus mysteriously unfulfilled in their exalted roles, neurosis was a convenient catch-all explanation: it was naturally easier for society to diagnose mental illness than acknowledge that its pervasive ideology was having a damaging effect

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<sup>91</sup> Patterson 363.

<sup>92</sup> Cited in Guy Reynolds, *Twentieth Century American Women's Fiction* (London: Macmillan Press, 1994) 173.

<sup>93</sup> Friedan 19.

upon the women it was supposed to satisfy. Accordingly, consumption of tranquillisers skyrocketed during the decade.<sup>94</sup> For many women, the place society said was their heaven had become a hell. Even if they had managed to escape (and it must be said that by no means every American housewife chafed strongly against her assigned role) – it was very difficult for a woman to expect much in the way of advancement outside the home.

Home – supposedly the family refuge from the stresses of the outside world; the foundation of a happy and productive society – had become a suffocating trap from which there could be no escape. Writing on this subject, Betty Friedan addressed the issue in these terms: “the suburban house is not a concentration camp, nor are American housewives on their way to the gas chamber. But they are in a trap, and to escape... they must finally exercise their human freedom and recapture their sense of self.”<sup>95</sup> In Shirley Jackson’s conflicting attitudes we find represented both extremes of opinion regarding the home and domesticity during the 1950s. In Jackson, the home represents both paradise and prison – a place that many of her characters are irresistibly drawn too, yet unable to leave – even when they have initially entered of their own accord.

It is important to stress that by no means was Jackson’s interest in the home confined to the Gothic mansion. In her first collection, *The Lottery* (1949), most of the characters that populate the first section are of the same recognisable type – lonely single females who inhabit cramped, shabby, city apartments, who long to have a real home (and life) of their own. As in the typical women’s magazine story of the decade, there are no happy go lucky career women inhabiting Jackson’s often cruel universe: living as a single woman here means loneliness, isolation, and extreme emotional

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<sup>94</sup> Chafe 125.

<sup>95</sup> Friedan 19.

vulnerability. Eleanor Vance from *Hill House* is one such character transferred to the larger canvas of the full-length novel. It is interesting to note that in five out of six of Jackson's novels, the main protagonist is a young (or relatively young) single woman. Housewives are confined to the more limited milieu of the short stories – except of course in Jackson's two best-selling volumes of family memoir, in which (she) the housewife is the heroine of various domestic dramas.

Whilst reading Jackson's contrasting depictions of domesticity and the home, I have concentrated upon the conflicting portrayals of the idea of the home found in her treatment of single women and housewives respectively. Jackson's spinsters overwhelmingly cling to dreams of domesticity and a home of their own, whilst the anxious housewives that populate so many of her short stories often view that same dream as a nightmare. It is as though Jackson is telling us the same thing that Friedan would later proclaim: that once embraced, the overbearing domestic ideal of the era could become a suffocating, imprisoning trap. *The Lottery and Other Stories*<sup>96</sup> showcases Jackson's conflicting views of the home in contrasting portrayals of figures that would recur again and again in her fiction – the unmarried urban woman and the country housewife, both subject to anxiety and crisis.<sup>97</sup> The collection's second story – “The Daemon Lover” is Jackson's rewriting of the traditional “Demon Lover” folklore. Indeed, the figure of the demon lover recurs through out these stories in the person of one James Harris – a man in a blue suit, who pops up in differing guises and roles through out. In fact, the Lottery is subtitled “The Adventures of James Harris.” In “The Daemon Lover,” Harris gets his first airing, as the mysterious fiancé who jilts a vulnerable woman on their wedding day. The main protagonist is a 34 year old single woman living in cramped, dowdy surroundings who, as the action

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<sup>96</sup> Shirley Jackson, *The Lottery and Other Stories*, (in) *The Masterpieces of Shirley Jackson* (1949; London: Robinson, 1996)

<sup>97</sup> Joan Wylie Hall, *Shirley Jackson: The Short Fiction* (New York: Twayne Publishers, 1993) 121.



begins, is awaiting the arrival of her future husband – in whom she has placed all of her fragile hopes and dreams. Her desperate loneliness and frantic hopes are so aptly evoked that they practically seep off the page. Most of the story is taken up with her nervous, obsessive preparations; the constant, futile rearranging of her apartment, her inability to decide upon an appropriate dress for the occasion. Hers, we soon realise, is a poignant, unfulfilled existence, a life of profound dissatisfaction: “She was not satisfied with her clothes, her face, her apartment”. She can hardly wait to settle down in blissful domesticity with her (younger) man. But there is no sign of Harris come the appointed hour, and even a panicked search for him yields no results – he has vanished. The only trace left is an apartment he was seen entering, an apartment from which the woman is locked out, although she does think she hears mocking laughter. She must return to her empty existence, as personified by her cheerless, shabby living conditions.

In the next story, “Like Mother Used to Make” a house-proud bachelor is similarly excluded from domestic contentment. His “warm” and “friendly” apartment and fine domestic skills stand in ironic contrast to the “bare and random” surroundings of his female neighbour. In a humorous reversal of gender stereotypes, she eats the dinner he has prepared. When her date – Jim Harris – appears, she pretends that her friend’s apartment is her own – and so he ends up in voluntary exile from his own cosy home.

“Trial by Combat” features another recurring Jackson character type: that of the aggressive older woman. Another lonely woman – Emily Johnson, this time an army wife whose husband is fighting overseas – lives in a ‘furnished room’ in a city boarding house. When small, trivial items begin to disappear from her room, she soon suspects Mrs Allen, the widowed older woman living upstairs. In an attempt to confront the thief, Emily pays her a visit, and finds a room “almost like her own – the

same narrow bed with the tan cover, the same maple dresser and armchair.”<sup>98</sup> As the two women politely converse, it becomes gradually apparent that Mrs Allen is a kind of older version of her visitor: her husband, though dead, was once too in the army; they both love flowers, they live in almost identical rooms – though Mrs Allen has been there three years, and her visitor only six weeks. We find that all the keys in the boarding house open all the doors, and Emily eventually discusses the petty larceny, and her desire for it to stop, and the two women part. Yet the very next day, even more items are missing from her room, and Emily decides to even the score. Entering the other woman’s home, it seems ‘as though she were in her own room’ and she feels a sense of “unbearable intimacy” with the woman whose life seems but a more advanced version of her own. Her own thievery is interrupted by Mrs Allen’s entrance, but the women choose to ignore the awkwardness of the situation, and politely gloss over their mutual intrusions into each other’s territory. Again, the inner city boarding room is representative of feminine loneliness and isolation, a place where women excluded from conventional domesticity are exiled.

Similarly, “The Villager” concerns another single female, a career woman who briefly relives her youthful dreams of becoming a dancer whilst pretending to be the owner of a bohemian young couple’s Greenwich Village apartment. Whilst looking for furniture for her own tasteful apartment, she briefly presents herself as the married owner of the property, showing other buyers around the place, and adopting a long – forgotten dancers pose. Living space is again here intimately related to identity. The story ends, as so many of Jackson’s do, on a note of pain: the pretender decides that

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<sup>98</sup> Jackson, “Trial by Combat” *The Lottery*, 33.

none of the furniture present would suit her, and leaves with shoulders aching from having maintained an unfamiliar (and ill-fitting) pose.<sup>99</sup>

Later in the collection, yet another dissatisfied spinster features in “Elizabeth”. Elizabeth Styles, who dreams of green grass and flowers, begins another depressing day at work as an unsuccessful literary agent. Her one-room apartment “could put on a sham appearance of warmth and welcome when she needed a place to hide in...could relax itself into a disagreeable, badly-put-together state.”<sup>100</sup> The dreary, shabby office in which she is trapped functions as a poignant parallel of her empty life and mental space: it is a “miserable” place, cheap and ill furnished, with paper thin partitions between the identical offices, yet Elizabeth, like all of Jackson’s preceding spinsters, still clings to the idea “that something might be done for it still, that somehow there might be a way to make it look respectable.”<sup>101</sup> Like them too, she longs for excitement and romance, for anything that can make her grasping life more bearable, throwing herself upon any unlikely male candidate who might help make her dreams come true.

The futile longings for change that grip Jackson’s single women in *The Lottery* echo the desires of Eleanor Vance in *Hill House*, the fictional culmination of all of Jackson’s lonely, desperate unmarried women. As in the earlier stories, Eleanor’s desperate desire for a home of her own is intrinsically linked to her need to establish her own identity. Like her predecessors, Eleanor is the wrong side of thirty, lacking close family ties or friends, without even a proper home of her own. And like them, she lives a life of quiet, intense loneliness, all the while longing for romance, security and love. We are told of Eleanor that “She could not remember ever being truly

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<sup>99</sup> Wylie Hall 123.

<sup>100</sup> Jackson, “Elizabeth” *The Lottery*, 112.

<sup>101</sup> Jackson, “Elizabeth” *The Lottery*, 117.

happy in her adult life,”<sup>102</sup> yet holds fast to “the belief that someday something would happen.”<sup>103</sup>

The strength of Eleanor’s obsessive desire for a home of her own is established during her long drive from the city to Hill House’s rural setting. The sunlit drive evokes in her happier childhood memories – memories from before her beloved father died – and leaves us with the poignant impression of a timid and sadly wasted life. Eleanor views her impulsive decision to go to Hill House as her first step towards independence and freedom. She is filled with disbelief at her own daring, and a bracing sense of exhilaration – “I am going, I am going, I have finally taken a step,”<sup>104</sup> and spins constant fantasies of settlement in a house of her own (leading us to wonder, and not for the last time, to what extent she is operating under the influence of Hill House). Eleanor imagines herself as the occupant of various dwellings that she sees: a vast mansion with pillars and stone lions one minute, a princess in a fairy tale castle, and as wise woman living in a little cottage by the side of the road.<sup>105</sup> These musings, as Lenemaja Friedman observes, serve both to alert the reader to Eleanor’s profound longing for a house of her own, and as portentous foreshadowing of her final acceptance of Hill House.

Eleanor’s first, repulsed impression of Hill House is also her most accurate: “The house was vile.”<sup>106</sup> Yet, despite her instinctive abhorrence of the place, she overcomes her natural shyness and orders Dudley, the hostile caretaker to open the “ominous” locked gate. “I am expected,” she bravely announces – but by whom, Dr Montague or the house? Although it has been established from the novel’s opening paragraph that

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<sup>102</sup> Jackson, *Hill House* 6.

<sup>103</sup> Jackson, *Hill House* 2.

<sup>104</sup> Jackson, *Hill House* 15.

<sup>105</sup> Friedman 124.

<sup>106</sup> Jackson, *Hill House* 33.

the house is “not sane”, that it is “arrogant and hating, never off guard,”<sup>107</sup> it isn’t long before Eleanor begins to feel that she has a special relationship with the place, a strange sense of belonging. “I’m sure I’ve been here before” she announces soon after arrival, “in a book of fairy tales perhaps.”<sup>108</sup> For a short while, whilst participating in carefree social interaction and witty rapport with the rest of the group, Eleanor imagines herself no longer alone – “I am one of them, I belong.”<sup>109</sup> And yet, even as Dr Montague relates the troubled history of the house on their first night together, she has fallen under its spell: “I don’t think we could leave here now even if we wanted too.” Soon, the “vile” house is “charming,” and the malign residence begins to exploit the vulnerabilities of its most vulnerable inhabitant. A mysterious rapping late at night is intended to remind Eleanor of the empty, resentful years spent caring for her invalid mother, whose ceaseless demands have irreparably stifled her daughter’s emotional and psychological development. An eerie, demanding plea (or demand) appears written in blood on the wall “HELP ELEANOR COME HOME”<sup>110</sup> – whether it is a message from her dead mother, the house, or her own increasingly unhinged subconscious, is left up to the reader to decide, but Eleanor has already made her mind up: “I am the one chosen.”<sup>111</sup> Like the inhabitants of *Sundial* or the sisters in *Castle*, the universe rapidly contracts around Eleanor until all that is left is her new home – “I can’t picture any world but Hill House”.<sup>112</sup> The relationship between the house and the guilty feelings Eleanor harbours about her mother’s death becomes even more significant when Dr Montague’s overbearing wife organises a ouija reading, from which they learn that a child named “Nell” (Eleanor) wants to go home – “What

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<sup>107</sup> Jackson, *Hill House*, 35.

<sup>108</sup> Jackson, *Hill House* 44.

<sup>109</sup> Jackson, *Hill House* 60.

<sup>110</sup> Jackson, *Hill House* 146.

<sup>111</sup> Jackson, *Hill House* 147.

<sup>112</sup> Jackson, *Hill House* 151.

do you want? Arthur read. "Mother" Mrs Montague read back. "Why?" "Child" "Where is your mother?" "Home."<sup>113</sup>

Eleanor's increasing isolation from her companions parallels her growing affinity with the house. When her desire to follow Theodora home is rejected, her descent into madness quickly escalates. She listens intently to the sounds made by the house (sounds only she can hear), creeps about the corridors at night following a voice "mother?" and knocks on the doors and walls – replicating the mysterious events of previous nights, except now, ominously, it is she who is doing the haunting. Her identification with, her irrational love of the house are complete: she is becoming one with Hill House, whose hills make her feel "protected and warm". As she climbs the rickety old library stairs (scene of a previous suicide), her descent into a fantasy world is complete: she joyfully thinks: "I am home, I am home," and envisions herself as a fairy princess awaiting rescue from atop a tower.

This desperate act prompts her dismissal from the house, and Eleanor is sent away by the others, regardless of her admission that she has nowhere else to go. She drives off towards the gate, believing that the house is waiting for her, that "no one else could satisfy it"<sup>114</sup> and feeling a deranged sense of pride – "Hill House belongs to me." Her violent death at the bottom of the driveway ensures that she will never leave Hill House: in an ironically cruel fulfilment of her domestic dreams, Eleanor at last truly has a home of her own. Her poignant longing for a place to call her own, and her desire to belong have been fulfilled, but in a truly nightmarish fashion. Her new "home" is in fact a hideous trap, a bitter supernatural parody of her deepest desires.

Profound (and insane) attachment to the home also occurs amongst unmarried women in Jackson's next novel *Castle*. Though the Blackwood house, unlike its

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<sup>113</sup> Jackson, *Hill House* 192.

<sup>114</sup> Jackson, *Hill House* 240.

actively malevolent predecessor, has no active role in the plot – except when in its role as a refuge, and its climactic destruction – throughout the novel the idea of home and domesticity is most significant. Ostracised by the community since the murders of the rest of the Blackwood family, maternal sister Constance, her psychopathic younger sibling (and narrator) Merricat and confused old Uncle Julian exist at the novel's beginning in their own peaceful, comfortable world, a world in which the upkeep of the family home and the loving preparation of food take centre stage (which is ironic considering the rest of the family died after eating one of Constance's splendid meals).

Constance, the pretty, cheerful, deeply domestic mother figure of the house has been since her trial for the murders a severe agoraphobic, unable to venture beyond the boundaries of the Blackwood property. It is a status quo welcomed by the cunning, childish Merricat, who functions as the weird little family's only envoy in the outside world, and who sees anyone apart from her immediate circle as inhuman "ghosts" and "demons." She dreams of living with her beloved Constance on the moon, where no one can reach them, for the thought of losing her sister to the outside world scares her as nothing else can. Appropriately, her household job is fence mending: keeping the family "safe"<sup>115</sup> and to that end, as noted previously, she erects charms and totems all over their property. For her, the house is everything, the centre of the universe, and she is unable to understand her sister's gradual longing for change: "Don't you ever want to leave here, Merricat?" "Where would we go?" I asked her. "What place would be better for us than this?"<sup>116</sup>

The invasion of their private, female space by their greedy cousin Charles – the image of their tyrannical father – is a violent upset to Merricat's cherished routine,

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<sup>115</sup> Jackson, *Castle*, 436.

<sup>116</sup> Jackson *Castle* 448.

and soon spurs her to desperate measures in order to expel this intruder. She burns the house down. By the novel's conclusion, the sisters have resigned themselves to living in the blackened ruins, and have done their best to re-establish their familiar domestic routine. Living in the blackened remains of their kitchen, hiding from the curious sight-seers that clamber all over their property, their home, albeit in a much more restricted sense, remains their world, their refuge, and their prison.

Having discussed the relationship between Jackson's unmarried women and the home, I shall conclude this chapter by comparing their frequently pathological longing for a place of their own with the feverent desire to escape exhibited by so many of the author's housewives. In contrast to the unmarried loners who populate the first six stories of *The Lottery* the stories that constitute the second part of the collection focus on women and girls in family settings, settings from which husbands are frequently absent or relegated to subordinate roles.<sup>117</sup> Where as Jackson's single women dream of having homes of their own, her housewives have already achieved that symbol of domestic status. Though ostensibly living out the idealised existence exalted by contemporary American society, Jackson's housewives time and time again find their fragile sense of security and identity threatened, their homes suffocating traps, their spouses and children indifferent or actively hostile. The "housewife" stories tend to play out in one of two ways: they depict women suddenly confronted by a strange or unexpected turn of events, or women who find themselves trapped, who long to turn their backs upon their prescribed roles and escape, even if it means running headlong into madness.

"The Renegade" (from *The Lottery*) is one of Jackson's most powerful portraits of domestic entrapment. As in "The Witch", the story that precedes it, a mother is

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<sup>117</sup> Hall xxi.



horrified to see the cruelty of strangers echoed in her children.<sup>118</sup> The protagonist is a Mrs Walpole, newly arrived in the countryside, and always referred to by her married name. The story opens with the domestic details of a busy weekday morning: Mrs Walpole is making breakfast, getting her (twin) children ready for school, her self-absorbed husband is concerned only with receiving his toast. She struggles from the start to maintain her composure, makes an effort not to snap at her husband and “patiently” prepares his breakfast. She has just managed to get the chaotic domestic situation under control when the “unbearable intrusion” of the phone breaks in, and a neighbour announces that “Lady” the family dog, has been seen killing chickens.<sup>119</sup> The neighbour demands retribution, but Mrs Walpole experiences a strong sense of identification with the female dog, and sees in her qualities that echo her own – “quiet competent and exceedingly tolerant.”<sup>120</sup> The thought of the dog’s violent actions – and the harsh retribution demanded by the locals, fills her with “sudden unalterable terror.”<sup>121</sup> Her sense of escalating disquiet and despair is made complete when her children arrive home and laughingly describe a spiked collar designed to decapitate the chicken-killing dog. Gazing at her unknowingly callous offspring, and the blood stained dog beside them, she suddenly feels “sharp points closing in on her throat.”<sup>122</sup> Her explicit identification with “lady” marks her out as a fellow “renegade”, one who despite outward restraint is filled with inner turmoil, in this brutal rural community who feels incompetent next to her proficient neighbour, Mrs Nash, whose bright house, full table, and cooking stills stand as “symbols somehow of Mrs Nash’s safety,

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<sup>118</sup> Wylie Hall 22.

<sup>119</sup> Jackson, “The Renegade” *The Lottery* 52.

<sup>120</sup> Jackson, “The Renegade” *The Lottery* 54.

<sup>121</sup> Jackson, “The Renegade” *The Lottery* 54.

<sup>122</sup> Jackson, “The Renegade” *The Lottery* 62.

her confidence in a way of life and a security that had no traffic with chicken killing, no city fears.”<sup>123</sup>

In “Flower Garden” another newcomer to the country becomes an outcast. Though it is a tale mostly concerned with racial prejudice (a young widow and her son are driven away because they befriend a black gardener), the theme of home is another important element.<sup>124</sup> The chief protagonist is a Mrs Winning, married to the son of an old local family, and unable to establish her own domestic identity because of the continued presence of the older Mrs Winning, her mother in law. The large Winning clan live in a large, ancient house on the top of a hill: the younger wife feels that her only real contribution was to have produced another son. She briefly gains some of her own identity when a young city widow moves into a little cottage on family land: it is a home she had often dreamed of owning and furnishing herself. The two women both have young sons the same age: they strike up a friendship, and Mrs Winning gradually begins to mentally distance herself from her mother in law. But the relationship ends when the newcomer employs the black gardener, and Mrs Winning has not the moral courage to go against the local consensus, which condemns such actions. She forsakes the freedom and warmth represented by her new friend and her cheery home for the narrow minded and old-fashioned mindset of her older double, the first Mrs Winning, and their solid, grey home.

In the unpublished story “The Good Wife”, (published in *Just an Ordinary Day*,<sup>125</sup> a posthumous collection recently assembled by Jackson’s heirs), entrapment within the home becomes literal. A woman is kept locked in her bedroom as punishment for an infidelity she denies ever having committed: her husband is determined to keep her

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<sup>123</sup> Jackson, “The Renegade” *The Lottery* 56.

<sup>124</sup> Though there is no connection between them, the plot of this story bears some resemblance to that of the recent film *Far From Heaven* (Todd Haynes, 2002).

<sup>125</sup> Shirley Jackson, *Just an Ordinary Day* (New York: Bantam, 1996).

confined until she confesses. She, although sane, is supervised by nurses and treated as though she is mad: whilst her deranged husband seems perfectly reasonable but intercepts all of her mail, and goes so far as to fabricate evidence of an affair himself.

Another posthumously published story (this time in *Come Along With Me*,<sup>126</sup> 1966) is “A Day in the Jungle” (1952) like “The Flower Garden” features a housewife who chooses a familiar trap over the prospect of a frightening escape. Elsa Dayton angrily flees what she perceives as her husband’s dullness and neglect. Like Jackson’s single women, she bitterly longs for change in her life. In this tale, the home is explicitly linked to her unfulfilling status as a wife. In leaving her apartment, whose windows look “as blank and unexciting as always,”<sup>127</sup> Elsa is leaving her marriage. A brief reference to a dead baby implies that she is suffering from post-natal depression. She flees to a hotel, but uses her real name in the register (suggesting that she hasn’t yet relinquished her old identity), and soon arranges to meet her husband, who has tracked her down. Her resolve to be independent soon crumbles: like another Jackson protagonist, in the story “A Pillar of Salt”, her journey across the unfamiliar city becomes a nightmarish episode of panic and mental disorientation. By the time she finally reaches her husband, she is so relieved to see someone “so wonderfully safe and familiar”<sup>128</sup> that she willingly returns to the bleak existence she has just escaped. Once again, like an animal caged so long that it cannot exist in the outside world, a Jackson housewife has found her foray into independence too frightening and unsettling to be endured.

The only way truly to escape, it is suggested in stories such as “The Tooth” is to become completely detached from reality. The small town, dowdy housewife who ventures into New York to have her teeth pulled is so affected by the painkillers and

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<sup>126</sup> Shirley Jackson, *Come Along With Me* (1966; New York: Penguin, 1996)

<sup>127</sup> Jackson, “A Day in the Jungle” *Come Along With Me* 131.

<sup>128</sup> Jackson, “A Pillar of Salt” *The Lottery* 142.

alcohol prescribed for her pain that she runs off barefoot with a (probably non-existent) man she met on the bus. His name of course is James Harris. She has escaped the domestic routine, but at the price of her sanity. In the unpublished stories “Mrs Anderson” and “What A Thought” (both in *Just an Ordinary Day*), dissatisfaction with homelier and with their boring, predictable, indifferent husbands prompts the protagonists to similarly succumb to irrationality and psychosis: both tales end as the women abruptly kill their spouses.

Jackson’s depiction of the home as prison was nothing new in Gothic fiction. As Kate Ellis Ferguson emphasises in her investigation of the relationship between idealization of the home and the eighteenth century popularity of the Gothic, the gothic fiction of the time both foregrounded the home as a fortress – a place of security and safety for women – while at the same time exposing its contradictions – the fact that this place of safety could all too often be usurped by male villains, and turned into a trap. Ferguson consequently argues that the 18<sup>th</sup> century gothic novel creates “a resistance to an ideology that imprisons [women] even as it posits a sphere of safety for them.”<sup>129</sup> This contradictory view of the gothic home has clear similarities to the treatment that the house and domesticity receive in Jackson’s fiction. As in 18<sup>th</sup> century England, 1950s America saw the idealization of domestic ideology and the role of the humble housewife: it seems forcefully apparent that, like her gothic predecessors, Jackson was making a forceful (though overlooked) comment on the harmful nature of the roles her society demanded of its women.

In that respect, it must be said that Jackson was one of the first female writers in mid century America to critique the pervasive cult of domesticity. She would be followed by women such as Anne Sexton, who in poems such as “Housewife”

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<sup>129</sup> Ellis 218.

described the revulsion her long term identity as a housewife inspired,<sup>130</sup> Sylvia Plath (a long time Jackson fan), who similarly deplored the prevalent cultural consensus of the 1950s in her semi autobiographical novel *The Bell Jar*, (1963) and her iconic poems, and journalist Betty Friedan, whose book *The Feminine Mystique* (1963) became a groundbreaking feminist document. Jackson, whose work was both part of a long tradition of Gothic writing, and yet so intimately related to the contradictory pressures of her own day, has long been excluded from the feminist roll call of women whose work she anticipated. It is time that this situation was remedied.

During the course of this chapter, I have gone beyond the usual purely psychological/analytical approach afforded Jackson's treatment of the house and home. By discussing the topic within a historical and cultural framework instead, I hope I have proven that Jackson was in fact engaging with the cultural and gender anxieties of the 1950s in a manner that has previously been overlooked.

Jackson's most famous depiction of a house was in *Hill House*, one of the very few explicitly supernatural texts she ever wrote. It is probable that the enduring popularity of the novel, and the overbearingly horrific nature of *Hill House* have overshadowed Jackson's other "House" novels, as well as the many short stories that deal with the idea of "Home". Jackson, when noticed at all by critics, is discussed first as a "Gothic" writer and, increasingly, as an object of feminist interest. I have no problem with either of these designations, which are entirely appropriate, but I feel that they have had the effect of insulating Jackson from the cultural context in which she operated. It is an impression reinforced by the generally self contained and "otherworldly" nature of her work. However, it is interesting to note that *Road* – the most naturalistic of all Jackson's novels, and the one with the firmest roots in reality

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<sup>130</sup> Matthews 215.

– is also the most overlooked. There may be several motives for this – it is Jackson's debut after all, by no means her best piece of writing, and has been out of print for several decades. But there could be another reason for the novel's almost total omission from the (admittedly sparse) roster of critical work on Jackson: the fact that the text is concerned with suburbia and its inhabitants seems somewhat surprising given the author's later, more obviously Gothic fictional creations. It is far easier to reconcile Jackson's abiding reputation as a writer of Gothic tales with the damp family mansions of her later work than with the tree lined avenues of Californian suburbia. Such critical tunnel vision ignores the important fact that Jackson had anticipated many of the most prominent themes and anxieties of 1950s suburban fiction almost a decade before it became a popular fictional subject: she was in that sense a literary pioneer.

If we are truly to appreciate Jackson's enduring fascination with the home, we must understand that although the house – or the suburb, the cosy country farmhouse, or the cramped city apartment – frequently operates as an effective Gothic prop – it is also much more than that. Jackson's varying portrayals of the home were also a powerful means of exploring the issues raised by the often contradictory and oppressive rhetoric of 50s domestic ideology. She knew that the demands placed upon women at that time were as terrifying and disturbing as any hackneyed supernatural occurrence: she had realised, as so many female writers before and since had done, that home was all too often where the horror was, and that the source of that fear and anxiety was usually a great deal more complex and inescapable than anything that might go bump in the night. In Jackson's work, evil has taken hold in even the most idyllic, sunlit corner of American suburbia as well as the ominous old house on the hill, and the modern young housewife or busy career woman is as trapped as any

swooning gothic heroine of yore. Her skill lay in combining old-fashioned terror with the pressures and anxieties of a new age. Almost every home Jackson ever wrote about is haunted in some respect, but the source is by no means as obvious as it may at first have seemed. The oppressive cultural ideology and contradictory demands of life in post war America are, in Jackson, as frightening as anything out of a more obviously gothic nightmare.

### **Chapter Three: “Insanity is More Complicated Than You Think” The 50s State of Mind and Female Madness in Jackson’s Work.**

If the Gothic house was Jackson’s favourite setting, the psychologically damaged woman was her favourite character type. Four of her six completed novels – and quite a few of the short stories – have as their chief protagonists mentally unstable young women. They suffer from disorders such as schizophrenia, multiple personality disorder, murderous psychosis, alienation, paranoia, and extreme neurosis. Indeed, Jackson’s preoccupation with psychological instability was so profound that it is rare to find a Jackson heroine who does not suffer from a personality disorder or experience a disturbing mental episode of some kind. Even the Jackson novels that are less explicitly concerned with mental aberration – such as *The Sundial* (1954) and *The Road Through The Wall* – feature casts of characters whose grasp on reality is more than a little tenuous. *Sundial*, after all, is about a group of maladjusted misfits who await the end of the world: *Road* details the moral implosion of a similarly inward looking (and possibly murderous) suburban neighbourhood. Indeed, it could be said that psychological abnormality is a hallmark of the Jackson protagonist.

It is therefore somewhat surprising to note that despite the fact that Jackson’s interest in aberrant psychology and mental illness is one of the most striking characteristics of her work, it is an area almost entirely unexplored by critics. Save for a handful of articles that discuss *The Haunting of Hill House* (1959) from within the inevitable limitations of a psychoanalytical framework, Jackson’s employment of psychology has barely been examined at all. In the following chapter I shall explore how Jackson’s use and understanding of contemporary psychology has resonances far



beyond psychoanalytic theories. I shall focus my discussion on three sorely neglected Jackson texts – *Hangsaman* (1951), *The Bird's Nest* (1954), *We Have Always Lived in the Castle* (1962) – and to a lesser extent, *Hill House* and some of the short stories. It is my contention that the recurrent madness of Jackson's heroines is a reflection both of a wider contemporary interest in the subject, and, more importantly, a means of highlighting the damaging limitations placed upon young women by the era's oppressive domestic ideology. I will begin by surveying the existing critical approach to the psychological/psychoanalytical approach in Jackson's work, in order to stress the difference between my approach and that of previous critics. I shall also take this opportunity to stress that I shall be discussing Jackson's work not from within a psychoanalytic framework, but within a much wider social and historical psychological context. This approach is part of the general historicizing project of my overall thesis. Next, I will briefly show that Jackson's use of psychology is part of a longstanding (and particularly American) Gothic preoccupation with madness. I'll demonstrate that this fixation is a hallmark of the earliest American Gothic writers – from Brown to Poe – and point out that Jackson's fascination with the fictional opportunities presented by illnesses such as schizophrenia and multiple personality disorder also found frequent (if rather more graphic) expression in the work of 50s horror writers Robert Bloch and Richard Matheson. I'll also briefly discuss the relationship between the supernatural and mental aberration in Jackson's work, with particular reference to *Hill House*.

One of the principal aims of this chapter is to show that Jackson's interest in psychology was not merely a symptom of her undeniably Gothic leanings. As a result, the bulk of this discussion will be devoted to my contention that her preoccupation was also a reflection of the general surge of interest in psychology and psychiatry that

gripped America during the 1950s and 60s. Like organised religion, both psychology and psychiatry boomed in the U.S during the 1950s: I will look at the reasons why, and discuss the relationship between this trend and Jackson's work, with particular reference to her depiction of psychiatry and the therapeutic process in *The Bird's Nest*. I'll also examine Jackson's choice of identity-related mental illness within the context of contemporary anxiety about the stability of the individual psyche at a time of unprecedented social and economic change.

The other key contention of this chapter is my belief that Jackson's recurrent depictions of specifically *female* madness are a reflection of the limited range of choices facing young women during the 1950s. I will argue that the mental crisis that so often afflicts the Jackson heroine is as much a result of the pressures induced by the era's oppressive domestic ideology as it is of Jackson's gothic inclinations. I will discuss the reason why the unstable female protagonists of Jackson's novels conform to a specific character type – that of the sensitive, unmarried, emotionally immature young woman. Finally, I will conclude by looking at the manner in which Jackson's use and understanding of psychology evolved from text to text. I shall look at the way in which Jackson's work progressed from the fairly conventional – albeit Gothic – psychological case studies of *Hangsaman* and *The Bird's Nest* to the psychotic lucidity of *Castle*, a novel that one critic has described as “not so much a depiction of madness as a poetic participation in it”.<sup>1</sup> I will examine this progression in relation to the contemporary notion (promoted by proponents of the “anti” psychiatry movement such as R.D. Laing and espoused in fictional form in novels such as *Catcher in the Rye* [1951], *Catch 22* [1961], and *One Flew Over The Cuckoo's Nest* [1962]) that personal madness is the sanest response to an insane world. I will locate *Castle* within

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<sup>1</sup> Jack Sullivan, *The Penguin Encyclopaedia of Horror and the Supernatural* (New York: Viking, 1986) 227.

the cultural context of such texts. I will also stress the importance of the female perspective in Jackson's work, and conclude by suggesting that the retreat from "normality" and "sanity" embraced by the Blackwood sisters at the novel's end is as much a response to the pressures placed upon them by patriarchal society as it is a response of their aberrant mental state.

As I have noted in previous chapters, what little critical work there is on Jackson has tended to focus on two texts: the short story "The Lottery" and the novel *Hill House*. It is therefore no surprise to learn that what scant attention there has been paid to the psychological in Jackson's writing has, until very recently mostly been written about *Hill House* ("The Lottery" really doesn't lend itself to such an approach), and, that given the relative ease with which Jackson's modern day ghost story lends itself to Freudian analysis, it is logical enough to expect that the articles I am about to discuss explore the text from a psychoanalytical perspective. Indeed, for several decades the only writer to take a sustained look at Jackson's work from a psychological viewpoint (and who examined texts other than *Hill House*) was Lenemaja Friedman, who devoted a (brief) chapter of her author 1974 study to "The Psychological Novels". More recently, Marta Caminero-Santangelo's useful book *The Madwoman Can't Speak: Or Why Insanity is Not Subversive*<sup>2</sup> (1998) has a chapter on "Multiple Personality and the Post-modern Subject" which discusses *The Bird's Nest* in considerable detail but fails to mention the rest of Jackson's oeuvre. The latest (and only the second) full length study of Jackson, *Shirley Jackson's American Gothic*<sup>3</sup> by Darryl Hattenhauer (2003) provides a much needed new overview of Jackson's fiction, including *Hangsaman* and *The Bird's Nest* but explores these novels from

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<sup>2</sup> Marta Caminero-Santangelo, *The Madwoman Can't Speak: Or Why Insanity is not Subversive* (New York: Cornell University Press, 1998).

<sup>3</sup> Darryl Hattenhauer, *Shirley Jackson's American Gothic* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2003).

within a post-modern rather than psychological framework. Jackson's work in general has yet to be explored from this perspective.

Judie Newman's 1990 article "Shirley Jackson and the Reproduction of Mothering"<sup>4</sup> explores Hill House in the light of recent feminist psychoanalytic theory. Beginning with a discussion of the Freudian notion of *Unheimlich*, or the "uncanny" in relation to Jackson's work, Newman goes on to claim that new developments in psychoanalytic theory can offer fresh insights into the author's writing. She takes as her starting point Feminist theorist Nancy Chodorow's analysis of the effects of gender on identity and the mother-infant bond in her book *The Reproduction of Mothering*. Chodorow is part of a movement amongst feminist psychoanalytical theorists who have set out to revise the Freudian account of psychosexual difference, which bases gender anatomically, on possession or lack of a phallus. In the Freudian paradigm, the male child attains adulthood by passing through the Oedipus complex. Feminist analysts such as Chodorow – and by extension, Newman – have shifted the focus from the Oedipal to pre-Oedipal stage. Chodorow's theory, (as Newman outlines it) concentrates on the dynamics of the mother/infant and mother/daughter bond.

Because infants are at first unable to separate the social and cognitive world from themselves, the mother is not seen as a separate identity: rather, the child is one with the mother, and the mother is the world, in a state that is both "seductive and terrifying."<sup>5</sup> Whilst boys disengage themselves from this state of unity early on, Newman continues, girls have more difficulty in doing so because they resemble their mothers, and so see themselves as continuous with them. "Female gender identity is

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<sup>4</sup> Judie Newman, "Shirley Jackson and the Reproduction of Mothering," *American Horror Fiction: From Brockden Brown to Stephen King*, ed. Brian Docherty (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1990) 125-136.

<sup>5</sup> Newman 128.

therefore threatened by separation, and shaped throughout life by fluctuations of symbiosis and detachment from the mother.”<sup>6</sup> Newman then claims that fictions of female development reflect this psychological structure, and argues that the “pleasures and terrors” of *Hill House* “spring from the dynamics of the mother-daughter relationship”. As I have previously noted, *Hill House* lends itself easily to exploration within a psychoanalytical framework, and Newman’s article is both persuasive and well written. To Newman, *Hill House* represents an “intrauterine fantasy” of the engulfing mother, with the building itself being a model of “monstrous maternity.” The troubled Eleanor Vance is, as Newman rightly points out, tragically mother dominated, haunted by guilt over her (perceived) neglect of her dying mother, and desperately seeking her own place in the world, a home of her own. The “mothering house” which similarly motherless playboy Luke characterises as both comfortable *and* rejecting is therefore part of this fantasy of the engulfing mother, whose final triumph comes when the vulnerable Eleanor finally surrenders all vestiges of individual ego and prevents herself from ever leaving.

Mark Jancovich takes a similar view of the novel in “Mothers and Children: Maternal Dominance and Childhood Trauma in *Hill House* and *Psycho*,” a chapter in his book on American Horror during the 1950s. He recaps Newman’s basic argument, but adds a new dimension by comparing mother-dominated Eleanor to the similarly haunted Norman Bates, infamous protagonist of Robert Bloch’s horror classic *Psycho*.<sup>7</sup> Jancovich outlines some of the notable traits shared by Eleanor and Norman. Both are consumed by guilt about a mother’s death (Norman perhaps with rather more

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<sup>6</sup> Newman 128.

<sup>7</sup> I will also discuss Bloch’s work in relation to Jackson’s later on in this chapter. In the meanwhile, it’s interesting to note that both novels were published in 1959, that both texts begin with a theft (Eleanor steals her sister’s car: Mary Crane steals a large sum of money) that the gothic house looms large in both and that both were made into successful, critically acclaimed, black and white films during the 1960s – albeit in radically different styles.

good reason than Eleanor), both desire, but cannot quite achieve independence, and neither can escape maternal dominance, even after death. Jancovich sees Eleanor's story as that of the struggle to define an independent self – a struggle that, also like that of Norman Bates, is destined to end in failure and violent death. For, Jancovich argues, despite her wish for independence and stable identity, both Eleanor's conscious and unconscious minds have for so long been shaped by others that her mind is a maelstrom of inherently contradictory desires. Hence her longing to escape a dreary existence, but inability to free herself from the millstones of guilt and an oppressive sense of duty: her heartfelt desire for conventional romantic attachment yet her simultaneous abhorrence when given the chance to elicit a confidence from the only eligible male in the novel; her longing to be like adventurous, free spirited Theodora and her accompanying hatred and resentment of her friend. In Jancovich's assessment therefore, Eleanor is a character who allowed herself to be influenced by others for so long that she no longer knows that she really wants herself, and so allows herself to be absorbed into the monstrous Hill House.

In contrast to the resolutely psychoanalytical approaches of Newman and Jancovich, Lenemaja Friedman had earlier taken a much more direct approach to the psychological in Jackson's work. In her 1974 discussion of what she terms "The Psychological Novels," Friedman concentrates upon two of Jackson's earliest, and most overlooked novels: *Hangsaman* and *The Bird's Nest*. Jackson's chapter on the subject is essentially a straightforward plot synopsis of each text accompanied by a few biographical anecdotes on Jackson's research for each book and some general discussion of her fictionalisations of schizophrenia and multiple personality disorder in the texts. Although rather slight, Friedman's critique is notable for being one of the few occasions in which *Hangsaman* and *The Bird's Nest* are afforded critical

attention, and she does discuss Jackson's use and understanding of psychology in a manner obviously (and unsurprisingly) absent from later, more theory based articles. She does however fail to discuss any other Jackson texts within a psychological context, despite the fact that mental illness and identity crisis are as much a feature of the author's later work as they are of the two featured texts, albeit in a rather more obviously gothic and stylised manner. Also, like the Jancovich and Newman articles Friedman eschews the establishment of a social or cultural context for Jackson's work entirely. Caminero-Santagelo's discussion of *The Bird's Nest* in relation to the 50s fascination with mental illness and multiple personality disorder represents one of the very few occasions in which this approach has been utilised.

Like Friedman, I will devote much of this chapter to a discussion of Jackson's employment of psychology in *Hangsaman* and *The Bird's Nest*, but unlike her, I shall apply the same criteria to the rest of her fiction also. Whilst Jancovich and Newman both present articulate, persuasive analysis of *Hill House* within the framework offered by psychoanalytic theory, it is also the case that confining discussion of such a key Jackson text entirely to these terms removes it entirely from the social and historical context in which it was created. As it is my hope to rehistoricize an author who has been dehistoricized, I shall focus not only on her most famous text but also on her many other explorations of mental aberration, and all from within the social, cultural and historical viewpoint of America during the 1950s.

Before I turn to more specific discussion of Jackson's use of psychology and the cultural context that informed that usage, I feel it is important to establish a historical dimension to her use of the aberrant mind as a fictional device. Why? Because it further shows the difference between my approach and that of previous critics, and also emphasises again that Jackson was not operating in a vacuum. Her influences and

genre predecessors should be acknowledged in order to approach a more complex and comprehensive understanding of her work.

Since its emergence as a genre during the latter half of the eighteenth century, practitioners of the Gothic has always displayed a particular interest in the imaginative possibilities presented by mental illness and psychological processes. The tortured, depraved villain soon became a hallmark of the gothic text: from the tyrannical Manfred of Horace Walpole's trailblazing *The Castle of Otranto* (1764) to the corrupt depravity of Matthew Gregory Lewis's *The Monk* (1796). Walpole had kick-started the Gothic form with *Otranto*, an unlikely blend of romance, fantasy, and increasingly absurd plot developments, which, despite failing to please the critics proved a massive hit with the sensation hungry reading public. He had combined features from old poetry, drama and romance in a text that featured many of the ingredients that would become the recognisable foundations of the early Gothic novel. One element his novels (and those written by the rash of imitators trying to cash in on the new genre's success) tended to lack however was any vestige of psychological depth. However, as the genre matured, and a second generation of Gothic authors began writing at the end of the eighteenth century, the texts themselves took on an increasingly psychological emphasis.

Whilst the restrained, allusive work of Anne Radcliffe, whose novels would become models of the genre, seemed to have little in common with the brash, sensationalist thrillers produced by M.G. Lewis, both writers nevertheless embody in their work evidence of this steadily evolving psychological sophistication. The (frequently self induced) paranoia and vulnerability of Radcliffe's sensitive heroines is epitomised by *The Mysteries of Udolpho* (1794) protagonist Emily St Aubert's increasing inability, as events in the novel unfold, to tell the difference between what



is real and what is imagined, in a process David Punter has labelled “distortion of perception caused by excessive sensibility.”<sup>8</sup> This gradual blurring of the boundaries between fantasy and reality, natural and supernatural, increasingly became an integral facet of the genre. It is also a characteristic common to the Jackson heroine, who, as I shall soon discuss in more detail, is often nightmarishly unable to differentiate between what is real and what is imagined.

Similarly, as the genre evolved, and became increasingly influenced by the intellectual climate of the times, Gothic villains were increasingly victims (like Ambrosio the mad monk, William Beckford’s tyrannical caliph Vathek, and Dr’s Frankenstein and Jekyll) of the inadequately repressed parts of their own psyche.<sup>9</sup> Internal vices such as arrogance, lust, sadism and the desire for forbidden knowledge had become the defining characteristics of the Gothic villain, whose worst enemy, in true Romantic style, would always turn out to be himself.

Unsurprisingly, the American form of the genre, which naturally grew from European origins, displays a long-standing preoccupation with madness and psychology. The development of the form in the new world owed much to Philadelphia native Charles Brockden Brown. His pioneering attempts to understand the complex relationship between society, ideology and the mind represent a key development not only for the Gothic genre but also for American literature in its entirety. Brown was the first American writer to explore “psychology” – “the strange inward – or gothic – turns of human behaviour under pressure.”<sup>10</sup> The manner in which he interrogated the deepest, darkest recesses of the human psyche would represent his most significant contribution to the genre.

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<sup>8</sup> Punter 65.

<sup>9</sup> Punter 121.

<sup>10</sup> Robert A. Lee, “A Darkness Visible: The Case of Charles Brockden Brown,” *American Horror Fiction: From Brockden Brown to Stephen King*, 12-32.

Although he was little recognised during his own lifetime, Brown's most praised novel was *Wieland* (1798), a highly influential tale of persecution and terror, inspired by the real life case of a father who had inexplicably murdered his entire family. Though he made frequent use of dramatic and elaborate effects in his writing (spontaneous human combustion, sleepwalking, ventriloquism), these devices always had a deeper layer of meaning beyond that of mere trickery.<sup>11</sup> For example, on the simplest level, protagonist Theodore Wieland's descent into murderous insanity is prompted by the villainous Carwin's devious use of ventriloquism (he pretends to be the voice of God). Yet Brown is simultaneously operating on a deeper level, for it is made clear in the novel that were it not for Wieland's innate religious fanaticism and willingness to believe that God would actually command him to slaughter his entire family, Carwin's deception would have ended in failure. Indeed, it is Wieland's dangerous credulity that prompts Carwin to employ ventriloquism in the first place, in a rather ill advised bid to disillusion his gullible host through the power of sheer rationality.

On one hand, Brown shows us the dangers of religious mania and an overly credulous disposition: on the other, he also emphasises the tragic and chaotic consequences of Carwin's cold – blooded adherence to logic and rationality. What's more, by depicting the fanatical life and mysterious death of Theodore's father, the similarly ill-fated elder Wieland, Brown highlights the troubled family background and social isolation that significantly contributes to his vulnerable mental state. In his 1800 novel *Edgar Huntly*, Brown further anticipated the work of Gothic writers a generation later. In the novel, which is situated in contemporary Delaware during the midst of a fierce Indian versus settler conflict, Brown replaced the crumbling castles

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<sup>11</sup> Punter 170.

of the European Gothic with a cave in the wilderness. The eponymous Edgar Huntly, in the throes of a dramatic mental collapse, sleepwalks his way to this emblematic cave, which acts both as a hiding place and as a dramatisation of his disturbed mental state. This correlation between setting and psychological state would be echoed in the work of many of Brown's thematic successors: in particular Poe, and of course Jackson herself, who in *Hill House* in particular, made highly effective use of this device.<sup>12</sup> Indeed, one critic has claimed that "Shirley Jackson's use of the Gothic lies primarily in her identification of her protagonist's psyches with the landscapes which entrap them: these produce and symbolise the repressed, with which her heroines are in conflict."<sup>13</sup> Perhaps the most striking example of Jackson's use of this conceit outside *Hill House* and *The Sundial* is at the beginning of *The Bird's Nest*. The novel's opening sentence describes the manner in which the foundations of the museum in which Elizabeth works have begun to sag. The extent to which her skewed surroundings parallel the workings of her disturbed mind is soon made explicit:

It is not proven that Elizabeth's personal equilibrium was set off balance by the slant of the office floor, nor could it be proven that it was Elizabeth who pushed the building off its foundations, but it is undeniable that they began to slip at about the same time.<sup>14</sup>

Brown's pioneering use of psychology and dedication to psychological realism would be echoed in the work of many of the acknowledged greats of American fiction. One such figure, whose obsession with the social and psychological effects of religious dogmatism owed much to Brown, was Nathaniel Hawthorne. Much of Hawthorne's fiction was concerned with the continuing theological and mental legacy of his Puritan ancestors. He frequently made use of gothic devices to effectively

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<sup>13</sup>Virginia Blain, ed. *The Feminist Companion to Literature in English* (London: Batsford, 1990) 565.

<sup>14</sup>Jackson, *The Bird's Nest* 8.

dramatise the psychological ramifications of this legacy, and in particular the theological doctrine of original sin. This profoundly Gothic notion of sin as a lingering, shaming mark would recur again and again in his writing. At the beginning of an essay entitled “Fancy’s Show Box” he asks the question “What is guilt?” The answer swiftly follows, “A stain upon the soul.” Hence the scarlet letter that adulterous heroine Hester Prynne is compelled to wear upon her breast as an all too obvious symbol of her wrong doing. Similarly, in his short story “The Birthmark,” a scientist becomes obsessed by a tiny, hand shaped mole upon his otherwise beautiful wife’s cheek. It seems to him to represent some sort of interior corruption, or taint: and so disturbed is he by the otherwise innocuous blemish that he talks of murdering his wife in his sleep. His terrified spouse, fearing for her life, urges him to experiment with removing the mark: during the process she dies.

In stark contrast to the “literary,” restrained writing of Hawthorne, contemporary Edgar Allan Poe’s gleefully excessive and frequently gruesome tales of mystery and terror did not fit easily into the canon of “respectable” American literature. Poe’s contribution to the Gothic genre in America is “enormous and varied.”<sup>15</sup> He refused to combine himself to a single genre, and would employ a wide range of genres and styles, from newspaper articles and prose to poetry, detective fiction, and imitations of German romance.<sup>16</sup> In addition, he pioneered the prototypical detective story in tale such as “The Gold Bug,” “The Purloined Letter” and “The Murders in The Rue Morgue.” However, his groundbreaking use of psychology and innate understanding of the diseased mind is perhaps his most important legacy to the genre. Other writers had frequently portrayed gothic madmen: Poe, the master of the first person narrative, delighted in immersing us in their minds. He invented a type of story that did not

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<sup>15</sup> Punter 176.

<sup>16</sup> Harry Levin, *The Power of Blackness* (1958; Chicago: Ohio University Press, 1980) 137.

move by simple narrative alone but rather by a process of spiralling intensification, a technique that can be seen at work in stories such as “The Fall of The House of Usher,” “The Tell-Tale Heart” and “The Cask of Amontillado.”<sup>17</sup> In “Amontillado”, as in the best of his stories, the reader is pressed uncomfortably close to a crazed narrator who whispers terrible things in our ears. The fact that editorial judgement is withheld and the narrator actually gets away with his terrible crime (the live burial of a rival) only adds to our feelings of profound unease. It is a technique that would be used to similar effect by Jackson in *Castle*, which is narrated by a teenage psychopath who escapes punishment for her murderous crimes and manages to even make a kind of crazy sense by the novel’s conclusion.

As would also be the case with Shirley Jackson, Poe’s fascination with mental illness, and in particular the effects of bizarre mental states induced by the likes of schizophrenia, mesmerism and extreme drunkenness would find frequent expression in his writing. For instance, one of his most prevalent recurring themes – that of premature burial – had an obvious antecedent in his interest in the death-like state induced by catatonia.<sup>18</sup> Such was Poe’s reliance upon psychology that, again like Jackson, he almost entirely dispenses with the supernatural. Like Brown, he is a rationalist, seeking to cast enlightenment on dark places, “but the forces of the irrational have their revenge in jeopardising the status of reason itself.”<sup>19</sup>

It is interesting to note that despite the fact that she is best known as a writer of supernatural fiction, thanks to the success of *Hill House*, the paranormal very rarely turns up in Jackson’s work at all: and that her few outright ghost stories (such as “Home” “The Visit” and “The Bus”) are laced with the same lack of closure and ambiguity that characterises so many of her other texts. Even whilst looking at the

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<sup>17</sup> Punter 177.

<sup>18</sup> Punter 178.

<sup>19</sup> Levin 137.

obviously haunted interiors of *Hill House*, we should bear in mind that most of the “supernatural” incidents in the novel, as in *The Turn of the Screw*, are filtered through the perceptions of a less than reliable protagonist. Indeed, the sustained lack of independent verification subtly suggests that the possibility that the most obvious “ghostly” manifestations in the book – the tearing up of Theodora’s clothing, the red paint daubed on the walls – are the unconscious work of Eleanor Vance herself.

In his discussion of Jackson’s work, critic Jack Sullivan reverses M.R. James’s dictum that a ghost story should leave a narrow “loophole” for natural explanation, and argues that Jackson wrote stories of psychological anguish that leave a loophole for supernatural explanation – the supernatural being “the final dark corner in the desolate room where Jackson’s isolated protagonists, usually women, find themselves.”<sup>20</sup> In other words, Jackson is a psychological writer whose fiction occasionally has a supernatural context, not a writer of supernatural fiction with a psychological context.

Poe’s frequent use of unreliable/psychotic narrators (as in “Usher” and “The Black Cat”) often destabilises *our* ability to distinguish between what is real and what is not, even within the context of the tale itself. The degree of self-consciousness he brought to the genre heralded an alteration in the entire Gothic tradition: his emphasis on psychology provided a necessary antecedent to the direction that American gothic would take in the twentieth century. As the new century began, the differences between British and American varieties of the gothic had become ever more pronounced. The American gothic had from its beginnings tended towards the psychological dimension, and whilst British writers in this period developed an increasing appetite for the macabre and sexually sensational (as seen in the work of

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<sup>20</sup> Sullivan 227.

Stoker and Wells, etc), American authors, with one or two notable exceptions in the work of Ambrose Bierce and Robert Chambers, concentrated instead upon the possibilities of the psychological ghost story.<sup>21</sup> During this period female writers of the Gothic and the uncanny such as Mary E. Wilkins Freeman, Charlotte Perkins Gillman, Edith Wharton and Ellen Dawson became ever more prominent. The increasing psychological realism of the genre enabled new expression to be given to the situation of women in a culture that, rather like that of 50s America, idealised a certain ideal of femininity yet denied women all legal and political recourse.<sup>22</sup>

Having discussed Jackson's use of psychology in relation to that of her Gothic predecessors, I feel that it is also worth briefly comparing her preoccupation with madness to that of two of her contemporaries in a rather more graphic – and overlooked – field: that of 1950s popular horror fiction. Although I have already devoted my opening chapter to an examination of the evolution and various manifestations of the horror genre during Jackson's era, I feel that it is necessary also to explore the extent to which her use of psychological instability is paralleled in the fiction of Robert Bloch and Richard Matheson.

As Mark Jancovich has pointed out, whilst post-war horror was dependent upon previous work, it had begun to free itself from the reliance upon Gothic elements that had characterised the earlier period. Contemporary American horror consequently tended to place its horrors firmly within the context of the modern world<sup>23</sup>: and, as I shall soon establish, a preoccupation with the mind and madness was one of the principal characteristics of that world. Richard Matheson was one of the most important figures in American horror fiction during the 1950s and 60s. Like Jackson, his work was grounded in domesticity and in the everyday, and his fiction displays a

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<sup>21</sup> Lloyd-Smith 73.

<sup>22</sup> Lloyd-Smith 73.

<sup>23</sup> Jancovich 10.

similar concern with social and mental breakdown. Whilst Jackson typically explored the anxieties of housewives and, disturbed young women, Matheson's work instead concentrated upon the psychological processes of the put-upon suburban male, the alienated corporate man for whom the American dream has similarly – albeit for very different reasons – been transformed into nightmare.

The typical Matheson protagonist is a man trapped, either by his wife, family, work, the workings of his own deranged mind or by social forces that are entirely beyond his control. In the 1953 story "League of Plotters," for instance, a man comes to believe that all the numerous petty irritations of ordinary life are part of a conspiracy designed to drive him insane. By the story's conclusion he had embarked upon a murderous rampage and has indeed gone completely mad. As in many Jackson stories – such as "The Beautiful Stranger,"<sup>24</sup> (in which a suburban housewife becomes convinced that her husband had been replaced by a double), by the stories end the reader is unsure about whether the narrator has been insane all along, or had merely been driven so by the events related to us.

Perhaps his most famous tale of mounting paranoia and psychological terror is the classic "Nightmare at 20,000 Feet" (1961). The story of a nervous airline traveller who sees – or thinks he sees – a hideous monster scuttling along the wing and hurling debris towards the engines, "Nightmare" is best known for the two unforgettable screen adaptations it inspired.<sup>25</sup> As in "League of Plotters", much of the story's impact lies in the fact that we are again unsure whether the unlikely events outlined in the tale are actually happening or, in this instance, whether they are a horrific manifestation of the protagonist's intense fear of flying. This ambiguity only adds to

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<sup>24</sup> Published in Jackson, *Come Along With Me* (1965; New York: Penguin, 1996).

<sup>25</sup> The classic *Twilight Zone* episode (starring a pre-Star Trek William Shatner) made during the series original run in the 1960s, and the even more effective 80s remake which formed a segment of *The Twilight Zone* film.



our appreciation of the feelings of intense paranoia and mounting isolation that grip our protagonist as he oscillates between intense embarrassment at the scene he is making, and sheer terror whenever he catches a glimpse of the gibbering horror on the wing. We end the story asking ourselves a question that would increasingly be raised by the more obviously literary fictions of the era: is our hero mad or is he the only one who truly knows what is going on?<sup>26</sup>

As his career progressed, Matheson's work was increasingly informed by what Mark Jancovich has described as the "... sense that human consciousness and identity were being produced and managed by social forces coupled with the sense that they were inherently unstable and uncertain."<sup>27</sup> In the 1960 story "Graveyard Shift," a young boy is driven into madness by his evil mother: in the 1959 novel *A Stir of Echoes* an ordinary man's perception of his apparently average suburban neighbourhood is forever soured when he unwittingly acquires supernatural powers of perception and stumbles upon a murderous secret. Matheson's interest in the inherent uncertainty of human consciousness and perception is dramatized in a manner with much in common with that of Jackson (and, as we shall soon see, Robert Bloch), in the 1969 story "Therese". Written in diary form, it recounts the story of Millicent, a bitter young woman who carefully plots the murder of her sister Therese. It is only gradually that we realise that Millicent, like Elizabeth Richmond in *The Bird's Nest*, suffers from multiple personality disorder,<sup>28</sup> and that in carefully orchestrating the death of her alter ego she has also killed herself.

As in Jackson, there is always the awareness in Matheson's work that behind the brittle façade of everyday life – and behind the average human mind- lurk a wide range of monstrous possibilities. Another 50s horror writer who specialised in

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<sup>26</sup> Jancovich 236.

<sup>27</sup> Jancovich 236.

<sup>28</sup> Hereafter shortened to 'm.p.d.' for conveniences sake.

everyday monstrosity was Robert Bloch, whose fictional hallmark was the depiction of the psychopathic murderer. Although best known for his 1959 novel *Psycho*, he had actually been writing about split personalities and psychopaths for years and indeed had a “far greater interest in psychology, psychiatry and psychoanalysis than either [Ray] Bradbury or Matheson”.<sup>29</sup> Bloch’s long fascination with the fictional possibilities of identity related mental disorders such as schizophrenia and m.p.d. means that much of his work has a great deal in common with that of Jackson, even if her style is a great deal more refined and her protagonists resort to murder rather more infrequently.<sup>30</sup>

As in Jackson and Matheson, the instability of identity is constantly emphasised in Bloch’s fiction, and is epitomised by his long preoccupation with multiple identities.<sup>31</sup> In 1943 he wrote the acclaimed short story “Yours Truly, Jack the Ripper,” in which a young man’s search for the savage murderer of his mother climaxes with the revelation that the psychiatrist who has been helping him all along is none other than the vicious fiend. In the 1952 tale “Lucy Comes to Stay”(which anticipates many of the elements that would recur in *Psycho*), a young woman named Vi plans her escape from an asylum with the help of her best friend Lucy, whom she perceives as her only ally. During their escape, Lucy kills Vi’s husband George, but as the story ends, and the fugitive(s) are captured, we realise that Lucy and Vi are one and the same. As Vi puts it in the final lines: “We just stood there against the bars, Lucy and I, laughing like crazy.”<sup>32</sup> As in Matheson’s “Theresa” and Jackson’s *The Bird’s Nest*, the primary personality is unaware - or unwilling to acknowledge - the actions undertaken by a

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<sup>29</sup> Jancovich 236.

<sup>30</sup> Although, it must be noted, not actually that much more infrequently: consider Merricat Blackwood’s mass poisoning of her unfortunate family in *Castle*, the murders of Lionel and Mrs Halloran in *Sundial* and the suspicious death of little Caroline Desmond in *Road*, not to mention the various nasty deaths that crop up in the short stories.

<sup>31</sup> Jancovich 238.

<sup>32</sup> Peter Haining, *Classics of the Supernatural* (1995; London: Pan Books, 1998) 179.

disturbed secondary persona. In *The Bird's Nest*, Jackson neatly plays this characteristic for laughs in a hilarious bathroom scene in which each of Elizabeth's four sub-personalities emerge and take successive baths in the presence of her increasingly exasperated – and sarcastic – Aunt Morgen.<sup>33</sup> By way of contrast, Bloch's most famous bathroom scene, although similarly the product of multiple personality disorder, would be an altogether nastier affair.

The climax of Bloch's preoccupation with split personalities would naturally be *Psycho*, in which the main character, Norman Bates, famously – and unknowingly – commits murders whilst submerged in the persona of his long dead mother. According to Stefan Dzieminowicz, in *Psycho*, Bloch “took the basic premise of the werewolf story and transformed it into the foundation of the modern psychological thriller.”<sup>34</sup> For the legendary werewolf, like Norman, and like so many other of Bloch's characters, is controlled by forces beyond his conscious control, by insane psychological impulses that cannot be resisted. It is worth noting here that there is an aspiring werewolf in Jackson's fiction, albeit an unlikely one: Merricat Blackwood, who tells us in the opening lines of *Castle* that:

I have often thought that with any luck at all I could have been born a Werewolf, because the two middle fingers on both my right hands are both the same length, but I have had to be content with what I had.

The irony lies in the fact that, in a psychological sense, Merricat already is a werewolf, albeit one in a perpetual state of transformation. Unlike Norman Bates, Natalie Waite, or even Elizabeth Richmond, her murderous, deviant, persona is perpetually sunny side up: she has a single, albeit deeply disturbed, identity.

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<sup>33</sup> Jackson, *The Bird's Nest* 189-197.

<sup>34</sup> Barron 203.

Whilst style and execution may differ greatly between the work of Jackson and Bloch, the fact that they both take psychology and the essential instability as human identity as frequent starting points means that their similarities are in many senses more pronounced than their differences. The manner in which the psychologically orientated work of other horror writers working during the same period also paralleled Jackson's preoccupations should be acknowledged also, in order to emphasise the fact that Jackson was writing from a similar generic background although rarely with quite the same sensibility.

While Jackson's use of psychology is related to that of her contemporaries it is also informed by a great deal more than her generic origins. That her interest in madness and the mind was shared by the work of many of the most significant authors working in the gothic and horror genres has already been made evident. I shall now discuss the extent to which her work was also shaped by a much more general preoccupation with these issues, a preoccupation that seized American culture and society during the 50s. The fact that Jackson was writing novels so obviously concerned with the workings of the mind at a time when the rest of American society was displaying an unparalleled interest in psychology and psychiatry is obviously something more than mere coincidence. Yet, surprisingly, the connection between her work – particularly the two obvious psychiatric case studies, *The Bird's Nest* and *Hangsaman* – and the historical and cultural context in which it was written has yet to be explored by critics. Which is why I shall now discuss her work within the context of contemporary fears about the nation's mental health, and in relation to the rash of female psychiatric case studies that were published during the period.

America's fascination with psychology and psychiatry during the 1950s is intimately related to the unprecedented changes that swept the nation in the years

following 1945. The war had proved a decisive catalyst for post-war growth.<sup>35</sup> The gross national product soared by 250% between 1945 and 1960; millions of returning G.I.s prompted the rapid growth of suburbia and one of the most astounding migrations in history. The 50s also saw the widespread introduction of modern staples such as the television, airplanes, highways, supermarkets and the two-car family, the arrival of widespread college education and vast corporations and the emergence of a new managerial class; the white-collar worker, or “the organisation man.”<sup>36</sup> With the economic boom came prosperity and security on a level never before experienced by so many people. As James Patterson has put it, it was “the biggest boom yet” and the “mid 1950s seemed almost wonderful, especially in a material sense, to millions of upwardly mobile people.”<sup>37</sup>

Yet no society can pass through such a catalogue of immense, life style altering changes – even if they seem mostly beneficial ones – without some kind of cultural hangover. This hangover is intensified if, as was the case during the 50s, the surface gloss of widespread prosperity and domestic bliss promoted by those in charge was all too often contradicted by the facts beneath. For despite the apparent calm of 50s America, there was a distinct undercurrent of restlessness. It should not be forgotten that from 1950 to 1953, the nation was engaged in the Korean War, a bitterly divisive conflict that would result in over four million casualties and which almost culminated in the use of nuclear weapons.<sup>38</sup> Despite the nation’s unprecedented prosperity, millions of its citizens – including most African Americans, Mexicans, and Indians – were still living with poverty and discrimination.<sup>39</sup> In spite of the culturally prescribed notion that women were supposed to be satisfied with their roles as housewives and

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<sup>35</sup> Chafe 111.

<sup>36</sup> Chafe 111-117.

<sup>37</sup> Patterson 311.

<sup>38</sup> Patterson 339.

<sup>39</sup> Patterson 333.

mothers, millions of females felt frustrated and unfulfilled with the place that society had assigned them. Similarly, their white-collar husbands were expected to devote most of their time and energy to the well being of increasingly demanding and impersonal corporations so that they would have enough money to buy luxuries that society told its citizens that they must have in order to be happy. With the advent of modern consumer culture and the associated emphasis on materialistic concerns came ever rising expectations about the quality of life that one could expect in the United States, and when those expectations were denied, the gap between what actually was and what seemed to be became ever more noticeable.

Increasingly, intellectuals such as David Riesman issued scathing critiques of the modern way of life that emphasised the psychological dangers post war American society posed to its inhabitants. Similarly, critiques of suburbia by writers such as John Keats claimed that the “conformist,” insular way of life encouraged in these new communities was extremely detrimental to the mental well being of their inhabitants. As James Patterson has pointed out, many of the buzzwords used in such critiques exposed these fears for the nation’s mental health – expressions such as “alienation”, “identity crisis,” “age of anxiety,” and “eclipse of community”<sup>40</sup> entered the nation’s vocabulary. The “uprooted” were said to people America, the “mass society” obliterated identity” and society itself, according to Riesman was “a lonely crowd”.

Given the bewildering pace of change and wide range of cultural and domestic pressures afflicting contemporary Americans during the 1950s, it is hardly surprising that alcoholism, divorce, and the consumption of tranquillisers all sky rocketed during the decade.<sup>41</sup> In addition, attitudes towards mental illness underwent a decisive shift in the post war era. Previously, the assumption that insanity was incurable had

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<sup>40</sup> Patterson 339.

<sup>41</sup> Chafe 126.

dominated the medical and popular consensus.<sup>42</sup> Afterwards, with the new emphasis on the potential psychiatric problems of the returning veteran, the focus shifted from containment of the incurable patient to methods of treatment, and the horror of asylum conditions became a cause celebre.<sup>43</sup> These trends were accompanied by a boom in popular psychology (led by Norman Vincent Peale and his best-selling tome *The Power of Positive Thinking* [1953]) and a vast increase in the number of Americans seeking psychiatric help. In addition, psychoanalysis, which had been introduced into the U.S by practitioners fleeing persecution in war-torn Europe, had become one of the most popular forms of therapy. As a result, in the post war period “both serious scholarship and pop psychology became replete with Freudian ideology.”<sup>44</sup> The U.S, it seemed, “was becoming a ‘therapeutic’ culture in which ‘experts’ helped people to feel good.”<sup>45</sup> In the words of David J. Skal, “society was willing to be treated as a mad house and the experts were only too happy to oblige.”<sup>46</sup>

Accompanying the psychiatry boom came a notable surge of interest in true stories of mental breakdown, which prompted the publication of many semi-autobiographical case studies. Indeed, the prevalence of such case studies was such that *Lizzie* – the film version of *The Bird's Nest* – was released at the same time, and consequently entirely eclipsed by the (admittedly far superior) movie *The Three Faces of Eve*, which similarly dramatised the same disorder. This highly successful film was based upon a case in which a quiet and respectable American housewife would lose consciousness and become a completely different person. Eve White, the original personality, was a prim and proper born again Christian, sexually frigid and socially

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<sup>42</sup> Caminero-Santangelo 6.

<sup>43</sup> Caminero-Santangelo 6.

<sup>44</sup> Sylvia Anne Hewitt, *A Lesser Life: The Myth of Women's Liberation* (London: Michael Joseph, 1987) 158.

<sup>45</sup> Patterson 340.

<sup>46</sup> David J. Skal, *The Monster Show* (London: Plexus, 1994) 239.

awkward: her alter ego, Eve Black, was an outgoing, unreligious good time girl who was fond of alcohol, sex, clothes and cigarettes. As in Jackson's novel, the repressed yearnings of the original persona are unconsciously acted out by a secondary personality.<sup>47</sup> Two decades later, another fictionalised true case study, *Sybil* would similarly tackle the same disorder on the small screen. Therefore, as Marta Caminero-Santangelo has also noted, *The Bird's Nest*, far from being unique, was merely the starting point of a post WW2 fascination with multiple personality – a preoccupation that significantly arose “just as the idea of multiple feminine roles, such as wife, mother and professional, had become socially threatening... multiple personality disorder, like hysteria in the nineteenth century or Anorexia today [allowed women to] enact a protest against the socially constructed category of femininity even when they reside fully within that category.”

However, despite this strong popular interest in m.p.d, schizophrenia – the disease most probably displayed by Natalie Waite in Jackson's earliest psychological novel, *Hangsaman* – was perhaps the most frequently written about mental disorder. As Elaine Showalter has pointed out, unlike hysteria, anorexia nervosa or depression, schizophrenia is clinically and statistically *not* a predominately female mental disorder. Yet, as she goes on to explain, “the best known studies of the inner life of the schizophrenic – Marguerite Sechaye's *Autobiography of a Schizophrenic Girl*, Barbara O'Brien's *Operators and Things* and Hannah Greenberg's *I Never Promised You a Rose Garden* – have female protagonists.”<sup>48</sup> The female schizophrenic, she argues, “has become as central a cultural figure for the twentieth century as the

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<sup>47</sup> Sullivan 331.

<sup>48</sup> Elaine Showalter, *The Female Malady: Women, Madness and English Culture, 1830-1980* (London: Virago, 1982) 204.



hysteric was for the nineteenth” – taken by literary modernists as a potent symbol of linguistic, religious and sexual breakdown and rebellion.<sup>49</sup>

According to Showalter, these parallels between schizophrenia and female identity were developed most fully in three important women’s autobiographical novels of the early 1960s (all of which related experiences which had taken place during the previous decade) – Jennifer Dawson’s *The Ha Ha* (1962), New Zealander Janet Frame’s *Faces in the Water* (1961) and *The Bell Jar* (1963). To that list I would add *Hangsaman* and *The Bird’s Nest*, which although not specifically autobiographical, have, as we shall soon see, much in common with the wave of female psychiatric case studies that they anticipated.

When compared to one another, the extent to which these accounts of mental breakdown and recovery parallel each other is considerable. Natalie Waite and Elizabeth Richmond closely conform to the profile of the typical case study protagonist. Like “Deborah Blau” in Greenberg’s *I Never Promised You A Rose Garden* (1964), Esther Greenwood in *The Bell Jar* (1963) and Dawson’s protagonist “Josephine” in *The Ha Ha*, Jackson’s characters are of a similar type – isolated young women in their early twenties or late teens, who, even prior to the onset of their illness have always been in some way out of step with the rest of society. Intellectual precocity and a highly developed imagination, as in *The Bell Jar* and *I Never Promised You a Rose Garden* are often partly to blame for this longstanding sense of estrangement from normal society. The college campus – which forms an important setting in *The Ha Ha*, and *The Bell Jar*, is also a common feature. Initial breakdown is generally followed by a period of intense psychiatric scrutiny and months – perhaps years – of therapy, during which the protagonist usually goes through some sort of

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<sup>49</sup> Showalter 214.

trial or cathartic process. Generally suicide is at some point attempted or at the very least given serious consideration: in both Plath and Greenberg's novels such attempts form the initial impetus for psychiatric hospitalisation. The intervention of an understanding and sympathetic (and frequently female) psychiatrist or psychoanalyst is often of great assistance. Such case studies/ semi autobiographical novels generally end with the protagonist undergoing a sort of symbolic rebirth – or resurrection – and having gained re-entry into the “normal” world. As Jeffery Berman has noted, whilst writing about Plath and Greenberg's texts:

The heroine's recovery contrasts with the fate of other less fortunate women who either commit suicide in the story or are condemned to permanent madness, victims of an uncaring society and questionable psychiatric procedures such as electroshock and lobotomy. Employing psychiatric case studies to dramatize the process of breakdown and recovery, *The Bell Jar* and *Rose Garden* fall into the category of the *bildungsroman*, an autobiographical novel about the growth and education of the artist.<sup>50</sup>

If one looks at Jackson's early psychological novels – particularly *The Bird's Nest* – in relation to the blueprint followed by the typical female case study, the similarities between them are obvious. Both Elizabeth and Natalie fall into the typical age group of the case study protagonist – Natalie is seventeen, Elizabeth Richmond is twenty-three. Natalie in particular has much in common with her “real life” counterparts. She is precocious, both highly intelligent and extremely imaginative: and even from the very beginning of the narrative we know that she feels herself somehow estranged from the rest of humanity: “Natalie Waite...lived in an odd corner of sound and sight past the daily voices of her father and mother and their incomprehensible actions.”<sup>51</sup>

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<sup>50</sup> Jeffrey Berman, *The Talking Cure: Literary Representations of Psychoanalysis* (New York: New York University Press, 1985) 156.

<sup>51</sup> Jackson, *Hangsaman* 4.

The Elizabeth Richmond we encounter at the beginning of *The Bird's Nest* is initially a less interesting protagonist than the more obviously disturbed Natalie. Her life, Jackson tells us, is one of dutiful routine and lifeless stoicism: "She had no friends, no parents, no associates and no plans beyond that of enduring the necessary interval before her departure with as little pain as possible."<sup>52</sup> However, it soon becomes clear that something is badly amiss. She suffers from constant, crippling headaches. She arrives at her boring desk job (in the museum whose foundations have begun to "sag") to find a nasty, puzzling note – "*dear lizzie, the letter read, your fools paradise is gone now for good watch out for me lizzie watch out for me...*"<sup>53</sup> – which we later find is only one in a series of such missives. Much to her Aunt Morgen's displeasure she has been sneaking out of the house late at night yet claims not to remember a thing. At a social gathering she arrives, blacks out, drinks far too much and causes several embarrassing scenes, then comes to her senses with no idea of what has transpired. At this point, it is decided that Elizabeth should receive professional help: she is referred to the affable, pompous Dr Wright, who, having placed his patient under hypnosis, soon discovers the real reason for her odd behaviour: multiple personality disorder.

Interestingly, unlike the single, highly subjective viewpoint of *Hangsaman*, *The Bird's Nest* presents a multiplicity of viewpoints and narratives, thus paralleling the mental state of its protagonist, to whom the phrase "I don't quite feel myself today" has a rather unique resonance. The novel is divided into six sections, each relating a different stage of the treatment. The first, entitled "Elizabeth," outlines the general background and symptoms of our heroine. The section that follows, "Dr Wright" is Jackson's rather tongue in cheek approximation of the real life case study. Related to

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<sup>52</sup> Jackson, *The Bird's Nest* 8.

<sup>53</sup> Jackson, *The Bird's Nest* 9.

us in the first person, in the form of extracts from Dr Wright's personal journal, this section is like its supposed author: good natured, paternal, and at times rather long winded. Much of this section, and indeed of the remainder of the novel, is concerned with matter of fact descriptions of the process of psychiatric diagnosis and treatment through therapy.

Under initial hypnosis, a charming, attractive alter ego whom Dr Wright is decidedly more partial to replaces the boring, colourless Elizabeth. This personality is named "Beth" and is labelled "R2": i.e., the second personality to be manifested by Elizabeth Richmond. It isn't long however before another, rather less wholesome persona surfaces, "A Devil's mask"<sup>54</sup> that the good doctor is both repulsed and disoriented by. "Betsy", or "R3" is consistently described by Dr Wright in demonic and monstrous terms: said to have "The dreadful grinning face of a fiend" and to be a "possessing demon,"<sup>55</sup> who is "the hateful, the enemy." Adding to his discomfiture is the fact that the undesirable Betsy can actually pretend to be both Beth and Elizabeth. This weakness is soon taken advantage of when Betsy absconds to New York, thus concluding the second stage of the narrative.

The section which follows, "Betsy", is the most complex and contradictory in the novel. It is also the section closest in style and tone to *Hangsaman* and stories such as "The Tooth" and "The Beautiful Stranger," which all have the nightmarish quality of a dream or hallucination. Elizabeth – the original personality – regains partial control of her faculties in the middle of confusing, "alien" bustle of New York, but, like so many of Jackson's heroines, is estranged from reality: "a stranger in a world of strangers and they were strangers she had left behind."<sup>56</sup> In moments, Betsy has regained control. "Betsy" believes she is sixteen years old, and has come to New York

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<sup>54</sup> Jackson, *The Bird's Nest* 50.

<sup>55</sup> Jackson, *The Bird's Nest* 54.

<sup>56</sup> Jackson, *The Bird's Nest* 85.

in order to find her mother (whom she believes to be still alive) and her mother's boyfriend Robin. Naturally, the search is unsuccessful, and characterised by episodes of paranoia and panic, with the various personalities always vying for overall control of Elizabeth's body. This struggle climaxes in a vicious fight between Elizabeth and Betsy, which results in unwitting harm:<sup>57</sup> ...with quiet slow strength she put her hand almost gently around Betsy's throat and tightened her fingers as slowly and surely as she could...<sup>58</sup> The next scene finds our heroine confined to a hospital bed, having at last been located: but the trauma undergone in New York has brought to the surface a fourth, and final personality, "Bess," who has no memory whatsoever of Dr Wright or any sort of treatment. The remainder of the novel follows the case study outline previously discussed fairly closely. Section four is once more told from the perspective of the benevolent Dr Wright, and details the struggles for dominance amongst his patients' various personalities. We discover that from the viewpoint of Bess, the newest persona, Elizabeth's mother has only been dead for three weeks: the importance of this event as a cause of her daughter's disorder becomes ever more apparent. The fact that no-nonsense Aunt Morgen describes her deceased sister as "a drunken, vice ridden beast" is another significant clue. As in the conventional case study, the childhood trauma inflicted by this loss plays a large part in Elizabeth's mental disintegration.

Whilst her other personalities bicker amongst themselves and play various cruel tricks on one another (and her) the original Elizabeth's position becomes ever more

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<sup>57</sup> Of course, this kind of violence is not uncommon in fictionalisations of split personalities: in "William Wilson," Poe's protagonist, in shooting his sinister doppelganger, inadvertently kills himself: and in David Fincher's 1999 film *Fight Club*, the protagonist shoots himself in the head in order to foil his alter ego's anarchic master plan (the blowing up of all the major U.S credit card companies). Rather implausibly, he survives.

<sup>58</sup> Jackson, *The Bird's Nest* 121.

tenuous: "Elizabeth had lost, and was losing, a large portion of her conscious life."<sup>59</sup> As in the rest of the novel, this section is concerned with detailing the course and results of Elizabeth's psychiatric therapy. Dr Wright is torn between professional curiosity and a decidedly unprofessional loathing for two of his patient's new personalities in particular: indeed, the deeper the psychiatric process goes, the more fragmented his patient seems to become. In what is the most comedic section, told from the viewpoint of Aunt Morgen, who must put up with her niece's peculiarities on a daily basis, Elizabeth's condition appears to deteriorate even more. The greedy Bess insists upon spending all of her aunt's money and obsesses over the contents of her (their?) father's will: Betsy plays spiteful tricks on both Morgen and the increasingly wan Elizabeth (including filling the refrigerator with mud, and walking miles out of town, then leaving Elizabeth to regain control and struggle home), and Beth simpers and smiles. Such is the seriousness of the situation that Morgen begins to seriously consider committing her niece to a mental institution (something the rest of us probably would have done long before). However, just as things look darkest, the various Elizabeth's are forced to confront the true memory of their dissolute, neglectful mother. We discover that Elizabeth had chastised her mother for the only time only a couple of hours before her sudden death. In true pop psychoanalytical style, we realise that although the two events are mere coincidence, Elizabeth (like Eleanor Vance in *Hill House*) blames herself for her mother's death. Her m.p.d. is therefore a result of her repressed guilt and trauma caused by the incident and by years of motherly neglect (and, it is subtly implied, an episode of sexual abuse by her mother's boyfriend, although it is only ever referred to in a very evasive manner). Shocked back into the real world by this realisation, the various personalities are

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<sup>59</sup> Jackson, *The Bird's Nest* 131.

reintegrated into a single, whole identity. When we next see Elizabeth, three months later, her mental health has improved to such an extent that she is considered sane enough to receive her inheritance, and declares, “I am all alone,” and “I know who I am.” Though Elizabeth has avoided incarceration in the traditional case study setting – the mental institution – she has, like the real life protagonists of books like *The Snake Pit* and *I Never Promised You a Rose Garden*, been helped towards recovery through a combination of sympathetic treatment and a profound reassessment of her past.

There are two major differences between *Hangsaman* and the conventional case study. Most significantly, Natalie receives no psychiatric treatment (or diagnosis) what so ever. Though concerned for her well being in a general sense, there is no indication that either her parents or any one else – teachers, other students – are at any point aware of the depths of her mental illness, or indeed realise that she is suffering from one. Unlike Elizabeth Richmond, who has the love and support of her Aunt Morgen and the paternal Dr Wright, Natalie works through her madness alone, without familial or professional help of any kind (which partially accounts for the unconvincing nature of the novel’s conclusion). Secondly, the novel has a far more impressionistic, free flowing narrative than its successor: virtually every event is related to us from Natalie’s viewpoint. *The Bird’s Nest* would, by way of contrast, consciously ape many of the structural characteristics of the real life case study.

The novel begins as Natalie is about to leave home for the first time to attend college (a college, we are pointedly told, that her pretentious, overbearing father has chosen for her), and the only thing more terrifying to her than going there is the thought of staying home forever with her mother and father. As is the case in *Castle*, the reader is aware from the outset that there is something not quite right about our

heroine. Though we do not get an outright declaration of mental slippage such as that found in the opening pages of *The Bird's Nest*, (when we are told that Elizabeth's "personal equilibrium" has been set off balance) we are nevertheless made aware that Natalie is more than a little strange. She has a rich, disturbing inner life and is accompanied everywhere by voices, such as that of a police detective who interrogates her about imaginary murders.

In an extremely vague incident at her parents' garden party, it is implied that she has been sexually assaulted by one of the guests, but rather than acknowledge what has occurred, she chooses to repress her memories – "I don't remember, nothing happened, nothing that I remember happened."<sup>60</sup> It was (and still is, in many cases) believed by psychiatrists that sexual abuse is a common trigger for severe personality disorders: certainly Jackson seems to adhere to that point of view in *Hangsaman*. A journal entry written as Natalie becomes increasingly disengaged from reality seems to confirm this hypothesis, as Natalie's inner self reassures her outward persona:

... I even knew that you thought I was worried about *that terrible thing*, but of course – I promise you this, I really do – I don't think about it at all, ever, because both of us know that it never happened, did it? And it was some horrible dream that caught up with us both.<sup>61</sup>  
[My italics]

Indeed, sexual abuse or exploitation of some kind is, as I have already indicated, also raised as a contributing factor to Elizabeth's breakdown in *The Bird's Nest*, albeit in a similarly undefined, ambiguous manner. It is implied that something had occurred between she and her mother's boy friend Robin, though again nothing is ever confirmed. Another connection between the two novels is the fact that in both texts,

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<sup>60</sup> Jackson, *Hangsaman* 55.

<sup>61</sup> Jackson, *Hangsaman* 78.



writing allows a means of accessing the unconscious: Elizabeth's other personalities often write nasty notes to each other, and Natalie's disturbed alter ego first surfaces in her daily journal, in which she often addresses herself in the third person.

Natalie is a consummate outsider, a child no more but an adult neither. College is supposed to represent a "new start" for her, but instead her stay there will lead to insanity. She longs to make friends with the other girls, but her combination of arrogance, innate oddness and social awkwardness make this impossible. Her refusal to take part in an initiation ritual organised by the senior girls seals her social fate. Some indication of the nature of her illness surfaces in Natalie's journal, in which the inner Natalie addresses her outer self as though they are separate individuals, in an entry that is part love letter and part psychotic manifesto: <sup>62</sup>

Dearest dearest darling most important dearest darling Natalie – this is me talking, your own precious own Natalie, and I just wanted to tell you one small thing: you *are* the best, and they *will* know it someday, and someday no one will ever dare laugh again when you are near, and no one will ever dare even *speak* to you without bowing first. And they will be afraid of you. And all you have to do is wait, my darling, wait and it will come....<sup>63</sup>

Following this entry, no more is written about Natalie's troubled thoughts, and the next scenes feature conventional college classes. Indeed, thirty pages pass before there is further mention of a secret self. In the meantime, Natalie is able to function in the outside world without anyone else noticing anything amiss: she even befriends the lonely wife of her English professor. In another journal entry she records that she is no longer afraid to be alone, and at the same time writes to her father about an interesting new friend – a girl named Tony: "There is a very strange girl round here

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<sup>62</sup> Freidman 93.

<sup>63</sup> Jackson, *Hangsaman* 91.

who would interest you very much. She is always off by herself somewhere, and when I asked someone about her they laughed and said, ‘Oh, that’s that girl Tony something’. I keep seeing her around and I think I would like to meet her.’”<sup>64</sup>

During thanksgiving break, Natalie returns home, and admits that she is having some problems with her academic work, but at no point indicates the disturbed nature of her inner life. Upon her return, Jackson provides for the first time some indication of the depth of her estrangement from the other girls in her dormitory: she hides in a stair well rather than talk to them, refuses to go into the dining room in case she is snubbed and has rearranged her room in very unorthodox fashion. Still, Tony is presented through Natalie’s perceptions, as a real life girl: the two are described as sitting next to each other on a porch during a party, and we are told that they often play cards. As Friedman points out, “even though Natalie’s affliction has progressed steadily, the reader has not known until almost the end the extent of her illness. For this reason, and because Tony has been treated as a real, though, though mysterious girl, the realization that Natalie is schizoid comes as a shock: indeed Jackson seems to have deliberately withheld information in order to provide a shock ending.”<sup>65</sup> The shock, or twist ending of this kind was a device often used by 50s horror writers such as Bloch and Matheson.<sup>66</sup>

As I have already stated, one of the major differences between *Hangsaman* and *The Bird’s Nest* is that in *Hangsaman* events are recounted entirely from Natalie’s distorted viewpoint. Consequently, we don’t realise until towards the end of the

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<sup>64</sup> Jackson, *Hangsaman* 177.

<sup>65</sup> Friedman 94.

<sup>66</sup> Indeed, the belated revelation of split personality has become a staple of the modern horror genre: see the already cited *Psycho* and “Lucy Comes to Stay” by Bloch, 70s horror bestseller *The Other* by Thomas Tryon, and *The Dark Half* by Stephen King, to name but a few – not to forget Poe’s classic story “William Wilson” and “The Jolly Corner” by Henry James. More recently, the films *Primal Fear* (1996) *Fight Club* (1999) and *Identity* (2003) have also concluded with a memorably schizoid revelations.

narrative (although, in retrospect, it is strongly hinted) that her “friend” Tony is actually a manifestation of own troubled mind. Instead of undergoing psychiatric treatment – which in a more conventional case study signals the beginning of a process of catharsis and healing – Natalie (seems) to resolve her split personality of her own accord, in a characteristically ambiguous confrontation with her other self in the woods outside town. Her period of trial is entirely self-contained. Though Natalie at one point idly wonders what she would actually say to a psychoanalyst – which indicates that she has at least some notion of the seriousness of her problems – the possibility of such a meeting is never raised in any realistic fashion. However, rather than completely give into madness, or (despite an abortive attempt) kill herself, Natalie returns to college, in an ending that is probably supposed to be hopeful, but, as contemporary reviewers noted, is altogether too expedient to be truly plausible:

The reassuring bulk of the college buildings showed ahead of her, and she looked fondly up at them and smiled. As she had never been before, she was now alone, and grown up, and powerful and not at all afraid.<sup>67</sup>

Indeed, in his analysis of the novel, Darryl Hattenhauer persuasively suggests that far from achieving recovery, Natalie has merely replaced schizophrenic behaviour with suicidal tendencies.<sup>68</sup>

*Hangsaman* does have many of the characteristics of the contemporary female psychiatric case study. Like *The Bell Jar* and *The Ha Ha*, the heroine is a precocious young co-ed. Indeed, the relationship between Jackson and Plath is one that I shall soon explore in much more detail during my conclusion. Similarly, Natalie’s age, her precocity and imagination, the strained relationship with her parents, her arrested

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<sup>67</sup> Jackson, *Hangsaman* 280.

<sup>68</sup> Hattenhauer 113.

emotional maturity, her increasing disengagement from reality, her 'trial' – (the ambiguous confrontation with “Tony<sup>69</sup>” in the woods), her contemplation of suicide (whilst on the bridge outside town) and her apparent recovery of sanity by the novel's end all give her story much in common with the generic blue print I have outlined.

Much of this similarity is undoubtedly due to the fact that although Jackson's two “psychological” novels are obviously fictional (though biographer Judy Oppenheimer claims that *Hangsaman*'s protagonist – schizophrenia aside – has much in common with the young Jackson), she did put a great deal of effort into researching the psychiatric disorders that afflict her heroines. Before writing both texts she spent many hours studying schizophrenia and multiple personality. In a 1954 letter she stated of *The Bird's Nest*: “I did a great deal of background reading before I wrote the book and one area I know backward and forward is the dissociated personality.”<sup>70</sup> A real life case study from 1906, which had been written up by a Dr Morton Prince under the title “The Dissociation of a Personality” was the basis for Elizabeth's disorder in *The Bird's Nest*<sup>71</sup>. Indeed, Jackson's fictional Dr Wright, who treats Elizabeth in the novel, actually quotes Prince in his journal:

Cases of this kind are commonly known as “double” or “multiple personality”, according to the number of persons represented, but a more correct term is *disintegrated* personality, for each secondary personality is a part only of a normal whole self.<sup>72</sup>

Dr Prince had used hypnosis as a means of reaching the various personalities submerged in his patient, “...a technique that fascinated Shirley, as did any means of

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<sup>69</sup> It is interesting to note that Stephen King, an avowed fan of Jackson's work and of *Hill House* in particular named the imaginary friend of his young protagonist in *The Shining* “Tony”.

<sup>70</sup> Friedman 95.

<sup>71</sup> Morton Prince, *The Disassociation of a Personality: The Hunt for the Real Miss Beauchamp*. (1908; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1978).

<sup>72</sup> Jackson, *Hangsaman* 57.

mind exploration.”<sup>73</sup> In addition, Jackson was also given a background briefing on the disorder by one of the psychologists at Bennington College. What seems clear is that Jackson had a particular interest in psychiatric disorders that caused the “disintegration” or splitting of one’s identity and personality. It was a fascination that was shared by the American public, if the proliferation of contemporary real life case studies and semi-autobiographical fictionalisations already cited is any indication.

Jackson’s specific choice of personality altering illnesses, is undoubtedly motivated by the position of women in American society, but is also, I would argue, influenced by the strong undercurrent of contemporary anxiety about the erosion of the individual identity at a time of immense social change. It was an anxiety reflected in the writings of – and fuelled by – several of the decade’s most prominent social commentators. In *The Lonely Crowd* (1950), sociologist David Reisman famously claimed that productivity and social control were “increasingly dependent upon the will of the people” and that individual identity was being absorbed into the “will of the peer group.”<sup>74</sup> The major impact of Reisman’s claims was to reinforce the image of post war America as a society fast achieving alarming proportions of conformity.<sup>75</sup> As James Patterson has pointed out, although subsequent nostalgia for the mid 1950s perceived it in retrospect as a harmonious and mostly happy era, much about that time had actually repelled social analysts.<sup>76</sup> “Conformity,” generally characterised as an all pervasive sameness, blandness and mindlessness brought about by the era’s unprecedented materialism and subsequent rise of the “ultimate conformists” – the suburban middle classes – became the epitome of what many contemporary critics perceived as the most oppressive aspect of life during the decade. According to many

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<sup>73</sup> Oppenheimer 162.

<sup>74</sup> David Reisman, *The Lonely Crowd* (1961; New Haven: Yale University Press, 1966)

<sup>75</sup> Christopher Brookeman, *American Culture and Society Since the 1930s* (London: Macmillan, 1984) 110.

<sup>76</sup> Patterson 131.

of the more alarmist analysts of the time, (such as John Keats, author of *The Crack in The Picture Window*) individuality itself was under threat from a suburban malaise that “represented a dictatorship of blandness and uniformity that killed the human spirit.”<sup>77</sup> In his best selling diatribe, Keats presented what he claimed was “an intensive scientific study of emotional problems in a typical section of American suburbia” and made sweeping generalisations about the incidence of psychiatric and psychosomatic illness amongst young housewives in the suburbs.<sup>78</sup> If this was the position espoused by so many of the nation’s most prominent “intellectual” commentators, it is hardly surprising to find that, as Mark Jancovich has noted, much of the horror fiction of the period is similarly – albeit much more graphically – concerned with the fictionalisation of identity crisis and anxiety about the processes of social development and modernisation.<sup>79</sup> Similarly, Jackson’s fiction, which is so obviously concerned with the fragmentation and “disintegration” of the individual personality, cannot be entirely uninfluenced by contemporary fears that so closely paralleled such anxieties.

Having discussed Jackson’s preoccupation with madness and psychiatry in relation to general interest in the subject during the decade, I shall now examine the issue from a much more specific angle. I have already looked at the reasons why America experienced a surge of interest in psychiatry and mental health during the 50s, and have examined the manner in which this preoccupation influenced Jackson’s work. I shall now add to this argument by suggesting that Jackson’s preoccupation with madness also had roots in another cultural trend of the time – the oppressive domestic ideology of the decade. Although obviously influenced by the cultural climate, I will argue that Jackson’s recurrent portrayals of female madness are also a reflection of

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<sup>77</sup> Chafe 122.

<sup>78</sup> Donaldson 117.

<sup>79</sup> Jancovich 2.

the limited range of choices and powerful pressures facing women during the period. Joan Wylie Hall has suggested that Jackson's "imperilled females embody a post war sensibility of dislocation and loss. Their sex, Jackson implies, is no badge of protection; rather it almost ensures their defeat".<sup>80</sup> Similarly, it is my contention that the mental collapse and loss of identity that characterises so many of Jackson's women is itself a manifestation of the "sensibility" described by Hall. As I shall demonstrate, the post war hardening of attitudes towards women is as important a factor in Jackson's recurrent depiction of mental illness as the more general issues previously outlined.

As Patricia Hewitt and other commentators have pointed out, in 1945, American women, who had played such a vital role in keeping the war machine on the right track, were more powerful than they had ever been before.<sup>81</sup> Yet the years that followed were characterised by a succession of endless losses in the battle for women's rights and the firm reinstatement of "traditional" gender stereotypes. At the war's end, women were "encouraged" to leave their jobs to free up positions for returning veterans. Those employed in well-paid war jobs were fired or "persuaded" to resign: federally funded childcare was closed in order to force young mothers back to the home, "the media heaped scorn on feminism, and on the emancipated 'career girls' of yesteryear."<sup>82</sup> Such reversals were accompanied by a decisive and startling shift in gender propaganda. The strong, self sufficient and hard working wartime female ideal embodied in "Rosie the Riveter" was rapidly replaced by the more traditional model of the housewife and mother once the war was over and Rosie's usefulness was at an apparent end.<sup>83</sup> The reinstatement of traditional gender roles was

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<sup>80</sup> Hall xiv.

<sup>81</sup> Hewitt 151.

<sup>82</sup> Hewitt 151.

<sup>83</sup> Emory Elliott, *The Columbia History of the American Novel* (New York: Columbia University Press,

in fact a crucial plank of post war government policy. It was still barely a decade since the great depression had made a vast and damaging impression upon the nation's psyche, an impression that was believed to have been especially damaging to American men, who for years had been both powerless and poor. In addition, four hundred thousand U.S service men had died in the war. By 1945, there was an enormous pent up demand for a "normal" life amongst returning service men that in many instances never really experienced such an existence. "Normality" in this case was taken to mean family, a house, a car and a good job – the embodiments of the post war American dream. As a result, the G.I. Bill, which provided free college education, generous tax allowances, and low cost mortgages was intended to subsidise a particular kind of family – one in which the husband was the breadwinner and the wife remained at home to care for their generously appointed suburban home and 2.4 children.<sup>84</sup> The white picket fence was optional, but encouraged. As a result of such policies, "for the first time in the history of the country educated women were expected and encouraged to devote their prime years and expand their energies on housework and motherhood."<sup>85</sup> The family centred, male orientated ideal wasn't quite the same if Mom was out earning as much as dad. This "sudden redefinition of female excellence" led to the creation of what Betty Friedan would famously term "the feminine mystique" – a socio psychological theory created to protect male access to power by restricting women's place to the home.<sup>86</sup>

Guy Reynolds has said of *The Bell Jar* that it "crystallised a cultural moment of the 1960s" by exposing 1950s domestic ideology as a "false consciousness that oppressed women psychologically even as it proffered a cornucopia of consumer

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1991) 485.

<sup>84</sup> Hewitt 154.

<sup>85</sup> Hewitt 152.

<sup>86</sup> Elliott 485.



goodies.”<sup>87</sup> In the following section, I will make the same claim for Jackson, and argue that in *Hangsaman* in particular, she anticipated many of the issues explored in Plath’s novel by more than a decade.

It seems obvious that the women most affected by the decade’s reversion to traditional female models would be those experiencing adolescence and early adulthood during the time at which such assumptions became standard. After all, they were the ones expected to conform most enthusiastically to society’s redefined expectations of female behaviour. I find it significant therefore that whilst housewives are frequently featured in Jackson’s short stories none of her novelistic heroines conform to that demographic. For her longer fictions, Jackson seemed to prefer younger, unattached women. Hence her focus, even amongst the heavily peopled narrative of her first novel, upon the friendship between isolated adolescents Marilyn Perlman and Heather Merriam in *Road*, and the depictions of 17 year old Natalie Waite in *Hangsaman* and 23 year old Elizabeth in *The Bird’s Nest*. Merricat Blackwood tells us in the opening paragraph of *Castle* that she is 18: her sister Constance is still in her twenties. *Hill House*’s Eleanor Vance is somewhat older, in her early thirties, but she is also very immature and resolutely unattached (save to her new home of course) whilst the only half way sympathetic character in *Sundial* is teenager Gloria (who, rarely for a Jackson heroine, is completely sane – but then her role in the novel is a fairly peripheral one). With the exception of Gloria and the girls in *Road*, the typical Jackson novelistic heroine has a significant checklist of characteristics.

As I have pointed out, she is generally quite young, and emotionally immature. Her parents are dead (as in *Hill House*, *Castle*, and *The Bird’s Nest*) or, in

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<sup>87</sup> Reynolds 172.

*Hangsaman*, physically separated and emotionally detached from their offspring. The Jackson young woman is isolated – either willingly or unwittingly – from her peers, and from the rest of the world by precocity, profound social unease or sheer strangeness. And of course, she suffers from some sort of severe mental disorder, whether named, as in *Hangsaman* or *The Bird's Nest*, or strongly implied, as in *Hill House* and *Castle*. Accompanying such disorders is strong resistance, or at least objection to the ideals of conventional domesticity. Such resistance is readily apparent in *Hangsaman*, in which Natalie, like Plath's Esther Greenwood, is deeply alarmed by even the very thought of becoming a housewife.

As in *The Bell Jar*, the fact that the most educated and able young women in the nation were being readied not for lives of academic or career accomplishment but rather for roles as housewives and mothers is a principal theme of *Hangsaman*, albeit in a less obvious fashion. Nowhere perhaps, was the contradictory and damaging nature of the era's domestic ideology more obvious than in the way it required educated young women to behave. As Betty Friedan put it: "...the shock, the mystery to the naïve who had great hopes for the higher education of women was that more American women than ever were going to college – but few of them were going on from college to become physicists, philosophers, poets, doctors...fewer and fewer college women were preparing for any career or profession requiring more than the most casual commitment."<sup>88</sup> And whilst there may have been more women going to college than ever, the proportion who managed actually to graduate was dropping – only 37% of women would do so, compared to 55% of men.<sup>89</sup> The majority dropped out to put their husbands through instead of themselves. Despite the fact that they were under pressure to work hard, and achieve good grades, women scholars were as

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<sup>88</sup> Friedan 132.

<sup>89</sup> Patterson 336.

a rule not taken seriously, and there was always the danger that if one was perceived to be “too smart” she would alienate potential suitors.<sup>90</sup> That marriage and family remained the ultimate yardsticks of female success was made perfectly clear by Adlai Stevenson in his commencement address to Sylvia Plath’s graduating class at Smith in 1955:

Once immersed in the very pressing and particular problems of domesticity, many women feel frustrated and far apart from the great issues and stirring debate for which their education has given them understanding and relish...Once they wrote poetry. Now it’s the laundry list. Once they discussed art and philosophy until late in the night. Now they are so tired they fall asleep as soon as the dishes are finished...

As Susan R. Van Dyne has explained, “his charge to the 1955 class counselled not resignation about these contracting horizons but a redirection to the role of moral guide and educator:”<sup>91</sup>

The assignment for you, as wives and mothers, has great advantages. In the first place, it is homework – you can do it in the living room with a baby on your lap or in the kitchen with a can opener in your hands. If you’re really clever, maybe you’ll even practice your saving arts on the unsuspecting man while he’s watching television.<sup>92</sup>

Apart from the obvious irony of the fact that Sylvia Plath was amongst the group Stevenson was encouraging to write laundry lists rather than poetry, one must bear in mind that he was addressing some of the most educated and capable young women in the land – and that by the standards of the time, Adlai Stevenson was considered a liberal in American politics. As Van Dyne and several other critics have pointed out,

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<sup>90</sup> Chafe 125.

<sup>91</sup> Susan R. Van Dyne, *Revising Life: Sylvia Plath's Ariel Poems* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1993) 133.

<sup>92</sup> Van Dyne 133.

such paeans to the lot of the humble housewife were in part an anxious reaction to women's actual growing independence from the home: the proportion of working married women was in fact rising year by year. However, Stevenson's address highlights the extent to which, regardless of the cultural strains that were actually underway, young women were still being urged to take their "rightful" place in the home.<sup>93</sup> Such a role, it was stated, was not only proper, it was natural – and any woman who chose career over family was by the same token "unnatural" and unfeminine – a decisive return to the arguments used against women's rights campaigners in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

It is interesting to note therefore that accompanying the mental disorders of Jackson's women is usually a deep-rooted resistance to conventional domestic ideals. This resistance is first seen in its strongest form in *Hangsaman*. At first, it seems as though Natalie's repulsion towards "traditional" family values and domesticity is merely another aspect of her severe personality disorder. It is clear from the outset that for the Waites, inter-familial relationships are characterised by awkwardness and tension. Mr Waite, "husband, parent, man of his word" is first described as "looking with some disbelief"<sup>94</sup> upon his wife and two children. Affection between him and Mrs Waite is said to consist of "an aimless, constant argument where either one took any side."<sup>95</sup> He is the largest, most significant figure in Natalie's life, demanding, pompous, arrogant, yet in his own strange way affectionate towards his daughter: he writes her loving, gently teasing letters whilst she is at college. Mr Waite even has access to Natalie's innermost thoughts – thanks to his daily review of her journal whilst she is at home – the same journal that will later chronicle much of her mental collapse. The man who laughingly declares "I am God" at the breakfast table in order

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<sup>93</sup> Van Dyne 134.

<sup>94</sup> Jackson, *Hangsaman* 3.

<sup>95</sup> Jackson, *Hangsaman* 6.

to annoy his wife really is a kind of god like figure to his daughter, who is always seeking his approval and even befriends her literature Professor Arthur Langdon because the two men are very alike.

However, it is Natalie's relationship with her mother that reveals most about her attitudes towards domesticity, and, initially, her increasingly disturbed state of mind. We are told in the opening pages of the novel that "terror lest she be left alone with her mother made Natalie almost speechless"<sup>96</sup> – she hides in the garden rather than spend an unscheduled moment in Mrs Waite's presence, and retreats into a typical fantasy about a murder. When reflecting upon what the future holds for her, Natalie imagines that she will be "Married, probably. Perhaps – and the thought was nauseating – senselessly afflicted with children of her own. Worn and tired."<sup>97</sup> Her way of distracting herself from such "disagreeably clinging" thoughts is to imagine "the sweet, sharp sensation of being burned alive"<sup>98</sup> – incineration apparently being preferable to the domestic ideals that so repel our heroine. Natalie also indulges herself in frequent, startling fantasies of violence and murder. Whilst standing in her father's office, awaiting his verdict on her journal entry of the day before, she imagines the room as the scene of his bloody death: "She would be found at the desk, not five feet away from the corpse....she would be unable to account for the blood on her hands, on the front of her dress, on her shoes."<sup>99</sup> Though Natalie never actually acts out her murderous fantasies (and they remain just that, fantasies rather than compulsions), the *actual* murder of fellow family members by disturbed females would of course feature prominently in two of Jackson's later novels, *Sundial* and *Castle*.<sup>100</sup>

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<sup>96</sup> Jackson, *Hangsaman* 8.

<sup>97</sup> Jackson, *Hangsaman* 11.

<sup>98</sup> Jackson, *Hangsaman* 12.

<sup>99</sup> Jackson, *Hangsaman* 14.

<sup>100</sup> For more on the family massacre in Jackson, see my footnote on the subject in Chapter Two.

The only significant time that Natalie spends with her mother is on Sunday mornings, as they prepare food for a weekly dinner party/intellectual salon hosted by her father. Whereas the rest of the house is completely dominated by the over bearing presence of her husband: “even her bedroom was not her own since [he] magnanimously insisted upon sharing it” – we are told “the kitchen was the only place that Mrs Waite possessed utterly”.<sup>101</sup> These Sunday mornings are the only time that Natalie actually listens to her mother, and in which Mrs Waite, in an all female environment away from her domineering spouse, feels able to air her considerable grievances. Indeed, she talks so much that Natalie doesn’t even bother trying to respond. These one-sided conversations undoubtedly influence Natalie’s feelings towards conventional family life. Her mother advises her that the key to a contented marriage lies in repressed emotions and lack of meaningful communication: “see that your marriage is happy, child, don’t ever let you husband know what you’re thinking or doing, that’s the way.”<sup>102</sup> This repression apparently extends to all aspects of familial life: when her mother tries to communicate genuine feeling, as when she tells Natalie, who is about to depart for college, that “A mother gets very lonesome without her daughter,” she expresses herself with “an air of girlish whimsy which irritated both Natalie and Mr Waite as no flat statement of hatred could have.”<sup>103</sup> Natalie can only respond with the apparently unfeeling words “You’ll find something else to do.” Note that Mrs Waite’s whimsy is said to irritate Natalie and her father in the same manner. As is apparent in much of the rest of the novel, it seems that Natalie has internalised, and replicates her father’s scornful assessment of her mother. Yet her mother, and not her father is the model of adulthood she is supposed to follow: according to the cultural propaganda of the time girls like Natalie are supposed to

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<sup>101</sup> Jackson, *Hangsaman* 20.

<sup>102</sup> Jackson, *Hangsaman* 22.

<sup>103</sup> Jackson, *Hangsaman* 25.

become housewives, not intellectuals. This contradiction perhaps goes some way towards explaining Natalie's resentment towards domesticity and her personality disintegration: she has absorbed two radically conflicting models of adult behaviour.

Whilst drunk, Mrs Waite warns Natalie to stay away from men like her father: "First they tell you lies," said Mrs Waite "and they make you believe them: then they give you a little bit of what they promised. Just a little, enough to keep you thinking you've got your hands on it. Then you find out you've been tricked, just like everyone else..."<sup>104</sup> Again, married life is characterised as a trap that women unwittingly fall into and find themselves unable to escape.

At college, Natalie, despite her mother's advice, is quick to find a hero/father substitute in the form of her literature teacher Arthur Langdon. However, her admiration of Langdon is quick to fade once she realises how badly he treats his wife. Elizabeth Langdon is an important figure in the narrative; the only (real) person with whom Natalie has any sustained contact with whilst at school. She is part double/younger version of Natalie's mother – like her, unhappily married to an arrogant academic, and prone to drinking too much in order to take the edge off her loneliness and desperation. Also like Mrs Waite, she feels the need to impart useful advice to Natalie – advice that again amounts to "stay away from men like my husband if you want to be happy". Elizabeth, who at 20 is only a couple of years older than her husband's students – and was once one of those students herself – is also a kind of vision of the future for Natalie, who vividly illustrates the pitfalls of conventional domesticity (and again confirms Natalie's revulsion towards these conventions) even as the rest of the girls Natalie encounters rush headlong into similar fates. As Natalie reflects, "their loveliness would be deadened as Elizabeth's had been

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<sup>104</sup> Jackson, *Hangsamán* 44.

deadened.”<sup>105</sup> Like so many other girls of the time, Elizabeth has left college with a ring on her finger rather than a diploma, only to find that the idyllic lifestyle she had been promised hasn’t quite materialised. Natalie’s refusal to take part in her dorm’s initiation ritual (in which participants must tell dirty jokes and are pressed to reveal their level of sexual experience or lack thereof) highlights her profound reluctance to reach maturity, and to enter fully fledged womanhood. Maturity, she realises, means that she will be expected to undertake the same burdens and responsibilities as Elizabeth and her mother. Yet she also subconsciously recognises that her refusal to participate makes her an outcast amongst her peers and indicates a mindset that is very different from the “norm”:

What a silly routine, Natalie thought, not realising, sitting there alone on the stool in the centre of the ring of girls, how she was jeopardising her own future in college, her own future for four years and perhaps the rest of her life; how even worse than the actual being a bad sport was the state of mind which led her into defiance of this norm....<sup>106</sup>

Lenemaja Friedman has stated that, in relation to Natalie’s extreme reactions to family and domesticity “the only reasonable explanation for Natalie’s violent emotions seems to be that she is displaying symptoms of the mental disorder that will become a severe one within a short time.”<sup>107</sup> Friedman’s assessment is only partially correct. Whilst Natalie’s vehement rejection of domesticity and adulthood is in part a manifestation of her mental illness, the fact that Jackson so frequently aligns her growing detachment from reality with a refusal to conform to society’s expectations suggests something much more. Natalie’s immaturity is as much an indictment of the 50s treatment of young women as it is a symptom of her illness. The fact that the

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<sup>105</sup> Jackson, *Hangsaman* 101.

<sup>106</sup> Jackson, *Hangsaman* 78.

<sup>107</sup> Friedman 91.



married women we encounter in the novel are so unhappy and lonely suggests that Natalie's descent into madness is no more harmful than the era's culturally prescribed lifestyle. Which is why, though ostensibly a happy ending, the novel's conclusion, in which Natalie defeats her "other" self Toni and declares herself "grown up and not at all afraid" is not as reassuring as it first seems: perhaps the disturbed Natalie really had good reason to fear adulthood, if the experiences of the women around her are anything to go by. Madness, it is subtly suggested by Jackson (as it would be by Plath in *The Bell Jar*) is perhaps the only real form of resistance available to a young woman in such circumstances – and the most powerful means of dramatising the detrimental effects the "feminine mystique" had upon those expected to embrace such ideals. It's an argument forcefully rejected by Caminero-Santangelo in *The Madwoman Can't Speak* – in which the figure of the madwoman as a symbol of subversion and resistance in women's writing and feminist theory is strongly rebuffed. Instead, Caminero-Santangelo suggests that female madness is merely "an illusion of power that masks powerlessness..."<sup>108</sup> After all, as the title of her study states "the madwoman can't speak". Nevertheless, despite the persuasiveness of Caminero-Santangelo's challenge to conventional feminist criticism, her analysis does not change the fact that this earlier notion of female madness as a form of protest is probably closest to Jackson's intentions. It's a perspective strengthened by the fact that this argument is also present, albeit in a much less obvious fashion in Jackson's follow up to *Hangsaman*, *The Bird's Nest*.

Although six years older than her fictional predecessor, Elizabeth, like Natalie, is naïve and childlike. Again, despite Elizabeth's age, the possibility of a conventional romantic attachment is never even suggested. Interestingly, of the four separate

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<sup>108</sup> Caminero-Santangelo 12.

personalities manifested by Elizabeth during the novel, the one liked best by the affable, paternal Dr Wright is “R2,” or “Beth” the persona that most closely replicates the prescribed ideal of 50s womanhood. Unlike the colourless, timid original personality Elizabeth, Beth is charming, winsome, pretty and ladylike, and is such a favourite of Dr Wright’s that he looks forward to meeting her each time his unfortunate patient is hypnotised. Ironically, the personality that Dr Wright fears and loathes the most is cunning, foul mouthed, mischievous “R3”, or Betsy, who unconventional Aunt Morgen at one point declares her favourite, because she has “backbone”. The restored, apparently sane Elizabeth we have by the end of the novel is the result of combining all of Miss Richmond’s conflicting personalities into a coherent whole. Mental stability, Jackson suggests, can only be achieved by integrating the less “pleasing” aspects of her heroine’s psyche with the personalities that seemingly conform to the era’s feminine ideal: the new Elizabeth is as much mischievous loudmouth, greedy shopaholic and timid clerk as she is the charming and controllable young woman, which is why she concludes the novel by declaring that she will cut her hair short, despite the good natured protests of her Aunt and Doctor.

*Hill House*’s Eleanor Vance, is as I have said before, the apotheosis of the Jackson heroine. Like so many of the unmarried women that populate Jackson’s short stories, she is an outcast from a world that is seemingly tailored for, and filled with, happy families. And, also like the typical Jackson spinster, her head is filled with vague longings for romance and adventure that come to unlikely and ultimately chilling fruition. There is, Jackson strongly implies, nowhere that a fading, unattached female like Eleanor can feel welcome: nowhere that is, except the deceptively receptive corridors of Hill House. Though part of Eleanor yearns for romance, she scorns the confidence of Luke, the only unattached male in Hill House, because she suddenly

feels that he is looking for a “mother” substitute. The notion repels her: perhaps because of the time she had spent caring for her own mother, and perhaps because she is picking up upon the house’s sinister, “mothering” influence. Eleanor’s inevitable surrender to the house’s malign embrace – itself a sadistic mockery of her naïve dreams of domesticity – seems to her a reasonable choice when faced with the alternative: returning to the uncaring outside world. Eleanor’s neurotic behaviour and psychological vulnerability, although viciously exploited by the house, has not been caused by the sinister edifice: this mental weakness is readily apparent even before she enters its domain. A lifetime spent putting the needs of others ahead of her has already taken its damaging toll, and therefore made her the perfect target for supernatural attack. Eleanor’s surrender to madness could therefore be attributed as much to her society’s rejection of women who are unable to conform to domestic ideology as it can to the house’s dark powers.

In *Castle*, the climax of Jackson’s explorations of female insanity, Merricat Blackwood, like her predecessors, is young, emotionally immature and childlike. She is so alarmed by the prospect of her beloved sister Constance taking up with their greedy cousin Charles (who looks and acts just like the girl’s late father) that she burns the house down. It is implied that the mass poisoning of the entire Blackwood clan (save Constance, of course) by 12 year old Merricat was motivated by her resentment towards the family’s tyrannical patriarch, her father, and towards the preferential treatment meted out to her younger brother. Although eighteen at the time in which the novel is set, Merricat, even more so than Jackson’s earlier heroines, resists entry into adulthood. She acts at all times like a child: a spoiled precocious child, but a child nevertheless, spending her days playing in the fields around the Blackwood house and erecting mysterious totems, and depending upon her older,

maternal sister for food and clothing. Although Merricat's obvious psychosis leaves us in no doubt that whatever the immediate spur for her murderous actions, her disturbed mental state was the ultimate impetus, the fact that her violent activities throughout the novel seem calculated to result in the establishment of an alternative, all female family unit – consisting of course of her and Constance – suggests again that Jackson's use of female mental illness had an agenda beyond the obvious fictional possibilities. Ultimately, I would argue, as Guy Reynolds did for *The Bell Jar*, that Jackson's interest in depicting female madness goes beyond contemporary interest in psychology and can be said in part to represent a protest against the oppressive feminine mystique of the era.

In this, the final section of the chapter, I will look at the manner in which Jackson's use of psychology evolved from text to text, with particular reference to her last completed novel *Castle*. It is interesting to note that Jackson's explorations of madness began with the fairly conventional psychological case studies of *Hangsaman* and *The Bird's Nest*, but ended with *Castle*, a novel that immediately immerses the reader in the deranged worldview of its unlikely heroine. I shall also examine Jackson's evolving use of psychology in relation to similarly themed novels being produced by other, more "literary" writers at the same time.

Towards the beginning of her writing career, Jackson made an entry in her journal, which, as S.T. Joshi has noted,<sup>109</sup> serves as an accurate encapsulation of her work:

Once I started a novel...but I never finished because I found out about insanity about then and I used to write about lunatics after that. I thought I was insane and I would write about how the only sane people are the ones who are condemned as mad and how the whole world is cruel and foolish and afraid of people who are different.<sup>110</sup>

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<sup>109</sup> Joshi 54.

<sup>110</sup> Quoted in Oppenheimer 40.

Jackson's words not only echo those of Emily Dickinson –

Much madness is divinest sense –  
To a discerning eye –

they also parallel a train of thought that was increasingly familiar in American thought from the late 1940s/early 50s, but which became most prominent during the 1960s. Jackson's belief that insanity provided an insight into reality that the "sane" would never achieve was by no means particularly new or even original, even in the early 50s. As Peter Shaw has noted (in reference to *The Catcher in the Rye*<sup>111</sup>), by the time that novel appeared, in 1951, the theme of the sensitive youth beleaguered by society was well established in the American novel, as was the link between "neurosis, self-destructive behaviour and social maladaptation on the one hand, and artistic sensibility and special insight on the other."<sup>112</sup> Holden Caulfield was therefore unsurprisingly regarded upon first publication as yet another fictional example of the sensitive outcast given superior insight by a touch of mental disturbance.<sup>113</sup> As critic Diana Trilling had put it a few years earlier, "a considerable section of our literary culture held the view that madness is a normal, even a better than normal way of life." Part of this feeling was no doubt due to the contemporary dislike of perceived conformity and post war materialism which, as I have earlier discussed, was common amongst many prominent intellectuals of the 50s.

As we have seen, like *The Catcher in the Rye*, Jackson's earliest full scale explorations of madness – *Hangsaman*, and *The Bird's Nest*, are case studies, detailing as they do the process of breakdown and eventual (presumed) recovery. As

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<sup>111</sup> Darryl Hattenhauer even suggests that Jackson may have read *The Catcher in the Rye* whilst it was still in progress. (Hattenhauer 117)

<sup>112</sup> Peter Shaw, *New Essays on The Catcher in the Rye* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991) 97.

<sup>113</sup> Shaw 97.

in Plath's and Salinger's more famous examinations of youthful breakdown and angst, Jackson's heroines Natalie and Elizabeth seem to have triumphed over their inner demons and come to some sort of peace with their lives and the society in which they live. Although their insanity has (particularly in *Hangsaman*) given Jackson an opportunity to subtly critique certain assumptions forced upon young women by society, by the end of both texts, her heroines have again become part of that very world once more – even though, as is implied, they return with a far stronger sense of who they are and what they want out of life (even if, as Hattenhauer suggests in the case of *Hangsaman*, that desire is for suicide). The ordinary, “sane” world is still viewed as something that Jackson's early heroines, despite their experiences, are able to – and even desire to – rejoin. This accommodation is rarely – if ever – reached in the many Jackson short stories that depict mental dislocation and sudden descents into madness: it is similarly absent from Jackson's last (and finest) novels: *Hill House* and *Castle* – written in the late 50s and early 60s respectively, as Jackson herself was finding the outside world and “normality” increasingly difficult to deal with. In the years between writing her first and last novels, Jackson seems to have become a great deal more pessimistic about the prospects for successful mental reintegration/recovery: both *Hill House* and *Castle* end with violent retreats into insanity, not returns to normality. Jackson gradually moved from careful, almost clinical explorations of madness to a novel in which the reader is completely immersed in the distorted worldview of its psychotic heroine. Merricat Blackwood is characterised in such a way that despite her terrible crimes and obvious lunacy, she still seems a great deal more likeable and understandable than the outside world. She is the fictional embodiment of the sentiments Jackson had expressed in her journal

years before, her insanity the cause of her “difference” from the “cruel and foolish” world.

Even the manner in which *Castle* is written highlights its difference from Jackson’s earlier novels. It is the only Jackson novel to be written entirely in the first person; as a result, the reader is from the very beginning immersed in Merricat’s rather unique worldview.<sup>114</sup> As in *The Bird’s Nest*, in which Elizabeth’s mental disintegration is foreshadowed from the outset by the physical collapse of the building in which she works, Merricat’s strangeness is apparent from the opening paragraph. Although it isn’t confirmed until the very end of the novel that Merricat, rather than Constance, is the one responsible for the deaths of the rest of the Blackwood family, any half way astute reader will have reached the conclusion long before. Indeed, our suspicions are as good as confirmed in the opening lines:

I like my sister Constance, and Richard Plantagnet, and *Amanita Phalloides*, the death-cap mushroom. Everyone else in my family is dead.<sup>115</sup>

S.T. Joshi has argued that Jackson genuinely meant the revelation of Merricat’s guilt to be a shocking twist for the reader, and characterises it as a particularly obvious plot development that was intended, but fails, to surprise. However, I would argue that the fact that Jackson makes Merricat such an obvious suspect from the start – much more so than the kind, maternal Constance – suggests a different intention. Jackson highlights Merricat’s devotion to Constance, her admiration of Richard the third, who similarly murdered family rivals, and her interest in deadly poisons – and then concluded by having her heroine flatly state “everyone else in my family is dead.”

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<sup>114</sup> It should be noted that at the time of her death, in 1965, Jackson was working on the early stages of the novel *Come Along With Me*, which was also written in the first person: unfortunately, only a few chapters were ever completed.

<sup>115</sup> Jackson, *Castle* 400.

The implications to any careful reader are obvious, too obvious, I think, for such a deliberate writer as Jackson to have made them and then expected anyone to be surprised by the later confirmation of our suspicions. The shock that eventually ensues is not so much due to the fact that Merricat was the one who poisoned the rest of the family, but rather that after six years, she has at last owned up to it.

*Castle* is written in lucid, dreamlike prose, which reinforces Merricat's detachment from reality and aids our immersion in her mindset. The novel opens with Merricat's account of her last-ever shopping trip to the local village. This chapter gradually reveals both the extent of Merricat's psychosis and the depth of the loathing in which the rest of the village holds her family. Merricat's way of coping with the hostility she encounters is to incorporate everything and everyone around her into her own uniquely vicious imaginative landscape. Thus the journey home becomes a giant board game, in which she loses and gains turns according to the obstacle she encounters:

The library was my start and the black rock was my goal. I had to move down one side of the main street, cross, and then move up the other side until I reached the black rock, when I would win.<sup>116</sup>

The village – and the people in it – fill Merricat with fear and paranoia. She feels assailed by the “hateful” looks of the villagers, hears “mocking” laughter, local cars give her “a quick ugly glance,” women in the grocery store “watch and gloat.” The villagers are said to “covet” the Blackwood family wealth: a simple cup of coffee in the local diner becomes an encounter filled with hatred and tension. Yet to Merricat, family pride and a kind of savage dignity (instilled in her by Constance) are still important: she keeps up a ritualistic pretence of politeness and gentility despite the

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<sup>116</sup> Jackson, *Castle* 402.



provocation she encounters. This insistence upon maintaining gentility and social superiority is poignantly continued at the novel's end.

The depth of Merricat's loathing for the villagers she encounters – and of the extent of her madness – is made clear in her graphic fantasies of murder and violence. As she makes her way down the main street, she wishes “they were all dead and I was walking on their bodies” and, even more gruesomely, “...thought of them rotting away and curling in pain and crying out loud; I wanted them doubled up and crying on the ground in front of me.”<sup>117</sup> Initially, Merricat's violent fantasies have much in common with those of Natalie Waite. Indeed, the deeply disturbed (and disturbing) entries that appear in Natalie's journal as she becomes increasingly deranged, and the hallucinatory, surreal nature of her thoughts in the latter half of the novel can be seen as rehearsals, or earlier versions of the poetic lunacy depicted in *Castle*. However, the fact that Merricat has actually acted upon her murderous impulses means that unlike in Natalie's case, there can be no return to the status quo; indeed, it seems doubtful by the end of *Castle* whether there ever was a status quo in the first place. Merricat's bluntly worded desire to see her (perceived) enemies doubled up in agony – which we initially perceive as a means of expressing the fear and hatred she feels as a result of their hostility – is given freshly historic significance when we accept that she had disposed of her family in just such a fashion:

Their tongues will burn, I thought, as though they had eaten fire. Their tongues will burn when the words come out, and in their bellies they will feel a torment hotter than a thousand fires.<sup>118</sup>

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<sup>117</sup> Jackson, *Castle* 407.

<sup>118</sup> Jackson, *Castle* 413.

As I have previously remarked, the fact that events in *Hangsaman* are recounted almost entirely from Natalie's viewpoint means that we don't realise the extent of her madness until the end of the novel. This technique is replicated, and indeed, intensified in *Castle*: not only are events related from Merricat's highly subjective perspective; they are related to us by her – so that, as so often was the case in the stories of Poe, everything that occurs has been filtered through her severely disturbed consciousness. Which means that we, the reader, gradually become lulled into accepting the Blackwood sister's siege like mentality – and ultimately end up seeing the world outside their grand house as much of a threat as they do. Indeed, Jackson is so adept at drawing us into the strange, isolated world of the Blackwood siblings that, as one contemporary reviewer noted, she manages “the ironic miracle of convincing us that a house inhabited by a lunatic, a poisoner, and a pyromaniac is a world more rich in sympathy, love and subtlety than the real world outside.”<sup>119</sup>

*Castle* has no hint of the objective case study about it. Though we soon realise that the beguilingly frank Merricat is a psychopathic mass murderer, and that her aptly named sister Constance had taken the blame for her dreadful crime out of some misguided sense of guilt or responsibility, their actions are never analysed or judged with any context wider than the confines of their own home. Indeed, we are perhaps invited to look upon Merricat's act in a somewhat sympathetic manner. After all, what are we to make of the fact that Constance (who, though unsurprisingly wary of the outside world, seems quite sane for most of the novel), is said to have announced to the police upon her arrest that “those people (meaning her father, mother, aunt and little brother) had deserved to die?”<sup>120</sup> Either the seemingly mild mannered, good-natured Constance has been affected with some of the bloodthirstiness and menace of

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<sup>119</sup> “Nightshade Must Fall,” *Time*, June 1963.

<sup>120</sup> Jackson, *Castle* 432.

her sister, or, as I think Jackson wants us to believe (because that is what Merricat believes) the rest of the Blackwood clan were asking for it?

Unlike *Hangsaman* and *The Bird's Nest*, in which certain events are cited as the trigger for mental collapse (the implied sexual abuse experienced by both girls; the death of Elizabeth's negligent mother), no such explanations are ever supplied in *Castle*.<sup>121</sup> And, significantly, there is no troublesome "other," or succession of alternate personas for Merricat to overcome. She suffers no pangs of conscience and clings to no moral code: that closest thing she has to a conscience is the instructions given to her by Constance, and the only absolute wrong to her is anything that will hurt Constance or separate them. Unlike many Jackson heroines, Merricat knows who she is from the very beginning. Unfortunately for everyone else, that person just happens to be a cunning and ruthless psychopath.

The closest we get to an outsider's perspective in *Castle* comes with the introduction of the eminently dislikeable cousin Charles. He conforms to a frequent Jackson type: the feckless, lazy, untrustworthy young man, a nastier version of Essex in *Sundial* or Luke in *Hill House*. Charles insists (perhaps rightly) that 'something' be done about Merricat – the implication is that once he and the rather gullible Constance are married, she will be shipped off to an institution of some kind – but his obvious greed and arrogance mean that we come to hate him as much as Merricat does, and that everything he says immediately becomes suspect. The insidious manner in which Charles soon slots into the position previously occupied by the sister's father – sleeping in his room, wearing his watch, being mean to poor uncle Julian, and ordering everyone about – and the searing resentment he inspires in Merricat means

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<sup>121</sup> Karen J. Hall's article "Sisters in Collusion: Safety and Revolt in Shirley Jackson's *We Have Always Lived in the Castle*" does argue that Merricat's disturbed mental state strongly resembles that of childhood victims of sexual abuse – and states that this is the reason behind her homicidal actions. However, the text itself provides no firm evidence for this contention.

that some sort of violent resolution is an inevitability. Indeed, when Merricat burns the house down, one is almost surprised by the lack of violent deaths (Uncle Julian does die, but he does so fairly peacefully, and with no overt assistance from Merricat).

*Castle* ends not with a return to societal standards of normality but with a decisive rejection of these norms, and a final retreat into deranged isolationism. The identification of mind with place here provides a striking and poignant conclusion: the Blackwood sisters huddled in the blackened ruins of their once magnificent house, forever shunning the outside world. What's even more significant is the fact that Jackson actually endorses the retreat into insanity chosen by the sisters. The path chosen is not that of Constance (who, prior to Merricat's impromptu spot of arson, had been gradually coming round to the idea of re-entering society), but rather, the damaged siege mentality of her sister, whose fondest wish (that she and her beloved Constance live "on the moon," without any fear of outside interference ever again) is ultimately fulfilled. Although Mrs Wright, a minor figure who visits the girls prior to the conflagration suggests at one point that perhaps Merricat's persecution complex is all in her head – and that the people of the village are by no means as monstrous as she has made them out to be – Merricat's worldview is ultimately vindicated, when a vengeful local mob destroys their home (the fact that she has brought them there in the first place, by setting the place on fire, does not seem to occur to her). The moral of the story, according to Jackson, might well be the old adage embraced by suspicious minds everywhere – just because you're paranoid doesn't mean they're not out to get you.

Similarly, *Hill House* ends not with the curing of Eleanor's neurosis, but with her violent, ultimate absorption into the destructive fantasy fed to her by her evil surroundings. There is the implicit suggestion in both texts that, according to the

main characters at least, insanity is preferable to the alternatives proffered by “normal” society. Eleanor, though no doubt heavily influenced by Hill House, still sees it as the only place in which she has ever truly belonged, and, as she becomes increasingly detached from reality, feels a strong sense of ownership for what is probably the first time in her life (she’s even had to ‘steal’ the car that she and her sister own jointly in order to make the journey to Hill House in the first place), as she puts it, “Hill house belongs to *me*.”<sup>122</sup> It could be claimed that the feelings of loneliness and alienation from the rest of the world that Eleanor has long experienced contribute as much to her collapse and suicide as the house’s malign manipulations: indeed, it is these factors which have created her mental vulnerability in the first place. Similarly, in *Castle* the outside world is ultimately represented by a howling, vengeful mob: given the less than pleasant reaction shown to them by the locals, it is unsurprising that a shadowy half life spent crouching in the blackened ruins is preferable to existence outside. In both novels, there is a kind of ironic safety in madness, and in succumbing to the comforting insularity of psychosis. In *Hill House*, the depth of her delusion and the insanity of her actions dawns upon Eleanor just before her car crashes into a tree: “Why am I doing this? Why don’t they stop me?”<sup>123</sup> Merricat experiences no such revelation, but then her madness has always been there, an integral part of who she is: in stark contrast to Eleanor’s final, cruel realisation of the extent to which she has been manipulated by the house, Merricat is delighted with her situation, and even finds it in herself to (ironically) pity those who don’t live like she and Constance: “Poor strangers,” I said. “They have so much to be afraid of.”<sup>124</sup>

Paralleling the gradual change in Jackson’s depictions of madness – from a disorder that can be cured, either through strength of will or professional and familial

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<sup>122</sup> Jackson, *Hill House* 245.

<sup>123</sup> Jackson, *Hill House* 246.

<sup>124</sup> Jackson, *Castle* 531.

intervention, to an incurable state that is to be treated sympathetically, and perhaps even celebrated – was the similarly evolving manner in which the topic was treated in American literary and culture in general. In the 1960s the so called “Anti” psychiatry movement began. Led by Glaswegian psychiatrist R.D. Laing, the main thrust of the movement was the belief that mental illness had to be examined in terms of its social contexts: the emotional dynamics of the family in question and the institution of psychiatry itself.<sup>125</sup> As Laing himself put it, “an individual’s subjective view of the world was not to be derided, ignored, or obliterated simply because it did not fit in with conventional views or opinions”<sup>126</sup> – a statement which also neatly describes Jackson’s treatment of Merricat in *Castle*.

In his most famous book, *The Divided Self*<sup>127</sup> (1960), Laing claimed to have applied “the ideas and techniques of modernist literature and criticism to mental illness in order to make madness and the process of going mad comprehensible.”<sup>128</sup> Schizophrenia, the disorder upon which Laing focused in the book, was no longer seen by the anti psychiatry counter culture as an organic disease to be treated with drugs or surgery: it was now viewed as a social process, a response to family “interaction” and “transaction”. The “onus of inadequacy” was thus transferred from the patient to the family and society that surrounded them – much as it had been in novels such as *The Bell Jar* and *The Catcher in the Rye*. The merging of literary criticism with the psychiatric case study was accordingly accompanied by a spate of fictional texts, which similarly revelled in – and frequently valorised – mental illness as a valid means of rebelling against a conformist, unjust society. Laing would describe madness (particularly female madness) as a strategy, a form of

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<sup>125</sup> Showalter 219.

<sup>126</sup> Bob Mullan, *R.D. Laing: Creative Destroyer* (London: Cassell, 1997) 1.

<sup>127</sup> R.D. Laing, *The Divided Self: An Existential Study in Sanity and Madness* (1960; Routledge, 1990).

<sup>128</sup> Showalter 60.

communication that had emerged in response to the flood of contradictory messages and demands from patriarchal society: the literature of the period increasingly concurred with his findings.

Laing's claims, whatever their scientific validity, had endorsed a perspective on mental illness that writers had been espousing many years before. Jackson's damaged heroines can therefore be seen as part of a more general literary engagement with insanity and marginality that emerged during the 1950s and 60s. Holden Caulfield's disdain of the "phoney" around him and the hypocrisy of the adult world would be echoed again and again in successive years, for "like other of Salinger's youths, Holden properly belongs to the contemporary American novel's procession of sensitive, psychologically crippled but superior characters."<sup>129</sup> For writers who specialised in producing "absurd" fiction (the initial assumption of which was the belief that human experience is fragmented, irritating and apparently unredeemable,<sup>130</sup> the psychologically divergent non hero was a potent means of making their point – and of exploring the paradoxical lucidity of those considered insane. As Joseph Heller put it in his anti-establishment classic, *Catch 22*: "That crazy bastard" "He's not so crazy", Dunbar said, "He swears he's not going to fly to Bologna" "That's just what I mean," Dr Stubbs said. "That crazy bastard may be the only sane one left."<sup>131</sup> Ken Kesey later explored similar ideas in *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*, in which the entry of a social misfit into a psychiatric ward is used as a means of highlighting the brutality and illogically of society's treatment of both the mentally ill and those who refuse to conform to its rules and expectations. The main

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<sup>129</sup> Peter Shaw, *New Essays on The Catcher in the Rye* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1991) 97.

<sup>130</sup> David Galloway, *The Absurd Hero in American Literature*, (Texas: Texas University Press, 1966) 2.

<sup>131</sup> Joseph Heller, *Catch 22* (1961; London: Black Swan, 1985).

character, Murphy, eventually falls catastrophically foul of the system and achieves a kind of absurdist martyrdom when he is forcibly lobotomised.

Though Jackson would by no means go to the extremes of Laing – who would eventually elevate the clinical schizophrenic to a kind of prophet status – her work nevertheless displays an increasing identification with madness and mental disorder, an interest that seems to go deeper than mere professional interest in a useful dramatic device. Insanity is never explicitly valorised in her work in the way in which it was by Laing, Kesey and Heller. Nevertheless, it is presented in her final novels as an alternative to the limited range of choices facing her female characters. In her early psychological novels, madness, whatever its cause, still means isolation, terrifying experiences, a loss of control over one's body and mind, and the threat of self harm: yet despite the extreme disturbances undergone by Elizabeth and Natalie, some kind of stability is reached by the end of both narratives. In *Hill House* and *Castle* however, as I have shown, madness is inescapable, and even, in a queer sort of way, is seen as something to be embraced, not rejected. Eleanor has a home of her own at last, whatever the horrific implications of her fate: Merricat's final words from her blackened shelter assure us that she had never been happier. It is as though, in face of the uncertainties and pressures of the outside world, madness is the only course of action that makes much sense to Jackson's later heroines. As the protagonist of "Colloquy" (the only Jackson story to have a formal psychiatric setting) puts it:

"What seems to be the trouble?"

Mrs. Arnold took a deep breath. "Doctor," she said, "How do people tell if they're going crazy?" The Doctor looked up.

"Isn't that silly," Mrs. Arnold said. "I hadn't meant to say it like that. It's hard enough to explain anyway, without making it so dramatic".

"Insanity is more complicated than you think," the Doctor said.



“I *know* it’s complicated,” Mrs. Arnold said. “That’s the only thing I’m really *sure* of. Insanity is one of the things, I mean.”<sup>132</sup>

Jackson’s preoccupation with female madness was informed by a wide range of factors – the gothic tradition of psychological fiction, contemporary interest in the mind and psychiatry, the pressures and oppressive ideals forced upon young women of the period, and the literary trends of her era – that have previously been largely ignored or overlooked in relation to her fiction. I hope that my examination of Jackson’s use and understanding of madness and psychiatry has shown, as Mrs. Arnold is well aware, that insanity – particularly as it appears in the writing of Shirley Jackson – is indeed a lot more complicated than one might initially think.

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<sup>132</sup> Jackson, *The Lottery* 108.

#### Chapter Four: “The World is Full of Terrible People”.

It is almost a cliché now to attribute every trend in 50s culture to Cold War anxieties – a simplistic reduction of an infinitely more complex cultural context. What I intend to do in this chapter is to show that apocalyptic anxieties have always been a part of American cultural tradition. In the previous chapter, I discussed the contention that personal insanity was preferable to existence in an insane “normal” world in relation to Jackson’s depiction of mental illness and psychiatry. During the 1950s, the apparently unstoppable movement towards a nuclear war epitomised societal insanity. It seems fitting therefore to devote this next chapter to an examination of the Jackson’s treatment of Cold War politics and nuclear angst, issues that, above all else, helped make that decade “The Age of Anxiety” for millions of apprehensive Americans. After all, nothing stirs up quite as much unease as the prospect of imminent global destruction.

In recent years, as Guy Reynolds has noted, critics have begun to discuss the work of Jackson’s contemporary and fellow writer of Gothic fictions, Flannery O’Connor, in relation to the “Cold War” culture of the 50s.<sup>1</sup> Indeed, an entire book has lately been devoted to the topic.<sup>2</sup> However, such an approach has yet to be applied to Jackson – which is why I intend to explore her work from a similarly contextual perspective. As I have made clear in the chapters leading up to this, Jackson’s fiction has yet to be examined in light of the historical and cultural context from which it originated. This is despite the fact that the undercurrent of apocalypticism I have detected in Jackson’s writing obviously has much in common with the similarly grim (and understandable) preoccupation with nuclear holocaust that had worked its way

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<sup>1</sup> Reynolds 210.

<sup>2</sup> John Lance Bacon, *Flannery O’Connor and Cold War Culture* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993).

into every aspect of American culture during the 1950s. This connection between Jackson's notably pessimistic (some would even say "sour") worldview and the politics of the era in which her writing was produced is one that was made explicitly clear by her husband, Stanley Edgar Hyman, in a eulogy that appeared in the *Saturday Evening Post* shortly after her death in 1965:

Her fierce visions of disassociation and madness, of alienation and withdrawal, of cruelty and terror, have been taken to be personal, even neurotic fantasies. Quite the reverse: they are a sensitive and faithful anatomy of our times, fitting symbols for our distressing world of the concentration camp and the bomb.<sup>3</sup>

It is my intention to explore this relationship between the most frightening aspects of the "distressing" world that Jackson lived in – the threat of nuclear war and the oppressive political climate of the decade – and her fiction.

My discussion will largely be confined to two Jackson novels: *The Sundial*,<sup>4</sup> and to a lesser extent, *We Have Always Lived in the Castle*.<sup>5</sup> I will also be examining several of the short stories, including "The Intoxicated," "The Renegade," "Flower Garden," and "The Lottery" from the collection of the same name, "The Summer People," from the posthumous anthology *Come Along With Me* (1968), and "One Ordinary Day with Peanuts" and "All She Said Was Yes" both printed in *Just an Ordinary Day*, the 1996 compilation of many of Jackson's previously unpublished and uncollected tales. I shall begin by discussing *Sundial* and several of Jackson's lesser-known tales in relation to the author's apocalyptic preoccupations. I will explore how in this novel, Jackson manages to both satirise and subvert past and present day pre-millenarian

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<sup>3</sup> Stanley Hyman, "Shirley Jackson 1919-1965." *Saturday Evening Post* 13 Dec. 1965:63.

<sup>4</sup> Shirley Jackson, *The Sundial* (1957; New York: Ace Books, n.d.) Hereafter shortened to *Sundial*.

<sup>5</sup> Shirley Jackson, *We Have Always Lived in the Castle* (1963; London: Robinson, 1996). Hereafter shortened to *Castle*.

angst. I will begin by briefly examining the longstanding tradition of Apocalyptic thought in American culture – a tradition that dates to the arrival of the Puritans – and establish the widespread popularity of similarly eschatological beliefs during the 50s. I will suggest that in *Sundial*, Jackson both replicates and satirises this strain of American thought.

Next, I'll demonstrate that Jackson's interest in the end of the world was by no means unique by briefly surveying the wave of apocalyptic films and books that would prove such an integral part of popular culture during the decade. I'll also discuss these eschatological fictions within the context of Susan Sontag's 1963 essay "The Imagination of Disaster." Then I will suggest that in *Sundial*, Jackson is also passing satirical comment upon the rather laughable instructions that the U.S. government was suggesting its anxious citizens follow in the event of nuclear war.<sup>6</sup> The propaganda of the time optimistically claimed that as long as the American family were well prepared for the holocaust, and the American people ready to stand together against the treacherous might of the U.S.S.R, they could survive a nuclear onslaught. As we shall see, Shirley Jackson has a rather more pessimistic and darkly comic view of the both the American family and the "end times."

Finally, I shall suggest that the isolationism and fear of outsiders that so many of Jackson's characters display reflects the self-absorption and suspicion that gripped a significant sector of American society during the 1950s. Several of Jackson's most notable texts are characterised by paranoia, xenophobia, and mob violence: both "The Lottery" and *Castle* climax with tragic explosions of communal aggression. I will

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<sup>6</sup> Instructions which, rather alarmingly, bear close resemblance to those which the Irish Government recently issued to its skittish citizenry in the aftermath of September 11<sup>th</sup> – in present day Ireland, as in 1950s America, the principal advice to be adhered to in the event of nuclear attack/catastrophe is "stay inside until the fall out disperses." How one can escape the vast pall of contaminated dust that would inevitably result, never mind survive a nuclear winter or the devastating effects of radiation sickness has yet to be explained.

argue that in these texts, Jackson intended to depict the savage consequences of community spirit when taken to its utmost extreme. At a time when “consensus” politics of the era dictated that Americans stand united or be defeated, Jackson was suggesting that this kind of cultural programming leads inexorably towards a mob mentality in which anyone deemed an outsider is a target for persecution. This attitude, as we shall see, inevitably informs the misanthropy which so many critics have detected in Jackson’s fiction (typified by her consistently negative portrayals of rural New England and its inhabitants) and goes some way towards explaining Jackson’s conviction that any “New World” inherited by humanity would soon go the way of the old one.

As I have established, most of this chapter will focus upon *Sundial*, which, after her debut *Road* (with which it actually has much in common – not least of which is a rather unwieldy cast of disagreeable people) is the Jackson novel that has received the least critical praise. Perhaps the main reason for the novel’s lukewarm reception is the fact that, apart from the unpleasant protagonists, the text utilises the evasiveness and inconclusive ending that was used to such good effect in so many of Jackson’s short stories. In these shorter texts, the uneasiness and uncertainty this technique inspired in the reader generally succeeds. In a full length novel, however, the effect ultimately falls rather flat: the reader is more likely to be frustrated than unnerved by the apocalypse’s failure to materialise. For *Sundial* is, simply put, the grimly comic tale of twelve people holed up in a mansion, awaiting the end of the world.

Before I begin to discuss the apocalyptic preoccupations of the 1950s, it is important to first establish the longstanding tradition of such thought in American history, and the relation this tradition has to Jackson’s writing. After all, as Zbigniew Lewicki has pointed out, the concept of the apocalypse was one of the predominant

ideas of the New World.<sup>7</sup> The term “Apocalyptic” is derived from the Greek word *Apokalypsis*, which means “uncovering” or “revelation,” therefore literature bearing this name, as Leon Morris explains, is largely taken up with revealing what has been hidden.<sup>8</sup> Obviously, the origins of the concept go back to the old world, and to the apocalyptic tradition in Jewish and Christian thought. “Apocalyptic” was a world view which located the believer in a minority and gave his life meaning by relating it to the end, soon to come, which would reverse his present status.<sup>9</sup> It originated with the dispossessed Jews who longed to be delivered from their plight. Since then, the notion that earthly suffering will all have proved worthwhile in the end, and that all save true believers are ultimately doomed has proved especially popular amongst (particularly Protestant) fundamentalist sects who have felt themselves persecuted by mainstream society. It is hardly surprising therefore that the notion would have played such an important part in Puritan theology.

Unlike its equivalent in other religious systems, in Judaism and Christianity, the end of the world can only occur once – when the old world is destroyed, it will reappear as a purified new world, which has been cleansed of all sin.<sup>10</sup> The Puritans would therefore have had a basically optimistic view of the apocalypse – after all, the destruction of the corrupt old world was a precursor to the establishment of a divine new order. Their faith in the concept was strengthened by the fact that their apocalyptic beliefs were seemingly replicated in their own journey from a sinful old world – Europe – to a pure, edenic “new” world – America. It is hardly surprising therefore that one of the most popular artefacts of Puritan culture was a poem cheerily

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<sup>7</sup> Zbigniew Lewicki, *The Bang and the Whimper* (Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 1984) 5.

<sup>8</sup> Leon Morris, *Apocalyptic* (London: Intravarsity Press, 1972) 20.

<sup>9</sup> Morris 27.

<sup>10</sup> Lewicki 5.

entitled “The Day of Doom” by Michael Wigglesworth.<sup>11</sup> The grim subject matter is indicated by the poem’s subtitle: “A Poetical Description of the Great and Last Judgement.” First published in 1662, ‘The Day of Doom’ was immensely popular in its day in both America and England. Indeed, one copy was sold for every twenty people in New England – massive sales for those times. The notion of the apocalypse has therefore from the very beginning been imbued with both a positive and negative charge – something which, as we shall soon see, is often reflected in end-of-the-world texts throughout the ages, including Jackson’s own contributions to the genre.

As American history progressed, so did the nation’s millenarian tendencies. The mid-late nineteenth century saw the birth of a range of cults for whom eschatology was the very point, or at least the principal theme of their existence. A New England farmer named William Miller established one of the most famous end-time cults. Miller, who claimed to have received advance notice of the end of the world and of the second coming of Christ, spearheaded a Millenarian movement that rekindled east coast revivalism and led to the birth of Adventism.<sup>12</sup> He predicted that the end was nigh in 1843. As a result, thousands of “Millerites,” or “Second Adventists” (Miller had an estimated 50,000 such acolytes at one point) sold their businesses and homes in eager anticipation of the great event. Christ’s failure to materialise was understandably devastating. Nevertheless, showing the persistence that would characterise many an apocalyptic sect, Miller set a second date for the end – October 23<sup>rd</sup>, 1844. Following a second failure to show by the almighty, Miller was a ruined man, but many followers remained faithful, continuing to await a second coming. Teenage Millerite Ellen Harmon White experienced a series of explanatory “visions” after the “Great Disappointment” and announced that Miller had gotten the timing

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<sup>11</sup> James D. Hart, ed. *The Oxford Companion to American Literature* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1965) 210.

<sup>12</sup> Marina Benjamin, *Living at the End of the World* (London: Picador, 1998) 204.

right, but the event wrong. 1843, it seems, had seen the “cleansing of the heavenly sanctum,” which meant that the second coming was not far off. White’s revelation formed the basis of the movement that would become known as Seventh Day Adventism.

As with the Adventists, apocalypticism is the very point of the Jehovah’s Witnesses movement – a form of radical Adventism “characterised by fierce hatred of a world that stubbornly refuses to end.”<sup>13</sup> The movement’s founder was Charles Taze Russell, who “had gone through Presbyterianism and Congregationalism, but found his true calling only when he encountered Adventist preaching.”<sup>14</sup> Russell was convinced that the second coming would be spiritual rather than fleshy: he soon abandoned the Adventists and prophesied the end of the world in forty years time – in 1914. The world once again failed to end according to plan, but luckily for Russell, World War One began, and this malign coincidence was enough to convince the faithful that Russell had been on to something. As recently as 1966, the sect announced that, the world would end in 1975. As the Millerites had done over a century before, followers severed all their worldly ties in anticipation of the apocalypse – dropping out of college, selling businesses and homes, liquidating bank accounts<sup>15</sup> – and were similarly aghast when their calculations proved to be incorrect. However, the sect endures: having learnt by example, the Witnesses picked themselves up, brushed themselves off, and reconfigured their theology. An important lesson had been learned: there will be no more prophecies, it seems, because the end times are *already* upon us: Armageddon, never far away, is now perpetually imminent, human existence, which “ended” in 1975, is in its final death throes.

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<sup>13</sup> Benjamin 205.

<sup>14</sup> Harold Bloom, *The American Religion: The Emergence of a Post-Christian Nation* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1992) 159.

<sup>15</sup> Benjamin 207.



Another uniquely American sect who learned the importance of hedging their eschatological bets was the Mormons, or “The Church of the Latter Day Saints.” Also indigenous to the U.S.A, and also originating in the mid nineteenth century, the Mormons were originally a very apocalyptically minded group. However, founder Joseph Smith (he of the golden breastplate and heavenly visions) was smart enough to develop a belief system that allowed his followers to quietly dispense with end time preoccupations in order to concentrate upon more important matters: namely, the conversion of everyone else in the world (living and dead – Mormonism conveniently permits the practice of *posthumous* baptism) and the establishment of the billion dollar business empire that exists today.

It is no coincidence that after a decade characterised by a relative lack of interest in things spiritual, the 1950s saw a major revival in organised religion and in apocalyptic theology in particular. Between 1949 and 1953, the annual distribution of bibles rose by 140%. There were ten million copies sold in 1953 alone.<sup>16</sup> Evangelists such as Billy Graham and Oral Roberts led the rise in fundamentalist Protestantism. Growing numbers of Americans now identified themselves as Pre-Millenarians – those who believed that the apocalypse would bring about the second coming of Christ.<sup>17</sup> As if to underline the new mood of religiosity that was sweeping the nation, the words “one nation under God” were inserted into the Pledge of Allegiance in 1954, whilst “In God We Trust” was added to all U.S currency in 1955.<sup>18</sup> As James Patterson has noted, no other western culture was nearly so religious. However, when we consider the political and historical landscape that post war Americans inhabited, it is hardly surprising that so many of them turned to God. After all, as Sacvan Bercovitch put it:

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<sup>16</sup> Peter Biskind, *Seeing is Believing: How Hollywood Taught Us to Stop Worrying and Love the 50s* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1983) 115.

<sup>17</sup> Patterson 331.

<sup>18</sup> Patterson 329.

In a strange way, no quarter of the century has had to grapple with extremity, or its terrible aftermath, more than the seemingly tranquil decades after the Second World War, which some Americans still look back on as a Golden Age. Besides coming to terms with general carnage on an unheard of scale, and moving rapidly towards the reconstruction of Europe and Asia, the post war world had to assimilate the most shocking news of the war, perhaps of the century of a whole: the details of the holocaust and the effects of the nuclear bomb.<sup>19</sup>

As a 1947 Gallup poll (taken shortly after the Soviet invasion of Czechoslovakia) revealed, 73% of Americans believed that a third World War was inevitable.<sup>20</sup> An immensely disturbing paradigm shift had taken place with the bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki in 1945: for the first time in history, man had it in his power to be the instigator of his very own do-it-yourself apocalypse. It was therefore to be expected that theological (and fictive) intimations of global catastrophe gained a disturbing new credibility from the foreboding existence of nuclear weapons.<sup>21</sup> It was also inevitable that millions would look for comfort to religious faiths that both confirmed the validity of their fears and placed them within the wider context of a theology that promised that the end would merely be the precursor of a time of renewal and reward – a heavenly new age.<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> Sacvan Bercovitch, *The Cambridge History of American Literature* (London: Cambridge University Press, 1996) 224.

<sup>20</sup> David Seed, "Filing the Future: Reporting on World War Three," *Histories of the Future: Studies in Fact, Fantasy and Science Fiction*, eds. Robert Dingley and Alan Sandison (London: Palgrave, 2000) 112.

<sup>21</sup> David Ketterer, *New Worlds for Old: The Apocalyptic Imagination* (Indiana: Indiana University Press, 1974) 4.

<sup>22</sup> A similar resurgence in Christian Fundamentalism occurred during the Cold War tensions of the 1980s: indeed, such was its success that today, "Millenarianism does not even need to compete with mainstream religion since, in terms of numbers and public profile it virtually is the mainstream religion..." In Ronald Reagan, America even had an avowed Millenarian at its helm: a devout believer in both the apocalypse and America's special millennial destiny. A cluster of high profile Millenarian preachers (many of them, like Billy Graham, having first come to prominence during the 1950s) numbered among his closest advisors. (Benjamin 42.)

Critics have already noted that *Sundial* is in part a satire of the eighteenth century Gothic genre. What has been overlooked until now is the extent to which the text also lampoons the resurgence in pre-millenarian angst that characterised religion during the 1950s. As I have just outlined, the most prominent apocalyptic sects in American history have shared the same general characteristics –characteristics shared by the Halloran clan and their hangers-on. As Richard Pascal has noted in his article “New World Miniatures: Shirley Jackson’s *The Sundial* and Postwar American Society” (the only critical discussion of the text which attempts to link it to the cultural and historical context of 1950s America), unlike most of Jackson’s fictions, her “American Jeremiad” openly comments upon contemporary social issues and delusions and pronounces upon their implications for the nation.<sup>23</sup>

No apocalyptic sect can truly take off without a prophet or visionary who provides a direct line to the almighty. The Mormons had Joseph Smith, the Adventists had William Miller, then Ellen Harmon White, the more recent Branch Davidians, who perished so violently at Waco, Texas, in 1993, had the ill-fated David Koresh. In *Sundial*, it is poor, pathetic (and possibly deluded) Aunt Fanny who fulfils this role. She is the unmarried sister of Richard Halloran, the wheel-chair bound, feeble patriarch whose domineering wife Orianna sees the burial of their son Lionel as a chance to definitively establish her authority over everyone in the Halloran house. In the novel’s opening pages, Aunt Fanny is a faint, doddering presence that is universally ignored or derided by everyone. Her profound attachment to the house and

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<sup>23</sup> Richard Pascal, “New World Miniatures: Shirley Jackson’s *The Sundial* and Postwar American Society” *Journal of American and Comparative Cultures* 2000 Fall; 23(3): 99-111. Indeed, Pascal’s useful article and Marta Caminero-Santangelo’s discussion of *The Bird’s Nest* and the 50s resurgence of interest in psychiatry (cited in the previous chapter) are the only instances in which I have come across critical discussions of Jackson in relation to the 50s context. Pascal’s article also discusses (very briefly) *The Sundial* and suburbia, contemporary anxieties about challenges to the dominant patriarchal ideology, and the disruptive effects of self-seeking individualism within the nuclear family.

it's grounds holds no water with sister-in-law Orianna, who announces her intention to purge the house of all its unnecessary inhabitants – and to send Fanny to live in exile in a disused tower. Significantly, Fanny's first "revelation" occurs the morning after this bombshell has been dropped.

The manner in which Aunt Fanny experiences her inaugural vision is as dramatic as anything out of the Old Testament. It occurs during a typically Jacksonian interlude in which a familiar, domestic setting (the rose garden) suddenly becomes threatening and strange.<sup>24</sup> It is early morning, and Aunt Fanny (who has spent the night in her dead mother's bedroom) goes for a walk in the grounds in the company of her sly, disturbed grand niece Fancy. Jackson, always an expert at depicting the moment at which a character's faint unease deepens into something altogether more serious, is as adroit as ever when describing Fanny's gradual realisation that something is not quite right in the garden:<sup>25</sup>

...walking in the gardens had always made Aunt Fanny feel happy, but when Fancy pointed out the gardener Aunt Fanny at the same time recognised that they had somehow strayed off the side path and were lost...<sup>26</sup>

Shortly thereafter, Fancy takes off (having first pointed out that the mysterious gardener is dressed in "funny," i.e., strangely anachronistic clothing), and Aunt Fanny desperately chases her through a dreamlike, mist-shrouded landscape. Her panicky thoughts are typical of the characteristic Jackson spinster who realises that events have taken a turn for the worse:

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<sup>24</sup> For similar instances in other Jackson texts, see the stories "The Tooth," "The Renegade," and "The Beautiful Stranger," amongst others.

<sup>25</sup> This episode also resembles the 'supernatural' interludes in *The Turn of the Screw*: in both texts these incidents are witnessed by lonely, highly strung spinsters, both feature ghostly servants, and both texts feature disturbing, strangely knowledgeable children.

<sup>26</sup> Jackson, *Sundial* 22.

This was not her secret garden, this was not the garden which ought to have been at the end of the path they had taken, this was a garden so secret that Aunt Fanny wondered, shocked, if anyone had ever seen it before.<sup>27</sup>

Eventually, she finds herself at the titular sundial – the sundial that is “set badly off centre” – and experiences her first “revelation<sup>28</sup>”: “It was huge, not Fancy at all, echoing and sounding around and in and out of her head: FRANCES HALLORAN, it came to her, FRANCES, FRANCES HALLORAN.”<sup>29</sup> Fanny attributes the voice in her head to her long-dead father, the creator of the house, who “could think of nothing better to do with his money than set up his own world.”<sup>30</sup> Her own attachment to the place has already been established. It is unsurprising therefore that, according to the voice, there is only one truly safe place in the coming cataclysm:

Tell them in the house, tell them, in the house, tell them that there is danger. Tell them in the house that in the house it is safe. The father will watch the house, but there is danger. Tell them.<sup>31</sup>

The source of this “danger” we are soon told, is an apocalypse as threatening, yet unspecific, as anything out of Nostradamus or the Book of Revelations: it will come “from the sky and from the ground and from the sea,” there will be “black fire and red

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<sup>27</sup> Jackson, *Sundial* 24.

<sup>28</sup> It is interesting to note that the source of Fanny’s revelation – her father – and the message given have much in common with the real life case study recounted by Leon Festinger *et al* in the sociological study *When Prophecy Fails* (Minneapolis: Minnesota University Press, 1955). The book followed the development of a group which believed that their founder, a Mrs. Marian Keech, had received messages from outer space, mediated through the spirit of her dead father. Soon, Mrs. Keech received notice that a devastating global flood, caused by the re-mergence of the lost continents Atlantis and Mu was going to destroy the world and wipe out all but a few chosen survivors. Festinger’s sociologists made contact with the group when their revelations were made public, and observed the consequences of the end’s failure to arrive as scheduled. It is possible that the UFO worshipping ‘True Believers’ that Jackson satirizes in *Sundial* may be based upon this group.

<sup>29</sup> Jackson, *Sundial* 27.

<sup>30</sup> Jackson, *Sundial* 11.

<sup>31</sup> Jackson, *Sundial* 28.

water and the earth turning and screaming”: once again, the house’s place as a refuge is reiterated. Unsurprisingly, when Fanny staggers back inside with the news, everyone is less than impressed. It takes a “miraculous” sign to lend credibility to her remarkable claim: “a small, brightly banded snake was watching them from the fireplace, seeming frozen with attention, and then, turning at once into liquid movement, slipped from the fireplace across the heavy carpet...angled behind a bookcase and disappeared.”<sup>32</sup>

Orianna, as resolutely practical as always, announces her intention to have the room fumigated, but it is too late: the damage has already been done. The snake’s judicious appearance has already been assimilated into Fanny’s burgeoning theology, in much the same manner that the Puritan’s incorporated everyday “signs” into their own belief system. The possibility that the snake has come inside by mere accident, perhaps hidden in a woodpile never occurs to Fanny, for whom the incident has already become a miraculous event: “You won’t find that snake,” Aunt Fanny said dreamily. “It was shining, full of light.”<sup>33</sup> And as for everyone else in the room: “Not one of the people around Aunt Fanny believed her Father’s warning, but they were all afraid of the snake.” As Jackson elaborates, in a brief meditation on faith that follows the “miracle”: “Being impossible, an abstract belief can only be trusted through its manifestations, the actual shape of the god perceived, however dimly against the solidity he displaces.” In other words, despite the tenuous nature of the ‘manifestation’ in question, the fact that it seems to confirm Fanny’s outlandish revelation is enough to convert the others to her new creed. It also helps that it suits everyone (except Orianna) to believe in her story. After all, Essex (the librarian), Mary Jane (Lionel’s widow), Miss Ogilvie (Fancy’s governess) and Fanny herself

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<sup>32</sup> Jackson, *Sundial* 32.

<sup>33</sup> Jackson, *Sundial* 32.

have all just been told to leave the house. Therefore, the prophecy conveniently gives them all an excuse to stay on indefinitely.

For Fanny herself, the prophecies mean a new found standing and respect within the house. For the first time in her life, she is the centre of attention. Her new spiritual dispensation means that she can behave in any manner she likes, and attribute it to her visions – while the family watches her sleep, she astonishes them by uttering the foulest of swear words. Self-satisfaction and arrogance soon follows: Jackson suggests that this is an inevitable by product of serving as a messenger to some “greater power”:

When Aunt Fanny awakened she was perfectly aware of all that had happened, including her own revelations, and – probably resembling in this all souls who have been the vehicle of a major supernatural pronouncement – her first reaction of shivering terror was almost at once replaced by a feeling of *righteous commonplace*...she was completely subject to some greater power and, her own will somewhat buried in what controlled her, she could only become autocratic and demanding.<sup>34</sup> (My italics)

The fact that the higher power in question is Fanny’s tyrannical father only adds to the ridiculousness of the scenario.

Sensing the sudden shift in the house’s power structure, Orianna is quick to seize control once more. After a couple more messages along the same lines, she decides not to take any chances, and dons the mantle of sect leader.<sup>35</sup> With that, preparations for the end get underway. As befits typical pre-millenarians, for the inhabitants of the house the end of all human civilisation has both a positive and a negative charge: as Lenemaja Friedman has put it, “the idea of being chosen to enter a new world is to

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<sup>34</sup> Jackson, *Sundial* 35.

<sup>35</sup> As Richard Pascal has noted, “Orianna” was one of the literary soubriquets of Queen Elizabeth the First – therefore Jackson’s very intentional naming of her uncompromising matriarch indicates that “Mrs Halloran’s primary desire is the rule the household, not to share power with its denizens”. (Pascal 103). It also helps explain her fondness for the crown she commissions to signify her power over everyone else in the house.

them both frightening and exciting.”<sup>36</sup> Indeed, their reaction to the prospect of imminent cataclysm closely approximates that of apocalyptic sects throughout history – as David Seed has noted, utopian and apocalyptic beliefs have a long and parallel development.<sup>37</sup> In the words of Krishnan Kumar: “Millennial hopes, or the utopian imagination, were commonly coupled with the belief that a great disaster – what H.G Wells called “a cleansing disillusionment” must precede the emergence of a millennial kingdom or the “good” society.<sup>38</sup> There is therefore a necessary correlation between the destruction of the old world and the establishment of the New Jerusalem. As several commentators have detected, there is a strong “semiotics of self-loathing” lurking beneath the lines of such belief,<sup>39</sup> “as though humanity itself were a global scourge whose annihilation would be somehow curative.”<sup>40</sup> This strain of anti humanism looms large in *Sundial*, most particularly in the form of a revealing analogy employed by Aunt Fanny when she explains the coming cataclysm to Fanny:

“Everything, Aunt Fanny?” Fancy was pulling at her sleeve. “The whole thing? All the parts I’ve never seen?”  
“All of it, dear. It has been a bad and wicked and selfish place, and the beings who created it have decided that it will never get any better. So they are going to burn it, the way you might burn a toy full of disease germs. Do you remember when you had the measles? Your grandmother took your teddy bear and had it put in the incinerator, because it was full of germs?”  
“I remember,” Fancy said grimly.  
“Well that is just what they are going to do with this diseased, filthy old world. Right in the incinerator.”<sup>41</sup>

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<sup>36</sup> Friedman 109.

<sup>37</sup> Seed 127.

<sup>38</sup> Quoted in Seed 127.

<sup>39</sup> This type of anti-humanism comes to explicit life in science fiction films such as *The Terminator* (1985), *Independence Day* (1996) and *The Matrix* (1998), in which humanity is ruthlessly hunted down by machines, or vastly more powerful aliens, to whom they are nothing more than vermin.

<sup>40</sup> Benjamin 20.

<sup>41</sup> Jackson, *Sundial* 36.



It is a simultaneously comic, yet chilling exchange, one that highlights the contempt which Fanny (and soon, her followers) holds towards the world beyond their own boundaries. In a similar vein, Fanny has earlier announced that “humanity, as an experiment, has failed”<sup>42</sup> – it is a sentiment that would do the Jehovah’s Witnesses proud. Hers is essentially a Christian apocalyptic theology, save for the fact that her father has taken the place usually occupied by God. As with other pre- millenarian sects, Fanny’s theology is ultimately founded on the notion of restoration of a primordial paradise – the millennium that is described in the book of Revelation.<sup>43</sup> The promise that a privileged few will be preserved from destruction is the belief that lies at the heart of Millenarianism. Jackson makes the link between her characters and apocalyptic thought explicitly clear. For not only does Aunt Fanny predict the destruction of the old world, she also promises a new one – “evil and jealousy and fear are going to be removed from us.” In addition, “those who survive this catastrophe...will be free of pain and hurt. They will be...a kind of chosen people, as it were.” It is interesting to note that it was in the 1940s and 50s that the Jehovah’s Witnesses reconfigured their theology to refine the chosen elite even further: they created a privileged class of “Kingdom Heirs”, those who belonged to the “144,000 Saints of Revelation” who would be the first to be saved.<sup>44</sup>

Though initially sceptical, for the inhabitants of the Halloran mansion, the prospect of inheriting a brave new world soon becomes irresistible. As Essex puts it in conversation with his patron Orianna:

I am prepared to follow Aunt Fanny because I agree with you: it is the only positive statement about our futures we have ever heard...If I can

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<sup>42</sup>Jackson, *Sundial* 35.

<sup>43</sup> Benjamin XV.

<sup>44</sup> Benjamin 175.

bring myself to believe in Aunt Fanny's golden world, nothing else will ever do for me: I want it too badly.<sup>45</sup>

Like many an apocalyptic sect before them, the inhabitants of the Halloran mansion sever their ties with the outside world. Jackson wrings much of the novel's black humour from the group's preparations for the end. Supplies are brought in, reinforcements are accepted, in the bustling form of Orianna's friend Mrs Willow and her two daughters, Gloria Desmond, (a distant relative who arrives at the house by mere chance), and a man known simply as "the Captain" who has been picked up by the side of the road and absorbed into the group because they've realised that there are only two men in the group – one of whom is an elderly invalid – and such odds bode ill for the future of the human race. In order to make room for the supplies, one group places the boxes on the library shelves while another carries out and burns the books in the barbeque pit. The only texts that will be needed in the new world, it seems, are a Boy Scout handbook, an encyclopaedia, Fancy's French book, and the World Almanac. This disregard for cultural artefacts brings to mind Harold Bloom's observation that "fundamentalism... is viciously anti intellectual, but so, alas, is most American religion, of whatever camp."<sup>46</sup> As the day of doom looms ever closer, August the 30th is revealed to be the final date (young Gloria has a vision in a mirror). The house is boarded up, and preparations are made for a farewell party on the eve of the great event. Orianna compiles a list of rules to be adhered to in the new world – among these is the warning that mates will be assigned by her: "indiscriminate coupling will be subject to severe punishment," and the damning stipulation that "On the First Day, and thereafter, wanton running, racing, swimming, play of various kinds, and such manifestations of irresponsibility will of course not be permitted. It is

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<sup>45</sup>Jackson, *Sundial* 40.

<sup>46</sup>Bloom 257.

expected that all members of the party will keep in mind their position as inheritors of the world, and conduct themselves accordingly”. “Father what have you done to me?” wails Fanny as she reads Orianna’s rules.<sup>47</sup>

From what little we learn of the “New World” *Sundial*’s protagonists are expecting to inherit, it seems to fit the description of a fairly conventional edenic paradise. Aunt Fanny declares that it is a place where no one will experience pain or suffering, and that all evil will have been banished. This assertion is very much undermined by the fact that the characters who are waiting to come into possession of this wonderful place are themselves such a greedy, arrogant, and generally unpleasant bunch: and by the fact that the “heir” Orianna has appointed is the (possibly) murderous Fancy. By forcing the virginal teenager Gloria (perhaps the only truly sympathetic character in the entire novel) to gaze into a mirror, the group is able (apparently) to glimpse what lies beyond the day of reckoning. According to this reluctant visionary, the new world will be very much like the countryside – green and lush, with “trees and grass and flowers. Blue sky. Nice birds.” It will however lack people, houses, walls and fences. Hints of a the primitive, primordial nature of this world are given by the fact that Gloria sees Essex hunting, without any clothes on, and a scene of people joyously dancing, as in a pagan ritual.<sup>48</sup>

We never get to see this new world for ourselves. Nor do we find out what happened to the old one, or indeed, learn if Fanny’s revelations come to pass. The novel ends on the eve of destruction, with the discovery of Orianna’s body at the foot of the stairs. Given the resentment her domineering ways have inspired there are plenty of suspects. The most likely, and fitting, of these is Fancy, who has long

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<sup>47</sup> Friedman 113.

<sup>48</sup> Given that Jackson’s most famous story “The Lottery” is a disturbing depiction of savage pagan ritual in a contemporary small town setting, this observation may be a little more sinister than it seems at first. Similarly, Jackson has rarely portrayed the countryside in a flattering light either, as I shall later elaborate.

coveted her grandmother's gold crown. Orianna's body is unceremoniously dragged outside and propped up against the totemic sundial. The would be inheritors of the new world hide inside their great house whilst a powerful storm rages outside. Jackson leaves the inhabitants of the Halloran house, like the reader, in a state of perpetual expectation, awaiting a destructive cataclysm that either never occurs, or which we don't get to see. It is immensely frustrating for the reader, but perhaps the only truly fitting way to end the novel. As Richard Pascal has suggested, whilst "the prospect of wide-spread annihilation, possibly to be followed by utopian renewal, precipitates all of the action in *The Sundial*" the fact that the threat of nuclear war is never explicitly mentioned is "a decisive indication that atomic anxiety is not the basic source of the apocalyptic anxiety that pervades the characters thoughts."<sup>49</sup> It is also worth remembering that this is a text more concerned with depicting preparations for the end rather than the end itself: with exploring the effect that this foreknowledge has upon her characters rather than showing how they will adjust to a new existence.

To go beyond this remit would have tipped the novel wholly into the realm of science fiction, or fantasy, which would have diluted much of Jackson's satirical intent. In the end, her characters meet the fate of all sects who insist upon predicting the end of the world: an eternity of expectation. Indeed, it is even possible that should the world fail to end at all, the inhabitants of the Halloran house may even find their faith strengthened, not undermined. As Leon Festinger has observed of such real life instances:

Suppose an individual believes something with his whole heart; suppose further that he has a commitment to this belief, that he has taken irrevocable actions because of it; finally, suppose that he is presented with evidence, unequivocal and undeniable evidence, that his belief is wrong: what will happen? The individual will frequently

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<sup>49</sup> Pascal 100.

emerge, not only unshaken, but *even more convinced of the truth of his beliefs* than before<sup>50</sup>. [My italics]

It is possible therefore that even the violent death of their putative Queen and the uncertain fate that awaits them will not dim the fervour of Jackson's squabbling protagonists. No matter what happens, as the ever-practical Mrs Willow observes, "It's going to be a long wait."<sup>51</sup>

Though I have just spent the last section of this chapter discussing *Sundial* as Jackson's satirical comment upon the apocalyptic preoccupations of American religion throughout history, and in particular during the 1950s, it would be misleading to imply that such anxieties were confined to this context. Indeed, once the nation's long held apocalyptic fears had been given physical form in the shape of the atomic bomb, this undercurrent of unease became a significant component of the popular culture of the era. This perhaps because of the fact that such anxieties were rarely directly confronted in the more "literary" writing of the era. As Sacvan Bercovitch points out:<sup>52</sup>

The Holocaust and the bomb do not often explicitly appear in the literature of the 40s and 50s, perhaps because writers found them too large to encompass and too remote from direct experience. Despite their eerie silence, they contributed to an undercurrent of anxiety that was freely reflected not only in poems and novels but also in popular culture, including horror films, Science Fiction, and the new vogue in ghoulish comic books...

The connection between popular culture and cold war anxiety is one that is made poignantly explicit by Stephen King in his semi autobiographical exploration of the horror genre *Danse Macabre*. It is interesting to note that in keeping with this trend,

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<sup>50</sup> Festinger 3.

<sup>51</sup> Jackson, *Sundial* 104.

<sup>52</sup> Bercovitch 224.

Jackson only once referred *directly* to the threat of nuclear war in her fiction. “All She Said Was Yes” (first published in *Vogue* in 1962) is a fairly conventional (by Jackson standards) tale of a sullen teenage girl named Vicky who has the ability to see into the future. Like Cassandra, she warns those around her of their fates but is singularly ignored by all concerned. The story begins with news of her parent’s death and ends on a similar note as the heedless neighbour who has narrated the tale embarks upon a fatal boat trip despite having been told not to by her reluctant charge. Following Vicky’s brief stay in her house, the smug neighbour finds the girl’s dairy has been left behind. Detailed within, amongst gossipy secrets about inhabitants of the local neighbourhood, are “horror tales about atom bombs and the end of the world” which the narrator heedlessly dismisses as “not at all the kind of thing you’d like to think about a child dwelling on.”<sup>53</sup> This may be the only Jackson text in which the Cold War is cited as the cause of global annihilation, but that is not to say that the implication is absent elsewhere. One other Jackson story deals with the same preoccupation.

“The Intoxicated” opens *The Lottery*. It is, as Joan Wylie Hall has noted, a “preview of global disaster at the kitchen table,”<sup>54</sup> a typically sinister conflation of the sinister and the domestic. The tale details an uneasy encounter between an unnamed party guest and the precocious teenage daughter of his host and hostess. The guest is drunk, and is all too aware of his inebriated, vulnerable state: he stumbles into the kitchen in search of water and meets the daughter of the house. His uneasy attempts to make small talk soon turns into a disturbing verbal duel, the first of many such encounters in *The Lottery*.<sup>55</sup> The daughter, Eileen, is intelligent, articulate, and deeply

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<sup>53</sup>Jackson, “All She Said Was Yes,” *Just an Ordinary Day* 285.

<sup>54</sup> Hall 7.

<sup>55</sup> Hall 9.

disconcerting – all the familiar qualities of a typical Jackson teenager.<sup>56</sup> She describes a paper about the future she is writing for school – and goes on to describe with great relish the way in which she foresees the world collapsing into ruins:

Somehow I think of the churches as going first, before even the empire state building. And then all the big apartment houses by the river, slipping down slowly into the water with all the people inside.<sup>57</sup>

Like the adults in “All She Said Was Yes,” the guest is at first gently mocking, then downright dismissive:” I think it’s a little silly for you to fill your mind with all this morbid trash. Buy yourself a movie magazine and settle down<sup>58</sup>”. However, his opponent ignores his protestations and goes on to counter his jibe by describing the post holocaust landscape in even more disturbing detail:

I’ll be able to get all the movie magazines I want,” she said insistently. “The subways crash through you know, and the little magazine stands will all be squashed. You’ll be able to pick up all the candy bars you want, and lipsticks, and artificial flowers from the five and ten...<sup>59</sup>

Theirs is a generational battle, with the girl blaming this future catastrophe on the adults of the world, and the guest refusing to believe that such an event could ever exist outside of a teenager’s overactive imagination. He comes off worst in the exchange, just as one suspects he would were such a cataclysm actually to occur. Eileen obviously relishes the new order that will come to pass in the post-apocalyptic world. Her words anticipate the actions of Orianna in *Sundial*: “Things will be different afterward,” she said. “Everything that makes the world like it is now will be

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<sup>56</sup> See also the aforementioned Vicky, Natalie Waite from *Hangsaman*, *Castle’s Merricat* and *Sundial’s* Fancy.

<sup>57</sup> Jackson, “The Intoxicated,” *The Lottery and Other Stories* (1949; London: Robinson, 1996) 5.

<sup>58</sup> Jackson, “The Intoxicated” 6.

<sup>59</sup> Jackson, “The Intoxicated” 6.

gone. We'll have new rules and new ways of living."<sup>60</sup> Unlike the deeply disconcerted guest, who leaves the room in disturbed puzzlement, the girl expects the end of the world, and indeed, can see nothing else in the future. In that sense, she has a great deal in common with most other contemporary Americans, for whom eventual annihilation seemed a certainty.

Of course, the Holocaust and after has long been one of the most popular themes in Science Fiction – a preoccupation as old as the genre itself, in fact. As *The Encyclopaedia of Science Fiction* puts it, “together with utopias and cautionary tales, apocalyptic visions form one of the three principal visions of pre 20<sup>th</sup> century futuristic fantasy.”<sup>61</sup> The earliest Scientific Romances of world’s end were, like the early Gothic genre, products of romanticism. One of the most prominent of these early investigations into apocalypticism was Mary Shelley’s *The Last Man* (1826), in which Lionel Verney is the sole survivor of a devastating plague that has wiped out the rest of humanity.<sup>62</sup> The plague was (and remains) one of the standard literary methods of depopulating the world.<sup>63</sup> It has an advantage over the cosmic cataclysm or nuclear war in that it leaves the physical trappings of civilisation perfectly intact. As well as Shelley’s novel, other significant texts which employed this method include Charles Brockden Brown’s *Arthur Mervyn* (1799) Jack London’s *The Scarlet Plague* (1915), Richard Matheson’s unique take on vampirism *I Am Legend* (1959), George R. Stewart’s groundbreaking (and highly influential) ode to nature *Earth Abides* (1949), John Christopher’s *The Death of Grass* and Stephen King’s 1978

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<sup>60</sup> Jackson, “The Intoxicated” 6.

<sup>61</sup> “The End of The World,” *The Encyclopaedia of Science Fiction* 382.

<sup>62</sup> For more on the topic of the “sole survivor” see also Fiona Stafford’s excellent study *The Last of the Race: the Growth of a Myth From Milton to Darwin* which traces the growth of what she calls the “last-of-the-race myth” from the Restoration, when traditional Christian views of the destiny of mankind began to wane, to the late nineteenth century, when new patterns of racial ending emerged in the wake of evolutionary and thermodynamic theories. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1994)

<sup>63</sup> “The End of the World,” *The Encyclopaedia of Science Fiction*, 382.



doorstopper *The Stand* (later reissued in an revised edition that bulked it up even further).<sup>64</sup>

With the advent of the Victorian era, the climate of intellectual agnosticism fostered by the ascendance of Darwinism helped authors to dream up scientifically rational means of ending the world.<sup>65</sup> The secular apocalypse loomed large in Victorian Science fiction, as though its exponents had seen a glimpse of the terrible advancements the next century would bring. The cosmic disaster became a particular favourite of the genre. Edgar Allan Poe's "The Conversation of Eiros and Charmian" (1839) is an early example of the comet-strike story – many more were to follow. Other methods of secular apocalypse included space invaders (as in H.G. Well's *The War of the Worlds*, 1898), and poison gas (M.P. Shiels' *The Purple Cloud*, 1901).

The aftermath of World War One saw a dramatic resurgence of interest in the apocalyptic scientific romance, "many of them bitter parables arguing that modern men and women thoroughly deserved to lose all the gifts of civilisation because of their stupid inability to refrain from warfare."<sup>66</sup> Examples included Edward Shank's *The People of the Ruins* (1920), Cicely Hamilton's *Theodore Savage* (1922) and John Gloag's snappily titled *Tomorrow's Yesterday* (1932). The early pulp SF magazines proved a receptive outlet for suitably imaginative methods of dispatching humanity.

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<sup>64</sup> The devastating global plague has also been a popular theme in film and television. In the 1970s, *The Survivors* saw most of Britain wiped out by a virus accidentally released by China: the series detailed the efforts of the survivors to rebuild some kind of society in the aftermath. *The Stand* was made into an (unsurprisingly) long mini series in the late 1990s, whilst cult sci-fi show *The X-Files* had a continuing plot thread about a genetically engineered plague designed to prepare humanity for alien invasion. Richard Preston's harrowing book about the threat posed by the devastating Ebola virus was dumbed down and made into the credibility-defying blockbuster *Outbreak*. George A. Romero's 1968 horror classic *Night of the Living Dead* could also be seen as a plague film, in that we are told that a 'space' germ causes the dead to rise from their graves.

<sup>65</sup> Kim Newman, *Millennium Movies: End of the World Cinema* (London: Titan Books, 1998) 20.

<sup>66</sup> "The End of the World" 382.

They printed stories that were “luridly bleak” alongside those that confidently predicted that mankind could outlast even the earth, if necessary.<sup>67</sup>

Naturally, the arrival of the nuclear age was to have a profound effect upon contemporary apocalyptic imaginings. The idea of the all-powerful weapon of mass destruction was one that had become increasingly common in the science fiction of the 20s and 30s: indeed, the “doomsday” device was used in stories such as Harold Nicholson’s *Public faces* (1932), *The Last Man* (1940) by Alfred Noyes, and Alfred Bester’s grim parable “Adam and no Eve”. H.G. Wells had even predicted the use of the Atom bomb as early as 1914, in the story “The World Set Free.” When the United States dropped the bomb on Japan in 1945, Wells saw the event as a confirmation of all his direst imaginings. He died the year after, bitterly disillusioned by the devastating course of a war that had dashed his utopian hopes.<sup>68</sup> He saw the prospect of a real judgement day just over the horizon: “The end of everything we call life is close at hand and cannot be evaded” he wrote in the revealingly titled *Mind at the End of Its Tether* (1945). He was by no means alone in his pessimism. As Brian Stableford has put it: “After Hiroshima the possibility of imminent atomic holocaust was clear to everyone and lent new pertinence to apocalyptic thinking. It seemed entirely likely that the world would end with a bang and not with a whimper after all.”<sup>69</sup>

In short, the principal difference between fictive imaginings of the apocalypse pre and post 1945 was that the “Doomsday” devices that had existed mainly in the fevered imaginations of pulp SF hacks were now an indisputable fact of life. As SF editor Donald Wollheim put it, “Ever since the day that I first heard that an atomic bomb had been exploded over Japan, I have had the disturbing conviction that we are

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<sup>67</sup> “The End of the World” 383.

<sup>68</sup> David J. Skal, *Screams of Reason: Mad Science and Modern Culture* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1998) 167.

<sup>69</sup> “The End of the World” 383.

all living in a Science Fiction story.”<sup>70</sup> The global cataclysm that had once been confined to the pages of the Bible or cheap magazines was now a genuine possibility. The effect that this realisation had upon American society and culture during the 1950s cannot be underestimated. In a way, everyone in the country was now a member of an apocalyptic sect, except that most people feared and dreaded the end, unlike their more theologically minded brethren. Jackson’s depiction of twelve oddballs holed up in their mansion, waiting for catastrophe may have been fictional, but in a way, that was what an entire society was doing: holing themselves up, and waiting for the end to come. The only difference was, if it did arrive, the American people, unlike the characters in *Sundial*, would know the cause, and know that their own politicians and scientists had brought about this calamity.

It is hardly surprising therefore that, as James Patterson has said, from 1950-54, Cold War fears lay at the centre of American society, politics and foreign policy.<sup>71</sup> The Cuban missile crisis of 1962 is commonly believed to have been the point at which the superpowers came closest to unleashing their nuclear arsenals, but it is also known that during the Korean War, the U.S briefly considered using nuclear weapons. From 1953-1960, the Bulletin of Atomic Scientists set the so-called “Doomsday Clock” on their newsletter at two minutes to midnight – it would become one of the most enduring and universally recognised symbols of the Atomic age, one that fixed a sense of apocalyptic urgency in the public mind.<sup>72</sup>

As Susan Sontag put it, “Modern Historical reality has greatly enlarged the imagination of disaster.”<sup>73</sup> It was now, she declared in 1963, an “age of extremity” in

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<sup>70</sup> Quoted in Newman 147.

<sup>71</sup> Patterson 237.

<sup>72</sup> Valerie P. Zimbaro, *The Encyclopaedia Of Apocalyptic Literature* (Santa Barbara: Oxford University Press, 1996) 400.

<sup>73</sup> Susan Sontag, “The Imagination of Disaster,” *Against Interpretation and Other Essays* (London: Octopus, 1976) 213.

which it had become clear that from now until the end of human history, every person would “spend his individual life under the threat not only of individual death, which is certain, but of something almost insupportable psychologically – collective incineration which could come at any time...” So how does a society deal with this incredible stress? According to Sontag, fantasy both distracts us from our fate and helps normalize what is psychologically unbearable, thereby inuring us to it. If that is the case, then during the 50s, American audiences and readers had plenty of material to help them get used to the idea of the nuclear holocaust. The popular culture of the time embraced what the “higher” culture of the time tended to treat evasively. It is important that we locate Jackson’s depictions of the apocalypse within the same cultural context that created not only a revival in religious fundamentalism, but also a spate of cinematic post-nuclear landscapes and swathes of mutants and giant, irradiated insects for moviegoers to enjoy. Genre critic John Brosnan has outlined the link between Cold War anxieties and the Science Fiction films of the era:

The Cold War produced an atmosphere of anxiety and paranoia: anxiety mainly caused by the ever-present possibility of atomic war between the two super-powers and the resulting global destruction; paranoia caused by the fear of communist subversion, and invasion from within by people who looked like ordinary Americans but were actually pawns of an alien power. As a result of these fears most SF films of the 1950s reflect a number of basic themes: the atomic bomb and its after-effects; the effects of atomic radiation; alien invasion and possession by aliens; and world destruction.<sup>74</sup>

However, whilst there can be no denying that the political context of the time had a huge impact upon the type of cultural artefacts produced by writers and directors during the 1950s, it must not be forgotten that, as I indicated in my discussion of end-

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<sup>74</sup> John Brosnan, *Future Tense: The Cinema of Science Fiction* (London: MacDonald and Jane’s, 1978) 210.

of-the-world theology (and as Shirley Jackson knew well), the apocalypse has *always* had a powerful symbolic charge. The truth is, the idea of the everyday world that we know so well suddenly, violently, coming to an end, is one that has always inspired in us a grim fascination. As Sontag has said of Science Fiction films, "... They are not about Science Fiction. They are about disaster, which is one of the oldest subjects of art. In SF films, disaster is rarely viewed *intensively*; it is always *extensive* – thus, the SF film is concerned with the *aesthetics* of destruction..."<sup>75</sup> (my italics). Though I think that Sontag's assessment of Science Fiction films is far too narrow, and perhaps typical of a critic not overly familiar with the genre (though, given the fact that Sontag was writing in 1963, and referring mostly to the SF films of the 50s, which are, as I have indicated, very apocalyptically minded, this could be excused), her discussion of the "aesthetics of destruction" seems an elegantly apt way of describing the hold the prospect of mass destruction has over us.<sup>76</sup> This hold is described by Jackson in both *Sundial* (in the scenes in which Aunt Fanny reverently describes the manner in which the 'polluted' old world will end) and in "The Intoxicated" when Eileen talks about the destruction of a city with similar rapture.

Like apocalyptically minded sects, science fiction writers have frequently realised that the building of a new world is most conveniently (and pleasingly) preceded by the destruction of the old one.<sup>77</sup> The principal advantage of Armageddon is that it,

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<sup>75</sup> Sontag 213.

<sup>76</sup> Indeed, one may look no further than the immensely violent action movies genre of the 80s and 90s to see Hollywood's full-blown 'aesthetics of destruction' in operation. And as the millennium approached, it was significant that the SF genre saw a wave of apocalyptically minded films such as had not been seen since the 50s – films like *Terminator 2*, *Independence Day*, *Mars Attacks!*, *Armageddon*, and *Deep Impact*, in which nuclear war, murderous machines, alien invasions, and cosmic collisions all threatened to wipe out humanity. Of course the unthinkable was always averted at the last minute, but not before the filmgoer had revelled in the destruction of a few major cities and national monuments. It is telling that the images transmitted during and after the collapse of the twin towers in September 2001 were so similar to the scenes depicted in a dozen Hollywood epics that many viewers at first thought what they were watching was a film. In this horrible instance, art had become life.

<sup>77</sup> Phillip Strick, *Science Fiction Movies* (London: Octopus, 1976) 82.

apart from the pleasure that comes with kicking over the global anthill and seeing what happens, is that above all else, it simplifies everything – “questions of morality and responsibility may legitimately be set aside in favour of basic matters like survival and the perpetuation of the species.”<sup>78</sup> It is no wonder then that apart from the inevitable fixation upon the end that came with the realisation that it seemed imminent, the subject proved such a draw for genre writers and filmmakers during the 50s. Indeed, it didn’t take very long at all for the unease generated by the onset of the Cold War to be translated to the vehicles of popular culture. Indeed, the bomb was falling on American movie screens as early as 1951.<sup>79</sup> The film in question was *Five*, and it marked the beginning of a wave of similarly themed movies that would reach its height in the mid 1960s. Written and directed by Arch Obeler, *Five* is set in a post-atomic United States inhabited by a broad cross section of humanity – an African-American, a cashier, a mountaineer, an idealist and a pregnant girl. From their home in an elegant cliff top mansion, the survivors bicker and wrangle amongst themselves, continuing to hold the prejudices and grudges that have put them there in the first place.<sup>80</sup> Though set *post* rather than *pre*-apocalyptically, in terms of setting and plot, the film appears to anticipate *Sundial*. In *Invasion USA* (1952) and *Rocket Attack USA* (1960), Soviet missiles rained down upon America (the U.S was almost always depicted in such films as the victim of a first strike attack despite the fact that it was the only nation ever to use a nuclear bomb during a time of war). Derived from the best-selling novel of the same name by Neville Shute, *On The Beach* was one of the most prestigious films to depict the effects of nuclear war. Populated by expensive A-List stars (Gregory Peck, Ava Gardner, Fred Astaire), it was a bleak portrait of a world slowly dying from radiation poisoning. Predictably, a wave of low budget B-

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<sup>78</sup> Strick 84

<sup>79</sup> Strick 84.

<sup>80</sup> Details outlined by Strick 84.

movies would also capitalise upon the mood of unease, and unleashed countless post-apocalyptic wastelands, murderous mutants, freaks of nature, and stock footage of A-bomb tests upon receptive audiences. However, the apocalypse was by no means confined to cinema screens, and nor was it always caused by nuclear war. In George R. Stewart's *Earth Abides* (1949), mankind is all but wiped out by a germ: similarly, Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring* (1962) suggested that our days were numbered because of the unchecked use of poisonous pesticides. Ray Bradbury's *Fahrenheit 451* described a post-atomic society in which all books are destroyed in order to keep the population docile and loyal. In Pierre Boulle's *The Planet of The Apes*, a marooned astronaut lands on a world where ape rules over man, and famously discovers at the end that he is not on an alien world, but rather a post-holocaust future earth. In the 1960s, there arrived a series of absurdist literary apocalypses, such as Kurt Vonnegut's *Cat's Cradle* (1966), (in which a substance called Ice-9 freezes every ocean in the world), J.G. Ballard's *The Crystal World* and *The Drought* (1966), and Michael Moorcock's *The Final Programme* (1968).<sup>81</sup> But as a method of wiping out humanity, nuclear weapons reigned supreme, having, as Leslie Fiedler has claimed, taken on in Science Fiction "the role of the haunted castle in the earliest gothic romances."<sup>82</sup>

I have already established that *Sundial* is, amongst other things, a satire of apocalyptic theology in the American cultural tradition. Now I shall explore the extent to which the novel also subverts the Government nuclear preparedness propaganda of the 1950s. Though nuclear war is, as I have earlier indicated, never directly cited as the cause of the cataclysm predicted in the text, it is surely no coincidence that Jackson should have written a novel about twelve characters awaiting the end of the

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<sup>81</sup> Vernon Louis Parrington, *American Dreams: A Study of American Utopias* (New York: Russell and Russell, 1964)

<sup>82</sup> Leslie Fiedler, *Love and Death in the American Novel* (1963; Normal, Illinois: Dalkey Archive Press, 1997) 502.

world at a time when, for the first time in history, the end of the world seemed like a distinct possibility. If we consider *Sundial* in light of the propaganda that was being foisted upon the American people during this period, we see the extent to which Jackson subverts many of the most strongly promoted policies that people were being urged to adhere to in the event of nuclear war. In other words, I am suggesting that although, like Jackson's other novels, *Sundial* seems to ignore the world outside the central house's boundaries, it has a great deal more to say about the era in which it was written than had previously been noted.

In a speech given in 1953, during his first year in office, President Eisenhower declared that an effective civil defence program required sober training and self-discipline.<sup>83</sup> The place where such discipline would be cultivated was the average American home, for, as we shall see, "the decisive role assigned to the household in Cold War national security planning was a consequence of the fundamental premise of civil defence: in World War Three, the people would be responsible for protecting themselves. Because the Government had ruled out a publicly-financed programme of civil defence, survival would largely be a do-it-yourself enterprise."<sup>84</sup>

The success of the American response to nuclear attack was therefore placed squarely in the hands of the average American family. It was up to every individual family member to draw upon the traditional American virtues of self-determination, personal responsibility and co-operation.<sup>85</sup> It was with them, according to the experts of the day, that the future of the United States lay. If they had prepared adequately, they could withstand the worst that the Soviets could throw at them. The cult of the family, already a principal tenet of importance in the 50s, thus assumed even more

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<sup>83</sup> Guy Oakes, *The Imaginary War: Civil Defence and American Cold War Culture* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996) 105.

<sup>84</sup> Oakes 105.

<sup>85</sup> Oakes 105.



significance as the principal form of resistance towards the ravages of nuclear warfare. Since even the most technologically advanced military defences could not defend the nation against a nuclear strike, it was believed that the chief nuclear target would be “our people – our human resources at home.”<sup>86</sup> The deaths of millions of ordinary Americans would therefore, it was reasoned, lead to the collapse of the home front and the end of the American way of life. The threat of war was now on every American doorstep.

Accordingly, the president of the Civil Defence Association, Val Peterson, urged the conversion of every household into a domestic civil defence unit. Each member of the family had to be “fortified with every possible training and plenty of practice, prepared to do everything [they] can to protect [themselves] in an emergency with assurance and without panic.”<sup>87</sup> It was also believed that civil defence would act as a deterrent, convincing the Soviets that an attack simply wasn’t worth the risk: “no enemy is likely to attempt an attack foredoomed to failure.”<sup>88</sup> By planning and practicing at home, it was said that families could acquire the requisite skills and develop the qualities of self-control, patriotism and co-operation necessary to survive a nuclear attack. One imperative however was stressed above all else: the transformation of each individual family into a civil defence unit. If everyone took care of themselves on the ground, or so the reasoning went, the overall structure could be maintained. The family that worked together in a loving, cohesive unit would survive.

It is significant therefore that in *Sundial*, Jackson presents us with a family unit whose preparations for the apocalypse both echo and subvert the response being asked of ordinary Americans during the 1950s. After all, the novel begins with the

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<sup>86</sup> Oakes 107.

<sup>87</sup> Oakes 107.

<sup>88</sup> Oakes 107.

suspicious death of one family member and concludes with the likely murder of another: it sets a certain tone from the outset and suggests that family togetherness is the last thing on Jackson's mind here. As Jackson biographer Judy Oppenheimer has noted, the Halloran house "seethes with backbiting, infighting, rivalry, greed, and a great deal of silliness."<sup>89</sup> Even before Aunt Fanny's dramatic revelation, the protagonists have by and large shown themselves to be a singularly unpleasant group of individuals. Orianna is a bullying tyrant, her daughter-in-law Mary Jane a dim bimbo, Granddaughter Fancy is rather disturbed, librarian and token young man Essex is a self-involved sycophant, and Aunt Fanny a hysterical nonentity. The fact that it is this unpleasant group who seem to have been chosen as the lone survivors of the predicted holocaust is deeply ironic; after all, the Hallorans and their hangers-on, as Jackson repeatedly implies, would be "destroyers of any new world they could ever hope to inherit."<sup>90</sup> They display few, if any of the qualities the Government was seeking to inspire in its citizens: instead of unity, there is rivalry and greed; instead of patriotism there is naked self-interest. The demanding, tyrannical first Mr Halloran, whose death does not seem to have improved his personality, has even replaced God. For him, as for the American civil defence association, the family home is the only place of safety in the event of cataclysm: 'Tell them in the house that they will be saved.'<sup>91</sup> The house, always a site of central importance in Jackson's fiction, has here become a modern day Noah's Ark, and its inhabitants the self-proclaimed pioneers of a brave new world. Like Jackson's protagonists, Harry S. Truman translated the Cold War national security crisis into the language of pioneer mythology.<sup>92</sup> He compared the situation Americans found themselves in to the days when settlements along the

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<sup>89</sup> Oppenheimer 217.

<sup>90</sup> Friedman 106.

<sup>91</sup> Jackson, *Sundial* 28.

<sup>92</sup> Oakes 130.

frontier came under attack by hostile Indian tribes. The pioneers, according to Truman, responded by forming communities in which every member did their utmost to combat the common danger – the fate of the community therefore depended upon the personal responsibility of each of its members. The implication was that if present day Americans could only behave in the same manner, they too would survive. Despite the similarity in language however, there is scant evidence of this sort of responsibility within the Halloran mansion. After all, the deaths that bookend the action are brought about not by any outside force, but by the resentment and selfishness of those inside the house. They are united only to the extent that they realise they need to co-operate to some degree in order to survive. They are motivated by self-interest rather than the greater interest – the antithesis of the ideal that was being demanded of contemporary American families. According to government propagandists, it was possible to survive a nuclear attack in virtually any home – whether that domicile was “a cottage, a mansion, an apartment, a hotel or a trailer.”<sup>93</sup> Survival was only possible however if the occupants had first been trained in the art of “Civil Defence Housekeeping.” The details of this programme were outlined in a manual called “Home Protection Exercises: A Family Action Programme” which was first distributed in 1953.

The first edition of this manual outlined seven tasks said to be essential to family survival under nuclear bombardment. The first, and most important of these was that the family home be made into a shelter. As a consequence, the bomb shelter rapidly became an American institution. A whole cowboy industry tried to persuade paranoid suburbanites that a shelter was “as essential as a pool in the back yard, a finned car, or

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<sup>93</sup> Oakes 107.

aluminium siding on a house.”<sup>94</sup> Tellingly, most of the men who saw themselves as well prepared for war also intended to keep guns in their shelters in order to defend themselves against lesser prepared neighbours who might try to force their way in.<sup>95</sup> Survival of the family unit was not necessarily aligned with neighbourliness. As Kim Newman has put it: “few suggested Americans might react like blitzed Londoners, helping each other out and defying the bombers...it seemed those best prepared to survive were more committed to resisting their fellow Americans than any communists.”<sup>96</sup> The selfishness and self-interest that often lay behind the survivalist credo of the era is echoed in *Sundial*. Jackson’s protagonists invite their (unwitting) neighbours to a farewell party, but despite their foreknowledge and the extensive size of the mansion, the thought of asking any of their guests to join their group is never even considered – their selfishness and snobbishness makes such a gesture unthinkable. The only other group they consider joining forces with is a fellow sect called “The True Believers,”<sup>97</sup> but Orianna overrules such a move when she discovers that they are a U.F.O. cult awaiting the arrival of a spacecraft to rescue them. Such a visitation, Orianna dryly reasons, would surely do a lot of damage to the lawn.

The inhabitants of the Halloran House have complete faith in the ability of their home to withstand attack – just like the American Civil defence association. Nevertheless, the decision is taken to erect a barricade just in case:

“But I insist that the house must be barricaded” Aunt Fanny said, adding with a burst of inspiration, “It is like a child hiding its head under a blanket. We have absolute faith in my father, of course, but

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<sup>94</sup> Newman 66.

<sup>95</sup> This trend was also reflected in two classic *Twilight Zone* episodes: *The Shelter* and *The Monsters Are Due On Maple Street*. In both episodes a normal suburban neighbourhood descends into violence and anarchy when it (falsely) appears as though an attack is imminent.

<sup>96</sup> Newman 66.

<sup>97</sup> It’s interesting to note that the “True Believers” seem to have much in common with the real life ‘Heaven’s Gate’ cult, whose belief in UFO’s culminated in a mass suicide in the mid 1990s.

even though his protection applies to the house and everyone in it, I can see strong reasons for covering the windows and blocking the doors.”

The response that follows is a reflection, perhaps, of larger concerns within contemporary society:

“Well, a blanket over the window is really not much protection” Mrs Willow said bluntly. “Perhaps,” Essex said, “it was planned to give us something to do while we are waiting”.

“The human animal burrows instinctively in times of danger,” Mrs Halloran [Orianna] said. I find Aunt Fanny’s picture of the child under the blankets not an inept one.”

“We would *feel* safer, I’m sure.” Essex said.

“Perhaps,” Gloria said softly, “the blankets over the windows *are* just to keep us from looking out?”

Mrs. Willow remarks that a blanket isn’t going to provide much protection – expressing scepticism about the usefulness of such measures.

As I noted in Chapter Two, all three of Jackson’s “House” novels end with the protagonist’s withdrawal from the outside world. It could be said that in *Sundial*, the characters’ severing of all ties with the rest of humanity is suggestive of a trend that was emerging in American society at that time. After all, the safety and resilience of the individual family unit was supposed to be everything: survival was very much a personal responsibility. S.T. Joshi has claimed that the protagonists of *Sundial* function as a microcosm of the unruly world they are purportedly leaving behind. Indeed, the house literally becomes their world.<sup>98</sup> As Joshi notes, the Hallorans have withdrawn from the world even before they “take up their insane view of imminent global destruction,” and this withdrawal is “entirely self-generated.”

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<sup>98</sup> Joshi 43.

Perhaps the rather sanguine response of the house's inhabitants to the news that the rest of the world is to be destroyed is therefore due in part to the fact that this event will make little practical difference to their lives anyway. Contact with the world outside the Halloran boundaries (as in *Castle*) is rare, and acrimonious when it takes place. As rich, arrogant landowners in a small rural community, the family, like their counterparts the Blackwoods, have always been isolated anyway. For them therefore, the house already is their world – hence the shock of those who are told that they must leave at the beginning of the narrative, and their eagerness to believe in a “prophecy” that legitimises their desire to stay.

Indeed, it cannot be forgotten that the Halloran mansion has purposely been created as a self-enclosed site – a “new world” for its inhabitants, from the very outset. We are told early on in the novel that the founding Halloran “could think of nothing better to do with his money than set up his own world.”<sup>99</sup> It is therefore highly significant that the God-like voice that Aunt Fanny claims to be in contact with is none other than her father, the man who created the house in the first instance. The house therefore functions as a disturbing microcosm of the outside world – both reflecting and exaggerating contemporary anxieties. As well as updating the traditional Gothic house, and of parodying traditional generic conventions, the novel is also Jackson's way of passing scathing comment upon American society during the 50s, and of satirising the manner in which people responded to unease generated by the Cold War. As S.T. Joshi says “the house becomes the world – does the rest of the world function as the Halloran house does?”<sup>100</sup> There is the strong suggestion in the novel that Jackson believed it did. For Jackson is deeply cynical when it comes to the

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<sup>99</sup> Jackson, *Sundial* 11.

<sup>100</sup> Joshi 47.

prospects for building a utopian “new world” in the aftermath of the apocalypse – a feeling informed by her decisive lack of faith in her fellow man (or woman).

*Sundial* makes it quite clear that the Hallorans will destroy any new world they get their hands on. The fact that they can’t even co-exist in the same house without frequent outbreaks of bickering, rivalry and murder is evidence enough of that. The founding Halloran’s desire to establish an orderly “new world” within the ground of the great house is therefore shown to be as impossible as the “utopian” dreams of his successors. Similarly, the Blackwood sisters from *Castle*, who briefly established their own domestic kingdom within the boundaries of the family land end up sipping tea in the blackened ruins of their sanctuary – their desire to remain in a world of their own having been thwarted by greed, prejudice, and insanity. In response to this they seek to withdraw themselves from the world to an even greater extent, but this means retreating entirely into madness. The attempt to create a self-contained, suburban paradise in Jackson’s first novel, *Road*, fails disastrously as well, because of prejudice, snobbery and carelessness – and results in the deaths of two of the neighbourhood’s children. Even Eleanor Vance’s dream of establishing a happy new life for herself in *Hill House* ends in death and in her chilling surrender to the demands of a malevolent supernatural force. In Jackson, new worlds, like new lives, are doomed from the outset by one insurmountable flaw – human nature. In that sense, Jackson’s apocalyptic fictions differ greatly from the beliefs displayed by real-life eschatological sects: they all stress the purity and worthiness of their members, and their suitability to inherit the new world, whilst Jackson deliberately presents us with a group of outsiders who are anything but deserving of a second chance.

Jackson's pessimistic view of human nature was undoubtedly a factor in the relatively poor reviews *Sundial* received. In *The New Republic*, critic Harvey Swados summed up the general reaction to the novel when he commented:

While Miss Jackson is an intelligent and clever writer, there rises from her pages the cold and fishy gleam of a calculated and carefully expressed contempt for the human race.<sup>101</sup>

At a time when Government officials claimed that after a mere two weeks in a fallout shelter, American families could emerge and start afresh in a post-atomic landscape, Jackson's suggestion that they'd only make the same mistakes all over again did not, unsurprisingly, go down well. The paranoia, xenophobia, insanity and savage outbreaks of mob violence that occur in so much of Jackson's fiction was very much at odds with the values promoted by the political agenda of the day. C. Wright Mills drew attention to the domestic political climate, a climate that strongly discouraged dissent from the status quo:

Impatience with things as they are in America was often judged to be mutinous. Hundreds of teachers lost their jobs over accusations of communism in the first fifteen years of the Cold War. Anti-communism often merged with anti-intellectualism.<sup>102</sup>

The decade was dominated by the notion of consensus politics, which was the idea that unless Americans agreed amongst themselves, they would be easy prey to internal/external enemies.<sup>103</sup> Any dissent from the general consensus was unpatriotic, and therefore dangerous. It is interesting to note therefore that in Jackson's fiction, community spirit – the very essence of consensus – is almost never a good thing. to

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<sup>101</sup> Cited in Oppenheimer 217.

<sup>102</sup> Quoted in Bacon 55.

<sup>103</sup> Biskind 26.



begin with, her protagonists are always outsiders or outcasts of some kind – usually lonely young women who have never fitted in with those around them. This observation is as true of Jackson’s short stories as it is of her novels, save for *Road* and *Sundial*, both of which focus upon a group of outsiders rather than one in particular.

It is significant that Jackson’s most famous single text is her short story “The Lottery” – a forceful parable about scapegoating and mob violence. As is well known, “The Lottery” is about a small, rural New England town that comes together on the 27<sup>th</sup> of June each year to perform a very special ritual. In cool, steady prose, Jackson first describes how the townspeople slowly trickle into their designated meeting place. Small boys scamper about gathering stones, whilst the adults talk amongst themselves in low murmurs. There is an expectant, almost festive air to the proceedings. The ritual they are about to take part in is one so old that even its exact origins have been lost to history:

The original paraphernalia for the lottery had been lost long ago, and the black box now resting on the stool had been put into use before even old Man Warner, the oldest man in town, had been born.<sup>104</sup>

A list of every family in town is gradually drawn up, and Tessie Hutchinson, a typically flustered Jackson housewife, hurries into the town square just before the proceedings get underway. There is the suggestion that the lottery may be some sort of ancient fertility rite – the oldest man in town mutters the saying “Lottery in June, corn be heavy soon.” One by one, the men of the town draw lots from the old black box at the front of the stage. Bill Hutchinson, Tessie’s husband, draws the marked ballot. His wife cries in dismay, “It wasn’t fair!” and argues that he be allowed to pick

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<sup>104</sup> Jackson “The Lottery,” *The Lottery and Other Stories* 216.

again. The atmosphere grows ever more tense. Each member of the Hutchinson family is summoned to the stage to draw their individual ballots – the unfortunate, resisting Tessie receives the ballot with the ominous black dot in the centre. The story’s horrific climax soon follows, and the actions of the small boys at the beginning of the tale take on a chilling significance: “Although the villagers had forgotten the ritual and lost the original black box, they still remembered to use stones.”<sup>105</sup> Everyone present prepares to help stone Tessie to death – a few pebbles are even given to her youngest child. Tessie barely has time to choke out one last protest: “It isn’t fair, it isn’t right,” Mrs. Hutchinson screamed, and then they were upon her.”<sup>106</sup>

Though many different interpretations have been supplied for ‘The Lottery’, (hardly surprising, as it is probably Jackson’s most written about text) – from the suggestion that it is a depiction of male misogyny, an ironic commentary on Christianity, or even a post-atomic parable – I would argue that the simpler explanations are perhaps truest to Jackson’s own intentions, and to the underlying themes of her work. “The Lottery” is, at heart, the story of a community whose ultimate act of togetherness – of consensus – is ritual murder. Everyone in the (significantly unnamed) village is complicit in the terrible act – even, to an extent, the sacrificial victim herself. After all, Tessie only raises an objection to the lottery when her family is singled out. She even shows herself willing to try and preserve her own skin by trying to include her married daughter and son-in-law in the fatal second ballot. Her objections, it would seem, are not so much to the lottery itself – she would be quite happy to participate in the stoning of someone else – but rather to the fact that she herself has been chosen as the communal scapegoat. It is also ironic to note

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<sup>105</sup> Jackson “The Lottery” 223.

<sup>106</sup> Jackson “The Lottery” 223.

that a story so obviously concerned with the dangers of a mob mentality should have attracted hundreds of angry letters upon first publications, and have received more complaints than any other story ever printed in *The New Yorker* magazine.<sup>107</sup>

The basic message of “The Lottery” – that it takes very little to prompt human beings to savagely turn upon one of their own – is one that is repeated again and again in Jackson’s work. In the story, a black circle scribbled upon a piece of paper is enough to mark an individual out for death: in Jackson’s other works, though outsider status is rarely conferred in such an obviously symbolic manner, but is rather the result of class, gender, intelligence, madness or sheer loneliness, the end result is often the same.

The setting for Jackson’s depictions of persecution and prejudice is frequently the same as that of “The Lottery” – the small New England village. Time and time again, Jackson provides us with narrow minded, suspicious and sometimes violent local communities in which her protagonists are at best warily tolerated and at worst openly attacked. Even in *Sundial*, relationships between the inhabitants of the big house and locals are strained: this is seen most clearly at the painfully polite garden party towards the end of the novel, and particularly in a sinister scene in which Mrs. Willow’s daughter Julia, having decided to escape to the city, hails a local taxi whose driver talks menacingly about killing animals, then dumps her by the side of the road in a thick fog. It is, as one critic has noted, a scene of great unease and threat that seems to have come from an altogether nastier Jackson text.

Even in *Hill House*, a text in which the local village is only briefly glimpsed, Jackson’s depiction of local colour is less than positive. In a scene already remarked upon in Chapter Two, Eleanor decides to test her newfound independence and stops in

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<sup>107</sup> Jackson’s witty account of the genesis of “The Lottery” and the often-outraged response it received is chronicled in the essay “Biography of a Story,” published in *Come Along With Me*.

the village of Hillsdale for a cup of coffee just before reaching her final destination, Hill House. Everything about Hillsdale is “dirty,” “crooked,” and “grey.” As she sits in the “unattractive” village diner, Eleanor bravely drinks her bad coffee and tries to make small talk with the “resentful” waitress, who exudes apathy and disdain, and who declares of her community, “They go away, the lucky ones.”<sup>108</sup> The waitress’s unendearing attitude is similar to that of the Dudleys’, the dour, unfriendly local couple who act as caretakers for Hill House.

Communal hostility of an even more powerful sort permeates *Castle* from the very outset. In this case however, the feeling is mutual: Merricat Blackwood loathes the people of the local village far more than (she thinks) they loathe her. The masterful account of Merricat’s final shopping expedition that takes up most of the novel’s opening chapter is very similar to Eleanor’s experiences in Hillsdale, though in this instance is very much informed by the psychotic sentiments of our highly disturbed narrator. Like Hillsdale, the village in *Castle* is “grey” “ugly” and resentful. “The people of the village have always hated us” declares Merricat at one point; at another she claims that she can “tell a local car by the quick ugly glance from the driver.”<sup>109</sup> The short trip to the grocery store is an ordeal for Merricat, who is terrified of the local children and their mothers: “...I was afraid of them. I was afraid they might touch me and the mothers would come at me like a flock of taloned hawks; that was always the picture I had in my mind – birds descending, striking, gashing with razor claws.”<sup>110</sup> In the village café, a local man taunts her until she must leave:

.... it was Jim Donell and I knew at once that today I had bad luck. Some of the people in the village had real faces that I knew and could hate individually; Jim Donell and his wife were among these, because

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<sup>108</sup> Jackson, *Hill House* 243.

<sup>109</sup> Jackson, *Castle* 407.

<sup>110</sup> Jackson, *Castle* 405.

they were deliberate instead of just hating dully from habit like the others.<sup>111</sup>

Though initially, the reader is unsure of the extent to which Merricat's loathing of the village is justified, or rather a product of her obviously damaged mind, it is her paranoid worldview, not the rather more optimistic, gentle hopes of her good hearted sister Constance that is confirmed at the text's conclusion. When the villagers arrive to put out a fire that Merricat herself has deliberately started, years of resentment, fear and sheer hatred spill over into an orgy of destructive violence.

As in "The Lottery," stones are employed by this vengeful mob as well. Once the fire has been extinguished, the fire chief, Jim Donnell, sets down his hard hat and hurls a rock through the window of a drawing room whilst the sisters watch from their hiding place. After a moment's pause, everyone else joins in, and the beautiful house is systematically vandalised:

Above it all, most horrible, was the laughter. I saw one of the Dresden figurines thrown and break against the porch rail, and the other fell over unbroken and rolled along the grass. I heard Constance's harp go over with a musical cry, and a sound which I knew was a chair being smashed against the wall.<sup>112</sup>

Apart from its clear links to "The Lottery," this scene also strongly resembles the moment in so many classic black and white horror movies when the local peasants gather their torches and pitchforks and storm the hated castle in order to kill the "monstrous" creature within.<sup>113</sup> Perhaps this is part of the reason why Jackson

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<sup>111</sup> Jackson, *Castle* 409.

<sup>112</sup> Jackson, *Castle* 494.

<sup>113</sup> Much the same image is also employed by Sylvia Plath in the poem "Daddy" – "There's a stake in your fat black heart / And the villagers never liked you. / They are dancing and stamping on you. / They always *knew* it was you." For a humorous modern version of such a scene, see Tim Burton's 1987 film *Edward Scissorhands* in which the pastel-clothed residents of a suburban neighbourhood end up storming their local castle in order to oust the eponymous outsider.

chooses to make the house/castle analogy so obvious, both in the title and when Merricat remarks of the blackened ruins: “Our house was a castle, turreted and open to the sky.”<sup>114</sup> Of course the interesting thing about such scenes in the classic horror film is that the audience, despite the usually despicable crimes of the monster involved, usually ends up feeling a strong pang of sympathy for them anyway – consider Frankenstein’s monster in the James Whale directed classic *Frankenstein*: the most poignant monster of all. In a similar manner, even though the reader knows that Merricat has murdered six people, and that Constance has shielded her from any punishment, our sympathy, like Jackson’s, is very much with the persecuted, not the mob, whose actions only cease when Uncle Julian’s (natural) death is discovered.

Though some of the villagers do come to regret their actions, and attempt to atone for them by leaving baskets of food in the blackened ruins, these gestures are inspired more by fear than remorse. For the sisters have become the witchlike, shadowy figures they were always believed to be, and the villagers fear some sort of preternatural vengeance unless they atone for their violence. The hostile rural community recurs again and again in Jackson’s fiction, and not just in the novels or ‘The Lottery’. In the previously discussed tale “The Renegade” (Chapter Two), a housewife who has just moved from the city sees certain disturbing parallels between her own plight and that of the family’s chicken-stealing dog, who has all but been condemned already by the self-righteous, cruel general consensus. Similarly, in “The Flower Garden” another newcomer to a small rural community, a widow with one young child, is welcomed at first but later ostracised and eventually forced to leave the community because she is deemed to be too friendly to a black gardener and his son. After “The Lottery,” Jackson’s most chilling depiction of the rural community is

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<sup>114</sup> Jackson, *Castle* 507.

found in “The Summer People,” in which an elderly couple who vacation in the country every summer decide to extend their usual stay indefinitely. However, they are soon systematically isolated from the outside world: the grocer refuses to deliver, the phone lines are cut off, their car is tampered with, and their mail appears to have been interfered with: “Mrs Allison turned the letter over, frowning. It was impossible to find any sentence, any word even, that did not sound like Jerry’s regular letters. Perhaps it was only that the letter was so late, or the unusual number of dirty fingerprints on the envelope.”<sup>115</sup> The story ends on an ominous note, “while the lightning flashed outside, and the radio faded and spluttered, the two old people huddled together in their summer cottage and waited.”<sup>116</sup> It’s up to the reader to decide exactly what they are waiting for, but given Jackson’s track record, it’s bound to be sinister.

In Jackson’s fiction – whether it may manifest itself in the form of a ritual stoning of a local housewife, the destruction of a fine local house, the ostracising and presumed deaths of summer visitors who have overstayed their welcome, or merely in the guise of unreasonable hostility towards all newcomers – community spirit is *never* a good thing. What may seem less clear is the relationship between her pessimistic view of human nature, and of people in groups in particular, and the manner in which the Apocalypse is depicted in her fiction. It must be said that they are intimately connected. For, in Jackson’s universe, human nature is always ultimately the most destructive force of all. It is precisely the character traits of prejudice, hostility, resentment and greed that she highlights in novels such as *Sundial* and the stories I have just mentioned that, Jackson suggests in “The Intoxicated” and “All She Said Was Yes,” will bring about the end of the world in the first place, and it is those same

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<sup>115</sup> Jackson, “The Summer People” *Come Along With Me* 76.

<sup>116</sup> Jackson, “The Summer People” 78.

characteristics that will sabotage the building of a utopian new world in the ruins. The ultimate holocaust, in Jackson's fictional worldview, comes from within, not from without. Perhaps this is why we never do find out the reason *why* the world is supposed to end in *Sundial*. People, Jackson suggests time and time again, are flawed – weak, paranoid, suspicious, greedy, lonely, delusional and mad: and it must be said that given the political circumstance of the time in which Jackson was writing, when it seemed as though the United States was leading its people straight into a cataclysmic nuclear war, Jackson's pessimism is not all that surprising. As I have shown, the overlooked undercurrent of apocalypticism in her fiction, as well as acting as a commentary on a longstanding trend in the American cultural tradition, is also very much of her time – particularly the strongly implied suggestion that in the event of nuclear war, Americans have as much to fear from their neighbours as they do from the Soviets. As a result, Jackson's world view is perhaps best summed up in a remark made by the indomitable Merricat in *Castle*: "The world is full of terrible people."



## Chapter Five. “No Ordinary Housewife”: Jackson’s Domestic Humour.

In this, my final chapter, I shall discuss two of Jackson’s most successful, and yet, seemingly uncharacteristic texts – her humorous family memoirs *Life Among the Savages*<sup>1</sup> (1953) and *Raising Demons*<sup>2</sup> (1957). Having spent much of this thesis discussing Jackson’s status as an accomplished creator of novels and stories that dramatise in frequently “Gothic” form many of the anxieties and preoccupations experienced by Americans during the post-war period, it may at first seem a little surprising to note that the author of so many unnerving, ruthless tales should also have made quite a bit of money from the publication of cosy, humorous anecdotes about the antics of her four small children and her lot as an (apparently) conventional housewife. As we shall soon see, it was a contrast that certainly baffled many contemporary reviewers and critics, who often found themselves quite unable to understand the apparently gaping gulf between these two divergent facets of Jackson’s fictional output. This puzzlement, as Lynette Carpenter has noted, undoubtedly contributed to Jackson’s latter neglect:

...traditional male critics could not, in the end, reconcile genre with gender in Jackson’s case; unable to understand how a serious writer of gothic fiction could also be, to all outward appearances, a typical housewife, much less how she could publish housewife humour in *Good Housekeeping*, they dismissed her.<sup>3</sup>

However, as I shall demonstrate during the course of this chapter, the relationship between Jackson’s “Housewife” humour and her more obviously “literary” fiction is a great deal more compelling (and revealing) than first impressions may suggest.

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<sup>1</sup> Shirley Jackson, *Life Among the Savages*, (1953; London: Michael Joseph, 1954) Hereafter shortened to *Savages* for convenience’s sake.

<sup>2</sup> Shirley Jackson, *Raising Demons*, (London: Michael Joseph, 1957) Hereafter shortened to *Demons*.

<sup>3</sup> Lynette Carpenter, “Domestic Comedy, Black Comedy, and Real Life: Shirley Jackson, Woman Writer” eds. Alice Kessler-Harris and William Mc Brien, *Faith of a Woman Writer* (New York: Greenwood Press, 1988) 143.

Indeed, as more than one commentator has noted, if a casual browser were to ignore the old precept against judging a book by its cover and look merely at the titles of Jackson's two volumes of domestic memoirs, he or she would probably gain the impression that the texts in question deal with subjects of the horrific, gothic or occultist nature. Though undoubtedly indicative of Jackson's notably sardonic sense of humour, it also seems odd that the most outwardly "horrific" and suggestive of Jackson's eight book titles should belong not to an intense exploration of madness and multiple personality like *The Bird's Nest* or a story of psychosis and murder like *We Have Always Lived in the Castle*, but rather to the most apparently innocuous texts in her entire oeuvre. It could perhaps be seen as a not-so-subtle dig towards the critics and publicists who exaggerated reports of Jackson's "witchlike" qualities and were known to call her by names such as "Virginia Werewolf"<sup>4</sup> – a warning that here was a writer who would always be more than willing to defy (and subvert) conventional expectations. It was perhaps also a subconscious reminder of the fact that despite initial appearances, it pays to bear in mind the fact that Jackson's "housewife" humour is frequently informed by the same feelings of female claustrophobia and desperation that influenced so much of her fictional output.

Accordingly, a significant portion of this chapter will be spent demonstrating the strength of the relationship between these two apparently contradictory modes of discourse. I will begin by discussing the contrasting ways in which Jackson was depicted by critics, reviewers and publicists during her lifetime – focusing upon the apparently irreconcilable depictions of her either as a "witch" or a motherly housewife. I will illustrate the extent to which Jackson herself contributed to these representations, and discuss the manner in which they later impacted upon her literary

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<sup>4</sup> Anon "Nightshade Must Fall." *Time* 21<sup>st</sup> Sept. 1962: (93-4)

reputation. I will then go on to suggest that the contrasting and unconventional manner in which Jackson was depicted during her lifetime is reminiscent of the ways in which the real lives of ordinary American women during the 1950s undermined the apparently pervasive norms of contemporary domestic ideology.

Next, I will embark upon a detailed examination of Jackson's "family" stories. I will begin by discussing the circumstances in which Jackson came to write these lucrative semi-autobiographical renderings of happy family life, and look at her own rather mercenary attitudes towards their production. I will also discuss the role that women's magazines of the era played both in reinforcing the decade's oppressive domestic and social norms. I will particularly refer to Betty Friedan's chapter on the subject in *The Feminine Mystique* (1963). I will also examine some of the factors behind the popularity of female authored "domestic" humour during the 1950s, and discuss Jackson's success in that field alongside that of other popular favourites such as Jean Kerr. I will discuss Friedan's scathing dismissal of such writing, and her specific reference to Jackson, and look at modern examinations of the role of humour in women's writing by critics Nancy Walker and Nancy Cott. In my final section, I will demonstrate the extent to which the recurring themes and anxieties of Jackson's short stories and novels are replicated (albeit generally in less sinister form) in her family memoirs. I will do so by comparing these traits in her "literary" fiction with their occurrence in her more populist, conventional writing.

Jackson's heroines tend to be perpetual outsiders, women who consistently find themselves unwilling or unable to accede to the demands made upon them by the narrow-minded and deeply flawed representatives of "mainstream" society. It seems fitting therefore to note that Jackson, like so many of her characters, was in several important respects something of an outsider herself. For a start, she was a female

writer who demanded to be taken seriously at a time when women were expected to be more interested in home and family than in personal and professional accomplishment. In addition, as I've previously indicated, Jackson also distinguished herself from conventionality by operating in two frequently marginalized and faintly disreputable genres – those of humorous domestic writing and the gothic. Even in a practical sense, Jackson would find herself outside the normal rhythms and expectations of 1950s society: her many depictions of narrow-minded, dangerously claustrophobic and conformist New England villages have their origins in her own family's experiences as the unconventional New York intellectuals who have suddenly found themselves marooned in the backwoods of deepest, darkest rural Vermont – a clash of cultures that, as *Castle*, *The Sundial*, and many of her short stories suggest, would not always have entirely amicable results.

Jackson's refusal to conform to conventional mores was complicated by the manner in which she was popularly depicted during her lifetime. Publicists and reviewers, as we shall see, tended to focus upon two rather disparate, but revealing representations of Jackson – either as “New England's only practicing amateur witch” or as matronly housewife. There was a grain of truth in each depiction, but ultimately neither revealed the true Jackson, and would actually diminish the writer and her work. The polarisation of Jackson's public personae began in 1948, with the publication of her first novel, the modestly successful *The Road Through the Wall*. The blurb on the dust jacket irreverently described Jackson as being “perhaps the only contemporary author who is a practicing amateur witch, specialising in small scale black magic and fortune telling with a tarot deck.”<sup>5</sup> As biographer Judy Oppenheimer notes, they were Jackson's husband Stanley's words and presumably it was also his

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<sup>5</sup> Shirley Jackson *The Road Through the Wall* (1948; New York: Farrar Straus, 1975).

idea to use this description – and, at “the time, since the book sold only moderately, it did no harm.”<sup>6</sup> Stanley Edgar Hyman and Jackson had no way of knowing that in just over a year’s time, this tongue-in-cheek publicity squib would come back to haunt them. Jackson’s relative anonymity forever ended on June 26<sup>th</sup>, 1948, when the *New Yorker* magazine published “The Lottery.” Amidst the ensuing storm of controversy, anger, and notoriety, Jackson herself naturally became the object of much curiosity and speculation. Her stories were much in demand as a result of her newfound infamy, and now readers wanted to know more about the author of this all too memorable tale. With the hurried publication of the short story collection of the same name in April of the following year, the publicity machine surrounding Jackson moved into high gear. It did not take long for publishing house Farrar Straus to rediscover Hyman’s blurb for *Road*; and “Jackson herself had contributed biographical notes that could hardly have failed to pique interest.”<sup>7</sup> The notes, which were perhaps just a little bit naïve and revealing, outlined Jackson’s unorthodox attitudes towards convention and the supernatural:

My children and I believe wholeheartedly in magic. We do not any of us subscribe to the pat cause-and-effect rules which so many other people seem to use...I have a fine library of magic and witchcraft and when I have nothing else to do I practice incantations.<sup>8</sup>

There was an element of truth in Jackson’s claims – as Oppenheimer notes, she did consider herself an expert on magic; she did have an extensive library of books on the subject; and she did make charms and mutter incantations to herself, as both family and friends testified<sup>9</sup> – but it is also likely that Jackson was poking fun at the whole business of publicity and promotion, and most of all perhaps, those who would be so

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<sup>6</sup> Oppenheimer 126.

<sup>7</sup> Oppenheimer 139.

<sup>8</sup> Oppenheimer 139.

<sup>9</sup> Oppenheimer 140.

gullible as to believe such a statement was said with an entirely straight face – no doubt the same rather impressionable section of the reading public who, a year earlier, had sent her angry letters demanding to know the name and location of the New England village whose arcane rites she had chronicled in “The Lottery.” However, there was something else there as well – deep seated frustration towards the role she felt that a woman writer was supposed to adopt, and a genuine desire to evade conventional categorisation. It was a desire that emerges strongly in the unpublished notes she made for that fateful biography:

I am tired of writing dainty little biographical things that pretend I am a trim little housewife in a Mother Hubbard stirring up appetising messes over a wood stove...I live in a dank old place with a ghost that storms around in the attic...the first thing I did when we moved in was to make charms in black crayon on all the door sills and window ledges to keep out the demons...<sup>10</sup>

This piece highlights the essential duality of Jackson’s life and work – her consistent conflation of the domestic with the uncanny, the natural and the unnatural. What comes through most powerfully of all is Jackson’s desire to resist imprisonment within the ideological “norm”, and a wilful eccentricity and defiance that characterises many of her finest fictional creations. The extracts suggests that along with her faith in charms and incantations, Jackson had much in common with Merricat Blackwood, her most deeply felt character, of whom it could also be said, as it has been of Jackson, “she would not be cubby holed, no matter how much easier it would make things for others.”<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Quoted in Oppenheimer 139.

<sup>11</sup> Oppenheimer 139.

It did not take Jackson long, however, to realise that her mention of “witchlike” powers had badly backfired, for “rare was the interviewer who could resist asking her about black magic.” Rather naively at first, Jackson tended to respond to such questions truthfully. The result, as Oppenheimer puts it, “was the elbow nudging that surrounded her answers in print.” Typical of such reports was one filed by Associated Press interviewer W.G. Rogers:

...She says she can break a man’s leg and throw a girl down an elevator shaft. Such things happen, she says! Miss Jackson tells you all this with a smile but she is not joking: she owns a library of two hundred books.<sup>12</sup>

Rogers was also responsible for saying that “Miss Jackson writes not with a pen, but with a broomstick” – an awkward, but lasting appellation. It didn’t help matters that Jackson’s publishers went out of their way to enhance their client’s occultist reputation, though perhaps given the fact that such stories “brought Jackson nearly as much publicity as the short stories themselves” they can perhaps hardly be blamed for their efforts. It was Farrar Straus who helped circulate the rumour that Jackson had, by means of Voodoo, managed to break the leg of rival publishing magnate Alfred J. Knopf. Whether or not Jackson herself believed this is difficult to gauge.<sup>13</sup>

Jackson’s standing as a witch soon became a critical commonplace in reviews and interviews: an easy way of snidely explaining the disparity between her matronly outer appearance and the frequently “otherworldly,” ruthless nature of her fiction. As one rather hyperbolic review of *The Bird’s Nest* put it: “Once more Shirley Jackson the wife and mother has yielded to Shirley Jackson the literary necromancer who writes novels not much like any other like the form was invented.”<sup>14</sup> It’s interesting

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<sup>12</sup> Oppenheimer 139.

<sup>13</sup> Oppenheimer 140.

<sup>14</sup> Dan Wickenden, *New York Herald Tribune Book Review*, 20<sup>th</sup> June. 1965.

that the reviewer of a novel about multiple personality disorder should phrase his praise of the author in such a way that he suggests that she suffers from a literary form of this disorder herself – “wife and mother” “yielding” to the position of “literary necromancer” – sorcerer, practitioner of the dark arts – as though one could not be all at once a wife, mother, and a writer of gothic fiction – as though a form of personality splitting, of uncanny transformation, was necessary before anything of that nature could be written by a woman.

Jackson soon learned to more guarded whilst taking part in interviews. Speaking to *New York Times Book Review* interviewer Harvey Breit, she warily dismissed the by now rather embarrassing and damaging issue of her “otherworldly” reputation<sup>15</sup>. Jackson admitted that she believed in magic, but quickly added, “It was a silly thing to talk about.” Perhaps in response to this dismissal, Breit instead focused on another theme that was becoming popular in critical dealings with Jackson – her “amazingly wholesome, motherly exterior.”<sup>16</sup> Jackson, Breit stated, “looks notably wholesome but very much on the dayside. She is neat, detached and impersonally warm. She subtly radiates an atmosphere of cosiness and comfort, and appears to be of a tranquil disposition.” Breit’s sentiments are similar to those expressed by Dan Wickenden in that in both instances, Jackson is presented in the image of an idealised 50s housewife – her “matronly” appearance seen as a surprise when contrasted with the nature of her writing. It reflects the expectation that a writer of gothic fictions should be suitably gothic looking themselves – and if they do not conform to these expectations, then due attention is drawn to their lack of adhesion to preconceived ideas. It was an issue that Jackson’s husband attacked head on in his introduction to *The Magic of Shirley Jackson* (1966) a collection released after her death. Hyman discussed the reaction of

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<sup>15</sup> Harvey Breit, “Talk With Miss Jackson.” *New York Times Book Review* 26<sup>th</sup> June 1949:15.

<sup>16</sup> Oppenheimer 143.



critics who had been puzzled by the disparity between his wife's outward appearance and her most famous work:

People often expressed surprise at the difference between Shirley Jackson's appearance and manner, and the violent and terrifying nature of her fiction. Thus many of the obituaries played up the contrast between a "motherly-looking" woman, gentle and humorous, and that "chillingly horrifying" short story "The Lottery" and similar works. When Shirley Jackson, who was my wife, published two light hearted volumes about the spirited doings of our children...it seemed to surprise people that the author of her grim and disturbing fiction should be a wife and mother at all, let alone a gay and apparently happy one.<sup>17</sup>

Critics who were taken aback by Jackson's appearance and apparently conventional home life, Hyman continued, had displayed an "elementary misunderstanding of what a writer is and how a writer works, on the order of expecting Herman Melville to be a big white whale." Whilst entirely reasonable, Hyman's remarks had however neglected to mention the extent to which, as with the earlier "Witch" label, Jackson herself had, intentionally or otherwise, in fact encouraged this depiction of herself as an everyday housewife who just happened to write in her spare time. Slightly later on in Breit's interview, Jackson made some rather self-deprecating and revealing comments about the nature of her writing:

I can't persuade myself that writing is honest work. It is a very personal reaction, but fifty percent of my time is spent washing and dressing the children, cooking, washing dishes and clothes and mending. After I get it all to bed, I turn around to my typewriter and try to – well, to create concrete things again. It's great fun, and I love it. But it doesn't tie shoes.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> Stanley Hyman, introduction, *The Magic of Shirley Jackson*, by Shirley Jackson (New York, Farrar, 1966) vii.

<sup>18</sup> Quoted in Oppenheimer 141.

The implication here is clear: writing for Jackson is just a pastime, “fun,” but the real work in Jackson’s life is that of a hardworking, thoroughly domesticated wife and mother, for whom the creation of fictional, “concrete” worlds is a secondary occupation, something to be sandwiched between cooking dinner and tying shoe laces. Jackson’s statement is partially true, for she was a busy wife and mother, who produced almost as many children as she did novels. However, such cosy sentiments and modest self deprecation are sorely at odds with the more realistic depictions of Jackson the writer; the woman who, in her late teens, had spent a year writing a thousand words of fiction a day, already convinced that her future lay in writing; the college magazine editor, frequent contributor to magazines both prestigious and popular; a woman who, from an early age, had been filled with determination, pragmatism, and above all, fierce ambition, and who, as her husband put it:

...always regarded herself as a professional writer...and did not see that vocation as being incompatible with being a wife and mother: did not see her art as being incompatible with producing art in saleable forms.<sup>19</sup>

Hence Jackson’s remarks to Breit can also be seen as the adoption of a calculated pose by Jackson, her way of presenting herself in a manner that the innately conservative world in which she lived would accept – a kind of reassuring buffer between a writer and the entirely unexpected nature of her fiction. As Donna Tartt has noted:

Jackson...could not in the most superficial aspects have appeared less the caustic, terrifying genius she was. Photographs show a badly dressed housewife with children climbing over the wings of her shabby flower-patterned armchair – no one special, a woman you might easily pass on an ordinary street in any ordinary town. But every so often,

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<sup>19</sup> Hyman viii.

from behind the harlequin glasses which do not suit her, her gaze flares up at the camera with a chilling intelligence, like a changeling who has thrown on the disguise of a dowdy faculty housewife...in order to walk among human beings unnoticed.<sup>20</sup>

Jackson was all too aware of the problem the figure of the writer/housewife presented – and the fact that she lived in a society that was quite often unwilling to accept that a married mother could also have a successful, creative career outside the home. It is a preoccupation that comes to the fore in her writing on several occasions, most particularly in the essay “Fame” (first published in *The Writer* magazine two months after “The Lottery” appeared) and the story “The Third Baby’s the Easiest” (1949) later integrated into *Savages*. “Fame” humorously recounts the purported details of a conversation that took place a week after her first novel, *Road*, was published. The essay begins with a ringing phone and a caller who abruptly demands, “Hello, who’s this?” before brusquely introducing herself as the local society columnist. It is an exchange that as Joan Wylie Hall notes, “precipitates an uncommon dialogue.”<sup>21</sup>

“This is Shirley Jackson,” I said, a little soothed because my name reminded me of my book. “Well,” she said vaguely, “is Mrs. Stanley Hyman there, please?” I waited for a minute, and then, “This is Mrs. Hyman,” I said reluctantly. Her voice brightened. “Mrs. Hyman,” she said, pleased. “This is Mrs. Sheila Lang of the Newspaper. I’ve been trying to get in touch with you for days.”<sup>22</sup>

Soliciting announcements for “North Village Notes,” Mrs. Lang “is more interested in Jackson’s house and children than in the author’s attempts to discuss her book and the publication party to be hosted by Farrar Straus.”<sup>23</sup> The next day’s society column reads: “Mrs. Stanley Hyman has moved into the old Thatcher place on Prospect street.

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<sup>20</sup> Donna Tartt, introduction, *The Masterpieces of Shirley Jackson*, by Shirley Jackson (London: Robinson, 1996) vii.

<sup>21</sup> Wylie Hall 75.

<sup>22</sup> Shirley Jackson, “Fame,” *The Writer* ^ ^.

<sup>23</sup> Wylie Hall 75.

She and her family are visiting Mr. and Mrs. Farrar Straus of New York City this week.” Jackson’s attempts to assert her separate, distinct identity as a successful writer have been completely ignored by the local old lady who conducts the interview: “Shirley Jackson” is completely overridden by “Mrs. Hyman,” the name that Jackson only “reluctantly” admits to, because it negates her independent writerly persona, which, significantly, is conducted under her maiden, rather than married name.

A similar identity crisis is depicted in “one of Jackson’s most memorable family stories,<sup>24</sup> “The Third Baby’s the Easiest.”” Checking into hospital in order to give birth to her third child, the anonymous narrator (ostensibly Jackson herself), whilst asserting her readiness for the child’s arrival, also refuses to limit her self-definition to the proscribed role of wife and mother.<sup>25</sup> Before she can give birth however, she must first unexpectedly prove herself to the hospital receptionist, who, like the interviewer in “Fame” is unable to accept that the narrator has an existence beyond that of wife and mother:

“Name?” the desk clerk said to me politely, her pencil poised. “Name,”  
I said vaguely. I remembered and told her.  
“Age?” she asked. “Sex? Occupation?”  
“Writer,” I said.  
“Housewife,” she said.  
“Writer,” I said.  
“I’ll just put down housewife,” she said.<sup>26</sup>

Even though suffering the pangs of childbirth, the narrator still insist upon identifying herself as a writer, even before she lists her name or age. It is clearly the most important element of her self-definition. The exchange between the protagonist and the receptionist is both comical, and significant, as the narrator futilely attempts to be

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<sup>24</sup> Wylie Hall 76.

<sup>25</sup> Wylie Hall 76.

<sup>26</sup> Jackson, *Savages* 61.

heard but is mercilessly overruled by another woman. It is she, not the heroine who has a pencil in her hands – writing can both empower and dispossess, depending upon who's in charge, and therefore the refusal of a minor bureaucratic figure to accept that the narrator might be something more than she seems is indicative of a more widespread societal attitude.

Both stories also significantly contradict Jackson's assertions in the (already cited) interview with Harvey Breit, for they suggest that Jackson saw her occupation as that of a writer, almost before anything else, albeit a writer who was constantly trying to assert her unique identity in the face of limiting and oppressive societal expectations. However, despite the fact that the narrators in both "Fame" and "The Third Baby." succumb to the stony logic of their opponents, the last laugh will ultimately be on the Jackson/writer figure, who triumphs in the end because she recounts these exchanges in print, thereby asserting her own authorial status and power even as the words of the story themselves suggest she has been defeated. So Jackson may, as Donna Tartt has suggested, to a certain extent thrown on the disguise of a "dowdy," unthreatening housewife – and may at times even have believed this fiction herself. In the end though, as we shall see, it was always Jackson the writer who got to have the last word.

Jackson's refusal to be confined to the roles that 1950s America demand she accept is but one example of a much larger subversion of societal expectations by the women of the era. Behind all the rhetoric, statistics suggested that many women were quietly breaking (or at least bending) the ideological rules. As historian William Chafe has noted, according to the precepts of the so-called "feminine mystique" women could secure fulfilment only by devoting themselves to homemaking. Housework was therefore presented to women as a "creative adventure." However,

there was also “something profoundly suspicious about this rhetoric – the effort to reinforce traditional norms seemed almost frantic, as though in reality something very different was taking place.”<sup>27</sup> And, indeed, in many cases, something very different *was* taking place. During the 50s, the proportion of married women who worked outside the home rose dramatically. In 1940, married women had represented barely a third of all working women: by 1950, they had formed 52% of that group.<sup>28</sup> Indeed, as Carl Degler states: “This amazing increase in the number of married women who joined the work force during the 1950s and 60s also meant that for the first time in American history more women than men took jobs.”<sup>29</sup> Millions of married women had entered the work place, “thereby directly contradicting the popular stereotype.”<sup>30</sup> What is more, the biggest work increase was led by those who had allegedly found lasting contentment in home and domesticity – middle class wives and mothers like Jackson. Reality was diverging significantly from the innately conservative domestic “ideal” usually associated with the post war years. As Chafe has pointed out, “the most striking feature of the 1950s was the degree to which women continued to enter the job market and expand their sphere.”<sup>31</sup>

However, things were not quite as progressive as they may at first appear. The fact remained that it was still extremely difficult for women to “accept much in the way of advancement outside the family home.”<sup>32</sup> The vast majority of working women still occupied the lower levels of the economic pyramid, and matters remained that way even up to and including the 1960s and 1970s.<sup>33</sup> Women also tended to take

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<sup>27</sup> Chafe 123.

<sup>28</sup> Degler 418.

<sup>29</sup> Carl N. Degler. *At Odds: Women and the Family in America from the Revolution to the Present*. (New York: Oxford, 1980).

<sup>30</sup> Chafe 125.

<sup>31</sup> Chafe 123.

<sup>32</sup> Patterson 368.

<sup>33</sup> Degler 423.

up highly segregated, traditionally “feminine” positions, generally low paid, low skill jobs in which few or no men were ever employed – working as secretaries, typists, maids, cashiers, nurses, kindergarten teachers and waitresses – jobs that were badly paid, usually part time, and with little opportunity for professional advancement. It seemed that whilst it may have confounded many of the personal stereotypes, women’s working patterns during the 50s, rather than increasing women’s autonomy within the family, was often entered into to support the family.<sup>34</sup> Degler even suggests that: “in spite of the transformation after World War Two, women’s relation to the family remained as primary and central as it had ever been. It was now combined with work...but that outside job was secondary and supplemental to the family, which still remained the primary concern and sphere of most women.”<sup>35</sup>

Nevertheless, although few women were lucky enough to have a career as financially rewarding and creatively fulfilling as Shirley Jackson, the fact remains that some significant cracks had appeared in the facade of 50s domestic ideology. As Malin Pereria has noted, in *The Feminine Mystique*, Betty Friedan had outlined the famous “problem that has no name” – one of the consequences of which was “the division of women into image and self, inside and outside.”<sup>36</sup> In other words, the everyday reality of women’s lives and the ideal to which they tried to conform were incongruent, “because the image of the pretty, perfect housewife was fundamentally a fiction.”<sup>37</sup> It’s an observation that again brings to mind Jackson’s frustrated anger towards having to write “dainty little biographical things pretending that I am a trim little housewife stirring up appetising messes over a wood stove.” If millions of American women were forced, either by financial necessity, boredom, or simply the

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<sup>34</sup> Degler 430.

<sup>35</sup> Degler 430.

<sup>36</sup> Malin Pereria, *Embodying Beauty: Twentieth Century American Women's Writers Aesthetics* (New York: Garland, 2000) 66.

<sup>37</sup> Pereria 66.

desire for a more independent lifestyle to take up positions within the workplace, their very presence in that sphere alone, regardless of the reasons or circumstances, drew attention to this gap between image and reality. It suggested that the fundamental tenets of the conservative focus upon domesticity and family values were not entirely realistic in other important respects as well.

This tension between “modern” and “feminine” roles – between work and family, image and day-to-day reality – would also be the source of severe role conflict for American women during this period.<sup>38</sup> After all, as the two Jackson extracts cited earlier would suggest, society would frequently be unwilling to accept that a woman could be both wife, mother, and gainfully employed outside the home as well. The “feminine mystique” had left women with an extremely limited range of societal sanctioned options: they could either be “fulfilled” women as housewives and mothers, or they could be unmarried, unattractive (as the stereotype suggested) career women. “Having it all” was not yet an option. Which meant, as Elizabeth Long has suggested in her survey of popular novels and the American dream, that “for women, success in any career other than wife and mother is problematic.”<sup>39</sup> It was an attitude both informed and reinforced by the women’s magazines of the day, an issue that Betty Friedan would devote an entire chapter to in *The Feminine Mystique*. With an economy and bitterness born of great anger, Friedan cited the relentless promotion of what she scathingly dubbed “The Happy Housewife Heroine” as a crucial element of the creation of the so-called “Feminine Mystique.” According to Friedan, the images which American women during the 1950s and early 60s lived by – “the college girl in love, the suburban housewife with an up-and-coming husband and a station wagon

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<sup>38</sup> Pereria 67.

<sup>39</sup> Elizabeth Long, *The American Dream and the Popular Novel* (Boston, Routledge, 1985) 76.



full of children”<sup>40</sup> were created by advertisements, television, movies, novels, columns in newspapers and books – the entire force of mass culture designed to reinforce conservative social norms, to “shape women’s lives and mirror their dreams.”<sup>41</sup> She reserved particular scorn for the images of womanhood that came from the women’s magazines of the era, stating that much of the impetus for *The Feminine Mystique* came from the fact that she could no longer “fit the quiet desperation of so many modern American women into the picture of the modern American housewife that I was helping to create, writing for the women’s magazines.”<sup>42</sup>

As part of her research for the book, Friedan spent several days in the New York public library, looking at a range of women’s magazines from the previous twenty years. What she found, she later wrote, “was a change in the image of the American woman, and in the boundaries of the woman’s world as sharp and puzzling as the change revealed in cores of sediment.”<sup>43</sup> Friedan found that the image of the woman that emerged from the “big, pretty magazines” of the 50s was “young and frivolous; almost childlike; fluffy and feminine; passive; gaily content in a world of kitchen and bedroom.”<sup>44</sup> In addition, the “only goal a woman is permitted is the pursuit of a man.” Magazines intended for women who had at the very least graduated high school, and in many cases had attended college, contained “almost no mention of the world beyond the home,” because, after all, if a woman’s appointed role in life was to serve as mother and wife, housekeeper and moral exemplar, what need had she to learn of the world beyond her brightly painted kitchen walls?

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<sup>40</sup> Friedan 30.

<sup>41</sup> Friedan 30.

<sup>42</sup> Friedan 30.

<sup>43</sup> Friedan 34.

<sup>44</sup> Friedan 34.

Yet, as recently as 1939, Friedan noted, the heroines of magazine stories and articles were invariably bold “New Women,” independent, adventurous and idealistic, women with careers, goals and ambitions far beyond the domestic sphere. In fact, “these New Women were almost never housewives...their stories usually ended before they had children. They were young, because the future was open.”<sup>45</sup> This independence was also reflected in women’s humour of the pre-world war two period, when, during the twenties and thirties, “a more urban and urbane humour became the vogue, and domesticity as defined by household tasks and childbearing briefly retreated to the background, to be replaced by another aspect of women’s lives – women’s relationships with men.”<sup>46</sup>

However, as Nancy Walker has shown, the Second World War and its subsequent suburban movement (discussed in considerable detail in chapter two) had “led women back to the kitchen to be fulfilled as wives and mothers, effectively negating those tentative steps towards gender equality that had been made previously.”<sup>47</sup> This was the movement that Friedan would famously dub the cult of “the feminine mystique,” the credo which:

...beneath the sophisticated trappings simply makes certain concrete, finite, domestic aspects of feminine existence – as it was lived by women whose lives were confined, by necessity, to cooking, cleaning, washing, bearing children – into a religion, a pattern by which all women must now live or deny their femininity.<sup>48</sup>

The change in expectations of American womanhood from the fast talking career girls of the thirties to the pretty, passive housewife of the fifties was “a transformation

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<sup>45</sup> Friedan 35.

<sup>46</sup> Nancy Walker, *A Very Serious Thing: Women’s Humour and American Culture* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1988) 46.

<sup>47</sup> Walker 5.

<sup>48</sup> Friedan 38.

reflected in the pages of the women's magazines" and in the creation of "The Happy Housewife heroine," in the pages of those magazines, a fictional creation who, in Friedan's words, "seems to get younger all the time, in looks and in childlike dependence" and must remain young, because their own image ends in childbirth. The Happy Housewife heroine must continue to produce babies year after year, because "the Feminine Mystique says there is no other way for a woman to be a heroine."<sup>49</sup>

Friedan was mostly referring to the bland, idealised female characters that populated the fictional stories and articles published in women's magazines of the 50s – pieces with titles like "The Sandwich Maker," "Femininity Begins at Home," "Do Women Have to Talk so Much?" and "Really a Man's world, Politics" – titles which say all one really needs to know about the kind of passive, limited ideal that women were being pressured into modelling themselves upon. Friedan also noted that whilst "serious fiction writers of either sex disappeared from the mass-circulation women's magazines," a "new breed of women writers began to write about themselves as if they were "just housewives," revelling in a comic world of children's pranks and eccentric washing machines and parent's night at the P.T.A." Shirley Jackson features prominently in the list of domestic humour writers that Friedan goes on to discuss, who are duly condemned for "denying the lives they lead, not as housewives, but as individuals."<sup>50</sup> Friedan reluctantly concedes that:

...some of their work is funny. But there is something about housewife writers that isn't funny – like Uncle Tom or Amos and Andy. "Laugh," the Housewife writers tell the real housewife, "if you are feeling desperate, empty, bored...isn't it funny? We're all in the same trap."<sup>51</sup>

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<sup>49</sup> Friedan 59.

<sup>50</sup> Friedan 50.

<sup>51</sup> Friedan 50.

The “housewife writers” are therefore angrily taken to task for what Friedan sees as the trivialisation of an inherently oppressive situation that millions of American women have found themselves in – and for implying a sense of sisterhood and solidarity that doesn’t really exist, because the writers of such pieces really live lives much more challenging and fulfilling than those of the frustrated women they ally themselves with in print. Friedan bitterly asks:

Do real housewives...think their frustrated abilities and limited lives are a joke? Shirley Jackson makes the beds, loves and laughs at her son – and writes another book. Jean Kerr’s plays are produced on Broadway. The joke is not on them.<sup>52</sup>

Friedan would probably therefore have been rather surprised to learn that Jackson had an even lower opinion of her own domestic writing than that expressed by Friedan in *The Feminine Mystique*, and that, ironically, the burden of having to churn out a humorous piece every month for women’s magazines soon began to weigh upon Jackson almost as much as the burdens of housekeeping and childrearing.

As Darryl Hattenhauer, amongst others, has noted, Jackson’s writings were amongst the most lucrative of her time: “her novels were bestsellers. There were movie deals on two of those novels (*The Bird’s Nest* and *The Haunting of Hill House*) ...Jackson got a minimum of one thousand dollars for each short story and article appearing in a mass market magazine: the average fee was probably much more.”<sup>53</sup> Much of Jackson’s financial success arose from her frequent appearance in the women’s magazines of the fifties. “The editors...knew that Jackson’s name on the cover meant higher sales” and were willing to pay premium prices in order to secure her contribution. Jackson’s 1949 contract with “Good Housekeeping” meant that she

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<sup>52</sup> Friedan 51.

<sup>53</sup> Hattenhauer 19.

received a large fixed fee in order to produce eight mass market stories a year and was so lucrative that it enabled the family to move from New York to New England. As a result, Jackson, perhaps unwittingly, became one of the decades leading writers of so-called “Housewife Humour.”

Just as 1950s female fashion showcased a fussy, ultra feminine style of clothing that exaggerated the maternal aspects of the female form and restricted movement in a manner not seen since the late nineteenth century, so too did women’s humour follow a similarly regressive trend. As Nancy Walker has persuasively shown in her analysis of women’s humour and American culture, the 50s generation of female humorists (including Jackson) “wrote about the domestic life of the woman in terms that were strikingly similar to those of their nineteenth century counterparts.”<sup>54</sup> As Walker has said: “the bridge club and the PTA replaced the sewing circle; and the beauty parlour the dressmaker, but the separation of men’s and women’s lives was as distinct as it had been a hundred years before.”<sup>55</sup> The post-war suburban ideal that led many middle-class women out of the cities, “the labour saving devices that merely elevated the expectations for women as homemakers, and the virtual isolation of women from commuting husbands all helped promote that particular sub genre of domestic humour that shows women interacting more often with girl scout cookies and matchless socks than with ideas.”<sup>56</sup>

The sub genre Nancy Walker has dubbed “The Domestic Saga” is generally characterised as “an account of a female persona in a domestic setting struggling to cope with the many demands of her role as homemaker.”<sup>57</sup> The domestic saga originated in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century, in the work of Caroline Kirkland and Fanny Fern,

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<sup>54</sup> Walker 48

<sup>55</sup> Walker 48.

<sup>56</sup> Walker 49.

<sup>57</sup> Walker 51.

but “reached its fullest flowering in mid-twentieth century works such as *The Egg and I* by Betty McDonald, Jean Kerr’s *Please Don’t Eat the Daisies* and Shirley Jackson’s *Life Amongst the Savages*.”<sup>58</sup> Appropriately enough, given the direction that American gender relations would take in the post-war era, the full length domestic saga became popular in 1945, with the publication of McDonald’s *The Egg and I*, in which, according to Walker, “the anguish of a woman attempting to be a model housewife is close beneath the surface of the comedy.” Jackson’s volumes followed in 1953 and 1957 respectively, whilst Jean Kerr had her greatest success also in 1957 with the publication of *Please Don’t Eat the Daisies*,<sup>59</sup> which, much as in Jackson’s case, was compiled from a series of articles written for fashion magazines. It’s also interesting to note that whilst all three books inevitably deal with the daily trials and tribulations of a housewife, in each case the text begins with the heroine and her family being transplanted from the big city to an unfamiliar rural environment – both Jackson and Kerr begin by detailing moves from the stimulating bustle of New York city to the relative wilds of New England, whilst McDonald’s book details her struggles to adjust following her husband’s decision to swap life and the city for life as a chicken farmer. As well as providing an obvious starting point for each episodic narrative, the move away from the city and towards the countryside chronicled by the narrator of each of these texts also parallels the move towards suburbia that most of their audience would have experienced, and the isolation and unfamiliarity that often followed, and therefore each book would have created from the outset a sense of sympathy and fellowship with their target audience.

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<sup>58</sup> Walker 48.

<sup>59</sup> Made into a popular film in 1960, which inevitably starred Doris Day, the decade’s filmic epitome of the “Happy Housewife Heroine” – blonde, maternal, and relentlessly cheerful.

Jackson was under no illusions about the quality or significance of her domestic sketches: she was “appreciative of their salability, but considered them potboilers.”<sup>60</sup> Her first volume of domestic humour, *Savages*, was published in 1953, bookended by Jackson’s two intense explorations of psychological breakdown and (apparent) recovery, *Hangsaman* and *The Bird’s Nest*. It’s an oddly revealing juxtaposition in itself, demonstrating both Jackson’s range and suggesting the close relationship between two of her favourite subjects – madness and domesticity. *Savages*, like its sequel *Raising Demons*, consisted of a series of humorous extended anecdotes that had in many cases previously been published in short story form – for instance, “Charles” probably Jackson’s most famous and frequently anthologised humorous piece first appeared in *Mademoiselle* in July 1948: “My Son and the Bully” featured in *Good Housekeeping* whilst other stories were placed in *Harpers* – popular mass publications directed mainly towards women.<sup>61</sup> For book length publication, the stories were arranged chronologically, given added description, and worked in alongside several previously unpublished pieces into an episodic family memoir.<sup>62</sup> Jackson’s magazine pieces had proved to be highly popular: and *Savages* duly became a bestseller.

Whilst it is difficult to believe that an author as pragmatic and ambitious as Jackson would entirely rue her own considerable success, there is certainly a strong note of defensive self-deprecation apparent in her own opinion, in which her domestic humour is seen as a lucrative, but embarrassing sideline: definitely not “real work.” Responding to a letter from her parents that had criticised the quality of her humorous pieces, Jackson wrote: “I quite agree with you...they are written for money and the reason they sound so bad is because these magazines won’t buy good ones, but

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<sup>60</sup> Friedman 145.

<sup>61</sup> Friedman 145.

<sup>62</sup> Wylie Hall 75.

deliberately seek out bad stuff because they say their audiences want it.”<sup>63</sup> At a rate of at least a thousand dollars a story, Jackson felt that she “could not afford to try to change the state of popular fiction today, and since they will buy quite as much of it as I write, I do one story a month and spend the rest of the time working on my new novel or other stories.”<sup>64</sup>

Jackson was not alone in being able to find an audience for her work in both “serious” and “popular” outlets. As Joan Wylie Hall has observed, several of Jackson’s contemporaries also published not only in the *New Yorker*, but also in mass market magazines – John Cheever featured in *Mademoiselle*, and Ray Bradbury in *Charm*, whilst Jean Kerr was, as already noted, a successful playwright whose work had been produced on Broadway. However, Jackson was “unusual for publishing so regularly in many of the magazines directed exclusively at a female readership...her name is the only one that is now at all familiar in issue after issue of *Good Housekeeping* and *Ladies Home Journal*.”<sup>65</sup> Jackson’s ability to prosper in both highbrow and popular markets was admired by none other than Sylvia Plath, who, as biographer Linda Wagner-Martin has noted, hoped to meet Jackson in June 1953 during her summer internship at *Mademoiselle*, and aspired towards a similar career path.<sup>66</sup> It is not entirely unusual, according to Nancy Walker, for writers previously known for serious literature to turn to the comic for varying purposes. Edna St. Vincent Millay published successful humorous skits for years in fashionable magazines like *Vogue* under the pseudonym “Nancy Boyd.” During the 1920s and 30s, Dorothy Parker interspersed her famous brand of sardonic wit published in fashionable magazines with more literary writing which suggested that the

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<sup>63</sup> Oppenheimer 145.

<sup>64</sup> Wylie Hall 75.

<sup>65</sup> Wylie Hall xiii.

<sup>66</sup> See Wagner-Martin 97; also cited by Wylie Hall xxi, and Hattenhauer 202.



independent and often reckless life of the much vaunted “New Woman” often came at a terrible price. Like Jackson, Parker considered her famously sarcastic columns and quips a mere adjunct to the “serious” business of writing short stories and poems, and was often eager, especially in later life, to disassociate herself from such work entirely. In a similar vein, Jackson’s dismissive attitude towards her own brand of domestic humour, whilst partly due to simple embarrassment towards the act of writing accessible “junk” for purely materialistic reasons, may, like Parker’s reaction, have also been due to the suspicion that success in this popular, “female” field would have a negative impact upon the critical response to her “real” work. It was a suspicion that would prove to be well founded. As Joan Wylie Hall has stated, “Jackson’s discovery of an appealing formula and a lucrative market distracted critical attention from the balance of her short fiction, which was much more important to her.”<sup>67</sup> The inability of traditional male critics to understand how a serious writer of Jackson’s calibre – especially one who specialised in Gothic tales – could also publish housewife humour in magazines like *Good Housekeeping* is also cited by Lynette Carpenter as one of the principal reasons for the lack of posthumous interest in Jackson’s work that has existed until very recently.<sup>68</sup> It’s interesting to note, as Linda Wagner-Martin does in her study of *The Mid Century American Novel*, that “the most important female fiction writers at mid-century were at one time considered popular writers rather than serious ones – Shirley Jackson and Jean Stafford in particular.”<sup>69</sup> Commercial success, she observes, perhaps unfairly, has rarely been a problem that affects the reception given “serious” male writers: according to Wagner-Martin, “Hemingway and Fitzgerald had no difficulty being

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<sup>67</sup> Wylie Hall xiii.

<sup>68</sup> See Carpenter 143.

<sup>69</sup> Linda Wagner-Martin, *The Mid-Century American Novel 1930-1960* (New York: Twayne, 1990).

profitable and serious simultaneously.”<sup>70</sup> It’s perhaps more accurate to say that this is an issue that can cause problems for authors in general, but which becomes especially pressing if one is a female writing in a particularly “feminine” genre such as domestic humour or faintly disreputable category such as gothic fiction.

However, as I shall demonstrate during this chapter, such outmoded and narrow minded attitudes towards Jackson’s fiction in general and her domestic humour in particular are no longer appropriate. Until fairly recently, it was relatively easy for critics, like Jackson herself, to dismiss *Savages* and *Demons* as “lucrative potboilers” and neglect to pay these narratives the attention they deserve. However, in recent years, critics like Nancy Walker have shown that during the 1950s, as at other times, “Women’s humour is an index to women’s roles and values; and particularly to their relationship with American cultural realities.”<sup>71</sup> Whilst Betty Friedan may have seen “Housewife Humour” as a kind of collaboration or at least implicit endorsement, of the social system that was oppressing American women because, in her opinion, it belittled the desperation of the very women who read it, more recent (and temperate) theorists such as Walker and Nancy Cott have persuasively suggested that “even highly conventional literary treatments of the Housewife functioned unintentionally to increase female awareness.”<sup>72</sup>

According to Walker, the housewives depicted by writers such as Jackson, Kerr, and Erma Bombeck (who began to write newspaper columns during the mid 1960s) who cannot reach perfection are in this situation not because of their own stupidity or incompetence but because “the standards for their performance are impossibly high.” It is “not the housewives who are failures, but a social system – including the media –

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<sup>70</sup> Wagner-Martin 108.

<sup>71</sup> Walker 6.

<sup>72</sup> Emory Elliott and Cathy N. Davidson, *The Columbia History of the American Novel* “Chapter Six: Society and Identity” (New York: Columbia University Press, 1991) 509.

that makes women solely responsible for the functioning of the household and sets impossibly high standards for their performance.”<sup>73</sup> From this perspective therefore, “housewife humour” is not, as Friedan states, a kind of exploitation of female desperation and unhappiness by other women, who, by dint of their own career success and talent, are themselves anything but typical; but rather a significant chronicle of the American woman’s “self perceived inability to meet a set of culturally determined standards for her role as homemaker” – a reflection of the inevitable conflict between fulfilment of this role and the woman’s sense of her own performance.<sup>74</sup> Indeed, impossibility is reflected in the titles of many of the most popular domestic humour texts: as has already been noted, Jackson refers to her children as “Savages” and “Demons”; Jean Kerr’s *How to Be Perfect* is “an ironically titled account of just the opposite,” Bombeck’s *Aunt Erma’s Cope Book* is subtitled “How to get from Monday to Friday in Twelve days.” whilst most overt of all is Peg Bracken’s *The I Hate to Cook Book*.<sup>75</sup> Such titles encapsulated the contrast that existed between the “official” ideal of how a woman’s life was supposed to be and the unofficial attitude that women had towards their own circumstances.<sup>76</sup> In Jackson’s apparently innocuous family chronicles, as in those of her contemporaries, the daily details and frustrations of motherhood and housekeeping were raised to the absurdity of slapstick comedy, yet “throughout the book(s) are strong suggestions that the life of the average housewife is repetitive and demeaning.”

Nancy Cott has even suggested that despite outward appearances, conservative ideologies can have liberating social consequences. According to her famous play on words, “the bonds of womanhood” that bound women to an oppressive ideology of

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<sup>73</sup> Walker 11.

<sup>74</sup> Walker 51.

<sup>75</sup> Walker 31.

<sup>76</sup> Walker 31.

hearth and home also bound them together as women. It has been suggested that we view the domestic fiction of the cold war period in the same light.<sup>77</sup>

All suburban novels reinforced clichés about the importance of the family and of the mother's role as nurturer and moral exemplar. Yet their comic tone established a conspiratorial relationship to their audience...in so defining "Housewife" as a job and as an object of literature, these novels set the stage for Friedan's subsequent critique of society's evaluation of that job. Only after readers recognised that they were housewives could they decide whether or nor "housewife" was something that they wanted to be.

Contrary to Freidan's impassioned indictment of "housewife humour" therefore, it is perhaps more accurate to refute her assertion that the "joke" of the domestic sub genre is squarely upon the millions of women trapped at home, and instead say that such writing became a means of sharing laughter at the absurd gap between the way women were supposed to be and the way things actually were. It was also a way of establishing valuable bonds of fellow feeling, of saying that the desperation and sense of absurdity depicted in their pages was not a phenomenon confined to the odd, isolated individual but a much wider, deeper problem, a reflection, as Walker has said, not of "the individual failure of an individual woman" but rather a "symptom of a society wide structure of power and powerlessness," that women were at last, and in great numbers, beginning to recognise.

Having discussed the manner in which the "housewife humour" of the 1950s, despite outward appearances, frequently exposed the flaws and damaging effects of contemporary domestic ideology, I shall now conclude by examining the relationship between Jackson's writing in that field and her Gothic fiction. In the following section, I shall discuss the manner in which Jackson's two volumes of Domestic

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<sup>77</sup> Elliott 506.

humour dramatise in (generally) more benign fashion many of the most salient cultural anxieties previously highlighted in her Gothic fiction.

Given the fact that domesticity was one of Jackson's most pervasive fictional themes, it's hardly surprising that there should be a great deal of crossover between the two modes of writing. After all, as James Egan has put it: "one of Jackson's favourite but least discussed motifs is the domestic, the familial and the rituals associated with it...An awareness of Jackson's treatment of the familial and its opposite not only allows us to examine the ways in which she transforms the domestic into horrific, but the evolution of her world view as well..."<sup>78</sup> As Egan indicates in his article, Jackson's use of the domestic is one of the keys to understanding her work, but it is a subject that, as he puts it, has rarely been discussed in any great detail. I intend to help rectify this imbalance by demonstrating that just as Jackson's "gothic" texts frequently dramatised the (particularly female) fears and pressures of the 1950s, so too did her domestic volumes. As Lynette Carpenter has noted, despite the fact that "traditional" critics could not reconcile Jackson's domestic humour with what they considered her more serious work, the two modes of writing actually have much in common:

In fact, the sketches display some of the same preoccupations as Jackson's fiction – her interest in the psychology of women and children, her fascination with fantasy worlds and characters, as well as with split or multiple personalities, and her appreciation of irony – but the tone is clearly different.<sup>79</sup>

Whilst these similarities, as I've indicated, have been noted on a few occasions, they have yet to be investigated in any real detail. The earliest in-depth discussion of Jackson's domestic humour is Lenemaja Friedman's 1973 study of Jackson: though

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<sup>78</sup> James Egan, "Sanctuary: Shirley Jackson's Domestic and Fantastic Parables," *Studies in Weird Fiction* 6, (Fall 1989) 15-24.

<sup>79</sup> Carpenter 144.

she devotes a brief chapter to the subject, Friedman's analysis is fairly brief and mostly consists of potted retellings of various Jackson anecdotes from *Savages* and *Demons*. In her much more recent study of *Shirley Jackson: The Short Fiction*, Joan Wylie Hall undertakes a much more interesting analysis, but only a couple of extracts are discussed and not in any great detail. Perhaps the most useful discussions of Jackson's domestic humour have been in Nancy Walker's book length study of American Women's humour, and in the previously cited articles by Lynette Carpenter and James Egan. Generally though, just as critical examination of Jackson's fiction has tended to be confined to discussion of "The Lottery" and *Hill House*, analysis of the family chronicles has tended to confine itself to a single extract – the story "Charles" first published in magazine form in 1948, but later published in *The Lottery and Other Stories* and then integrated into *Savages*. "Charles" is the most popular and frequently reprinted of Jackson's family stories, probably in part because it provides the most obvious example of Jackson's Gothic sensibilities given (benign) expression in her domestic humour. It also, as several commentators have pointed out, showcases Jackson's interest in the dramatic possibilities provided by multiple and split personalities, a preoccupation that would of course be given its most comprehensive treatment in the novels *Hangsaman* (1951) and *The Bird's Nest* (1954).

"Charles" begins unassumingly enough, with the as always unnamed narrator (ostensibly Jackson herself) watching her eldest son Laurie leave for his first morning at school, "seeing clearly that an era of my life was ended, my sweet-voiced nursery tot replaced by a long trousered, swaggering character who forgot to stop at the corner and wave goodbye to me."<sup>80</sup> Whilst a conventional enough account of a child's first morning of school, the narrator's sadness at the end of this stage in her child's

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<sup>80</sup> Jackson, *Savages* 25.

development is perhaps also a subtle sense of foreboding regarding the inevitable consequence of the post war era's emphasis upon motherhood and child bearing – what Barbara Ehrenrich has called the “Reproductive Consensus.” Given these circumstances, what would become of a mother whose children no longer needed her? After all, according to the precepts by which American women were expected to live their lives during this period, their principal purpose in life had already been fulfilled. Therefore, even an apparently innocuous milestone such as that recorded in “Charles” could also serve as a reminder that a woman's days of fertility, and therefore usefulness, would one day come to an end. As Glenna Matthews has stated:

There could be no more cruel reminder of the essential uselessness of the older woman in the culture of consumption than the reduction of the last several decades of a woman's life to a “desert of wasted time.”<sup>81</sup>

The narrator's son soon starts arriving home with tales of a classmate named Charles who is constantly getting himself into trouble. Amongst several other misdeeds, Charles hits the teacher, kicks one of her friends, throws chalk, and makes a classmate cry by hitting him in the stomach. By the third week of kindergarten, stories of his misdeeds have become so familiar that, as the narrator says, “Charles was an institution in our family.”<sup>82</sup> Laurie's parents naturally become extremely curious about this disruptive child's unfortunate parents, so at the P.T.A. meeting, the narrator sets out to encounter Charles's mother: “At the meeting I sat restlessly, scanning each comfortable matronly face, trying to determine which one hid the secret of Charles. None of them looked to me haggard enough.”<sup>83</sup> The denouement comes after the meeting, when, having unsuccessfully failed to find Charles' mother, the narrator pauses for a conversation with her son's kindergarten teacher. To her immense

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<sup>81</sup> Matthews 208.

<sup>82</sup> Jackson, *Savages* 28.

<sup>83</sup> Jackson, *Savages* 30.

surprise, the narrator is told that Laurie has had some problems in adjusting to school during his initial weeks there. The narrator nervously tries to laugh this off by saying, “I suppose this time it’s Charles’s influence” – and is shocked when the puzzled teacher responds by saying “We don’t have any Charles in the kindergarten.” The twist in the tale – the belated revelation that Laurie and Charles are the same person – is here played for laughs: but in other Jackson texts, this kind of discovery is chilling. Jackson’s second novel *Hangsaman* features the exact same twist: we discover about three quarters of the way in that Natalie Waite’s “friend” Tony is a figment of her highly disturbed imagination. This revelation, like the ironic reversal of the narrator’s expectations in “Charles” forces us suddenly to view everything that has gone before in an entirely new light. The shocking climax of Jackson’s most famous fictional tale, “The Lottery” inspires a similar process of reconsideration by the reader.

One can therefore easily understand why “Charles” has proved such a popular topic for discussion – especially in the more general surveys of Jackson’s work. For example, the recent introductory study of Jackson edited by Harold Bloom and intended for use of American colleges and high schools features devotes several pages to this story, alongside, inevitably, *The Haunting* and “The Lottery”, but leaves the rest of Jackson’s oeuvre undiscussed<sup>84</sup>. However, whilst “Charles” may be the most famous example of crossover between Jackson’s two modes of discourse, but it is by no means the only one. For instance, as I made clear in Chapter Two, Houses and the home constitute one of the most important preoccupations in Jackson’s fiction. What has been almost entirely overlooked until now is the extent to which the way in which the family houses are depicted in the domestic humour both anticipates and parallels Jackson’s more famous fictional explorations of the same theme.

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<sup>84</sup> See Harold Bloom, ed. *Shirley Jackson: Bloom’s Major Short Story Writers*. (New York: Chelsea House, 2001).



*Savages* begins with a line that immediately highlights Jackson's interest in houses: "Our house is old, and noisy, and full."<sup>85</sup> It's hardly surprising that Jackson should choose to begin in this fashion, because the house is, as I've indicated, such an important element of both Gothic and domestic fiction. I've previously written about the importance of the "haunted" house in Gothic fiction, from the genre's very origins to the present day, as a setting simply laden with symbolism and potential meaning. As for the centrality of the home in women's humorous writing, as Nancy Walker has said: "Because the focus of most women's lives has been the home, it is natural that much of their humour should be located there."<sup>86</sup>

As previously noted, *Savages* opens with a prolonged description of the laborious process of moving house – in this case, a move from New York city to the New England countryside that would be replicated upon many occasions in Jackson's fictional stories. Hill House begins with Eleanor's fateful drive from the city to the malevolent setting where she will meet her dramatic end: stories such as "The Flower Garden" "The Renegade" and "The Summer People" (all published in *The Lottery*) similarly depict city dwellers trying to adjust to life in the often unwelcoming countryside. *Savages* opens with the sense that the narrator and her husband have fallen into a particular way of life – that of apparently cosy, but cheerfully chaotic domesticity – without ever really intending to end up this way. It is an arrangement treated light-heartedly enough by Jackson, but, whilst aiming for comedy, she also, inadvertently or otherwise, uses a metaphor that suggests entrapment, not contentment whilst describing their situation:

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<sup>85</sup> Jackson, *Savages* 7.

<sup>86</sup> Walker 6.

This is the way of life my husband and I have fallen into, inadvertently, as though we had fallen into a well and decided that since there was no way out we might as well stay there and set up a chair and a desk and a light of some kind...<sup>87</sup>

Even from the apparently humorous opening therefore is the sense of a life out of control – of events happening without a person really being consciously aware of it – and a hint of the kind of futile sense of panic that so often infects Eleanor during *Hill House* and the heroines of stories such as “The Demon Lover” and “The Tooth.” It is a feeling exacerbated by the circumstances in which we are told the family had to move from New York – the landlord simply rented their apartment to someone else and gave them a week’s notice. Having decided upon a move to Vermont (biographical source suggest that in actuality, Jackson had become prone to severe panic attacks and was no longer able to cope with the rigours of New York life – a problem that, as we shall soon see, she frequently fictionalised), the newcomers are manoeuvred into leasing a large, old house by the canny locals of a small Vermont town. Like Jackson’s fictional houses, this one has unusual architectural properties: a product, like the Halloran House in *Sundial* of the classical revival, built by a local doctor in 1820 and modelled after a “minor Greek temple”, the history of this house, like those fictionalised by Jackson in *Hill House*, *Sundial* and *Castle*, is closely linked to the history of the town itself.

When Eleanor Vance first views Hill House, she experiences an immediate, visceral dislike for the building, and immediately declares it vile. It is a moment of revulsion as heartfelt and startling as though she had accidentally stepped upon a slug or discovered a rotting corpse. Eleanor’s powerful first impressions are interestingly described in almost the same terms as those of the narrator of *Savages* when she first

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<sup>87</sup> Jackson, *Savages* 7.

enters *her* new home. As she and her husband view a kitchen “where a monumental ironwork stove threatened to fall on us,”<sup>88</sup> the narrator spots a table with “two hideous doughnuts” laid out on it. She is suddenly, like Eleanor, stricken with a feverent desire to flee: “I’m sorry we stayed,” I said to my husband earnestly, my hands shaking as I looked at the two hideous doughnuts.” The narrator’s extreme reaction is described in terms very similar to those of a sudden panic attack, as is Eleanor’s instinctual response to Hill House:

I should have turned back at the gate, Eleanor thought. The house had caught her with an atavistic turn in the pit of the stomach, and she looked along the lines of its roofs, fruitlessly trying to locate the badness, whatever dwelt there; her hands turned nervously cold so that she fumbled, trying to take out a cigarette, and beyond everything else she was afraid, listening to the sick voice inside her which whispered, *Get away from here, get away...*<sup>89</sup>

Yet just as Eleanor resists her initial instincts and enters Hill House, so too does the narrator of *Savages*. It seems that the Fielding house is the last suitable place in town; moreover, the elderly leaseholder presumes without being asked that the family are going to move in and offers them the place for an absurdly cheap rent. The narrator, still doubtful, blames her husband for making the decision to rent: “‘You seem to have taken the house,’ I said unjustly to my husband. ‘It’s probably because we went inside,’ he said. ‘No one else has ever gone inside and that probably constitutes a lease.’”<sup>90</sup> However, despite the narrator’s deep misgivings, when the family return a few weeks later in order to move in, they find that the house has been transformed: “literally scraped clean; down to the wood in the walls, straightened up, painted and repaired.” Upon seeing the house on this occasion, the narrator voices a completely different opinion: “It’s beautiful” – a remark that anticipates Eleanor’s similar *volte-*

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<sup>88</sup> Jackson, *Savages*, 17.

<sup>89</sup> Jackson, *Hill House* 35.

<sup>90</sup> Jackson, *Savages* 19.

*face* in Hill House and her remarks that “I don’t think we could leave now even if we wanted to.”<sup>91</sup> What’s most interesting about the opening of *Savages* is the manner in which Jackson, for the very outset, personifies her new home as a kind of living, thinking, entity with likes and dislikes, feelings and plans all of its own. The family’s new home has rooms that seem to choose where furniture should go, and instinctively prefers old things to those brought from the city:

All these things, the ones that had been in the house before, and other things which had been in similarly old houses and knew their ways, fell naturally into good positions in the rooms, as though snatching the best places before the city furniture could crowd in.<sup>92</sup>

Like Hill House, “not sane,” Jackson has imbued this building with life-like qualities and preferences. There is also the sense of an inevitable caving in to the demands of antiquity and of the countryside: the old furniture instinctively crowds out the newer, city possessions – yet another example of the rural/urban divide that appears so often in Jackson’s fiction. Similarly, the narrator and her family soon learn the futility of trying to impose human will upon their new home: “After a few vain attempts at imposing our own angular order on things with a consequent out-of-jointedness and *shrieking disharmony*...we gave into the old furniture and let things settle where they would<sup>93</sup>”(My Italics). It’s a statement that strongly recalls the non-Euclidian geometry of Hill House, a place whose unconventional dimensions make it a site of “clashing disharmony.” Jackson’s description of the chaos that results from human intervention in the house’s preferred order of things in *Savages* therefore clearly anticipates the subtly, though powerfully askew spatial dimensions of her most famous fictional building:

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<sup>91</sup> Jackson, *Hill House* 75.

<sup>92</sup> Jackson, *Savages* 21.

<sup>93</sup> Jackson, *Savages* 21.

No human eye can isolate the unhappy coincidence of line and place which suggests evil in the face of a house, and yet somehow a manic juxtaposition, a badly turned angle, some chance meeting of roof and sky, turned Hill House into a place of despair.<sup>94</sup>

The sickening disorientation that results from initial exposure to Hill House's skewed geometry initially provokes an immense sense of claustrophobia in Eleanor; even her bedroom, we are told has an "unbelievably faulty design which left it chillingly wrong in all its dimensions."<sup>95</sup> The similarities between the description of the houses in both texts are therefore obvious: with the Jackson family's eventual acceptance of the old furniture reminiscent of Eleanor's ultimate surrender to the malign intelligence of Hill house. There is however, one key difference: whilst Jackson would later say of Hill house that "a house arrogant and hating, never off guard, can only be evil," the home she and her family move into in *Savages* "was a good house, after all" – the benign flipside of her most notorious fictional edifice, the "sane" mirror image of Hill House, with an intelligence that is welcoming and benign rather than oppressive and malevolent – or at least *seems* to be, once its human inhabitants accede to its wishes.

The relationship between the two types of house also provides an important indication of how we should view Jackson's domestic humour in relation to her Gothic fiction. As Lynette Carpenter has noted, whilst the preoccupation may be the same – in this case the personification of a family home – it is the tone that constitutes the important difference. As we shall soon see, Jackson often describes events and conversations in such a manner that context and tone become key. If something is framed within the light-heartedly domestic context of Jackson's humour, than it is in that spirit that the reader is intended to take her remarks. Yet when removed from this

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<sup>94</sup> Jackson, *Hill House* 34.

<sup>95</sup> Jackson, *Hill House* 40.

reassuring context, or simply even looked at in more detail, we often see that Jackson discusses the same themes and preoccupations broached in her more “serious” fiction – and often using much the same type of language. Whether this kind of repetition was intentional or unintentional is difficult to say; nevertheless, the cosy façade of Jackson’s domestic humour has already been disturbed by its extremely close relationship to her gothic tales. If the reader has no knowledge of Jackson’s gothic fiction, they might well be mollified by the narrator’s reassuring pronouncement that “It *was* a good house after all”: but that significantly placed italic opens up another whole range of possibilities, and prompts us to wonder what would have happened had the narrator’s initial reaction to the house been correct? What if it had been a “bad” house? It’s a question that Jackson herself obviously found intriguing and would explore with considerable success only six years later in *Hill House*. What also seems clear is that even as Jackson’s domestic humour appears to uphold conventional assumptions, they are already being subtly undermined, if only by the manner in which her evocations of “happy” family life correspond to the language and descriptions employed in her gothic fiction.

It is also interesting to note that Jackson’s follow up to *Savages, Demons*, also opens with the process of moving home – from the very house discussed in the first text. This time, the clutter that inhabits the narrator’s household is simply too much to deal with, so again, without ever really making an active decision she and her family are subtly manoeuvred by the local community into purchasing a new home – thus provoking in the narrator “an extraordinary sense of inevitability.”<sup>96</sup> Again, as Jackson tells it, the family’s fate is most definitely not in their own hands: “I have not now the slightest understanding of the events which got us out of one big white house

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<sup>96</sup> Jackson, *Demons* 12.

which we rented and into another, bigger white house which we own.”<sup>97</sup> The narrator soon discovers the real reason why the local community was so eager to see them move; it transpires that a member of the old local family who had originally owned the Fielding house has returned to town and decided to reclaim her ancestral property in a particularly pushy manner. When this erstwhile scion arrives to inspect the property, she displays a sense of entitlement that shocks the narrator: “I thought someone had told you,” she said, “I was a Fielding before I was married...we are coming home again.”<sup>98</sup> It’s therefore clear that a preoccupation of Jackson’s fiction overlooked by Carpenter – her recurrent portrayals of the clash between newcomers from the city and long established, rural communities, is also present, albeit in much less sinister form, in the domestic humour.

In *Savages* and *Demons*, the network of gossip that inevitably fuels small town discourse is treated in fairly comedic fashion: for example, although the local people are encouraging a move of house for their own reasons, they help the narrators family find a new home very quickly because they know exactly what they’re looking for. The family’s situation, as the narrator discovers on a trip into town, is common local knowledge: “I was to learn later that the grocer not only knew our housing problems, but the ages and names of our children, the meat we had served for dinner the night before, and my husband’s income.”<sup>99</sup>

It’s not difficult to see why Jackson would later choose to fictionalise this uneasy relationship between newcomers and locals in her gothic fiction: whilst here played for laughs, the very same reservoir of local knowledge, can, with just a slight change of emphasis become downright disturbing. Consider, for instance, a shopping trip in another Jackson text: that which opens *Castle*. Merricat’s final foray into the local

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<sup>97</sup> Jackson, *Demons* 7.

<sup>98</sup> Jackson, *Demons* 10.

<sup>99</sup> Jackson, *Demons* 10.

village for supplies is an virtuoso exercise in paranoia and (apparently) mutual hatred, as Jackson depicts Merricat's psychotic hatred of the local people and their "prying" gaze. It's a scene that, as I've indicated in Chapter Four, was anticipated by the relationship between the arrogant Halloran clan and the resentful locals in *Sundial*, and then by Eleanor's deeply uncomfortable stop at a local coffee shop in *Hill House*. Similarly, Jackson explores the damage that local gossip can do in stories such as "The Flower Garden", "The Very Strange House Next Door" and "The Possibility of Evil."

However, as has been previously noted, Jackson's most obvious (and accomplished) exploration of the culture clash between rural New England and urban newcomers takes place in "The Summer People." In this story, an elderly couple who overstay their welcome in the countryside come to an uncertain, though no doubt sinister end. Though, in typical Jackson fashion, it is never explicitly stated, the locals seem to band together in a subtle, deadly alliance against the outsiders: the electricity to the old couple's cabin is cut, their car is sabotaged, trapping them, and their mail arrives late, with dirty fingerprints all over the envelope – "dirt" of course being one of Jackson's favourite adjectives when it comes to describing inhospitable small towns: both Merricat Blackwood and Eleanor Vance remark upon how "dirty" and "grey" their respective locales seem. It's therefore interesting to note that in *Demons*, the narrator's family briefly takes up residence in a summerhouse in another part of the state whilst their new home is being renovated. As the narrator tells us, "Our neighbours were almost all summer folk like ourselves, and agreeable, informal people."<sup>100</sup> Though the family soon move into their own home, there is always this sense, as in Jackson's fiction, of never truly belonging, of an unbridgeable gap

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<sup>100</sup> Jackson, *Demons* 15.



between newcomers and locals whose families have lived in the same place for generations. It is a preoccupation that would become more and more pronounced in Jackson's writing as the years passed and would reach its ultimate expression in the paranoid misanthropy of Merricat Blackwood in *Castle*.

Unsurprisingly enough, given that *Savages* and *Demons* both take the form of what Lenemaja Friedman has described as "family chronicles," Jackson's young children usually take centre stage. It's interesting to note that whilst mothers with small children crop up fairly frequently in Jackson's short stories (they appear on fewer than five occasions in *The Lottery and Other Stories*), not one of Jackson's six novelistic heroines is a mother. For that matter, as I've previously noted, the only married heroine of a Jackson novel is Angela Motorman, the protagonist of Jackson's never completed final novel *Come Along With Me* (1965): she too, however, is childless. The mothers who do appear in Jackson's novels are either ineffectual (*Hangsaman*), dead (*The Bird's Nest*, *Hill House*, *Castle*) or murderous and power crazed (*Sundial*). Ironically, the closest we get to a benign maternal figure in Jackson's novels is a sister – Constance Blackwood – or, at a stretch, *The Bird's Nest's* brusque but kind Aunt Morgen. Jackson's only sustained portrait of benign, conventional motherhood comes in the semi-autobiographical form of her domestic humour. However, it's important to remember that, as I stated earlier, Jackson wrote these family memoirs for wholly commercial reasons – and it's doubtful that during the 1950s anyone would have wanted to read about the adventures of a bad mother who neglected her children (although today, such memoirs seem very popular indeed). What I mean by this is that we must bear in mind that although Jackson's humour has its roots in reality, actual events have also been fictionalised, and purposely moulded into a form that would prove commercially successful. In that light it could be said that Jackson's "happy

housewife heroine” is as contrived a creation as any of her more obviously fictional characters.

Whilst the narrator’s children prove a useful source of anecdotes, they are also, like many of the children in Jackson’s fiction, simultaneously magical and frightening, as the narrator of *Savages* reflects:

Sometimes, in my capacity as a mother, I find myself sitting open mouthed and terrified before my own children, little individual creatures moving solidly along in their own paths and yet in some mysterious fashion vividly reminiscent of a past which my husband and I know we never communicated to them.<sup>101</sup>

Like the mothers in stories such as “The Witch” and “The Renegade,” the narrator has found herself suddenly able to see her own children with detached astonishment, and not a little hint of fear: perhaps because the appreciation of magic and insatiable curiosity that characterise children in Jackson’s world have their dark side also. For instance, the little boy on the train in “The Witch” laughs delightedly as a strange old man talks about beheading his sister. There is also the sense in Jackson’s writing that children can suddenly be diverted away from their parents by outside (“local”) influences – in *Demons*, the narrator worries that “The children were changing in the new house: they belonged to the town now.”<sup>102</sup> The same thought strikes the protagonist of “The Renegade” as she listens to her two children excitedly discuss gruesome methods of preventing the family dog from stealing chickens: “Mrs. Walpole looked at them, at her two children with their hard hands and their sunburned faces laughing together, their dog with blood still on her legs laughing with them.”<sup>103</sup>

Children also provide Jackson with ample opportunity to explore another of her favourite preoccupations: that of multiple personalities and identity slippage. The

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<sup>101</sup> Jackson, *Savages* 45.

<sup>102</sup> Jackson, *Demons* 85.

<sup>103</sup> Jackson, “The Renegade,” *The Lottery* 62.

most famous example of this in the family stories, is, as I've already discussed, "Charles." There are plenty of other such instances though: as Lenemaja Friedman and Joan Wylie Hall have both noted, Jackson's children in the family chronicles are constantly changing their names and adopting new, fantastic identities. For example, in *Savages* we are told that the narrator's eldest daughter Jannie has an imaginary friend named "Mrs Ellenroy": this incident, like that recounted in "Charles" obviously recalls Natalie's imaginary friend in *Hangsaman*. Jannie at one point also pretends to have forgotten her own name<sup>104</sup>; an identity loss anticipated by Jackson's earlier stories "The Tooth," "The Beautiful Stranger," and "Nightmare," all stories in which women suddenly find themselves cut off from reason, with little or no idea of who they really are and no way of returning to normality.

Jackson's youngest child, Barry, has many different names: "As soon as Barry was old enough to be regarded as a recognisable human being, with ideas and opinions, it became necessary to change him around."<sup>105</sup> As a result, the child soon learns to answer to a whole selection of names given to him by other members of the family:

Barry was clearly too formal a name, and we took to calling him B. B was too short however, and then he became Mr B, then Mr Beetle, and finally Mr Beekman. He stayed Mr Beekman until he was almost ready for nursery school, and then came round full circle, moving back to Mr B, then B, and at last to Barry again.<sup>106</sup>

Jackson's comment on this perpetual shifting of identities pretty much encapsulates the warning given by so many of her fictional creations: "Nothing is stable in this

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<sup>104</sup> Jackson, *Demons* 47.

<sup>105</sup> Jackson, *Demons* 70.

<sup>106</sup> Jackson, *Demons* 16.

world.”<sup>107</sup> There are also clear resonances with her fiction to be found in the narrator’s observation that her youngest daughter Sally spends her days “wandering perpetually in a misty odd world where familiar signs merged and changed as she passed.”<sup>108</sup> After all, what is the typical Jackson story but the tale of a wrong turn taken on a familiar road, the sudden transformation of everyday reality into sinister fantasy, the line between madness and reality crossed in an unwary instant? The sing-song doggerel frequently uttered by Sally also has clear echoes in the skewed world view and unconventional syntax of deranged Jackson heroines like Merricat Blackwood and Natalie Waite: at one point in *Demons*, Sally suddenly comes out with a statement that the narrator finds as disturbing as it is nonsensical:

“In my river,” Sally remarked once, chillingly, “we sleep in wet beds and hear our mothers calling us” – giving me a sudden, terrifying picture of my own face, leaning over the water, and my voice far away and echoing.<sup>109</sup>

Sally also at one point chants the question that has been asked by nearly every Jackson heroine at some point, if only of herself: “Do you know who I am?” Sally was singing on her head in the backseat, “Do you know who I am?” In this case the childish answer is surreal and baffling: “I’m a rat and you’re a fish,” Sally said, “and now you know who I am.”<sup>110</sup>

Much of this thesis has been spent exploring the idea that Shirley Jackson’s fictional texts actually have a great deal more to say about American culture and society during the 1950s than has previously been noted. One of the most significant preoccupations of Jackson’s fiction is her recurrent dramatisation of specifically female anxieties about the limited roles women were being forced into during the

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<sup>107</sup> Jackson, *Demons* 70.

<sup>108</sup> Jackson, *Demons* 148.

<sup>109</sup> Jackson, *Demons* 148.

<sup>110</sup> Jackson, *Demons* 149.

decade, and the detrimental effect unrealistic societal expectations were having upon them. These frustrations also appear in Jackson's domestic humour – but the apparently conservative context in which they appear makes such manifestations all the more significant.

Jackson's obvious frustration towards the life expected of a 1950s housewife did not really surface too explicitly in *Savages*, her first volume of domestic humour. Perhaps the most obvious expression of resistance to societal pressure came in the already cited scene in which Jackson recorded her farcical exchange with a midwife who refused to accept her self definition as a writer and insists upon recording her occupation as "housewife." However, it is in Jackson's second domestic saga, *Demons*, published four years later that the narrator's simmering anger and bitterness towards her lot as a housewife come bubbling to the surface of the text. This book, though fairly successful, did not achieve the popularity of the first. Jackson attributed its poorer reception to inadequate publicity;<sup>111</sup> but, as Judy Oppenheimer as observed, there may have been another reason: "Though funny and enjoyable, the book as a whole did not come off as well as *Savages* – the tone was more harried, at times even irritable, with more than a few rough edges. Occasionally a harsher reality broke through: Shirley's jealousy of Stanley, for instance, cropped up in no less than three episodes."<sup>112</sup> In other words, readers may well have been deterred by the definite hint of gall that had appeared where they had expected sugary evocations of happy family life. This trait emerges as early as Chapter Two, when Jackson unleashes an extraordinary rant filled with frustration and barely concealed violence. Surveying the family's kitchen, the narrator, in the midst of winter and suffering from a prolonged cold, suddenly erupts in a remarkable outpouring of anger:

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<sup>111</sup> Friedman 150.

<sup>112</sup> Oppenheimer 208.

I got to feeling that I could not bear the sight of the coloured cereal bowls for one more morning, could not empty one more ash tray, could not brush one more head or bake one more potato or let out one more dog or pick up one more jacket. I snarled at the bright faces regarding me from the breakfast table and I was strongly tempted to kick the legs out from under the chair on which my older soon was teetering backward.<sup>113</sup>

The narrator's frustration is expressed towards the sheer unrelenting tedium of the perpetual treadmill of domesticity – the constant round of minor tasks to be completed. Yet there is no way for Jackson's narrator to escape this life: unlike many of the housewife protagonists of her short stories, who often try to flee normality, the speaker in *Demons* is pragmatically accepting of her situation: "This state of mind is not practical in a household which continues to move relentlessly on from breakfast to mail to school to bath to bed to breakfast, no matter how *I* feel."<sup>114</sup> Jackson softens this extract by ending on a note of comedy – the narrator wishes that the doctor would arrive and suddenly declare her seriously ill so that she may be carted off to hospital – "I took my temperature twice a day, and limped carrying in the dinner dishes" – but nevertheless, the daily routine continues uninterrupted, and the machinery of domesticity continues working. Nancy Walker has stated that Jackson's primary technique in *Savages* and *Demons* is "raising the daily details of motherhood and housekeeping to the absurdity of slapstick comedy."<sup>115</sup> However, as the preceding extract demonstrates, there are also "strong suggestions that the life of the average housewife is repetitive and demeaning."<sup>116</sup>

Intimations of unease amongst the humorous domestic anecdotes also appear later on in *Demons*. When Jackson sarcastically describes the existence of a particular

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<sup>113</sup> Jackson, *Demons*, 64.

<sup>114</sup> Jackson, *Demons* 64.

<sup>115</sup> Walker 33.

<sup>116</sup> Walker 33.

subtratum of housewife: “the faculty wife”, the still nameless narrator of Jackson’s family stories explains how her husband’s profession as a teacher at a women’s college further threatens her sense of self.”<sup>117</sup> “On Being a Faculty Wife” first appeared in the Bennington college alumnae magazine, then was slightly extended for “Mademoiselle” and was finally incorporated into *Raising Demons*.<sup>118</sup> In this story, the narrator describes how her husband’s job has begun to encroach upon her own public identity: “I was slowly becoming aware of a wholly new element in the usual uneasy tenor of our days: I was a faculty wife.”<sup>119</sup> Jackson then explains just what this position entails:

A faculty wife is a person who is married to a faculty. She has frequently read at least one good book lately, she has one “nice” black dress to wear to student parties, and she is always just the teensiest bit in the way, particularly in a girl’s college such as the one where my husband taught.<sup>120</sup>

In addition, “She is presumed to have pressing and wholly absorbing interests at home, to which, when out, she is always anxious to return, and when at home, reluctant to leave.”<sup>121</sup> The faculty wife’s supposed pastimes, Jackson wryly remarks, are all typical “feminine”, “domestic” tasks such as “knitting, hemming dish towels, and perhaps sketching wildflowers”<sup>122</sup> – they do not of course include interests outside the home such as a successful career of her own.

Jackson’s sarcastic listing of the qualities required of the typical faculty wife was clearly anticipated in *Hangsaman* (1951), which is largely set in an all-girl college much like Bennington during the 1950s. As well as being Jackson’s first sustained

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<sup>117</sup> Wylie Hall 76.

<sup>118</sup> Wylie Hall 77.

<sup>119</sup> Jackson, *Demons* 124.

<sup>120</sup> Jackson, *Demons* 124.

<sup>121</sup> Jackson, *Demons* 125.

<sup>122</sup> Jackson, *Demons* 125.

depiction of mental disturbance, *Hangsaman* also explores the sentiments expressed in humorous form in “On being a Faculty Wife.” The faculty wife in *Hangsaman* is Elizabeth Arnold, Natalie’s only (non imaginary) friend. Elizabeth is twenty, only a few years older than Natalie, a former student of the college who had married her professor. She has therefore apparently achieved the supreme goal of every young woman of the time, at least as those goals were defined by society: she has married a professional man and should now settle down to the business of producing children. But although Elizabeth has conformed to societal expectations she is a deeply unhappy young woman. Her husband is already fooling around with his adoring young students, and she is isolated, bored, and possibly suicidal, with a fondness for imbibing one too many cocktails. Like Jackson’s narrator in *Demons*, Elizabeth is hyper aware of the temptation posed by the hordes of bright young women that hang upon her husband’s every word (after all, she was quite recently one of their number), and of their perception of her as being an unworthy companion to such a “deserving” man. They are the future generation of housewives, young women brought up to believe that their prime objective in life is to get married, have children, and keep a beautiful home: in many cases working towards degrees that they will never complete and in most cases fully intend never to use: as Jackson says, they are “neat, well mannered, and demure. Their clothes were subdued, sometimes so much as to be invisible.”<sup>123</sup> The piece comes to an awkward climax with the narrator’s extremely strained conversation with one of these women, who insensitively asks: “Listen, when you were young – I mean, before you kind of settled down and all, when you were

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<sup>123</sup> Jackson, *Demons* 128.



well *younger*, that is – did you ever figure you'd end up like this?"<sup>124</sup> The narrator's withering response is entirely wasted upon her naïve young questioner:

"Certainly," I said, "My only desire was to be a faculty wife. I used to sit at my casement window, half embroidering, half dreaming, and long for Professor right." "I suppose," she said, "that you *are* better off than you would have been. Not married at all or anything."<sup>125</sup>

The end result of such conversations, the narrator says, is that "By the end of the first semester, what I wanted to do most in the world was invite a few of my husband's students over for tea and drop them down the well."<sup>126</sup> When asked by the young hostess "How come you just ended up doing housewife and stuff? Couldn't you get a job?" the narrator conspicuously fails to mention her writing but asserts instead the importance of her work as a homemaker: "I have a job," she says, "I cook and sew and clean and shop and make beds and drive people places and –"<sup>127</sup> It's all part of the calculated pose adopted by Jackson in these family stories. Her irritable justification of the lot of the ordinary housewife would no doubt have struck a chord with her readers, who would mostly have been in a similar position. Jackson's response here also highlights the difference between the narrator and the rather arrogant young women who judge her lacking but seek nothing less than to end up in the same position themselves. It would also imbalance the piece if the narrator had in fact spoken the truth and said that she most definitely did have a job: that she was a best-selling and critically respected author – such a response would have negated the point of this extract, even though it flatly contradicts the defiant stance taken in "The Third Baby's the Easiest," one of very few occasions in which the narrator of Jackson's

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<sup>124</sup> Jackson, *Demons* 130.

<sup>125</sup> Jackson, *Demons* 130.

<sup>126</sup> Jackson, *Demons* 131.

<sup>127</sup> Jackson, *Demons* 131.

domestic sagas declares herself a writer, or even indeed mentions writing at all. If the true complexity of Jackson's status as a working, independently creative force in her own right and a housewife had been revealed to her readers it would surely have punctured the sense of solidarity her work inspired in the ordinary middle-class housewife (many of whom, much to Jackson's dismay, wrote to her looking for advice on the running of their own homes) and therefore have rendered her work less commercially successful. So Jackson continued to portray herself as a normal housewife, even though the very fact such depictions were regularly published in major mass-market outlets suggested that she spent as much time at a typewriter as she did at the sink. Ironically, the manner in which she perpetuated a homely image of herself actually suggested that image was less than accurate: that it was a continuation of the pose she adopted in interviews such as the one discussed earlier with Harvey Breit. However, there were strong suggestions throughout Jackson's domestic humour, but particularly towards the end of *Demons*, that all was not well in happy housewife land.

Around three quarters of the way through *Demons*, the typically harried narrator, snowed under by the demands of home and family, humorously considers running away from it all – a fantasy that, as I've shown in Chapter Two, occurs to Jackson's housewives very frequently. The narrator considers making her escape to "Mexico, maybe," I said. "Some place where it's hot and I don't need to talk to anyone because I can't understand a word they say."<sup>128</sup> Her wish soon comes true – sort of – in an episode so reminiscent of one of Jackson's shorts stories that I find it amazing that the similarity between the two pieces has never been noted before. The narrator's deliverance from domestic routine comes courtesy of a broken tooth:

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<sup>128</sup> Jackson, *Demons* 180.

I took my tongue out of the hole in my tooth and said to my husband, "What I would like more than anything in the world is about three days in a hotel in New York City. Where it's quiet."<sup>129</sup>

Her wish is humorous – of course, New York city is not a quiet place at all, but it *is* away from home and family. Moreover, the narrator reasons to her sceptical husband, she can visit her own dentist while she's there. However, her dreams of a peaceful, lone trip to the city are soon derailed: her children overhear the conversations and demand to come along as well. Thus follows an extended account of the family trip to the city that has overwhelming echoes not only of "The Tooth" but also the story "Pillar of Salt", which, like "The Tooth" appeared in *The Lottery and Other Stories*. The incident recounted by Jackson in *Demons* bears such a striking resemblance to the stories she has written several years before that it at first seems as though it is a kind of humorous pastiche of her earlier, more obviously fictional work: if events did actually occur as she describes them, it seems like an extraordinary instance of life imitating a writer's own art. However, the hints of anxiety that soon surface suggest that Jackson has taken an element of truth and, consciously or unconsciously, written about the episode in such a way that despite the humorous, light-hearted context, it contains resounding echoes of two of her most accomplished and subtly disturbing short stories.

In "The Tooth", the protagonist, Clara, a dowdy rural housewife is sent alone to New York on the night bus so that she may visit the dentist and get rid of her rotting tooth (something which, as her concerned but dull husband notes, has long been a problem: "You had a toothache on our honeymoon."<sup>130</sup> he says accusingly).

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<sup>129</sup> Jackson, *Demons* 189.

<sup>130</sup> Jackson, "The Tooth," *The Masterpieces of Shirley Jackson* 197.

Doped up on codeine, lack of sleep, and whiskey, Clara falls into a “fantastic sleep” on the bus and ultimately escapes the tedium of her everyday life by surrendering her old identity all together and running away with a man who may or may not exist. Jackson’s version of a housewife’s trip to New York in *Demons* has exactly the same starting point as “The Tooth” – the need to visit the dentist – but ultimately, her narrator ends up more like the protagonist of “Pillar of Salt,” a wife and mother from rural Vermont who at the outset of the story is bursting with enthusiasm at the thought of her trip to New York, but whilst in the city itself soon becomes seized with feelings of panic and dread, and ultimately ends up rooted to the spot on a busy city street, so filled with fear that she is unable to move, and must telephone her husband for help: the city has inspired in her some kind of catastrophic panic attack or nervous breakdown.

Jackson’s account of the family trip to New York in *Demons* begins unassumingly enough, with the narrator’s observation that:

It has long been my belief that in times of great stress, such as a four-day vacation, the thin veneer of family unity wears off almost at once, and we are all revealed in our true personalities: Laurie, for instance, is a small town mayor, Jannie a games mistress, Sally, a vague, stern old lady watching the rest of us with remote disapproval and Barry a small intrepid foot soldier.<sup>131</sup>

However, the first hint of the mental disintegration that characterises Jackson’s fiction has already appeared: “These several personalities began to emerge in the car driving to Albany, and Sally’s hat began to unravel<sup>132</sup>.” Were it to appear in one of Jackson’s fictional stories, Sally’s steadily unravelling hat would serve as a powerful symbol of psychological breakdown: though the tone and context of this anecdote differ greatly

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<sup>131</sup> Jackson *Demons* 192.

<sup>132</sup> Jackson, *Demons* 192.

from such gothic tales, I nevertheless think it likely (perhaps unconsciously on Jackson's part) that it serves much the same purpose in *Demons*. It is an observation strengthened by the fact that Jackson then goes on to describe the narrator's reaction to the trip in terms that suggest that, like many Jackson heroines, she suffers from some degree of agoraphobia. Jackson tries to play this scene for laughs, but the humour is leavened by apparently genuine disquiet:

So long as we were within familiar territory, the circle of about ten miles which we cover regularly and of which I know every path and house, I was fairly comfortable...When we got out into the world, and the hills were no longer at the same angle and the road turned past bewilderingly strange trees and houses, my hands began to tremble...<sup>133</sup>

Despite her desperate desire for escape, the narrator fears change: like Merricat and Constance Blackwood she is terrified of anything that interrupts the familiar rhythm of her days and takes her out of her customary surroundings. Aptly enough then, she is also seized with anxieties related to the family home – will they be burgled, has something important been left behind, did she leave the lights in the basement on? Despite her eldest son's blasé attempts to ease these concerns, "It doesn't matter", the narrator's unreasonable disquiet persists – and all the while, her daughter's hat continues slowly to unravel. She soon becomes unable to take it all in: her last clear thought takes place on the train:

...We were going to New York. That was, I believe, my last clear, co-ordinated thought. From that moment until I came back through our own front door again, four days later, nothing happened in any kind of reasonable or logical order: nothing made sense.<sup>134</sup>

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<sup>133</sup> Jackson, *Demons* 192.

<sup>134</sup> Jackson, *Demons* 194.

For the narrator of *Demons*, as for the protagonists of “The Tooth” and “Pillar of Salt”, the city is a deeply disorientating locale that soon removes any sense of order or logic. Significantly, it is just as the family arrives in Grand Central Station that Sally’s hat unravels completely: “the last knot disappeared out the taxi window when we were about half way to the hotel.”<sup>135</sup> Once in the city, days run together in a haze of restaurants, sight seeing, children’s tantrums, and excursions to the narrator’s old haunts. But soon, all are notably underwhelmed by the experience: the family ends up coming home several days earlier than planned, and it is only when they have returned to normality that the narrator realises that “I didn’t get to go to the dentist after all.” There really is no place like home, it seems, and the family “came off pretty lightly after all.”<sup>136</sup> The episode demonstrates the extent to which Jackson’s domestic humour, whether consciously or unconsciously, replicated the sense of desperation and panic that so often afflicts Jackson’s fictional heroines. The initial desire for escape into the city ends up in a relieved return to the countryside and to the domestic routine: like the protagonist of “Pillar of Salt,” Jackson’s narrator was woefully unprepared for the “blasting reality” of New York, where “Everything was imperceptibly quicker every minute.”<sup>137</sup> In “Pillar of Salt”, Margaret’s disintegration is hastened when she and her husband visit a beach near where they’re staying. Escape for a moment seems possible:

The beach was the one where she had lived in imagination, writing for herself dreary love-broken stories where the heroine walked beside the wild wave; the little tune was the symbol of the golden world she escaped into to avoid the

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<sup>135</sup> Jackson, *Demons* 195.

<sup>136</sup> Jackson, *Demons* 198.

<sup>137</sup> Jackson, “Pillar of Salt” 181.

everyday dreariness that drove her into writing depressing stories about the beach.<sup>138</sup>

Her reverie is brutally interrupted by the discovery of a human leg lying on the beach. Margaret desperately asks, “What starts to happen?” She said hysterically. “People starting to come apart.” When they return to New York, she begins to notice even more “new perceptible cracks”: the erosion of the city seems to have accelerated, and like the unravelling hat in *Demons* is a symbol of her own impending breakdown – a breakdown hastened by the realisation that even the place of escape she fantasises about has been sullied by brutal reality: there is no “golden world,” just life, and the “everyday dreariness” it encompasses.

As a fiction writer, Shirley Jackson excelled at bringing the gothic into the everyday. It is a characteristic that has also been identified in the work of other female gothic novelists, who, as Kari J. Winter has noted, “uncovered the terror of the familiar.”<sup>139</sup> This trend is also present, albeit in a somewhat softened tone, in Jackson’s domestic humour. Yes, the portrait of family life painted in *Savages* and *Demons* may be (mostly) a happy and loving one, but this does not negate the fact that there are several occasions where definite hints of the darker side of family life and its effect upon women surface.

Until fairly recently, Jackson’s domestic humour has been overlooked as a trivial sideline, a mere adjunct to the main body of her more “serious” work. It is a feeling that was no doubt heightened by the author’s own dismissive attitude towards this element of her output. This is an unfair assessment. The domestic fiction of the 1950s does have a significance far beyond that which is immediately apparent, not least

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<sup>138</sup>Jackson, “Pillar of Salt” 181.

<sup>139</sup>Hattenhauer 5.

because it increased female awareness, no matter how unintentionally. It also reflected the impossible, oppressive nature of the behavioural standards that women were then expected to live up to, and indicted the failure of the American social system rather than the women who were trapped within it instead. It is a trend exacerbated in Jackson's work by the extent to which the themes, preoccupations, and even language of her gothic fiction is replicated in her domestic sagas: an appropriation that ultimately seems to suggest that even the most apparently cosy evocation of conventional family life is but a hair's breadth away from the desperation and anxiety of her fictional texts. This interpretation is further strengthened by the fact that the increasing identification with madness and entrapment that, (as I indicated in Chapter Three,) often manifests itself in Jackson's later fictional works, particularly *Castle*, is also present, albeit in a slightly watered down fashion, in *Demons*.

It all helps further prove my thesis that, as in her fiction, Jackson's humorous writing frequently dramatised the anxieties of her age. Far from being separated from the cultural and historical context in which it was written, her work, like the manner in which Jackson promoted and viewed herself, has been inescapably influenced by these circumstances. Despite her attempts to pass herself off as such, Jackson knew only too well that she was no ordinary housewife, and was aware, even before Friedan, that the "happy house wife heroine" was a comforting, but controlling myth. There is genuine humour and love to be found in *Savages* and *Demons*, but there is also the subtle, but insistent suggestion that beyond the antics of boisterous children and the safety of repetitive tasks there is a nagging desire for something... *more*. It's the same vague, unfocused desire for change that infects so many of Jackson's more obviously fictional heroines. We should not be surprised therefore by the fact that the



laughter in these stories sometimes seems a little forced, or contains more than a slight hint of hysteria. As was the case with Jackson herself, there is a great deal more to her domestic humour than first impressions seem to suggest.

### *Conclusion.*

*“Sylvia Plath wanted to be the next Shirley Jackson.”<sup>1</sup>*

At the beginning of the long, hot summer of 1953, an ambitious young Smith co-ed named Sylvia Plath was selected amidst fierce competition to help assemble *Mademoiselle* magazine's annual College Board issue. It was an experience that would, famously, herald the beginning of a phase of acute mental breakdown for Plath and later be immortalised in her iconic semi-autobiographical novel *The Bell Jar* (1963). In the weeks before she embarked upon her eventful apprenticeship in New York, Plath was asked to supply the magazine with the names of four writers whom she particularly admired, one of whom she would hopefully meet, interview, and be photographed with. The names Plath came up with were J.D. Salinger, E.B. White, Irwin Shaw, and Shirley Jackson; she excitedly wrote to her mother to say that she hoped “one of these luminaries consents to be seen with me.”<sup>2</sup> As it happened, none of Plath's initial choices proved available; instead, she would have to make do with Elizabeth Bowen (who, coincidentally, authored one of Shirley Jackson's favourite short stories, the classic ghost story “The Cat Jumps”.) It's interesting, but as we shall see, not surprising to note that Jackson should have been the sole female author on Plath's list: the budding writer had long been a fan of Jackson's work and during her formative years saw Jackson's diverse and extremely successful career as a model for her own (at the time, much less successful) assault on the literary and commercial publishing outlets of the era.

We can go a long way towards understanding the importance of Jackson's writing both during the 1950s and in the present day by looking at the reasons why she

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<sup>1</sup> Hattenhauer 202n.

<sup>2</sup> Sylvia Plath, *Letters Home: Correspondence 1950-1963* (London: Faber, 1985) 114.

presented such an obvious literary role model for someone like Plath. By discussing one of the most famous female voices of the 1950s alongside one of the most overlooked, one can explore the dynamics of posthumous female literary fame, and examine the reasons why Plath, a fairly obscure though highly promising poet at the time of her death, has in the past thirty years reached virtually iconic status in literary culture and in the popular imagination, whilst Jackson, one of the most critically and commercially successful female writers of the 1950s, has been largely sidelined.

Whilst not quite *entirely* ignored, Jackson's contribution to American literary culture during the 1950s and after has rarely been celebrated either. Despite the efforts of critics such as Darryl Hatttenhauer and Joan Wylie Hall to establish her importance, there still persists the view in some quarters that Jackson, though undeniably talented, was still at heart a 'minor' writer. It's a critical perspective that was first given prominence in the earliest (and for a long time, only) full-length critical study of Jackson's work, *Shirley Jackson* by Lenemaja Friedman (1973). In her concluding overview of Jackson's work, Friedman chose to damn her subject with faint praise:

Miss Jackson is not, however, a major writer; and the reason she will not be considered one is that she saw herself primarily as an entertainer, as an expert storyteller and craftsman. She has insights to share with her readers; but her handling of the material – the surprise twists, the preoccupation with mystery and fantasy, her avoidance of strong passions, her versatility, and her sense of sheer fun – may not be the attributes of the more serious writer who wishes to come to grips with the strong passions of ordinary people in a workaday world, who prefers to deal directly with the essential problems of love, death, war, disease, poverty and insanity in its most ugly aspects...Despite the lack of critical attention, her books continue to be popular with those people who are sensitive, imaginative, and fun-loving; and perhaps, in the long run, that popularity will be what counts.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Friedman 161.

Friedman's reservations seem to hinge upon two (rather predictable) characteristics that she isolates in Jackson's work: the first of which being the fact that Jackson was an "entertainer," i.e. a popular writer who, as detailed in the previous chapter, tailored much of her output towards the desires of a particular audience, and whose work could often be considered "fun". Alongside this damning knowledge of what the public wanted to read, Jackson's work, according to Friedman, has another significant flaw: "the preoccupation with mystery and fantasy" and the use of gothic devices such as surprise twists – in other words, the fact that Jackson was not afraid to venture beyond the boundaries of strictly realist fiction. The fact that Jackson reconfigured the stock devices and settings of the Gothic form in order to skilfully reflect contemporary fears and anxieties is not mentioned. Jackson did not deal with the problems of the world "directly" (which here seems to be one of the defining characteristics of a "major" writer), and so the best one can hope for in future, Friedman concludes, is that ultimately "popularity will be what counts."

Friedman's rather condescending attitude towards Jackson's writing is one that has persisted even to this day: as Lynette Carpenter has indicated in her article "Shirley Jackson: A Woman Writer," Jackson's popularity, commercial success, and ability to simultaneously operate in two faintly disreputable genres has resulted in critical marginalisation. Jackson's "versatility", as Friedman put it, her ability to write a story for *The New Yorker* one day and a humorous family essay for the *Ladies Home Journal* the next – is both the reason behind her commercial success and prominence during her lifetime and, I shall suggest, one of the major causes of her critical neglect afterwards. What the contrasting literary afterlives of Plath and Jackson demonstrate is the effect that society's attitudes towards female writers and the writing process can have upon the ways in which an author is posthumously evaluated. Jackson's

apparently conventional life and ease with differing modes of writing meant that she resisted conventional categorization, and was therefore easy to dismiss or over look in favour of more easily summarised bodies of work. In Plath's case, by way of contrast, the irresistible conjunction of powerful poetry and tragic personal circumstances has meant that in death she has rarely been far from the critical spotlight.

Though separated by a seventeen-year age gap, the writings of both authors were to a significant degree shaped by the anxieties and contradictory demands made of American women during the 1950s. During the years in which Jackson married, had children, and settled down into a life of apparently contented domesticity and fairly constant literary production, Sylvia Plath was experiencing life as a hugely ambitious, highly strung college girl. If the plot of Jackson's second novel *Hangsaman* (1951) – which tells the story of a gifted teenage girl with an overbearing father and passive aggressive mother who attends an exclusive women's college, suffers a serious mental breakdown, contemplates suicide and ultimately recovers – sounds rather like that of *The Bell Jar*, that is due to the fact that Jackson's early novels are known to have influenced Plath, but also the fact that Plath herself had much in common with Jackson's troubled fictional heroines. After all, as has previously been noted, all six of Jackson's completed novels feature (and in all but *The Sundial* and *The Road Through the Wall*) focus upon disturbed, intelligent, lonely teenage girls and relatively young women who discover that the boundaries between fantasy and reality, sanity and madness are much more easily (and unwittingly) transgressed than they'd ever been led to believe. Plath's youthful breakdown and near-successful suicide bid suggest that in real life, she too was dangerously familiar with these boundaries.

Whilst Linda Wagner-Martin has noted that *The Bird's Nest* (1954) gave Plath important ideas that helped her in thinking about *The Bell Jar*<sup>4</sup> (as did the work of J.D. Salinger, and the book *The Snake Pit*, by Mary Jane Ward), it has recently been suggested that Plath's fictional debut owed an even larger debt towards *Hangsaman*: "Plath's novel is also about a budding writer with a name suggesting callowness. And, like Natalie, Esther is surrounded by doubles and writing a paper on doubles. Plath had modelled herself after Jackson."<sup>5</sup> For although Plath would ultimately find fame as a poet, she longed for her entire life to achieve recognition for her prose as well. Indeed, for much of her teens and twenties, this was Plath's primary ambition in life. With characteristic determination, Plath submitted no less than fifty pieces to *Seventeen* before she had her first story published in August 1950<sup>6</sup>. Thus began her career as a frequent (and frequently rebuffed) contributor to the teen magazines of the era. Advised by a sympathetic editor to "slant" her subject matter and treatment towards the requirements of a particular publication, Plath soon discovered that a story or poem with a "pathetic" twist was found more acceptable,<sup>7</sup> an aesthetic compromise which perhaps helps explain why the considerable body of prose she left behind after her death was mostly unpublished.<sup>8</sup>

Plath's ambition was to achieve both commercial and critical success in her chosen field – to publish in the national slicks, the popular magazines that she "regarded as arbiters of fashion" yet at the same time place her work in more upmarket, intellectual outlets such as *The New Yorker*. It is no coincidence that two of the authors she wanted to meet in 1953 – Jackson and E.B White – were frequent contributors to that

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<sup>4</sup> Linda Wagner-Martin, *Sylvia Plath: A Literary Biography* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1999) 164.

<sup>5</sup> Hattenhauer 203.

<sup>6</sup> Stevenson, *Bitter Fame: A Life of Sylvia Plath* (London: Penguin, 1990).

<sup>7</sup> Plath, *Letters Home* 34.

<sup>8</sup> Ted Hughes, Introduction, *Johnny Panic and the Bible of Dreams*, By Sylvia Plath (London Faber, 1979).

magazine. It's seems quite reasonable to speculate therefore that one of the factors that contributed to Plath's suicide attempt that year was her failure to gain admittance to Frank O'Connor's Harvard short-story writing class. As he mother would later put it, with characteristic understatement, the effect that this rejection upon her daughters already fragile state of mind was significant, after all, "at this point, success in short story writing was her ultimate goal, and Sylvia was too demanding of herself."<sup>9</sup> Of course the reasons behind Plath's breakdown were a great deal more complex and deep-seated than this one factor, but it does seem likely from both *The Bell Jar* and Plath's journals that this news had a devastating impact upon the young would-be writer: it was as though she had just been told that she would never make the grade in her chosen profession.

Shirley Jackson had the career that the young Sylvia Plath really wanted. As I've indicated else where in this thesis, the 1950s were a time of considerable commercial and critical success for Jackson, so much so that the author of one study of mid-century American writing has even gone so far as to say, "the 1950s were the decade of Jackson."<sup>10</sup> Her work was regularly published in the popular magazines that Plath tailored so much of her early output towards – particularly women's magazines such as *The Ladies Home Journal* – yet Jackson was at the same time a frequent (and respected) contributor to more obviously high brow journals such as *The New Yorker*. What Plath's failure to thrive in these markets as a prose writer proves is that she lacked Jackson's ability to compartmentalise. Jackson was a literary multitasker – a pragmatic, practical author who had the lucrative ability to compartmentalise her literary output and master several different styles – domestic humour, the Gothic, psychological novels, and the supernatural horror tale. Although she saw her more

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<sup>9</sup> Plath, *Letters Home* 123.

<sup>10</sup> Wagner-Martin, *The Mid-Century American Novel*, 48.

obviously “serious” writing as her life’s work, Jackson had no qualms about sitting down to write an unabashedly populist piece about the comic perils of life as a housewife and mother in order to bolster the family finances. What’s more, although Jackson resented the time she had to spend away from her literary writing in order to fulfil the demand for her more obviously commercial articles and essays, she undoubtedly had the knack for that kind of prose: the frequency with which her work appeared in the magazines of the day is testament to her success in this field. Jackson may have pleased the critics, but she was also an efficient, pragmatic professional who was good at giving the public what they wanted.

Perhaps the most significant difference between Plath and Jackson is this contrasting approach to literary production. For Plath, writing required full investment of the self – for her, the writer functioned as a medium through which the power of language flowed, a conduit for a higher force. She struggled for many years to truly find her own poetic voice, partially because she had for so long tailored her work towards the demands of the markets she sought to publish in. Ted Hughes noted as much in his introduction to her collected prose writings, “No doubt one of the weaknesses of these weaker stories is that she did not let herself be subjective enough. When she merely wanted to record, with no thought of artful shaping or publication, she could produce some of her most effective writing – and that appears in her journals.”<sup>11</sup>

The reason why the bulk of Plath’s reputation today rests upon the poems written during her last six months is that it was during this traumatic personal period that she finally surrendered to the powerful psychological forces that characterise her most intense poems. The recognition that she channelled immense rage into her poetry was

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<sup>11</sup> Hughes, viii.



acknowledged by Plath in her journals: “Fury jams the gullet and spreads poison,” she wrote, “but as soon as I start to write, dissipates, flows out into the figure of the letters: writing as therapy?”<sup>12</sup> This process of channelling ultimately brought Plath’s poetry to vivid, potent life. Whilst discussing the work of Plath alongside that of Diane Wakoski, Adrienne Rich has written that “...in the work of both these poets, it is finally the woman’s sense of herself – embattled, possessed – that gives the poetry its dynamic charge, its rhythms of struggle, need, will and female energy.”<sup>13</sup> This notion of the female artist as one who has to somehow surrender to forces greater to herself, who allows herself to become ‘possessed’ by her own internal demons in order to create is a dramatic, intriguing idea that has gained a great deal of currency, particularly amongst femininity literary critics. As Janet Malcolm put it, “Plath, like so many women writers, had to leave the daylight world and go underground to find her voice.”<sup>14</sup>

The only problem is that women writers like Jackson, who on the surface appear never to have left the “daylight world” have often been marginalized and ignored in favour of their more dramatic counterparts. Jackson was never “possessed” by her creative voice in the sense that Plath can be said to have been: she was always very much in charge of her writing, a characteristic reflected in her ability to master several literary personae at once – the happy housewife who laughingly chronicles the antics of her small children, “New England’s only practicing witch,” the writer of serious, well received short stories, the psychological novelist, the best selling populist, and more. Jackson’s career also presents a challenge to Adrienne Rich’s suggestion that

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<sup>12</sup> Quoted in Stevenson 138.

<sup>13</sup> Adrienne Rich, “When We Dead Awaken: Writing as Re-Vision” (in) *On Lies, Secrets and Silence: Selected Prose 1966 – 1978* (London: Virago, 1980) 35.

<sup>14</sup> Janet Malcolm, “Annals of Biography: The Silent Woman,” *The New Yorker*, August 23<sup>rd</sup> (1993): 84 -115.

domesticity conflicts with the subversive function of the imagination. Rich has claimed that:

For a poem to coalesce, for a character or an action to take shape, there has to be an imaginative transformation of reality which is in no way passive. And a certain freedom of the mind is needed – freedom to press on, to enter the currents of your thought like a glider pilot...Now, to be maternally with small children all day in the old way, to be with a man in the old way of marriage, requires a holding back, a putting aside of that imaginative activity, and demands instead a kind of conservatism.<sup>15</sup>

For Jackson however, marriage and a life of apparently conventional domesticity seems to have been no barrier to imaginative creativity and subversive intent. Instead, Jackson was able to operate on two creative levels simultaneously – on the one hand, writing cosy, witty anecdotes of traditional family life, whilst at the same time producing stories and novels which frequently suggested that domesticity and societal expectations about the kind of lives women were expected to lead during the 1950s were both damaging and destructive. In addition, as I demonstrated during the previous chapter, even Jackson's apparently innocuous domestic humour frequently suggested that there was a lot to be uneasy about beneath the happy portrayals of family life. Far from stunting Jackson's imaginative activity, domesticity would instead become one of her most compelling themes.

However, there was a price to be paid for such intense hard work. As Lynette Carpenter has observed, "From the perspective of current feminist criticism, it is difficult to read biographer Lenemaja Friedman's account of Jackson's numerous domestic and literary accomplishments without wondering how she sustained her sanity as long as she did."<sup>16</sup> When Jackson did suffer a nervous breakdown in the

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<sup>15</sup> Rich 43.

<sup>16</sup> Carpenter, "The Establishment and Preservation of Female Power in Shirley Jackson's *We Have Always Lived in the Castle*." *Frontiers* 8.1 (1984): 32-38.

early 1960s that manifested itself in the form of bouts of severe anxiety and depression, she was encouraged by her psychoanalyst to keep a journal in which to record her thoughts. Despite her doubts about the usefulness of such an approach, Jackson found her journal therapeutic and hoped that it would help her with her fiction,<sup>17</sup> once commenting that (sic) “writing is the way out writing is the way out writing is the way out.” Indeed, Jackson did seem to make a good recovery from her psychological problems, and had started work on a new novel (the first to feature a woman her own age) at the time of her death from heart failure in 1965.

Whilst her intense work schedule no doubt contributed to her breakdown, writing remained for Jackson an invaluable lifeline during her time of inner turmoil – a means of clinging to sanity during a time of extreme stress. At the end of her lapse, Jackson emerged even more determined to create than ever, and began work on what may well have been one of her most revealing and confident novels, the tantalisingly incomplete *Come Along With Me* (1965). There would be no such return to psychological equilibrium for Sylvia Plath: the burst of immense creative energy that produced her final poems would culminate in depression and suicide. Surrendering to her inner demons had allowed Plath to finally fulfil her poetic potential, but it also seems likely that this very process had left her dangerously vulnerable, for as one critic has said, she was both “heroine and author; when the curtain goes down, it is her own dead body there on the stage, sacrificed to her own plot.”<sup>18</sup> Plath has remained on that stage ever since.

Jackson’s profile, as I’ve indicated, has been rather less pervasive. Ironically, it seems as though Jackson’s ability to simultaneously operate in several different modes of writing – the quality that Plath so envied, and which gave Jackson such a

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<sup>17</sup> Carpenter 37.

<sup>18</sup> Cited in Malcolm 102.

high profile during the 1950s – may be one of the principal reasons for her latter-day critical neglect. Many critics found themselves unable to reconcile the various manifestations of Jackson’s writing into an easily summarised body of work, and, failing in this respect, like Friedman, and, recently, Harold Bloom<sup>19</sup>, dismissed her as an interesting though ultimately “minor” writer.

What such critics have failed to notice is that Jackson’s work has a great deal to offer beyond her obvious mastery of generic material. Though it has never been looked at in terms of its historical and cultural context before, it seems clear that her writing provides a fascinating portrait of American womanhood during a period of significant change. Hers is not an explicitly feminist voice – at least not in the sense that there was always an underlying political or ideological element to her writing – but Jackson remains an important figure nevertheless, a writer who excelled at dramatizing the anxiety and claustrophobia experienced by so many (particularly middle class) American women during the 1950s. Her critique of the era’s domestic ideology may not seem particularly overt at first, but it is almost always present, perhaps most strikingly apparent in that terrible, pervasive sense of indefinable longing and gnawing dissatisfaction that infects so many of her female characters. Like *Hill House*’s Eleanor Vance, most of Jackson’s women “held fast to the idea that someday something would happen.”<sup>20</sup> It’s a longing for change that is in itself a powerful indictment of the decade’s oppressive promotion of conservative domestic ideology: a nagging reminder of the unfulfilled potential and low-grade despair that

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<sup>19</sup> In his brief introduction to *Bloom’s Major Short Story Writers: Shirley Jackson*, (New York: Chelsea House, 2001) Bloom writes that “Jackson always had too palpable a design upon her readers – her effects are as calculated as Poe’s” and concludes by saying that although Jackson “aspired to be more than an entertainer...her art of narration stayed on the surface and could not depict individual identities”. Bloom appears not to have come across either Eleanor Vance or Merricat Blackwood during his reading of Jackson: by my reckoning surely two of the most adeptly drawn characters in modern American fiction.

<sup>20</sup> Jackson, *Hill House* 8.

frequently afflicted the many women who found themselves living bland, restricted lives. It says a lot about Jackson's work when we consider that the only character in her writing who openly declares herself to be "happy" is a teenage girl who has burnt down the family home and poisoned almost all of her close relations.

However, Jackson's awareness of contemporary preoccupations and anxieties was by no means restricted to the problems facing American women. As this thesis has shown, Jackson's work has been influenced by a wide range of historical and cultural issues – from the effects of the suburban lifestyle to Cold War paranoia, and the strong undercurrent of apocalypticism in the American psyche, from the boom in pop psychology and psychoanalysis to the most pervasive themes of 50s horror fiction. Jackson's ability to write for a range of commercial and literary outlets was paralleled by the diverse range of contemporary anxieties and preoccupations that appear in her work. Although this thesis marks the first time that Jackson's work has been discussed in relation to the cultural and historical context of the 1950s, it seems clear that this approach permits us to view her writing in a rewarding new light. It must be hoped that future studies are also willing to adopt fresh new perspectives. Already, there are definite signs that the critical neglect that Jackson has been faced with for so many years is coming to an end: in the past two years, one new full-length study making the case for Jackson's status as a key proto-postmodernist has appeared, as has a critical bibliography, whilst a much more general guide to her work intended for American high-school students has also been published. In addition, I myself am in the process of assembling a multi-contributor collection of critical essays on Jackson, the first time such a project has been undertaken.

In the previous chapter, I mentioned a rather surreal moment in one of Jackson's domestic volumes in which her youngest daughter repeatedly intoned the words, "Do

you know who I am?<sup>21</sup>”. At the time, I noted that it was a phrase that almost every Jackson protagonist could utter: for rare is the Jackson heroine who knows who she truly is. It’s a statement that Jackson herself could have asked of those who for so long have taken her versatility and efficiency to mean that her work is unworthy of truly serious consideration. Far from being a liability, Jackson’s varied achievement should instead be considered one of her greatest strengths. Unlike so many of her own characters, Jackson knew exactly who she was: I can only hope that by examining her work from a fresh perspective, this thesis has gone some way towards satisfactorily answering her question.

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<sup>21</sup> Jackson, *Demons* 146.

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