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**Women (Un)Moored:
Shirley Jackson's Entropic Female Characters**

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i. Abstract

Shirley Jackson's fiction presents an expansive catalogue of female characters who find themselves in eerie predicaments that they negotiate in interesting ways. This thesis explores the presentation of female characters in these predicaments. What roles do the female characters play in the stories they inhabit? What modes of escape do they employ from their predicaments? What makes their situations fundamentally anxious? To explore these questions, I examine the roles ascribed to female characters and their various responses to them. I inspect Jackson's use of the ghost story and the fairy tale and the ways in which she engages with characteristic tropes to explore female agency. I interrogate anxieties about the self, and examine how these anxieties haunt many of the stories through their presentations of the female protagonists. These anxieties play out in the spaces that form and deform possibilities for women – the home, the suburb, the city – and through their allotted roles as wives, mothers, daughters, women alone. This study hopes to illuminate the entropic and anti-entropic nature of Jackson's female characters: women variously unhinged by their roles or grounded by them. These women produce diverse reactions to oppressive situations as they negotiate their restrictive circumstances that simultaneously anchor and imprison them.

ii. Acknowledgements

I am indebted to my supervisor, Associate Professor Sarah Shieff, for her many insights that contributed to the shaping of this thesis. Sarah's unwavering support and constructive input inspired me to realise my potential and evolve as a scholar. Her supervision has been invaluable, and her vast knowledge a phenomenal asset. I will always be immensely grateful to have been her student.

A special thanks, also, to my family and friends, who kept the faith at all times, especially on the days that I did not.

iii. ['The Future Will Find Her Powerful Visions...Significant': Introduction](#)

I first encountered Shirley Jackson's work through 'The Lottery'. Like many readers I was captured by the evil the story exposed, the adept way in which Jackson is able to tap into the dark crevices of human nature and present a community committed to self-perpetuation through destruction. 'The Lottery' is, in my view, a timeless story, one that remains relevant in discourse about collective complicity and humans' proclivity for violence and scapegoating. Jackson's most famous story haunted me long after I consumed it, but it is not the one that enticed me into exploring more of Jackson's oeuvre: that story was 'The Beautiful Stranger', which I discovered much later. The story follows a housewife who awaits the return of her husband from his business trip, and veers into the uncanny when she suspects her husband is an imposter. There are echoes of Cold War anxieties related to invasion and sleeper agents characteristic of the period – the film *Invasion of the Body Snatchers* (1956) comes to mind – but what I found most intriguing about the story was the wife's *excitement* at the possibility of her husband being an imposter: she welcomed it, craved it even. Focalised from her point of view, the reader is never provided with evidence outside of Margaret's own interpretation to add credence to her belief, but the true potency of the story lies in Margaret's peculiar response to the possibility, which lends unique insight into her predicament. In many of Jackson's stories, if not all of them, it is in the responses of the characters where the true fascination lies. This is not to say that Jackson does not produce compelling plots, but what distinguishes her in my mind is her ability to create complex characters and situate them in predicaments that pull extreme reactions from them. These reactions, rarely duplicated in any of her stories, bring into question the conditions that lead to such upheaval. Writing predominantly during the postwar period that sought to restore the cult of domesticity in the home and inculcate the nuclear family as the paragon of American pride and virtue, Jackson often engages with themes involving domestic entrapment,

monstrous families, and entropic characters. She is frequently labelled as a horror writer, but her stories often elude categorisation.

In *The Feminine Mystique* (1963), Betty Friedan's landmark study detailing the pervasive dissatisfaction of white middleclass women in the post-WWII period in America, Friedan refers to Shirley Jackson as part of the 'new breed of women writers' who 'write about themselves as if they were "just housewives," revelling in a comic world of children's pranks and eccentric washing machines and Parents' Night at the PTA'.¹ These women, Friedan argues, 'picture themselves as housewives' while in reality enjoying careers as writers, poets, and playwrights.² Thus, their depictions of domesticity are fanciful, for the 'joke is not on *them*'.³ Friedan's critique of Jackson is a myopic one, not only because she limits her examination to Jackson's family chronicles, but also because she misreads them as one-dimensional pieces that ignorantly parody the quotidian reality of the American housewife and mother. Her interpretation fails to recognise the 'genuinely subversive element' of Jackson's chronicles that pokes fun at the venerated image of the housewife and the idealised execution of her role.⁴ What makes Friedan's critique conjectural is that she appears to have overlooked Jackson's short stories and novels that capture many of Friedan's own concerns about the 'feminine mystique',⁵ presenting portraits of women troubled and unfulfilled by their confining domestic roles in the spaces they inhabit. If it were at all possible for one term to represent Jackson's fictions, the word that seems most fitting is "disruptive", for her writings challenge entrenched notions about domesticity and Western morality. Her literary fiction is saturated with ambiguities that often demonstrate the

¹ Betty Friedan, *The Feminine Mystique* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2001), p. 83.

² Friedan, p. 82.

³ p. 83.

⁴ Ruth Franklin, *Shirley Jackson: A Rather Haunted Life* (New York: Liveright Publishing Corporation, 2016), p. 369.

⁵ Friedan, p. 70.

difficulties for her characters to negotiate the predicaments she inserts them into. If a fiction initially seems idyllic, there is a sense that it is merely an illusion due to come undone as the narrative unravels. It would be a rather challenging endeavour to find a fiction in Jackson's oeuvre with a happy ending, or even a definite resolution. Yet Jackson's oeuvre is not a catalogue of despair or persistent cynicism: instead, her fictions explore what lies beneath the surface of her characters' lives and behaviours, what forces shape their predicaments and disturb them. Jackson borrows from multiple genres in her experimentations with the characters she fashions, and demonstrates a keen insight into the genres and their characteristic tropes to achieve particular, penetrating effects. A knowing writer, she delves deep into the human condition to expose comfortable illusions about the structures that shape and influence society and the individuals that comprise it.

Like her fictions, Shirley Jackson is not easy to pin down. She lived an exciting and challenging life that often found expression in her writings. She is known for her wicked sense of humour and sharp wit that rings clear in letters and rare interviews. Jackson had a lifelong interest in witchcraft and studied it, even writing a children's book, *The Witchcraft of Salem Village* (1956), about the Salem witch trials.⁶ The biographical information on her first novel identified her as 'a practicing amateur witch' and there was a running joke in literary circles that she had used magic to break the leg of a publisher.⁷ Witchcraft in various forms finds its way into a number of her short stories and novels, notably *The Lottery; or, The Adventures of James Harris* (1949) and *We Have Always Lived in the Castle* (1962), and is often employed by female characters as a means of claiming agency and harnessing power. Closely associated with witchcraft, myth and ritual, too, is a dominant theme: Jackson was a learned student of myth and ritual – an interest shared by her husband, the literary critic

⁶ Franklin, p. 356

⁷ Franklin, p. 108.

Stanley Edgar Hyman, whose signature course at Vermont's Bennington College where he lectured was Myth, Ritual and Literature – and her fictions, particularly 'The Lottery' (1948) and *Hangsaman* (1951), explore ancient rites in contemporary settings that figure rituals as destructive but cathartic. As a writer of both domestic comedy and literary suspense, many critics at the time often struggled to reconcile the writer of fluffy domestic memoirs such as *Life Among the Savages* (1953) and *Raising Demons* (1957) with the writer of disturbing literary horror like 'The Lottery' (1948), 'The Tooth' (1949), and 'A Visit' (1950). Yet domesticity and horror often converge in her work that depicts the horror in the ordinary, the seemingly normal lives of women unsettled by underlying anxieties born from their domestic predicaments. The ambiguity of her fictions often brings into question the sources of the anxieties that plague the women and cause psychic disturbances: are the women intrinsically unhinged, or is their entropy a product of the situations she plants them in? The answer is seldom unequivocal.

Apparent in Jackson's letters and writings is the tension between her role as housewife and her creative ambition. While she was writing piece after piece for magazines and publishers, she was also a full-time mother and housewife: a writer who didn't only 'picture' herself as a housewife, as Friedan contended,⁸ but lived and performed as one, all the while attempting to produce creative pieces and meet publisher deadlines. Hence, much of her life involved juggling these two seemingly incompatible lives – tensions which would often trickle into her writings. Jackson's home was the headquarters of a social circle that included renowned intellectual contemporaries such as Ralph Ellison, Howard Nemerov, and Bernard Malamud. Because of Jackson and Hyman's liberal associations, neighbours were asked to inform on their household during the invasive paranoia of the McCarthy era. This anecdote could be said to symbolise Jackson as a writer: subversive and disruptive. In an

⁸ Friedan, p. 82.

effort to cope with the pressures of her domestic and professional life, she would eventually become reliant on tranquilisers for nerves and on amphetamines for weight, often mixing these with alcohol. In her last years she developed severe agoraphobia and seldom left her house: a condition explored in stories that portray wives who become overwhelmed by the cities they visit, such as 'Pillar of Salt' (1949) and 'A Day in the Jungle' (1952). Jackson was working on her novel, *Come Along With Me* – arguably her most hopeful fiction to date – when she died of cardiac arrest at the age of forty-eight. Recurring themes across her catalogue concern troubled women attempting to negotiate or escape their predicaments, and or disruption by a daemon lover, a male character who serves to seduce the woman into ruin or lure her away from her domestic life (often taking the form of the “James Harris” character or some version of it). Pompous men, wicked children, motherless/haunted women, and insular communities frequently populate her corpus. Her work also engages with issues of racism, anti-Semitism, classism, and scapegoating. Very often, her stories take a turn into the uncanny.

What I have often observed in my research into criticism on Jackson's work is a propensity for some scholars to find intersections between Jackson's personal life and her fictional writing. Of course, an author can hardly compartmentalise herself when she crafts her stories, and aspects of the writer and her experiences will always seep into the writing, but I have endeavoured, for the most part, to treat these stories in isolation from their author. Jackson did have a marriage troubled by her husband's infidelity and controlling personality. She did suffer an exhausting relationship with her mother who seemingly never ceased to find an opportunity to criticise her. And she did abuse prescription medication and alcohol which ultimately contributed to her untimely death. These aspects of her life can be found in some form in her work that contains overbearing mothers, domineering husbands, and embittered wives a little too reliant on alcohol, but these constitute only pieces of Jackson and her

writing: there is a lot more to her stories worth interrogation. Of particular interest to me is Jackson's presentation of her female characters. Her women often appear on the edge, troubled by their predicaments and themselves that tilt them further over the precipice. These women are entrapped in spaces that consume them; physical spaces such as the home, and psychological ones such as marriage and social conformity. What makes these stories even more compelling is the ways in which the women are complicit in their own entrapment, some of them willingly making costly sacrifices to secure the ties that bind them. Those women who do attempt escape frequently fail and seldom succeed, and the costs of their actions are destructive and detrimental. The extreme lengths to which Jackson's female characters are prepared to go to claim agency and independence demonstrates the gravity of their entrapment that so often demands absolute compliance and sacrifice. In many instances, their predicaments necessitate monstrous behaviour that enables them to wield agency and seize power, but not without crippling cost. In her explorations of individuals and the collectives to which they belong, Jackson exposes a normalised evil blanketed by illusion and myth. These individuals form part of communities ostensibly decent, but *pointedly* ordinary and traditional. What her stories reveal is the unseen: the tensions, the drives, the impulses, that run below the surface of the nuclear family, the traditional community, and the domesticated woman. My explorations into Jackson's fictions aim to lay these bare: the conditions that shape the women's predicaments, the tensions that charge the environments the characters inhabit, the costs of compliance and negotiation, and the dangers of the structures that govern and confine them.

The author of six novels, two family chronicles, and hundreds of short stories and essays, Jackson's oeuvre is extensive. In the early stages of probing her body of work, I soon realised that my initial intention to engage with all of her fictional writing was exceedingly ambitious: Jackson's collection contains far too many stories to examine substantially within

the scope of a Master's thesis. Thus, and somewhat regrettably, I had to confine my selection to only a fraction of her work, determined predominantly by two conditions: that the story best suits the aims of my discussion, and that it is different enough from the others to warrant inclusion into the chapter. The "fraction" that I include is considerable enough and diverse enough to embody the crux of Jackson's interests, and I believe that the chosen works provide persuasive testimony of Jackson's genius and subversive charm. Jackson is a canonic writer, but it is well known that this has not always been the case. Jackson herself would eventually tire of 'The Lottery's' popularity (the story was reprinted significantly more than her other writings), concerned that the story would overshadow her other work to the extent that she 'would become known for that story and nothing else'.⁹ After her death, Stanley Edgar Hyman, her fiercest advocate, would express his bitterness at the critical neglect and misreading Jackson endured during her lifetime, and predicted that scholars of the future would reclaim her: 'the future will find her powerful visions of suffering and inhumanity increasingly significant and meaningful, and that Shirley Jackson's work is among that small body of literature produced in our time that seems apt to survive'.¹⁰ As recent years have demonstrated, Jackson's place within the literary canon has been restored, if not realised: all of Jackson's books are in circulation, previously uncollected and unpublished materials have been printed, and the 2020 film, *Shirley*, is a reimagining of a chapter of her life. Furthermore, examination of scholarship on Jackson would prove the fulfilment of Hyman's prediction: critical attention on previously neglected Jackson texts, as well as wider interrogation of more prominent ones, continues to mount. Most notable of the scholarship, perhaps, is Darryl Hattenhauer, whose book, *Shirley Jackson's American Gothic*,¹¹ is often quoted in other scholarly appraisals of her work. Hattenhauer presents a rather compelling

⁹ Franklin, p. 246.

¹⁰ Franklin, p. 9.

¹¹ Darryl Hattenhauer, *Shirley Jackson's American Gothic* (New York: State University of New York Press, 2003).

argument for Jackson as a ‘proto-postmodernist’,¹² dedicating particular focus to her characterisations, use of unreliable narration, fabulist and gothic features, and interweaving of metanarratives. His examination covers Jackson’s most familiar works, including all of her novels and two canonical short story compilations. Shirley Jackson is the subject of two biographies: Judy Oppenheimer’s *Private Demons: The Life of Shirley Jackson*¹³ and Ruth Franklin’s *Shirley Jackson: A Rather Haunted Life*.¹⁴ I have regularly consulted Franklin’s book in my own research: her meticulous account provides a modern frame for Shirley Jackson as an artist, woman, and family figure. Franklin’s analysis of Jackson’s work is both historically engaging and contemporary, offering insightful interpretations that speak to Jackson’s era and our own. Franklin’s observations aid my considerations of historical and biographical context when examining Jackson’s characterisations and literary effects.

Jackson herself – through her letters – provides valuable insights that conjure a portrait of a beguilingly subversive woman with a cracking wit.¹⁵ Pertinent to my fervour for Jackson is commentary from Angela Hague,¹⁶ who argues convincingly for Shirley Jackson’s place in the literary canon and serves as an entreaty for deeper and more expansive investigation of her work. Published almost twenty years ago, her article exemplifies a time when Jackson’s writing was largely overlooked, and demonstrates the progress that has been made since by many scholars to re-centre Jackson’s work. Much of the interest concerning Jackson is on her depiction of the complicated relationships between mothers and daughters,

¹² Hattenhauer, p. 3.

¹³ Judy Oppenheimer, *Private Demons: The Life of Shirley Jackson* (New York: Putnam, 1988).

¹⁴ Ruth Franklin, *Shirley Jackson: A Rather Haunted Life* (New York: Liveright Publishing Corporation, 2016).

¹⁵ Shirley Jackson, *The Letters of Shirley Jackson* (New York: Random House, 2020).

¹⁶ Angela Hague, “‘A Faithful Anatomy of Our Times’: Reassessing Shirley Jackson”, *Frontiers: A Journal of Women Studies*, 26.2 (2005), 73-96

as examined by Lynne Evans,¹⁷ Richard Pascal,¹⁸ and Roberta Rubenstein.¹⁹ Maternity is regularly presented monstrously in Jackson's work and matricide in various forms appears, often accompanied by wicked children. Some of the tensions that frequently plague the characters, specifically the daughters, involve hauntings by consuming mothers or maternal figures. The gothic house as the embodiment of the mother often features in discussions of such themes, with particular focus on *The Haunting of Hill House* and *We Have Always Lived in the Castle* as primary texts. As is common with readings of the Gothic, psychoanalytic interpretations, such as those from Lynne Ann Evans, Patrycja Antoszek, and Darryl Hattenhauer,²⁰ draw on Freudian theory and Julia Kristeva in their examination of oedipal relationships, psychic drives, and the uncanny apparent in Jackson's writing. Less prevalent are readings about escape, though these can be found in Franklin and Hattenhauer, as well as Richard Pascal's reading of 'The Tooth'.²¹ Jackson's use of food is analysed by Shelley Ingram and Willow G. Mullins, as well as Jen Cadwallader,²² who concentrate on Jackson's later novels, namely *The Sundial* (1958), *The Haunting of Hill House*, and *We Have Always Lived in the Castle*, and examine the relationships between food and the characters in their respective presentations of food as a symbolic object. Scholarship pertaining to Jackson's presentation of the self/selves is often contained in readings of themes related to trauma, such

¹⁷ Lynne Evans, "Help Eleanor Come Home": Monstrous Maternity in Shirley Jackson's *The Haunting of Hill House*, *Canadian Review of American Studies*, 50.1 (2020), 102-120.

¹⁸ Richard Pascal, 'Walking Alone Together: Family Monsters in *The Haunting of Hill House*', *Studies in the Novel*, 46.4 (2014), 464-485.

¹⁹ Roberta Rubenstein, 'House Mothers and Haunted Daughters: Shirley Jackson and Female Gothic', *Tulsa Studies in Women's Literature*, 15.2 (1996), 309-331.

²⁰ Lynne Anne Evans, 'A "brutal, unprincipled, drunken, vice-ridden beast": Maternity in Shirley Jackson's *The Bird's Nest*', *ESQ*, 43.4/44.1 (2018), 25-47.

Patrycja Antoszek, 'Haunting Feelings: Shirley Jackson and the Politics of Affect', *Women's Studies*, 49.8 (2020), 850-867.

Hattenhauer, *Shirley Jackson's American Gothic*.

²¹ Richard Pascal, "Farther than Samarkand": The Escape Theme in Shirley Jackson's "The Tooth", *Studies in Short Fiction*, 19.2 (1982), 133-139.

²² Shelley Ingram and Willow G. Mullins, 'Would You Like a Cup of Tea? Food, Home, and Mid-Century Anxiety in the Later Novels of Shirley Jackson', in *The Routledge Companion to Literature and Food*, ed. by Lorna Piatti-Farnell and Donna Lee Brien (New York: Routledge, 2018), pp. 342-50.

Jen Cadwallader, 'Picknicking at Hill House: Shirley Jackson's Gothic Vision of Heaven', *Women's Studies*, 49.8 (2020), 884-900.

as Susan J. Behren's article on the relatively under-examined novel, *Hangsaman*,²³ and Tony M. Vinci's discussion of *The Haunting of Hill House*.²⁴ Jackson's depiction of normalised evil and social conformity, so very prevalent in her work, is examined predominantly in readings of 'The Lottery' and *The Road Through the Wall*, notably by Jay A. Yarmove, Ruth Franklin, Zaid Ibrahim Ismael and Sabah Atallah Khalifa Ali, and Patrycja Antoszek.²⁵ These readings variously figure both fictions as commentary on scapegoating (with particular emphasis on the Holocaust and the Red Scare), passivity, and primitive violence.

The central concept informing my own examination of Jackson's short stories and novels is entropy and its manifestations through entropic and anti-entropic characters and structures or forces. In physics, entropy is 'a measure of the amount of disorder in a physical system'.²⁶ Alternatively, entropy can be understood as the quantity of disordered energy. According to the second law of thermodynamics, physical systems with many constituents have 'a natural evolution toward greater disorder [or higher entropy], since disorder can be achieved in so many more ways than order'.²⁷ When maximum disorder – or maximum entropy – is reached, 'heat death' occurs, the point at which all temperature has become uniform and no more energy is available to do work (heat death is also hypothesised as the ultimate fate of the universe).²⁸ Entropy, in essence, represents disorder: the higher the

²³ Susan J. Behrens, 'The Essential Self of Natalie Waite in *Hangsaman* by Shirley Jackson', *Names A Journal of Onomastics*, 69.1 (2021), 1-9.

²⁴ Tony M. Vinci, 'Shirley Jackson's Posthumanist Ghosts: Revisiting Spectrality and Trauma in *The Haunting of Hill House*', *Arizona Quarterly*, 75.4 (2014), 53-75.

²⁵ Jay A. Yarmove, 'Jackson's The Lottery', *The Explicator*, 52.4 (1994), 242-5.
Franklin, *Shirley Jackson: A Rather Haunted Life*.

Zaid Ibrahim Ismael and Sabah Atallah Khalifa Ali, 'Human Rights at Stake: Shirley Jackson's Social and Political Protest in "The Lottery"', *International Journal of Applied Linguistics & English Literature*, 7.6 (2018), 28-36.

Patrycja Antoszek, 'The Suburban Unhomely: Alienation and Anxiety in Shirley Jackson's *The Road Through the Wall*', *Explorations: A Journal of Language and Literature*, 5 (2017), 12-24.

²⁶ Brian Greene, *The Fabric of the Cosmos* (Melbourne: Penguin Books, 2008), p. 154.

²⁷ Greene, pp. 154-5.

²⁸ *The Encyclopaedia of Science and Technology*, e.d. by James Trefil, 1st edn (New York: Routledge, 2002) 179 (p. 179) s.v. entropy.

entropy, the less structured the system becomes until all that remains is chaos (or disordered energy). Conversely: the lower the entropy, the higher the order. Importantly, '*homogeneity implies low entropy*'.²⁹ As such, entropy is also an effect that reflects the state of the system in which it occurs. My explanation is by no means comprehensive, but it encapsulates the crux of my interest in the entropic and anti-entropic forces of Jackson's fiction: those structures and characters that either generate entropy or contain it. If we understand entropic forces as disruptive forces that increase disorder within the system and upset the established equilibrium, anti-entropic forces would be those that are stabilising, restrictive, and manipulative, in order to keep entropy low or reverse its growth. Thus, if entropy has a natural tendency to increase in an isolated or closed system (such as the home, or the family, or the community, or the individual), anti-entropic forces contain and reduce it. On this point, I deviate slightly from the physics definition of entropy, since according to thermodynamic laws entropy cannot be reversed in closed systems, or 'happens rarely, at best'.³⁰

This definition of entropy frames my readings of Jackson's work, providing a blueprint to understanding the characters and the forces that shape their predicaments. I devote much of my focus to Jackson's female characters, who often embody entropy (in various forms) in their negotiations of their individual predicaments. In chapter one, I discuss the anti-entropic domestic contract, the overarching mandate that prescribes the women's place within domestic society. I look at the ways the contract determines the women's status, the various responses to its terms, and the costs of compliance or rebellion. In chapter two, I examine Jackson's use of genre to explore female agency by looking at her ghost story, *The Haunting of Hill House*, and her fairytale, *We Have Always Lived in the Castle*. I analyse the characteristic tropes that Jackson employs to present female agency as destructive and

²⁹ Greene, p. 227. Emphasis added.

³⁰ Greene, p. 159.

volatile when women are placed in situations that consume and inhibit them. My third chapter considers attempts at escape, its possibilities and costs, and observes what these attempts illustrate about the women and the conditions of their entrapment. Finally, my last chapter considers anti-entropic structures at a collective level, and how the forces that impose them cultivate a culture of compliance that demonstrates a potential for evil.

It is my hope that Hyman's assertion regarding Jackson's writing is demonstrated in the investigation I undertake. I do not believe that I need to make a case for Shirley Jackson's relevance – her fictions do that for her – but I aim to illustrate the knowing quality of her work that depicts characters, regularly female, anchored and unsettled by the contexts of their inhabitation. A number of the stories that I consider, particularly in chapter three, were published posthumously, and thus have no distinctive date beyond the collections to which they belong. In all instances where exact dates exist, I have provided them – those that are undated are left as such. My examination of Jackson's oeuvre has been expansive, but not exhaustive: most of her fictions have been omitted simply because she has written too many to be included or even referenced in my thesis. For this reason, there is still much to be said about Jackson's interests and the ways that she explores them, but I'll leave that to others as captivated with her as I am to interrogate.

1. Chapter One: 'Be a Good Sport, Tessie': The Domestic Contract as an Imperative

The domestic contract has been prescribed for women for centuries, albeit that its stipulations have varied from era to era and culture to culture. Within the nuclear families of the early twentieth century, the domestic contract was a prevailing qualifier: it enforced mandates according to which women's "value" was measured and their roles defined. Much of Shirley Jackson's work concerns women negotiating their domestic spaces, as well as the roles the domestic sphere connotes. Domesticity and its associations are an imperative, imposed in various ways upon the women in the stories, be they wives, daughters, mothers, or women alone. The domestic contract is pervasive, and the responses to it are intriguing and varied. What forms does the domestic contract take in Jackson's work? What are the interior responses to its terms? What are the costs of compliance or rebellion?

Permeating Jackson's oeuvre are deep-seated tensions around the woman's role within the family and the home. These tensions largely concern the status the various roles endow and the costs of that status in terms of autonomy. Complete identification with the contract results in automatism, while resisting it or attempting to negotiate a space somewhere within its sphere carries with it some form of marginalisation. Yet irrespective of where we find these women on the spectrum, the price they pay is always one of sacrifice. The question that remains, then, is what forms these sacrifices take, and what this says about the roles the women assume (or are expected to assume). In the stories that follow, Jackson's women occupy different roles, but each role is influenced and shaped by the contract and its circumscriptions. Even when it appears that the contract has no presence in the woman's life, its reach is evident, its power destabilising and consuming. The contract pervasively haunts the women, no matter where they go or from whence they flee. The result is that they are

always subject to its pressures, always forfeiting something of themselves under its cumbersome weight.

Jackson's acclaimed short story, 'The Lottery' (1948), centres on the selection of a sacrificial victim during an annual harvest ritual in a rural village. Ostensibly established to ensure an ongoing prosperous harvest, the ritual appears to select its victims at random. Tessie Hutchinson, the victim of this lottery, enters the story from its margins. From a narrative point of view, there is a structural inevitability that Tessie should be the victim. From the moment of her arrival onto the scene, it seems certain that Tessie will be the one chosen: she is late for the ceremony, and her attitude towards it is one of nonchalance: 'clean forgot what day it was'.³¹ Moreover, when her lateness is remarked upon, she ridicules the triviality of both domestic work and the ritual: '[w]ouldn't have me leave m'dishes in the sink, now, would you'.³² Particularly when her family's name is drawn, Tessie's fate appears sealed, despite the fact that any of the other members of her family could be chosen as the sacrifice. She excitedly proclaims that it 'wasn't fair' when her family's name is revealed in the first draw,³³ seemingly aware, or unavoidably aware, that she is now at risk of being chosen (yet, she has always been at risk, but enjoyed a false sense of security that the arbitrariness of the selection ostensibly provides). Inevitably, it seems, Tessie's slip is the one containing the damning black spot, and she is promptly stoned to death.

While the lottery is purported to be fair and incorruptible, with everyone '[taking] the same chance',³⁴ it is prepared and conducted by men, notably by three men who occupy influential (and therefore powerful) positions within the town: Mr Summers (who owns the coal company), Mr Graves (the postmaster), and Mr Martin (the grocer). To this extent, the

³¹ Shirley Jackson, *Novels and Stories* (New York: Library of America, 2010), p. 229.

³² p. 230.

³³ p. 233.

³⁴ p. 233.

business elite organise and control the lottery, which immediately brings into question the fairness of the process. The ritual may appear to generate a random victim, but it *needs* Tessie to be the sacrifice. Of the Hutchinsons, Tessie is the member with the most expendable position in her family. Having fulfilled her role as housewife and mother, her place in her family and in the greater collective of the community has become increasingly superfluous, and consequently her position as a useful and thus relevant member of society has diminished. Tessie's status within the community is attached to her role as wife and mother: she has fulfilled her role as both by bearing children and rearing them, and had she borne more (particularly sons, who do not marry into another family), her own risk would have been reduced, but even that security is no guarantee. Therefore, her suitability as sacrifice outweighs any residual value she may hold as a woman within the village. In René Girard's terms, Tessie qualifies as a "sacrificeable" being because her 'crucial social link' to the community has weakened or entirely dissolved, warranting her selection as sacrifice.³⁵ Moreover, because her relevance within her family and the village has waned, she is a person who 'lacks a champion' and can thus be struck down 'without fear of reprisal'.³⁶ This is patently demonstrated when Tessie objects to the "unfairness" of the process: she is chided by the women to '[b]e a good sport', and admonished by her husband, who is seemingly unaffected by her imminent death, to 'shut up'.³⁷ Nobody but Tessie objects to her selection, and Tessie only does so because she is the one due to be slain.

What truly makes this story horrifying, though, is the complicity of every member in the community: nobody questions the ceremony or rejects the violence it demands, even those who are claimed as its victims. Myth and ritual play an important role in framing the

³⁵ René Girard, 'Violence and the Sacred', in *On Violence: A Reader*, ed. by Bruce B. Lawrence and Aisha Karim (Durham: Duke University Press, 2017), pp. 334-350, (p. 339).

³⁶ Girard, p. 340.

³⁷ Jackson, p. 233.

violence as fundamental to survival. The lottery is held annually to guarantee another harvest, and the ancient fertility ritual it is derived from ('lottery in June, corn be heavy soon') assumes a status of divinity.³⁸ As such, the villagers 'can dispose of their violence more efficiently if they regard the process not as something emanating from within themselves, but as a necessity imposed from without, a divine decree whose least infraction calls down terrible punishment'.³⁹ Thus, the villagers comply with the ritual because they believe that they have to, but as Jackson demonstrates, it is also because they *want* to: contextualising the lottery as "necessary" only aids in veiling their own violent impulses that, if left unappeased, will 'accumulate until [the violence] overflows its confines' and results in fractious disorder.⁴⁰ In this sense, the violence, channelled at one individual – the sacrifice – protects the community 'from its *own* violence' by choosing a victim or object 'outside of itself': the scapegoat.⁴¹ The conduit for their violence chosen, the villagers partake, with relish, in the stoning, complicit in the murder of the marked victim. Even Tessie is no different: she only questions the *process* – not the ritual – when her husband picks the blotted slip of paper, and even attempts to reduce her own personal risk by insisting that her daughter and son-in-law be included in the family draw, seemingly more than willing to endanger her own daughter at the mere chance of survival.⁴² Thus, the lottery perpetuates a culture of violence and self-preservation in which familial ties dissolve as soon as members of the family unit are placed at risk once they have served their purpose. In addition, the community join together to murder, not to protect. Mrs Delacroix appears as Tessie's friend the one moment, and her condemner the next, the abrupt shift in their dynamic effected by Tessie's marked status as sacrifice. The apparent camaraderie suggested in the story's opening pages is an illusion, for

³⁸ p. 232.

³⁹ Girard, p. 340.

⁴⁰ p. 336.

⁴¹ p. 335.

⁴² Jackson, p. 233.

at least once a year, the community turns on one of its own in a savage ritual designed to cull extraneous members. As a result, the violence shapes the relationships within the community, prioritising catharsis and order over social and even familial bonds.

In his discussion of violence, Girard asserts that the purpose of the sacrifice is to ‘restore harmony to the community, [and] reinforce the social fabric’.⁴³ In this sense, the lottery is an anti-entropic structure. On the surface, the ritual appears to be sustained out of fear that discontinuing it would be detrimental to the village’s crops, but on deeper inspection, it becomes evident that the ceremony is also the primary means of retaining the status quo and upholding tradition for, as Old Man Warner remarks, there has ‘*always* been a lottery’.⁴⁴ Notably, other villages have already renounced the ritual, but this is met with derision by some in the focal village, accusing those villages of being a ‘pack of crazy fools’ who listened to their ‘young folks, nothing’s good enough for *them*’.⁴⁵ Thus, circular reasoning is used to justify the ritual’s relevance. Change is rejected and deemed a fancy, if not insanity. While the ritual in this village has changed superficially, its purpose remains the same: the selection and execution of a sacrifice. Significantly, while ‘so much of the ritual had been forgotten or discarded’,⁴⁶ chips of wood had been replaced by slips of paper, and the original black box used for the draw had been lost, the villagers all ‘still remembered to use stones’.⁴⁷ The community has abandoned many pieces of the ritual, but it has preserved the violence and, more specifically, the *form* of violence, which entails communal stoning of the sacrifice. In this way, the lottery absolves individuals from the murder by making the ritualistic killing a *collective* act. Thus, the community as a whole is responsible for the death and is guilty (or innocent?) of murder. Individual defiance seems hopeless in a community

⁴³ Girard, p. 335.

⁴⁴ Jackson, p. 232.

⁴⁵ p. 232.

⁴⁶ p. 228

⁴⁷ p. 235.

that revels in its violence, particularly when the community's only instance of genuine unity is found in the slaying of the lottery's victim. What keeps this ritual alive, and particularly its violence, is the complicity of the community, who do not interrogate the legitimacy of the ritual and conform mindlessly to its alleged purpose, even when the very nature of the ritual purportedly places every member of the community in *mortal* peril. Thus, the contract cultivates a culture of compliance and blind obedience that poses no threat to the continuation of the exclusionary ritual.

The role that women play is of particular note: women reprove Tessie first, and the emphasis is placed on their responses (as opposed to the men's) to Tessie's selection and subsequent attitude. They are also singled out by the story's narrator when the stoning commences: 'Mrs Delacroix selected a stone so large she had to pick it up with both hands and turned to Mrs Dunbar. "Come on," she said. "Hurry up"'.⁴⁸ The women, more than the men, exhibit an almost feral excitement for the stoning, similar to the children who fill their pockets with stones before the lottery ceremony even begins.⁴⁹ In 'The Lottery', a woman is made the sacrifice, and it is women who seem most eager to slay her. Tessie is first silenced by other women, and it is women, not men, who instruct her to 'be a good sport',⁵⁰ in other words, to conform to the terms of the ritual and her role as sacrifice, and to accept her fate without protest. Perhaps, for the women, the stoning ritual is an opportunity, and the only one, for them to release their suppressed frustrations, a mode of catharsis for their pent-up rage at their positions within the patriarchal order. As the subjugated group, the women cannot simply charge at men without fear of reprisal, and so the lottery functions as a patriarchal and thus acceptable structure for them to channel their rage and direct it at a scapegoat, no matter who the scapegoat may be. Hence, the ritual functions as a mechanism

⁴⁸ p. 235.

⁴⁹ p. 227.

⁵⁰ p. 223.

of control, an anti-entropic structure that ensures resistance is curbed. The women target their violence at the sacrifice – the object, and not the cause, of their fury – thereby remaining complicit in the terms of their own entrapment. As a result, indignation at the positions imposed by structural determinacy is endlessly deferred. The fact that the lottery occurs every year and ends with a stoning indicates the brief mitigation that the ritual provides and the continual deferral of unappeased impulses and frustrations. Consequently, the anti-entropic villagers remain invested in the ritual's survival, and the ritual succeeds at keeping people confined and compliant, all the while exterminating the outliers.

An interesting companion piece to 'The Lottery' is another of Jackson's short stories appearing in *The Lottery* collection: 'The Renegade' (1949). Mrs Walpole, a woman from the city who has recently settled in an isolated country town (and thus presents as an outsider), has her domestic morning disrupted by a phone call accusing her dog, Lady, of killing chickens in the town. News of this incident spreads fast, and soon various options are offered by the townsfolk to "deal" with Lady and prevent any further killings – all of which are rooted in violence and present grotesque solutions to eradicating the threat that Lady poses. The dog is 'known among the neighbours as Lady Walpole' and is, in Mrs Walpole's view, 'on an exact par with Jack Walpole or Judy Walpole; quiet, competent, exceedingly tolerant'.⁵¹ Notably, Lady is recognised as an official member of the Walpole family, moreover, her nature is compared favourably to the children's, Jack and Judy (a comparison that ultimately proves ironic, as the children are the ones to propose the most barbaric suggestion for punishing Lady). Lady shares a metonymic relationship with the family (especially Mrs Walpole) and in this sense, is an extension of them. Lady's positioning within the family thus echoes Girard's claim that 'all victims, even the animal ones, bear a certain

⁵¹ Jackson, p. 58.

resemblance to the object they replace'.⁵² Which begs the question – *who*, specifically, does Lady replace? It is no coincidence that the name of the dog, which is female, is “Lady”, especially if we read her role as that of symbolic stand-in for women being brought in line. The Walpoles are outsiders, city folk who ‘would probably always be city folk’,⁵³ and it is their dog that allegedly wreaks havoc. Interestingly, after a conversation with Mr White, the ostensible witness to Lady’s “crime”, Mrs Walpole expresses relief that Mr White doesn’t appear to consider that she herself is culpable, thinking, ‘at least he doesn’t blame *me*’.⁵⁴ So long as the violence is directed away from her, she seems willing to accept it: Mrs Walpole is increasingly horrified by the punitive solutions she hears, but she doesn’t necessarily reject a punitive option as the answer to disciplining Lady, whose guilt is not even clear. Mrs Walpole’s thoughts are further suggestive of the idea that Lady functions as the substitute for her, which is most pronounced in the conclusion of the story that sees Mrs Walpole trading places with Lady in an imagined moment of punishment, and ‘feeling the harsh hands pulling her down, the sharp points closing in on her throat’.⁵⁵ Why does Mrs Walpole identify so closely with Lady – a dog? Why, when the dog’s mutilation is imagined, does she see herself in its place? Perhaps domesticity has already begun to close in on her throat and choke her.

An outsider rather ignorant of the practices and customs of the country town, Mrs Walpole comes to learn the lesson that the townsfolk intend to convey in their proposed castigation of Lady: know your place, and do not disrupt the status quo. Could it be that this is a lesson meant for her? There is a strong compulsion amongst the townsfolk to punish the dog to a degree that actually “breaks” it, but if it cannot be broken, the only alternative is death.⁵⁶ The question that the story poses in its conclusion is who the titular “renegade” is –

⁵² Girard, p. 338.

⁵³ Jackson, p. 61.

⁵⁴ p. 63

⁵⁵ p. 68.

⁵⁶ p. 62.

Lady or Mrs Walpole? It is significant that Mrs Walpole imagines herself in Lady's position in that crucial moment of castigation, and even more so that her own children are the ones to enact the grotesque sentence: 'we [pull] on the rope [...] and [...] the [spiked collar] cut[s] her head off'.⁵⁷ Does Mrs Walpole believe herself to be a traitor to her gender, and her role? Lady is a domesticated female dog – Mrs Walpole a domesticated woman, but both ostensibly exhibit qualities that deviate from imposed prescriptions: Lady is unruly, while Mrs Walpole demonstrates a poor understanding of the domestic contract. The story opens with a scene in the kitchen, but the scene is riddled with disorder: the food isn't properly cooked, Judy's hair isn't 'accurately braided' and '*someone* [...] was going to be late'.⁵⁸ Additionally, as a result of the disarray, Mrs Walpole would eat breakfast later, which meant 'her wash would be late getting on the line, and if it rained that afternoon, as it certainly might, nothing would be dry'.⁵⁹ From the outset, Mrs Walpole is depicted as a clumsy housewife, which is further exemplified when she compares herself to her neighbour, Mrs Nash. In her visit to Mrs Nash, she becomes 'painfully aware of her own kitchen with the dirty dishes in the sink', observing Mrs Nash's 'freshly washed' kitchen and her ability to 'fry doughnuts without making any sort of mess'.⁶⁰ Mrs Walpole knows that she does not quite fit into the community, and relies on the townsfolk for the local knowledge and insights that she, being a city person and outsider, is ignorant of. Moreover, it is *her* dog that ostensibly causes severe disruptions to the town. Mrs Walpole assumes Lady to be 'so gentle'⁶¹ yet the dog may possess a 'murderous brutality'⁶² that demands violent rectification. There is no place for Lady's disruptive behaviour and, unless permanently corrected, there is no place for the dog either. The townsfolk insist that something be done about Lady, as

⁵⁷ p. 68.

⁵⁸ p. 57.

⁵⁹ p. 58.

⁶⁰ p. 61.

⁶¹ p. 59.

⁶² p. 67.

something has always been done about the dogs that caused unwelcome disturbances in the town. Like Tessie in 'The Lottery', Lady's punishment is necessary to retain the status quo, and violence is the answer to accomplishing this. If Lady functions as a substitute for Mrs Walpole, the punishment serves as a means of coercing obedience from her, to compel her to leave her "city ways" behind and embrace completely her role as wife and mother in her new community. Mrs Walpole is to uphold the status quo through her domestic role and to quell disruption by disciplining Lady and keeping her (and herself) in line. 'The Lottery' and 'The Renegade' both end with violent reckonings against female characters, and in both cases, it is the community that collectively enacts this reckoning. Tessie's and Mrs Walpole's deaths arise from their positions as women in the communities they inhabit: they occupy fixed roles, and if or when these roles are not assumed, if they deviate from them and disrupt or threaten the established order, their status within their communities is subject to dissolution, and the women are rendered expendable and undesirable.

'Company for Dinner' strongly features depersonalisation, and the story illustrates, rather chillingly, the ease with which one person can be swapped out for another with minimal or *no* impact to the situation and family. In the story, a man accidentally walks into the wrong house believing it to be his own, and only once settled down for dinner does he realise that this home and this family are not his own. What finally clues him in, it would seem, is the serving of the tomato soup that he remarks he had had for dinner the night before.⁶³ Upon leaving and entering (ostensibly) the right home, the scene is eerily similar to the one he had just departed from, from the wife's *precise* actions to her words: upon hearing her husband's arrival from the kitchen, 'the sound of the can opener stopped, and she said, "That you, Dear? Dinner's almost ready"'.⁶⁴ The domestic scene of the wrong home seems so

⁶³ Shirley Jackson, *Let Me Tell You* (London: Penguin Books, 2016), p. 59.

⁶⁴ p. 59.

natural to the man that the woman's voice or the son he greets does not advise him of the situation he has walked into. His family appears to be so interchangeable, that it is a factor outside of his family – food – that rouses him into awareness. Yet, how certain can we be that he does not, once again, enter another house that is not his own? If the wives mirror one another in every respect, how do their husbands identify them? Perhaps there is no way for them to do so, beyond external markers such as precisely scheduled dinners. The point of automaton wives anyway is the services they provide, not the personalities they possess. 'Company for Dinner' presents a complete identification with the contract, an identification so effective and so thorough that the wives become utterly interchangeable – their behaviour and words echo each other to the extent that individuality is lost. These women function by rote, controlled by the domestic contract that dictates their every move and utterance. They appear as one-dimensional copies of each other, easily replaced and easily forgotten.

Conversely, 'The Beautiful Stranger' features a substitute husband, an imposter who *looks* like John, but does not *act* like him. Margaret becomes increasingly convinced that the John who has returned to her and the family is not the same John who left for the business trip. The subtleties in his behaviour, it would seem, betray his disguise. Unlike the wives of 'Company for Dinner', whose actions and behaviour render them indivisible, Imposter John, although a doppelgänger, is not able to deceive Margaret because she is too in-tune with her husband's character, observing: 'this is not the man who enjoyed seeing me cry'.⁶⁵ Imposter John's performance of John is good, but not *that* good: John is too individualised to be imitated immaculately. Both 'Company for Dinner' and 'The Beautiful Stranger' concern strangers, and both suggest that the husband is the stranger, but the defining characteristic that sets these stories apart is that they unfold from different points of view, notably, from

⁶⁵ Shirley Jackson, *Come Along With Me: Classic Short Stories and an Unfinished Novel* (New York: Penguin Books, 2013), p. 66.

spouses of opposing genders. The husband of 'Company for Dinner' does not recognise he is in the wrong home or with the wrong family, whereas Margaret in 'The Beautiful Stranger' begins to suspect immediately that John is an imposter. The wives in 'Company for Dinner' are unrecognisable because they're all the same, they all act by rote, while John cannot be entirely replaced by his imposter because he has his a distinct identity and does not follow a set script. Behaviour reinforces similitude in 'Company for Dinner' and destabilises it in 'The Beautiful Stranger', yet the man is the cause of this destabilisation, while the woman embodies similitude. John is *different enough* to be noninterchangeable, no matter how much his imposter may look like him. The implication is that the domestic contract does not shape the man, because it is not designed for him to obey.

Perhaps it is worth acknowledging that the wife of 'The Beautiful Stranger', a woman, is able to recognise her spouse's differences while the husband of 'Company for Dinner', a man, is not, but that is because there are differences to recognise, not because a woman is more capable of detecting a stranger than a man is. When read in conversation with each other, the stories expose the gendered disparity between the woman's characterisation and the man's. Patterns of behaviour are prescribed by the domestic contract that moulds the woman's every word and action, while the man embodies individuality. For the woman, her purpose is stipulated by the contract which prescribes her role, one that is standardised for all women. In the case of 'Company for Dinner', the woman's identity becomes subsumed by the role that defines her. She steps rather easily into the role designed for her by others, seemingly without resistance, complying with the contract that demands devout obedience. As a result, she becomes increasingly depersonalised, an automaton wife in an automaton role, divested of place and self. Is Margaret to follow the same trajectory? While her husband may or may not be an imposter, her role within the marriage and the family remains the same. She is expected to perform as a housewife and mother, to continue fulfilling the requirements

of the contract, and she does. Her initial discomfort appears to lie more with her husband than her position, though her discomfort with John could be the symptom of a deeper malaise related to her prescriptive existence. Margaret is situated at a different point on the spectrum, but she occupies the same role as the automaton wives. Even when she suspects her husband is an imposter, she maintains the status quo, the structured order, believing that in doing so, she undermines the real John's authority and significance. Yet the effect is the same: she fulfils her role as housewife and mother, she follows the domestic script, her behaviour does not change. It appears Margaret is to find her small delights in a rotation of imposter husbands because her own place within the home is established, and she doesn't seem particularly interested in disrupting it. Her reliance on her husband (imposter or no) remains, and his status as an imposter does little to change her own status. If anything, it may keep her complicit in her own entrapment, perpetually believing (or imagining) her husband is not the man she married, having been replaced by his (superior) double.

For those women who do not marry and do not reach the vaunted heights of domesticity – whether by choice or a lack thereof – isolation and loneliness appear to be the only outcomes possible. 'The Villager' (1949) follows Clarence, a thirty-five-year-old woman unfulfilled, isolated from society because of her chosen path of independence. Supposedly content with her 'common sense' decision in 'handling a good job competently and supporting herself better than she would have in her home town',⁶⁶ it becomes apparent that the life she has created for herself is not enough, nor is the role she has settled for. Clarence lives alone, is unmarried, and invests herself emotionally in other people's lives and conversations. She contrives an entirely different narrative for herself as a successful dancer in the process of leaving New York permanently for Paris with her husband "Artie". She even adopts this imaginative invention in an encounter with a stranger. The story ends with

⁶⁶ Jackson, *Novels and Stories*, p. 41.

Clarence making her way alone to her apartment, her shoulders aching; an ending similar to Katherine Mansfield's 'Miss Brill' (1920), which concludes with its title character (who imagines herself an actress) returning to her 'little dark room – her room like a cupboard' and projecting her isolation and sadness onto her fox fur.⁶⁷ Is the same ending in store for Clarence? Is Miss Brill who Clarence is destined to become, once she retires and exits the economic domain, having nobody with whom to share the remainder of her life? Is she to fill her days with outings to parks to '[sit] in on other people's lives' in an effort to escape her loneliness?⁶⁸ Miss Brill seems to embody Clarence's future: if marriage is not the pursued outcome, the alternative to it is a life of solitude. This solitude is one of isolation and loneliness, one that relies considerably on fantasy to enhance a rather bleak reality. It would seem that a woman ending up alone, without a man, is a worse outcome than what a life of domesticity and marriage presents. Miss Brill is treated as a pariah, as someone who does not belong amongst those who conform: 'why does she come here at all – who wants her? Why doesn't she keep her silly old mug at home?'⁶⁹ Both Miss Brill and Clarence are friendless, lacking genuine relationships with anyone, seemingly as if there are no options outside of heteronormative pair-bonds available for single, independent women (wives, on the other hand, are friends with other wives). Thus, while Clarence has managed to claim independence through acquisition of a respectable job, she remains confined. She is able to move more freely across spaces denied to other women who integrate into domesticity, but, like Miss Brill, she suffers emotional and social isolation. She concludes the story, not as an independent woman living on her own means, but as a thirty-five-year-old failed dancer, unfulfilled, and still dreaming of Paris. The reach of the contract is evident, as it still manages to shape Clarence's role considerably, even though her role is one relatively distanced from

⁶⁷ Katherine Mansfield, *The Garden Party and Other Stories* (London: Penguin Classics, 2007) p. 114.

⁶⁸ Mansfield, p. 111.

⁶⁹ Mansfield, p. 113.

identification with domesticity. Clarence remains constrained by a lack of choice: she does not become the dancer she always hoped to be, and assumes a role within the economic domain traditionally occupied by women. Therefore, she is, to a certain degree, still defined by the domestic contract. Her time and energy is not devoted to the home and the family, nor is her purpose fundamentally shaped by these aspects, but her social position seems to be attached entirely to her occupation, which determines the status she holds, similarly to the traditional domestic roles held by those in the home. The implication is that the contract cannot be escaped, because even the alternative roles that exist for women are moulded by its prescriptions. The alternative to life as a wife, it would seem, is a life of a lonely spinster: empty, and haunted by failed dreams.

Conversely, the female protagonist of 'The New Maid'⁷⁰ presents an alternative for wives: she is a successful fashion designer ostensibly having managed to escape the confines of the domestic sphere. Most of her domestic duties are assumed by the maid, who serves as governess for the children and as housekeeper. Yet, presented only as 'Mrs Arthur Morgan', this story's protagonist does not represent an ideal answer to the question of alternatives that exist for women within Jackson's writing. Although liberated, significantly so, from many of the prescriptions the domestic contract so regularly imposes on Jackson's female characters, Mrs Morgan regresses into childhood as she relinquishes her domestic role. She whines like a child, refuses to eat her food, and is scolded by the maid to 'mind her manners' when she complains that she hates oatmeal.⁷¹ The maid is thrust into the available role of mother, and Mrs Morgan into the only other available one – that of child. Even though she has a role outside of the home, the role does not appear compatible with the domestic realm. The result is that she is forced to assume an available role to find a place within the home and adopt its

⁷⁰ Jackson, *Let Me Tell You*, pp. 63-72.

⁷¹ p. 67.

associated prescriptions. Mrs Morgan's economic role may enable her to leave strictly domestic spaces for more liberating ones (albeit at the expense of another woman), but the role appears to cost her her own unique place within her family and home. She cannot leave as an independent working mother and wife and return as one, for it seems there can be no convergence of seemingly opposing roles. She is forced to leave each role at the door as she moves between the spheres, for although the contract extends to both of spheres, the roles do not. Furthermore, Mrs Morgan's refusal to eat her food when assuming her role as a child underscores the limits of language in expressing her anger with her predicament: it appears that Mrs Morgan is only able to exhibit defiance through the non-verbal language of a child, for such behaviour or even agency is not accessible to wives and mothers. The effect of this, of course, is that her defiance manifests as petulant and juvenile: '[y]ou've got everything on backward', Mr Morgan tells her, and they proceed to bicker childishly.⁷² It becomes apparent that what is missing from the world these women inhabit is a language in which to question the terms of their entrapment. Even when they manage to step beyond domesticity's most limiting forms, reaching for independence and agency, their silence remains, evinced by recourse to other (minimally) available roles that deform their possibilities as independent women.

Dabbling in absurdity, *The Sundial* (1958) could be conceived as an exploration of matriarchy within the patriarchal structure. The novel is populated by unsympathetic, self-serving characters who swiftly exemplify the dangers posed by agents within the home as opposed to those outside of it. The Halloran estate is 'distinguished from the rest of the world by a stone wall, which went completely around the estate, so that all inside the wall was Halloran, all outside was not'.⁷³ It was built by the first Mr Halloran so he could 'set up his

⁷² p. 70.

⁷³ Shirley Jackson, *Four Novels of the 1940s & 50s* (New York: Library of America, 2020), p. 639.

own world',⁷⁴ construct his own kingdom suiting his own tastes and leave the 'other world' behind.⁷⁵ Adorned with objects of beauty 'plundered ruthlessly' from the other world (thus, not *entirely* leaving the old world behind),⁷⁶ the estate is designed to be an exhibit of opulence, breeding similarly decadent people. The grand estate and its large stone walls give the lie to a security that does not exist inside the house, which is undermined by death and pervasive acrimony. The safety of the home is inverted by parricide that claims the lives of the Halloran heir and Halloran matriarch, disturbing the idealised image of the loving, united nuclear family. The grotesqueness of the killings is exacerbated by the assumed culprits of the murders: a mother, and a granddaughter. The suspected murderers, both female, disrupt domestic definitions that figure femininity as docile, tender, and innocent. Orianna's murder of Lionel casts her as an 'unmotherly monster' who murders her own son simply to claim his inheritance.⁷⁷ Her homicidal deeds speak to the tensions around domesticity, which confines and consumes its women as it claims their agency. Women's security in a patriarchal world is precarious, dictated by the contract that binds them to men and not property or wealth. Thus, their safety and security is always subject to disruption, always potentially at risk of displacement. Orianna, in turn, upsets this conventional exchange by murdering her son and usurping his position as head of the household, taking the power and the wealth of the Halloran estate into her own custody. She thereby claims the security conferred on men for herself, and assumes the primary position in the Halloran hierarchy.

Yet far from the affectionate and loving matriarch, Orianna lords her position over the others, keeping old hierarchical structures intact. Her delusions of grandeur inspire her to fashion a crown to wear in the house and the coming new order, intent on retaining the

⁷⁴ p. 639.

⁷⁵ p. 639.

⁷⁶ p. 639.

⁷⁷ p. 676.

familial hierarchy beyond the end of the world: ‘even if the world outside withered and dissolved Mrs Halloran would face a new world, herself in order, and balanced, relinquishing nothing of what was her own’.⁷⁸ This ‘new world’ promises to be a rehash of the old one, with the same structures in place that relegate purpose and status. Thus, even with women or a woman at its centre, the Halloran domain isn’t any less dictatorial or authoritative. Orianna commands the rest of the house’s occupants with an entitlement that recalls the estate’s first patriarch, Mr Halloran. She threatens expulsion to those who do not conform, and invites selected men into the fold to be exploited for sexual and reproductive purposes. A close inversion of the patriarchal arrangement, it is nonetheless one defined by it: matriarchy, in this vision, can only be destructive. It replaces its patriarchal figures with women, but the women replicate the same structures that confine and oppress them. While it may look different, it functions in an almost identical way and may even be more overtly monstrous than its precedent. Fancy, Orianna’s young granddaughter, shares her grandmother’s ambition, and waits with bated breath for her succession as head of the Halloran household. She threatens to push Orianna down the stairs ‘like [Orianna] pushed [her] daddy’,⁷⁹ and is equally obsessed with Orianna’s frivolous crown that superficially bestows privileged status in the Halloran family order. So intoxicated are she and Orianna by the image of that status that they kill to claim the position for themselves. The family dynamic is troubled by a capitalistic struggle for power by the women to assume the head position that would place them as master of the Halloran domain. The way to claim this power, ostensibly, is through murder, and it is power that cannot or will not be shared: there is only one crown, after all.

Like ‘The Lottery’, there is a propensity for violence within *The Sundial* that has characters killing each other and exhibiting glee at the belief that they alone will survive a

⁷⁸ p. 682.

⁷⁹ p. 633.

global genocide necessary for “violent purification” in order to forge the new world. Violence manifests as a means of control in both fictions, but the agents harnessing the power in *The Sundial* are women. Written roughly ten years apart, the fictions explore women on opposite sides of the patriarchal coin: they are either (dead) victims or (dead) tyrants. Tessie and Orianna appear as inversions of each other – Tessie complicit, Orianna disruptive – yet both women embody extremes determined by the structures that govern them. Tessie, anti-entropic until the very end, is unquestioning of the ritual that claims her life. Orianna, an entropic and anti-entropic amalgam, flips the order but keeps its foundations in place, similarly unquestioning of the structures that induced her rebellion. The patriarchal paradigm that shapes these women’s predicaments does not appear escapable. The women either conform completely, unquestioning of the structures that destroy them, or perpetuate the structures by replicating its terms. In both cases, the structures remain firm. Even Orianna’s insurrection poses no real threat, for order is restored once Orianna ascends the Halloran throne and demands identical compliance.

The horror of the domestic contract takes various forms across Jackson’s oeuvre, causing irresistible pressures for all the women trapped within its constraints. Sacrifice – to varying degrees – is certain, no matter where on the spectrum the woman is poised. Jackson’s fictions stress the impossibilities of resolving the invasive pressures generated by domesticity. Her plethora of characters each have their own particular response to domestic identification, and every option bears a detrimental cost that seems to outweigh that which is gained. Most significantly, the reach of the contract seems boundless, woven into the spaces the women inhabit and the roles they assume. Orianna’s role, while granting her power and agency, is simply a gendered inversion of the domestic contract that has her imposing its imperatives on everyone within the Halloran home. Like Tessie, she, too, dies at its hands: a seemingly inevitable outcome in a patriarchal order not compatible with female power. It

seems the only solution to sustainable female power is to reimagine the order, but what form would such an order take?

2. Chapter Two: ‘I Wonder If I *Could* Eat a Child’: Jackson’s Ghost Story and Fairytale

Asked to write a biographical note by her publisher, Jackson drafted the following version – one of many – that resembles, quite self-consciously, the witch persona often attached to her throughout her career:

I live in a dank old room with a ghost that stomps around in the attic room we’ve never gone into (*I think* it’s walled up) and 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 demons, and was successful in the main. There are mushrooms growing in the cellar, and a number of marble mantels which have an unexplained habit of falling down onto the heads of the neighbours’ children. At the full of the moon I can be seen out in the backyard digging for mandrakes, of which we have a little patch, along with rhubarb and blackberries. I do not usually care for these herbal or bat wing recipes, because you can never be sure how they will turn out. I rely almost entirely on image and number magic.⁸⁰

Jackson entertained a lifelong interest in witchcraft, perhaps ignited in her college years by James George Frazer’s *The Golden Bough* (1890) or her encounters with Grillet de Givry’s *Witchcraft, Magic, and Alchemy* (1931) and Joseph Glanvil’s *Saducismus Triumphans* (1681), turning to the latter for epigraphs for sections of *The Lottery; or, The Adventures of James Harris*.⁸¹ In fact, ‘Notes from a Modern Book of Witchcraft’ was suggested as a subtitle for the short story collection, and the publicity campaign proposed stone paperweights, witches’ brooms, and cauldrons as reader rewards.⁸² Jackson’s biographical draft, with its references to ghosts, mushrooms, and magic, also has intimations of *The Haunting of Hill House* and *We Have Always Lived in the Castle*. Both novels are laden with amorphous tensions that create a sense of invasive unease, manufactured, in part, by a

⁸⁰ Franklin, Ruth, *Shirley Jackson: A Rather Haunted Life* (New York: Liveright Publishing Corporation, 2016), p. 259-60.

⁸¹ Franklin, p. 106.

⁸² Franklin, p. 252

singularly knowing use of the familiar tropes of their respective genres. Reimagining the ghost story in *The Haunting of Hill House* and the fairytale in *We Have Always Lived in the Castle*, Jackson delves into uncanny territory, in which nothing is ever clear, threats lurk around every corner, and unhinged, entropic characters are always on the brink of being devoured, poisoned, or ensnared. In what ways does Jackson reimagine both the ghost story and the fairytale? What do these reimaginings reveal about the characters' predicaments and their responses to them?

Jackson takes on the ghost story in *The Haunting of Hill House*, her 1959 novel following a haunted protagonist's descent into madness that culminates in a quasi-fated death. The structure of Jackson's story mirrors another seminal classic of the genre: Henry James's *The Turn of the Screw*. Like James's 1898 novella, Jackson's story is set in a remote estate, arrival at the estate is enacted by means of an invitation, the illusion of security initially promised is disrupted, and the tale concludes with a death. In a similar vein to James, whose interest was piqued by hearing a fragmentary ghost story recounted by a rather uninspired storyteller, Jackson's interest had been piqued after reading a book about nineteenth-century psychic researchers who rented a haunted house and recorded their experience for the purposes of an academic study. Finding the researchers' reports compelling because of what it revealed about its subjects – that is, the humans, not paranormal entities – Jackson was curious about crafting her own story with a similar setup: 'I found it so exciting that I wanted more than anything else to set up my own haunted house, and put my own people in it, and see what *I* could make happen.'⁸³ What she could make happen indeed. A defining and indelible characteristic of *The Haunting of Hill House* is its indeterminacy, its refusal to provide a concrete answer to the source of the hauntings that

⁸³ Shirley Jackson, *Come Along With Me: Classic Short Stories and an Unfinished Novel* (New York: Penguin Books, 2013), p. 225.

terrorise the novel's characters. Bad things happen at Hill House, people die, and the Dudleys – the spooky caretakers who seem extensions of the house itself – refuse to stay there after dark, but is the house the cause of the horror, or does the horror exist so long as people walk along its halls? The answer is never clear, and one answer alone seems insufficient to encapsulate the uncertainty that generates unease throughout the story. In her own experimentation with the ghost story, Jackson delivers a tale that employs its familiar tropes to explore entropic women in entropic spaces. What unfolds is a haunted tale of consumption and entrapment, in which female agency is gradually seized and siphoned, and escape proves illusory.

From the outset of the story, from its very title, readers are conditioned to expect a haunting. Death features prominently at Hill House, particularly in non-traditional ways (but ways characteristic of the genre). The first Crain wife, for whom Hill House was built, died minutes before she would first set eyes on the house, and the two Crain wives who followed both died tragically and prematurely (the one from a mysterious fall and the other from consumption whilst abroad). While the two Crain daughters would survive their own encounters with Hill House and live long into adulthood, death would still feature: the female Crain companion who inherited the house from the older Crain sister committed suicide in the tower soon after, and the 'last person who tried to leave Hill House in darkness [...] was killed at the turn in the driveway, where his horse bolted and crushed him against the big tree'.⁸⁴ Traditional to the ghost story, Jackson sets her story in a house shadowed by a legacy of death. Eleanor and Theodora are invited by an anthropologist, Dr Montague, to partake in his 'analysis of supernatural manifestations' in the hopes that it would culminate in the publication of his definitive work on 'the causes and effects of psychic disturbances'.⁸⁵ Hill

⁸⁴ Shirley Jackson, *Novels and Stories* (New York: Library of America, 2010), p. 288.

⁸⁵ p. 243.

House, regarded by the neighbouring village as “haunted”, is chosen by Dr Montague as the site of his study. His participants are not randomly selected either: both are invited because they had ‘in one way or another, at one time or another, no matter how briefly or dubiously, been involved in abnormal events’.⁸⁶ The artistic and suggestively queer Theodora is a recorded clairvoyant, while Eleanor experienced a strange incident in her childhood that involved a shower of stones raining down on her house for three days, an occurrence historically considered the ‘most frequent characteristic of a poltergeist manifestation’.⁸⁷ Luke, the heir to the Hill House estate, accompanies the women and Dr Montague as a mandatory representative of the family, and whom Dr Montague finds to be a beneficial participant for his ‘catlike instinct for self-preservation’.⁸⁸ The novel’s main characters congregate in a place that is already haunted, not necessarily with ghosts, but with a past characterised by death, tragedy, and mystery; an ideal setup for a tale involving obscure encounters and spooky coincidences. Hill House is linked to every death in some way, even to those that do not occur in its grounds (such as the first Crain wife’s and the last one’s), but is this association merely a coincidence?

Jackson opens *The Haunting of Hill House* with a masterful introduction that effectively presents the setting of the horror as something *more* than a house, as something not quite inanimate, an entity of its own:

No live organism can continue for long to exist sanely under conditions of absolute reality; even larks and katydids are supposed, by some, to dream. Hill House, not sane, stood by itself against its hills, holding darkness within; it had stood so for eighty years and might stand so for eighty more. Within, walls continued upright, bricks met neatly, floors were firm, and doors were sensibly

⁸⁶ p. 244.

⁸⁷ Franklin, p. 406.

⁸⁸ Jackson, p. 247.

shut; silence lay steadily against the wood and stone of Hill House, and whatever walked there, walked alone.⁸⁹

Crucially, the novel closes with almost identical lines, implying that the mystery of whatever walks there, whatever does the haunting (or is haunted), remains unknown. But what makes the story's opening ever the more fascinating is the anthropomorphism Jackson assigns to the house, a theme that continues throughout the tale's progression and echoes Edgar Allen Poe's similarly anthropomorphic house, the 'mansion of gloom', in 'The Fall of the House of Usher'.⁹⁰ Hill House is 'not sane' and holds 'darkness within' harbouring an enigmatic something that walks its halls alone. Hill House is presented not only as a setting, but as a character, an arguably sentient one that recalls Poe's House of Usher. From its design to its history, Hill House is pervaded by an unnamed darkness that bolsters its menacing countenance. It is a house 'without kindness, never meant to be lived in, not a fit place for people or for love or for hope'.⁹¹ It is far removed from the village, isolated, sequestered by 'unattractive hills'⁹² and seemingly out of place with its surroundings and far beyond it: '[e]xcept for the wires which ran to the house from a spot among the trees, there was no evidence that Hill House belonged in any way to the rest of the world'.⁹³ Designed by the 'sad and bitter' Hugh Crain to 'suit his mind',⁹⁴ inside, its construction is perverse: with slightly-off angles and stairs that are not quite level, the house distorts perception, twisting it physically. It presents like a claustrophobic, disorienting maze sinisterly constructed to mislead and torment: 'time after time we [the group] choose the wrong doors, the room we want eludes us'.⁹⁵ As a result, the constitution of the house itself is unsettling, *wrong*, warped by 'tiny aberrations of measurement [that add] up to a fairly large distortion in the house as a

⁸⁹ p. 243.

⁹⁰ Edgar Allan Poe, *Classic Tales of Horror* (London: Arcturus Publishing, 2017), p.87.

⁹¹ Jackson, p. 265.

⁹² p. 260.

⁹³ p. 276.

⁹⁴ p. 294; p. 316.

⁹⁵ p. 315.

whole'.⁹⁶ This distortion extends to the temperament of the house, variously described as 'evil', 'leprous', and 'deranged',⁹⁷ and seemingly corroborated by the house's dark history. Thus, Hill House is not only disturbing because it is an image of perversion: it looks and *feels* threatening, a "living" house imbued with a darkness of an ambiguous source(s).

Similar to *The Turn of the Screw*, the nature of the horrors that plague Hill House are indeterminate: there is tension and there is terror, but it remains unnameable, undefinable, succinctly captured by Dr Montague: 'I will not put a name to what has no name'.⁹⁸ However, unlike James's *The Turn of the Screw*, in which the existence of the hauntings are even more dubious, only framed through the governess's relationship with Bly and seemingly corroborated by Mrs Grose, the strange and otherworldly occurrences within Hill House seem to be experienced by others within the house, rendering the status of the hauntings slightly more verifiable. Theodora, Luke, and Dr Montague, together and on separate occasions attest to ghostlike encounters during their stay (not to mention Mrs Montague, who appears to communicate with paranormal entities via the planchette device). Eleanor and Theodora both shudder at the attempted intrusion into Eleanor's room on their second evening at Hill House, which begins as a 'hollow bang'⁹⁹ against Eleanor's bedroom door and escalates into a 'hammering' and forceful jostling of the door that ends abruptly.¹⁰⁰ Dr Montague and Luke together chase a (phantom) dog to outside of the house until it disappears from sight (although, it is not entirely clear if Luke *sees* what he is chasing: the joint pursuit of the dog is prompted by Dr Montague's belief that he saw the creature run past his door).¹⁰¹ When Hill House goes 'dancing' near the end of the novel,¹⁰² it induces a visceral reaction from the

⁹⁶ p. 316.

⁹⁷ p. 265; p. 290; p. 290.

⁹⁸ p. 293.

⁹⁹ p. 333.

¹⁰⁰ pp. 334-5.

¹⁰¹ p. 337.

¹⁰² p. 387.

foursome as they each strain to keep a grip of the house while it ‘shiver[s] and [shakes]’.¹⁰³ Conversely, the newcomers Mrs Montague and Arthur sleep ‘like babies’ during the incident,¹⁰⁴ seemingly unaware or unaffected by the house’s violent outburst – are they immune to Hill House’s sway, or is Hill House simply biding its time?

In Jackson’s ghost story, the ambiguity lies more in the source of the hauntings and less in whether there are any hauntings at all: Hill House is, after all, not merely an estate in which the characters roam, it is an active agent in the story. The house engenders an atmosphere that is prime for stoking and feeding delusion and, most significantly, seems to function as an organism that is intimately bonded to its occupants: ‘I think that an atmosphere like this one can find out the flaws and faults in all of us, and break us apart in a matter of days’.¹⁰⁵ Similar to the House of Usher that embodies its residents, diseased by the incestuous history of the family that inhabits it, Hill House feeds its tenants and feeds on them, thereby constituting a symbiotic relationship between the house and the people who reside in it (not to say that this reciprocation is balanced or equal). Some people, it would seem, are more susceptible to its influence than others, but no one appears to be immune, at least not entirely. Yet there is a sense that Mrs Montague is somewhat of an exception. She even gets along with Mrs Dudley, whose voice is ‘comfortable and easy’ when interacting with her.¹⁰⁶ This is notable when considering that no one else in the group has had pleasant encounters with Mrs Dudley, all their exchanges being terse and laboured. In some ways, Mrs Dudley presents as an agent of Hill House, she ‘walk[s] without sound’ like a ghost,¹⁰⁷ and dogmatically adheres to a fixed schedule that she does not deviate from, almost automaton-like in nature:

¹⁰³ p. 386.

¹⁰⁴ p. 387.

¹⁰⁵ p. 329.

¹⁰⁶ p. 399.

¹⁰⁷ p. 270.

Mrs Dudley turned aside to let Eleanor come in, and spoke, apparently to the wall. “I set dinner on the dining-room side-board at six sharp,” she said. “You can serve yourselves. I clear up in the morning. I have breakfast ready for you at nine.”¹⁰⁸

Yet there is a marked transformation in her demeanour when interacting with Mrs Montague: ‘[y]ou sit down over there and rest; you’ve done enough. I’ll put on the water and we’ll have a nice cup of tea’.¹⁰⁹ If Mrs Dudley is an extension of Hill House, what could this vivid change signify about Mrs Montague and her relationship with the house? Despite her boasting, Mrs Montague is really *not* susceptible to ghosts. As the party’s least entropic character, she poses no real threat to the house or the Dudleys. Mrs Dudley can, therefore, afford to treat her more warmly, for Mrs Montague does not attract Hill House’s attention or interest. This is further demonstrated during a key moment when Eleanor experiences “oneness” with the house and develops a heightened awareness of its sounds and structure,

[o]nly the library was closed to her; she could not hear the heavy breathing of Mrs. Montague and Arthur over their planchette, nor their little excited questions; she could not hear the books rotting or rust seeping into the circular iron stairway to the tower.¹¹⁰

If Eleanor, at this point, has become an agent of the house (further implied by the possession that follows), the fact that Mrs Montague and Arthur are seemingly inaccessible to her, unreachable, suggests their security from Hill House’s consuming influence, but what makes *them* the exception?

Upon arrival at Hill House, Mrs Montague asks to be settled in the house’s ‘most haunted room’.¹¹¹ Although declaring that she ‘never sleep[s] when there are troubled spirits

¹⁰⁸ p. 268.

¹⁰⁹ p. 399.

¹¹⁰ p. 400.

¹¹¹ p. 370.

about',¹¹² she does not awaken when Hill House goes 'dancing',¹¹³ her deep and peaceful slumber uninterrupted by the house's turbulent quaking. She and Arthur are the only ones who do not appear frightened by Hill House or the possibility of it being haunted. From the moment of arrival at Hill House, Dr Montague's group are noticeably unsettled by the house, while Mrs Montague and Arthur seem to embrace it. Their objective is 'to get in touch with the elements disturbing [the] house'¹¹⁴ and cure the house of its ailments by helping the 'unfortunate beings' trapped inside it.¹¹⁵ It always remains questionable how credible their "communications" with the house are, but their presence and their relationship with the house speaks more than their words: they are mostly ignored by Hill House, perhaps because they are too literal-minded to be prey to its seduction. Mrs Montague seems to imply this herself when talking of the others to her husband: 'they are so very, *very* vulnerable, with their hard hearts and their *unseeing* eyes' (ironically, she could be speaking about herself here).¹¹⁶ What her words suggest is that the relationship one has with the house determines the status of the haunting, a relationship that is inevitably shaped by the status of its participants. The older Crain sister did, after all, live in Hill House for many years and 'genuinely loved' it before dying of natural causes in her old age.¹¹⁷ On the other hand, the younger Crain sister adamantly refused to be in Hill House at night, while the young Crain companion who inherited the house was driven to suicide, 'maddened by the conviction that locks and bolts could not keep out the enemy who stole into her house at night'.¹¹⁸ Too unimaginative and leaden, Mrs Montague and Arthur may simply be too banal to capture Hill House's interest, but this does not mean that they cannot be used by it: while their characterisations do typify

¹¹² p. 373

¹¹³ p. 387.

¹¹⁴ p. 373.

¹¹⁵ p. 381.

¹¹⁶ p. 382. Second emphasis added.

¹¹⁷ p. 295.

¹¹⁸ p. 298.

the comic stereotype of the (possibly misguided) medium and their assistant diagnosing paranormal “grievances” that they interpret, the two characters do function to some degree as pawns who voice Hill House’s ominous intent during their planchette sessions.¹¹⁹ No one, it appears, is invulnerable to Hill House’s touch, and the house seems to call the people it needs: some of them to be used, others to be consumed.

After “conferring with the spirits” by means of planchette, Mrs Montague talks of a nun who was ‘walled up alive’ in the house who suggests to her names eerily resembling “Eleanor”, such as ‘Elena’ and ‘Helen’.¹²⁰ Thereafter, she recalls a message she received from an entity called ‘Nell [...] Eleanor Nellie’ who is ‘waiting’ for ‘home’.¹²¹ At the story’s conclusion, when Eleanor is forced to go home by the group after her seeming possession and almost-suicide, she responds: ‘Walled up alive [...] I want to stay here’,¹²² and subsequently dies on her way out of the estate when her car crashes into a tree. Mrs Montague’s reading by means of planchette seems prescient, not delusional (and in this sense, the house employs Mrs Montague as its conduit to communicate its intent) for at this point in the story, it is all but confirmed that Eleanor’s visit to Hill House is ill-fated. The novel’s narration, while omniscient, is often focalised through Eleanor’s unreliable point of view (characteristic of the genre), and does not provide a definitive explanation for anything ostensibly supernatural that the characters encounter. The muddling of the narrative voices deepens the ambiguity of the story, complicating the reliability of what is being told: there is not a consistent demarcation of subjective experience and objective presentation. Eleanor ‘suffers from painful self-consciousness’¹²³ that causes her to lie to the group about where she lives in an attempt to

¹¹⁹ p. 376; p. 378.

¹²⁰ p. 376.

¹²¹ p. 378.

¹²² p. 413.

¹²³ Franklin, p. 411.

“save face”, fabricating a life in an apartment that conforms to her wistful fantasies.¹²⁴ Her lying is not always consciously done either, but is often a result of impulse, which brings into question the veracity of her immediate accounts: when Eleanor lies to Theodora about her age, she ‘wondered what obscure defiance made her add two years’.¹²⁵ Eleanor even makes an offhanded comment that, at a textual level, hints at her potential state of mind and delicate hold on reality: “I could say,” Eleanor put in, smiling, “All three of you are in my imagination; none of this is real”.¹²⁶ It is Eleanor’s unstable mind, more than anything else, that renders her perspective unreliable and makes her most susceptible to Hill House’s pull.

As her turbulent mind progressively spirals the longer she stays at Hill House and becomes subject to its increasing influence, Eleanor’s consciousness begins to merge with that of the house, to the point where she is ‘able to hear everything, all over the house’¹²⁷ and her sentient relationship with it deepens:

Eleanor sat, looking down at her hands, and listened to the sounds of the house. Somewhere upstairs a door swung quietly shut; a bird touched the tower briefly and flew off. In the kitchen the stove was settling and cooling, with little soft creakings. An animal – a rabbit – moved through the bushes by the summerhouse. She could even hear, with her new awareness of the house, the dust drifting gently in the attics, the wood aging.¹²⁸

The passage is located between two significant moments: Eleanor’s submission to the house – ‘I will relinquish my possession of this self of mine’¹²⁹ – and her climactic possession by it that sees her climbing to the tower to re-enact the death of the Crain companion. This intermediate moment is, in a way, the calm before the storm. At this point in the novel, Eleanor’s consumption by Hill House is almost complete, and the metaphors of consumption

¹²⁴ Jackson, p. 303.

¹²⁵ p. 339.

¹²⁶ p. 340.

¹²⁷ p. 400.

¹²⁸ p. 400.

¹²⁹ p. 387.

that appear throughout the narrative aid in evoking this devouring: after only spending mere moments in Hill House, Eleanor begins to feel ‘like a small creature swallowed whole by a monster’,¹³⁰ while Theodora later describes the night-time incident of the banging on the door as though ‘whatever was outside her door was coming to eat her’,¹³¹ which Eleanor affirms: ‘the sense was that it wanted to consume us, take us into itself, make us a part of the house’.¹³² The narration gradually exemplifies Eleanor’s absorption: she begins to merge with Hill House until she is no longer able to assert her own individual will, losing herself to its consuming influence: ‘I am disappearing inch by inch into this house’.¹³³ Similarly, the narration has a claustrophobic effect that blurs focalisation, overwhelming visible boundaries of perspective. This effect dissolves once Eleanor is completely consumed by the house and dies, her narrative focalisation concomitantly dying with her. Clear, omniscient narration is restored as the tale closes, mirroring the novel’s opening:

Hill House itself, not sane, stood against its hills, holding darkness within; it had stood so for eighty years and might stand for eighty more. Within, its walls continued upright, bricks met neatly, floors were firm, and doors were sensibly shut; silence lay steadily against the wood and stone of Hill House, and whatever walked there, walked alone.¹³⁴

Hill House’s latest victim claimed, the narration ends the tale the same way it began it, without any further mention of Eleanor or even her death: she has been subsumed entirely.

Eleanor’s initial feeling, once entering Hill House, is: ‘I don’t belong here [...] I am not the sort of person for Hill House’.¹³⁵ Conversely, after spending several days in its embrace, she expresses: ‘I am home, I am home’.¹³⁶ The fact that Eleanor eventually comes

¹³⁰ p. 270.

¹³¹ p. 340.

¹³² p. 340.

¹³³ p. 385.

¹³⁴ p. 417.

¹³⁵ p. 271.

¹³⁶ p. 407.

to feel that she belongs in Hill House is alarming, but not surprising: the history of Hill House would suggest that a death is inevitable, fated, for ‘Hill House has a reputation for insistent hospitality; it seemingly dislikes letting its guests get away’.¹³⁷ Of all the characters residing within the house, Eleanor’s death seems most fitting: after eleven years as her late mother’s caregiver, years which ‘had been built up devotedly around small guilts and small reproaches, constant weariness, and unending despair’,¹³⁸ Eleanor is left an unmarried, lonely woman, with no home and no sense of belonging (like the nun, perhaps, from Mrs Montague’s *planchette*?). All her life ‘she had been waiting for something like Hill House’¹³⁹ and holds an almost virginal expectation that her visit to Hill House will provide her with everything she yearns for: friends, a home, a place to belong. Thus, she enters Hill House as its most willing participant, amenable to its sway. Theodora’s rejection (rebuffing Eleanor’s wish to live with her) only further pushes Eleanor into Hill House’s embrace; spurned by her supposed friend and the wider group, her desperation to belong deepens. Her position echoes in many ways the Crain companion who committed suicide years before: a young, unmarried, alienated woman, persecuted by the villagers who deemed her guilty of defrauding the younger Crain sister of her inheritance, she ultimately hanged herself in the hopes of escaping her torment. Even Theodora alludes to the resemblance: ‘[p]erhaps the spirit of the poor little companion has found a means of communication at last. Maybe she was only waiting for some drab, timid-’.¹⁴⁰ This doubling further manifests during Eleanor’s “possession” that draws her to the tower where the Crain companion hanged herself, an incident that is almost repeated by Eleanor before she’s interrupted by the group on her way up the stairway. The mirroring hints at Eleanor’s fate: is she, too, to die? Her death is disrupted, but not averted. As she gradually unravels, Eleanor’s purpose begins to emerge (the writing is *literally* on the

¹³⁷ p. 288.

¹³⁸ p. 245.

¹³⁹ p. 246.

¹⁴⁰ p. 346.

wall): written twice on the wall of Hill House, once in chalk and later in what appears to be blood, the house bids Eleanor to come home: ‘HELP ELEANOR COME HOME’.¹⁴¹ Finally, it seems, she is wanted, wanted for exactly who she is and, crucially, *only* she is wanted: ‘[t]he house was waiting now, she thought, and it was waiting for her; no one else could satisfy it’.¹⁴²

Eleanor arrives at Hill House with the belief that it will offer her an escape from her meaningless life, and ironically, it may do just that, but it is an escape that gradually claims her life, siphoning her will until she is consumed entirely. Hill House presents as the answer for people like her, people who are anchorless and marginalised, but it is an ill-fated illusion, promising salvation and delivering death. Eleanor believes she is chosen because she is ‘outside’ the group,¹⁴³ her role unclear, her purpose undefined. As an entropic character, an outsider with no place to go, Hill House gives her meaning and a “home”, but what it grants is always equivocal: it takes just as much as it seemingly gives. Eleanor chooses Hill House in an assertive attempt to take control of her own life now that her mother, whom she hated, is dead, but her autonomy is gradually conquered by the house as it exploits her marginal status to consume her. The agency that Eleanor ostensibly asserts by committing suicide is complicated by her absorption: does she commit suicide to escape, or to return to Hill House? Eleanor fervently exclaims, ‘I am really doing it, I am doing this all by myself, now, at last; this is me’,¹⁴⁴ but whose will does she exert in those last moments? She fatally rebels against Dr Montague’s demands that she leave, yet her final thoughts question the act as she commits it. A woman without a home, she dies thinking that she is going home, but her death may be in vain: the home that Hill House offers is a prison, one that claims her completely.

¹⁴¹ p. 345; p. 351.

¹⁴² p. 413.

¹⁴³ p. 341.

¹⁴⁴ p. 417.

Chillingly, even in death, Eleanor is its (willing?) captive, subsumed by the house and becoming part of that which ‘walked there’,¹⁴⁵ free to roam but never to depart – like a ghost.

Hill House ‘is both impossible to remain in and impossible to escape’,¹⁴⁶ an anthropomorphic house that exploits its occupants’ anxieties to entrap and devour them. Yet, the house alone is not the source of the horror: the characters suffuse their visit with their own fears, feeding Hill House in their very efforts to hide from it. Thus the horrors within the estate take on mutable forms, moulded by the characters that experience them. In simple terms, Hill House is as terrifying as the characters make it out to be, rendering its horrors paradoxically limiting and uncontainable. Mrs Montague, the novel’s least entropic character, is still able to be employed by the house as its agent – to be used not consumed – while Eleanor, whose highly entropic status renders her the most likely victim of the group, succumbs to Hill House’s insatiable appetite. A hungry ghost, the house feeds on all those who enter it, but carefully selects the victim it will claim as its own. In the Montague party, Eleanor is the chosen figure, her marginal status and longing for a place to belong marking her as Hill House’s preferred victim. She is picked almost instantly, and her will is gradually siphoned as Hill House greedily consumes her. A woman lacking genuine bonds with anyone outside of Hill House (and those within it), the house embraces her, and their bond is immortalised through her death. Eleanor finds her home, it would seem, but the conclusion to her story is far from happy. Even her death is complicated by its ambiguity, yet its purpose is apparent: it is a means to an end, either as a mode of escape or subjugation. True to the genre, the answer remains equivocal, but Eleanor’s death speaks to the impossibility of her escape: whatever the cause of her death, the outcome is the same – Hill House claims her anyway, its

¹⁴⁵ p. 417.

¹⁴⁶ Franklin, p. 416.

status as escape or haven equally illusory. In Jackson's subsequent novel, agency is fiercely reclaimed, but its power is similarly consumptive.

In her last completed novel, *We Have Always Lived in the Castle*, Jackson reimagines the fairytale, reworking several of the genre's most recognisable tropes and employing food as a polyvalent object that occupies a central role throughout the tale. The result is a rather subversive story about agency and the cost of claiming it, narrated through the lens of Jackson's arguably most entropic character. Like Hill House, the Blackwood estate of *We Have Always Lived in the Castle* is isolated and fenced, distinctly separated from the townsfolk who equally fear and resent it. It is deliberately segregated from the rest of the town through the installation of infrastructure: Blackwood Road 'goes in a great circle around the Blackwood land and along every inch of Blackwood Road is a wire fence'.¹⁴⁷ In addition, a 'big black rock [that] marks the entrance to the path' to the estate's gate is located 'not far past the town hall'.¹⁴⁸ The house is designed to keep people out, to keep the estate separate from the village, and to prevent any outside "contamination" (i.e., the villagers) from finding its way into the property. It seems out of place in a village fit for 'the drab and the unpleasant',¹⁴⁹ almost as if the house itself is a prisoner of the ugly village, captured as 'punishment for the Rochesters [the mother's ancestral family] and the Blackwoods and their secret bad hearts'.¹⁵⁰ The Blackwood house functions like a castle in the story, originating from a "far off magical land", elevated and overlooking a town of "peasants". Predictably (by fairytale standards), the house and the family it belongs to are despised by those in the village, who regard the family with bitter contempt and resentment: '[t]he people of the village have always hated us'.¹⁵¹ Built to keep everyone out, the house now keeps the

¹⁴⁷ Jackson, *Novels and Stories*, p. 424.

¹⁴⁸ p. 424.

¹⁴⁹ p. 426.

¹⁵⁰ p. 426.

¹⁵¹ p. 424.

remaining Blackwoods in: Merricat only ventures beyond the gates on Tuesdays to restock on supplies, and Constance never risks further than the estate's garden. Not only alienated by the house and its architectural barriers, the sisters are ostracised by the villagers beyond the gates, who express their hatred each time they encounter Merricat in the village. Moreover, the ancestral home is tainted by the mass murder that haunts its legacy, seemingly validating the villagers' hatred and the 'secret bad hearts' of the Blackwoods.¹⁵²

The tale is narrated by Merricat, who is also an unreliable narrator: she infuses the narration with fantastical notions such as thinking that she 'could have been born a werewolf' and 'living on the moon'.¹⁵³ Her bias plays a significant role in shaping her perception, particularly with regards to the 'trash' villagers: 'the blight on the village never came from the Blackwoods; the villagers belonged here and the village was the only proper place for them'.¹⁵⁴ Most significantly, Merricat never reveals herself as the culprit of the Blackwood murders, allowing readers to assume that her beloved Constance is responsible. Through Merricat's narration, the villagers (and the deceased Blackwoods) are presented as the villains of the story, despite the fact that Merricat has murdered her entire family. Thus, Merricat, although "wicked", is not presented as the entity who ought to be vanquished or destroyed, even though she may very well be the witch of this fairytale, and thus, the quintessential fairytale villain.

Is Merricat a witch? The accusation follows both Merricat and Constance throughout the novel, and they ultimately become mythologised at the conclusion of the story, as the manor gradually transforms into a decrepit castle, and the sisters disappear entirely from public view. It seems Jackson herself flirts with the idea of particularly Merricat being a

¹⁵² p. 426.

¹⁵³ p. 421; p. 433.

¹⁵⁴ p. 430; p. 426.

witch. Merricat's black cat, Jonas, is her companion and follows her closely around the estate, not unlike the "familiar" of a witch, a 'small animal or imp kept as a witch's attendant, given to her by the devil or inherited from another witch' and often taking the form of a black cat.¹⁵⁵ Merricat regularly talks to Jonas and 'listens' to his 'stories'.¹⁵⁶ Often, it seems as if they are one being: they both dislike rhubarb, they both appear to share trepidation for an imminent disruption to their lives (Charles's arrival), and they act "wickedly" together: 'always before Constance had listened and smiled and only been angry when Jonas and I had been wicked'.¹⁵⁷

Outside of her relationship with Jonas, Merricat seems to *act* like a witch. She buries tokens all around the estate in rituals of protection to keep out intruders and ward off any change to their status quo. She talks of omens and uses protective words, like spells, to shield Blackwood Manor from outside forces. She utters '*solanum dulcamara*'¹⁵⁸ like an incantation to Charles as if she's unleashing a curse on his life (as the utterance refers to deadly nightshade). Her hideout – like Baba Yaga's – is in the forest, hidden from view. And, of course, she, along with Constance, is later accused of 'hunting little children' at night and eating them.¹⁵⁹ Merricat's characterisation seems to conform quite closely to the witch persona, but there is perhaps a crucial deviation in the role she fulfils: this is her story, her fairytale. She is the main character and the chief agent of the story. Merricat is to save the princess (Constance) from the false prince/intruder (Charles) and secure her happy ending, for although she is murderous and therefore "evil", all she really wants is to be left alone in peace with her sister (and thus, her happiness is directly contingent on the safety of the

¹⁵⁵ *Britannica Academic* (Encyclopaedia Britannica, 1998) <academic-eb-com.ezproxy.waikato.ac.nz/levels/collegiate/article/familiar/33675> [accessed 22 March 2022] s.v. familiar.

¹⁵⁶ Jackson, p. 471.

¹⁵⁷ p. 494.

¹⁵⁸ p. 514.

¹⁵⁹ p. 554.

princess). Greatly maligned by the villagers, she comes to be feared by them (a relationship resembling that of a witch's with her persecutors), a marked difference from the insult and mockery she initially has to endure on her weekly visits to the village. Constance presents as the princess in the tower, the one who never leaves the estate because she remains entrapped by the bloodthirsty villagers beyond its walls. Moreover, like Cinderella, her primary role within the Blackwood house before the murders is to cook and clean, her will dictated by those of her parents. Merricat ostensibly saves her from her primary oppressors by murdering them, and before the arrival of Charles, the Blackwood sisters appear content in their reimagined bliss, with Merricat assuming the role of protector and Constance that of nurturer. The sisters' respective roles within their relationship positions both women in an arrangement that disrupts heteronormative codes, queering the fairytale instantly. Yet the advent of Charles threatens to refigure this special order, as divined by Merricat: '[a]ll the omens spoke of change'.¹⁶⁰ Charles's role is part-harbinger, part-intruder, signalling the return of patriarchal hegemony and jeopardising the Blackwood sisters' established idyll. He enters as the prince promising salvation but is ultimately exposed as the false hero with malicious intent. Charles functions as the central conflict of the tale, whose banishment is necessitated by the demands of the plot and its narrator. Merricat, of course, serves as the hero to resolve the conflict and restore the peace and happiness at stake. She is successful in her efforts, but not without sacrifice.

Perhaps most unsettling for Merricat about Charles's intrusion into their home is the fact that the intrusion is enabled by Constance: 'he was the first one who had ever gotten inside and Constance had let him in'.¹⁶¹ His threatening influence over Constance and increasing potential as Merricat's usurper positions him as the obstruction to Merricat's

¹⁶⁰ p. 458.

¹⁶¹ p. 475.

happiness, as the thing that must be destroyed before the story's conclusion. While none of her usual "spells" or protective measures prove successful in driving Charles away (at least not at the time), Merricat resorts to fire as the means of vanquishing him, selecting his pipe as the "magical" device or conduit. This solution, while ensuring that Charles is chased away, also guarantees that 'every touch he made on the house [was] erased',¹⁶² thus purging the home of his contamination. Fire is an element often weaponised in fairytales (and history) against witches to guarantee their annihilation. Fire in this fairytale, however, does not obliterate the witch, but is instead harnessed by the witch to vanquish the 'demon' Charles, the false prince.¹⁶³ Hence, fire functions as the mechanism that frees the Blackwood women of Charles's reach and, with the death of Uncle Julian, the last remaining vestiges of patriarchal influence. However, this is not without cost. It also results in the destruction of Blackwood house, initiated by the fire but accelerated and exacerbated by the voracious, embittered villagers who revel in the devastation as they wreak havoc on the home. In this sense, fire enables catharsis and restores balance: the sisters have been scapegoated for the sins of their family, and the violent ritual purges the villagers of their pent-up rage and resentment for the Blackwoods and the inequity and envy they embody. Consequently, the sisters are freed, but constrained: the house is ruined beyond repair, leaving only the kitchen and the cellar as viable spaces of habitation. The manor becomes a castle or 'tomb' as the sisters retreat completely from society.¹⁶⁴ As a result, they become legends or myths, witches who "eat" children – like the witch in *Hansel & Gretel* or Baba Yaga: 'they'd hold you down and make you eat candy full of poison'.¹⁶⁵ When a boy, acting on a dare, taunts the women outside their home, that night a basket of fresh eggs is left on the doorsill with the plea: '[h]e

¹⁶² p. 485.

¹⁶³ p. 498.

¹⁶⁴ p. 553.

¹⁶⁵ pp. 553-4

didn't mean it, please'.¹⁶⁶ Now feared and pitied by the villagers, they are sustained with donated provisions from them, contrite offerings given as reparation for the inflicted devastation, and as offerings of protection to the witches in the castle to stave off their retaliation for mockery and insult.

The Blackwoods' peace has been restored (and then some) at the conclusion of the tale, and the sisters find their non-traditional happy ending with each other in their solitude and seclusion. But their happy ending is a compromised one: the sisters reside in two dark rooms within a dilapidated, roofless house, and rely on gifts from the village for sustenance, in addition to a dose of fantasy to supplement their happy ending: 'I told you that you would like it on the moon'.¹⁶⁷ While it is particularly subversive that the witch procures her (queer) happy ending with the princess, it is, of course, slightly undermined by the fact that Merricat is not a reliable narrator: some things remain hidden, unexplained. We assume Constance's happiness because Merricat does, but everything is slanted by Merricat's point of view, her own feelings and wants. Merricat is positioned as the protagonist of the tale, and it is her journey and her story we follow, her happy ending we invest in. Although Constance is not positioned as a prize to be won, her agency throughout the story is nonetheless limited: she receives the ending secured for her by her sister. This is not to say that it is an ending she loathes, but her role within Jackson's fairytale parallels those of other princesses whose agency is largely contingent on the heroes who rescue them, the same heroes with whom their happy endings are exclusively dependent. And perhaps most significantly, Constance is no longer able to exercise the agency she does possess as unreservedly as she did before, when food was easily accessible and she could cook whatever meal her heart desired.

¹⁶⁶ p. 559.

¹⁶⁷ p. 557.

True to the fairytale, food plays a central role in *We Have Always Lived in the Castle*. It functions as a polyvalent object that shifts meaning as scenes change. Various used as a lure, an expression, a gift, a currency, an art form, an instrument, food is an ‘endlessly interpretable’ object that is employed in Jackson’s fairytale to liberate as well as enslave.¹⁶⁸ It is arguably never ‘just food’,¹⁶⁹ and is frequently used to claim and exert power. Its significance as a literary object lies in its multiplicity, embodying ambiguity at all times. Thus, food lends meaningful insight to tales that figure women in entrapped spaces: occupying little room on the page, it imparts meaning far beyond its biological purpose. Jackson harnesses its polyvalence within a fairytale context, wielding one of the genre’s most recognisable motifs to portray female agency as both potent and destructive. Most prominently, perhaps, is its role as a lure and poison.¹⁷⁰ Food is the mechanism for trickery and ensnarement, remaining a threat throughout the tale: who will die next? Is that treat poisoned? Uncle Julian captures it succinctly when he remarks: ‘[i]t could be said that there is danger everywhere [...] Danger of poison, certainly’.¹⁷¹ In typical fairytale fashion, the Blackwood sisters become subjects of nursery rhymes, hurled as insults against them by the village children:

Merricat, said Connie, would you like a cup of tea?
 Oh no, said Merricat, you’ll poison me.
 Merricat, said Connie, would you like to go to sleep?
 Down in the boneyard ten feet deep!¹⁷²

The murders of the Blackwoods haunt the house and the sisters, but it is the mechanism of the deaths that arouse the most interest and fascination from those in the village. Ditties centred

¹⁶⁸ Terry Eagleton, ‘Edible écriture’, in *Consuming Passions: Food in the Age of Anxiety*, ed. by Sian Griffiths and Jennifer Wallace (Manchester, New York: Manchester University Press, 1998), pp. 203-208, (p. 204).

¹⁶⁹ Eagleton, p. 204.

¹⁷⁰ Eagleton, p. 204.

¹⁷¹ Jackson, p. 449.

¹⁷² Jackson, p. 435.

on poisoned tea as a lure are scattered throughout the tale always asking the same question: ‘Merricat, said Connie, would you like a cup of tea?’¹⁷³ Before we even learn of the mode of death of the Blackwoods, we encounter the village children who harass Merricat on her way home with the rhyme, as well as taunting her with the pointed question: ‘Where’s old Connie – home cooking dinner?’¹⁷⁴ Mrs Wright, on her second visit with Helen Clark to Blackwood house, accepts the tea with trembling hands but leaves it and the proffered rum cake untouched,¹⁷⁵ enthralled by Uncle Julian’s clinical re-enactment of the fateful dinner, but too frightened and suspicious to consume anything Constance has prepared.

Food is alluring and appealing, promising nourishment and pleasure while concealing the full range of its makeup. Of course, in *We Have Always Lived in the Castle*, food is especially equivocal: it offers life and death. It is sugar that delivers the fatal blow to the Blackwood family, poisoned with arsenic intended for rats. Like the gingerbread or the apple, the berries are the lure used to entice the unsuspecting prey before ensnaring them. But Merricat has laid her trap carefully: Constance is not fond of berries, and does not eat sugar. The lure is specifically picked for those it is meant to target: the entire Blackwood family *except* Constance. Moreover, using food as a lure obscures the identity of the culprit. As Merricat does not cook, she would not be suspected of poisoning the food, and as Constance is the one who does, the food would be consumed without suspicion. This calculating trick is a ‘combination of malice and triumph – the complete assumption of the role of poisoner: one who lulls an enemy into a false sense of security, or who invites the ingestion of an unknown substance, and absolutely betrays that trust’.¹⁷⁶ Merricat’s choice of lure is symbolic, too, because she is denied food on more than one occasion when she is sent to bed without her

¹⁷³ p. 435.

¹⁷⁴ p. 435.

¹⁷⁵ p. 452.

¹⁷⁶ Sarah Shieff, ‘Katherine Mansfield’s Fairytale Food’, *Journal of New Zealand Literature*, 32.2 (2014), 68-84, 15 (pp. 80-1).

dinner. As ‘literary food symbolically surrogates unmet needs’,¹⁷⁷ the withholding of dinner translates to a withholding of love and affection by her parents. Constance confesses that Merricat was a ‘wicked, disobedient child’ always in disgrace, and yet, crucially, she would always bring her a tray of dinner up the backstairs when their father left the room.¹⁷⁸ Thus, while the rest of the family starved her, emotionally and physically, Constance would feed her. It is little wonder, then, why Constance was spared Merricat’s wrath.

In her article ‘Gingerbread Wishes and Candy(land) Dreams: The Lure of Food in Cautionary Tales of Consumption’, Susan Honeyman argues that food lures provide ‘fictive opportunities for self-expression or disempowerment’.¹⁷⁹ Merricat expresses her fury and agency by poisoning the food, disempowering those who had disempowered her. She exercises power in using food as a lure, as a triumphant means of deception and lethality, but Constance’s power manifests in using food as a channel for creativity and self-expression (not to mention the power that lies in her possessing knowledge about the more *lethal* types of food, such as the *Amanita phalloides*, the death-cup mushroom).¹⁸⁰ While Merricat enjoys ‘fairy tales and books of history’, Constance ‘[likes] books about food’.¹⁸¹ She reads *The Art of Cooking* at night and practices cooking to perfection.¹⁸² Her cooking ‘is of a very high standard’ that her meals are often recalled with exquisite detail by Uncle Julian and Merricat.¹⁸³ She genuinely seems to enjoy cooking (although Charles’s intrusion begins to change this as he settles himself in the house) and it is a means for her to express her own identity and her own agency in a home she is confined in. It serves, also, as a historic connection to her foremothers, whose traces can still be found in the jars of preserves kept in

¹⁷⁷ Susan Honeyman, ‘Gingerbread Wishes and Candy(land) Dreams: The Lure of Food in Cautionary Tales of Consumption’, *Marvels & Tales*, 21.2 (2007), 195-215, (p. 197).

¹⁷⁸ Jackson, p. 453.

¹⁷⁹ Honeyman, p. 196.

¹⁸⁰ Jackson, p. 421.

¹⁸¹ Jackson, p. 422.

¹⁸² p. 422.

¹⁸³ p. 481.

the cellar. Through cooking, Constance is able to explore and harness her creativity, her own “magic”, and she is celebrated for it. As Ruth Franklin avers, ‘[t]he domestic arts, which Constance practices to perfection [...] are another way in which women have traditionally expressed control over their environment. It is no accident that the witch’s symbols are, of all things, a broom and a pot’.¹⁸⁴ Cooking becomes Constance’s power in a world that forces her to hide and keep within the walls of the Blackwood estate. She is a witch of another kind, who conjures magic through the creation of delicacies.

Merricat notes that ‘food of any kind was precious to Constance, and she always touched foodstuffs with quiet respect’.¹⁸⁵ Food forms the core of Constance’s role and purpose: every day is spent deciding on what food to cook and preparing it. On stating that she would prepare a spring salad in the future, Merricat responds: ‘[w]e eat the year away. We eat the spring and the summer and the fall. We wait for something to grow and then we eat it’.¹⁸⁶ Food consumes the household (quite literally too – it kills half of the family) and also functions as a temporal marker. Julian remembers that ‘the breakfast was particularly good that [fatal] day’¹⁸⁷ and the Blackwood cellar is filled with food preserved in jars by the entire female Blackwood line:

[a]ll the Blackwood women had taken the food that came from the ground and preserved it, and the deeply coloured rows of jellies and pickles and bottled vegetables and fruit, maroon and amber and dark rich green stood side by side in our cellar and would stand there forever, a poem by the Blackwood women.¹⁸⁸

Significantly, Constance forbids the consumption of any of the jars that weren’t her own: ‘we never touched what belonged to the others; Constance said it would kill us if we ate it’.¹⁸⁹

¹⁸⁴ Franklin, p. 449.

¹⁸⁵ Jackson, p. 439.

¹⁸⁶ Jackson, p. 463.

¹⁸⁷ Jackson, p. 465.

¹⁸⁸ Jackson, p. 460.

¹⁸⁹ Jackson, p. 460.

What transforms these preserved nourishments into poison? And if they are indeed deadly, why does Constance not dispose of them? The jars form a legacy of the Blackwood women, of bottled labour and capital that is ultimately wasted, buried in the family cellar as archives of an unchanged history. If we also read the jars as bottles of female power and creativity, as Ruth Franklin argues, the toxicity of the food suggests that, if bottled up too long, those forces become lethal.¹⁹⁰ Significantly, the jars of preserves are not destroyed during the novel's climax, the cellar and the jars within it untouched by both the villagers and the fire: the female Blackwood legacy survives destruction without mutation.

Surviving the night in the forest after the destruction of their home, Merricat and Constance Blackwood return to the ruins and discover what remains of the once eminent Blackwood house. The damage is severe. Their home has been devastated to a degree that has Merricat expressing: 'I thought that we had somehow not found our way back correctly through the night, that we had somehow lost ourselves and come back through the wrong gap in time, or the wrong door, or the wrong fairy tale'.¹⁹¹ Following the fairytale template while simultaneously reshaping it, Jackson develops a story that redefines fairytale tropes and the agents within them. *We Have Always Lived in the Castle* takes readers through the 'wrong door' and into the 'wrong fairy tale' to explore a world of shifting rules, where the lines between good and evil are blurred, things are not as they seem, and happy endings are irrevocably compromised. In a similar vein, *The Haunting of Hill House* presents a ghost story riddled with ambivalence. Its horrors are equally alluring and unsettling and never, for one moment, are they clear. The horrors repeatedly mutate, adding to the difficulty (and even impossibility) of negotiating them in successful ways. Unable to be seen, the terrors are unable to be defeated. Even attempting to escape them seems an illusion. As a result, agency

¹⁹⁰ Franklin, p. 450.

¹⁹¹ Jackson, pp. 527-8.

takes the form of suicide, in which escape is achieved, but the reward it grants is cold and hollow. Agency is similarly self-destructive in *We Have Always Lived in the Castle*: suicide is not the egress, but escape demands immense sacrifice, constraint, and even fantasy.

Employing genres that bend the rules to explore female agency, Jackson presents stories that depict the difficulties for women of claiming agency and power. While not entirely pessimistic, the stories suggest that happy endings for women are impossible: something, and something of immeasurable value, will be lost, and the cost of a happy ending may just be too steep to pay.

3. Chapter Three: 'I'll Bury Him in the Cellar': Modes of Escape

Happy endings in Shirley Jackson's world seem a futile dream, but are attempts at escape wasted endeavours? The women of Jackson's fiction almost always find themselves in confining predicaments which they negotiate in different ways. Not every Jackson story depicts a woman attempting escape, but those stories that do present escape at different stages and to varying degrees of effectiveness. Sometimes these acts are imaginative, other times they are real, yet they always serve to illustrate the stifling (and often impulsive) urge of the woman to flee her predicament, at times violently. Moreover, the stories exemplify the woman's dissonance with her position and her environment that frequently induces a destructive or delirious reaction resulting in some form of dislocation, casting escape as a double-edged sword that exacerbates entropy. What might escape look like in Jackson's universe? What are the costs of attempts at escape? What do the attempts show about the conditions of their entrapment?

In Jackson's earlier stories, the majority of which were published posthumously, escape is presented, but it is fleeting, enabled by the absence of men as a result of conscription during WWII. While men are commanded and regimented, women are liberated, their husbands' absence granting them space (literally and metaphorically) to move and act with significantly less restraint, expanding their territory (kitchen, laundry, nursery) to include spaces traditionally occupied by men (such as employment and bars). Moreover, the domestic conventions that dictate the priorities of their behaviour are relaxed: women have social lives, go to bars, spend the evenings with people outside of their immediate circle. Their priorities, as women with enlisted husbands, shift, and conforming to their husbands' tastes does not factor into their considerations. These stories, namely 'Homecoming', '4-F

Party’, and ‘The Paradise’,¹⁹² provide a telling contrast to the confinement depicted in Jackson’s post-war stories, already hinted at in the wives’ attitudes to their husbands’ return: in these early stories, the women are resistant, or melancholic.

In ‘Homecoming’, a wife prepares for the return of her husband after a long absence, experiencing an ‘anticlimactic feeling that comes after something exciting and final is over’.¹⁹³ Judith knows that her husband’s return will mean a return to a life of constant domesticity and prescription. Prompt attention is dedicated to restocking the pantry and refrigerator, planning meals for the coming days, tidying the home, and dressing appropriately into ‘something that would make her seem a quiet woman in a quiet house, waiting by her son’s bed for her husband to come the next day, or the next, or the one after that’,¹⁹⁴ re-conforming to the prescribed static image of housewife and mother. She approaches these preparative tasks with lacklustre commitment, all the while reflecting on the suspended reality she has enjoyed during her husband’s lengthy absence. She spends ‘more [money] than she should have, as usual’,¹⁹⁵ relishing the power that gives her: she will spend what she can while she can, knowing that the “privilege” – and the independence it promises – will expire once her husband returns to re-assume his position as head of the family and household. Even during the war, with its rations and adjusted economy, having any money at all to do with as Judith deems fit is more than what she’s used to – the money is literally in her hands, and the true gratification lies more in the *power* to purchase than the product itself. When we meet her, her escape is reaching its end, and Judith mourns what she is about to lose: ‘tomorrow was an old life recommencing and she had now a faint feeling that since he’d left, she and Robbie [her toddler] had gotten along somehow without shopping, without food,

¹⁹² Shirley Jackson, *Let Me Tell You* (London: Penguin Books, 2016), pp. 285-92; pp. 271-7; pp. 279-84.

¹⁹³ p. 285.

¹⁹⁴ p. 290.

¹⁹⁵ p. 288.

ration points, or money'.¹⁹⁶ Her reflection is fantastical, trance-like, but it presents the interlude as effortless, with Judith and Robbie mostly subsisting on the contents of the kitchen that gradually depletes over the months. The nameless husband's return (a return that hardly seems essential) signals the end of this comfort: the household will be consumed in much greater quantities and in many different respects, bringing a definitive end to the mobility the war allowed Judith. Even more mobile than Judith is Sally, who, married but childless, is able to enjoy the interlude as a solo wife who babysits Robbie on occasion, exploring the town with him and having ice-cream at the drugstore. Without a child of her own to care for, Sally's valuable time is hers to expend, her agency more exercisable. The life that awaits her after the war is apparent, as suggested through Judith: '[y]ou ought to have a baby, Sally, really'.¹⁹⁷ The next logical step for a young married wife is motherhood, and once the war ends, the family unit will form the core of domestic devotion, and the woman's position as wife and child-bearer will calcify.

Judith's (and Sally's) escape is a temporary one, and like many of Jackson's other wartime stories, there is an undercurrent of resignation at the husband's inevitable return. The women know *loss* is imminent: they will regain their husbands, but will lose the freedoms the war has ironically granted them (most precious, perhaps, their independence). This irony, in that the war liberates women while confining men, suggests that much of what determines autonomy is systemic, shaped by the structures in place that govern one's status and function. Irrespective of whether men volunteer for the war effort or are conscripted, they are relegated to disciplined positions that dictate their mobility and purpose. Their autonomy is heavily restricted as they are absorbed by the military machine and conform to its will, essentially resembling the domestic arrangement of women, particularly post-wartime, that fixes women

¹⁹⁶ p. 288.

¹⁹⁷ p. 291.

to the home and the family, reducing them in many ways to bodies that are operated by the prevailing institution (like soldiers). The fundamental difference, of course, is that the men's predicament is due to end with the war, while for the women, many of theirs will only begin – with no clear end in sight.

For many of the wives, there is an awareness that time is limited and running out and thus full advantage must be made of the suspension of traditional reality. '4-F Party' provides a snapshot of wives choosing to do just this, whilst also suggesting possibly the most realistic escape from their suffocating domestic fates: 'Look, everyone, [...] here's the ideal state. Married just long enough to get the fun of it, and then *grass-widowed*'.¹⁹⁸ Centred on a social gathering amongst wives all with absent husbands but one, the story includes several interactions with a young wife, Ruth, whose husband has recently departed for the war. Each woman tries to comfort Ruth over the separation, encouraging her to 'have a little fun' and 'enjoy life',¹⁹⁹ but their attempts are continuously frustrated by the intrusions of the one husband remaining, Rickey, who claims ownership of all the women: 'I want all you girls to know that from now on I'm the big shot around here. From now on you girls are going to be mixing drinks for me, and bringing me my slippers, and crowding around me so thick'.²⁰⁰ The gathering is meant to be an opportunity for the wives to have 'grand times together' and enjoy their camaraderie,²⁰¹ but it converts into an occasion that fully centres Rickey, enabling the "4-F" man medically unfit for military service to impose his shaken masculinity and dictate the terms of the party. The irony about this party, of course, is that the women, too, are "4-F", exempt from military service because of their gender, presumably physically and mentally unfit for war as dictated by moral codes. Unlike Rickey, their status as "4-F" will

¹⁹⁸ Jackson, *Let Me Tell You*, p. 273. Emphasis in original.

¹⁹⁹ p. 276.

²⁰⁰ pp. 273-4.

²⁰¹ p. 271.

not change after the war, and may even become more concrete, when all women are pressured to return home and assume their stringent domestic positions that bind them to the domestic domain. Predatory and entitled, further exacerbated by his disempowerment as a result of his “4-F” status, Rickey contaminates the space with his presence and ego, serving as an obtrusive reminder that escape is not quite possible so long as there are (even powerless) men to remind women of their position. He feigns outrage when another man’s name is mentioned in his presence,²⁰² and declares that as ‘the only man left in town, [he intends] to make the most of it’,²⁰³ referring, of course, to his predacious appetites that he does not hesitate to indulge in (even in the presence of his wife), making crude comments towards the women and approaching them inappropriately. The women mostly oblige him, seemingly having little choice but to tolerate his vulgarity, his own wife advising Ruth to kiss the encroaching Rickey to ‘make him shut up’.²⁰⁴ In his own words, the women are ‘all stuck with Rickey for the duration’,²⁰⁵ subject to his pestering and impositions that are ‘liable to go on and on’ unless or until the women are able to remove themselves from his smothering reach.²⁰⁶ For removal is the solution here, not refusal. While there is fellowship amongst the women and mutual exasperation at Rickey’s misconduct, they do not intervene when Rickey persists with his unwanted advances on Ruth, nor do they truly discourage him. Ruth has to run away – literally – and leave the party to put a stop to Rickey’s harassment and is consequently labelled a ‘lousy sport’ by him for doing so.²⁰⁷ The temporary escape suggested by the war is not guaranteed: while the wives might attempt to make the most of their solo status and have ‘grand times’,²⁰⁸ their agency and independence will always be undermined if

²⁰² p. 274.

²⁰³ p. 276.

²⁰⁴ p. 277.

²⁰⁵ p. 273.

²⁰⁶ p. 274.

²⁰⁷ p. 277.

²⁰⁸ p. 271.

there is a man present, whose status in a patriarchal culture enables him at all times to demand prioritisation, even when he is a dominated fraction of the dominant sector. If anything, his diminished position inflames his need to assert his masculinity and impose it on a group subordinate to him, in this instance, women. The ‘ideal state’,²⁰⁹ then, that the story teases (becoming grass-widowed) may not be quite so ideal when men are still involved in some form in that state – perhaps being a grass widow is only an illusory solution, and the true answer lies in leaving one’s whole life behind, irrevocably (explored elsewhere in Jackson’s work).

For women who do attempt to resist their husbands’ will and reject domestic prescriptions, the social implications of defiance serve well to sober them up. An ostensibly troublesome wife in ‘The Paradise’ is threatened with divorce when she rebuffs her newly returned husband’s pleas that she leave with him after a night out in the town. Upset that he has to chase his wife ‘into every bar in town’, Bert reveals that he has been granted an emergency furlough because of ‘trouble at home’.²¹⁰ Although Gladys appears to fulfil her wifely duties and write to Bert every week with updates on ‘every single thing [she’s] been doing’,²¹¹ it is the Gladys that Bert will return to once the war is over that is of chief concern to him and his mother (who urges her son to get a divorce): ‘when I’m out of the Army you won’t settle down and we shouldn’t try to stay married’.²¹² Too intoxicated by the liberties the war and her marital status has granted her in the interim, Gladys appears unwilling to conform completely to domestic tradition and adopt all of its prescriptions. This may render her unviable as a wife, particularly when the war ends, and stability, as well as domesticity, becomes devoutly idealised.

²⁰⁹ ‘4-F’, p. 273.

²¹⁰ Jackson, *Let Me Tell You*, p. 283.

²¹¹ p. 283.

²¹² p. 282.

Having married at only seventeen, the war thrusts Gladys into a premature marriage and subsequently into a provisional life considerably removed from traditional marriage. Thus, having tasted a life substantially outside of traditional marriage, Gladys is reluctant to forfeit her current circumstances when the time demands it, presenting as the unsympathetic character of the couple. She is initially petulant and uninterested in accompanying Bert when he arrives, but her entire demeanour changes once divorce is posed as the alternative: ‘when all the excitement went out of her face it was little and pale, like a rabbit’s, or like the face of some small, staring fish’.²¹³ The prospect of becoming the subject of scathing whispers as a young divorcee unsettles Gladys, as articulated by her older sister: ‘you know what people are going to say about a girl Gladys’s age who gets divorced by her husband [...] Seventeen [...] only seventeen years old [...] what are people going to say?’²¹⁴ Effectively “sobered” by the threat of divorce, Gladys leaves the bar with Bert, curling ‘her hand under his arm’ and ‘leaning up against him affectionately’.²¹⁵ Away from the bar and outside alone with her husband, Gladys steps into the traditional role of devoted and compliant wife – or at least a performance of it – the threat of divorce spurring her acquiescence. Having fallen into the trap of marriage earlier than she perhaps would have had there not been a war, Gladys is arguably more constrained because of the war, still liable to conform to tradition and espouse dominant social practices. As a wife, she may move more freely and act less reservedly because her husband is abroad, but as a seventeen-year-old, her mobility has been clipped by a premature marriage. Hence, the exceptional circumstances created by the war do not abolish boundaries firmly established by domestic convention: some boundaries may dissolve, but others becomes less permeable, fortified by societal pressures that keep women in their place.

²¹³ p. 282.

²¹⁴ p. 283.

²¹⁵ p. 284.

In Jackson's early wartime stories, it is in the responses of the wives where the value of their quasi-escape is most apparent: they do not attempt escape, per se, but they welcome it, and begrudgingly relinquish it when their husbands return (not that choice is theirs to exercise here). Their husbands' conscription gives them a *taste* of freedom, of what life without their husbands' oppressive eyes feel like, but they are still confined within the same system that entraps their husbands. Their freedom is relative only – a matter of degree – for the war does not discharge them from their roles as wives and women within a patriarchal framework: their prisons expand, but don't dissolve. Once the war ends, the boundaries of their mobility will recede, and they will step back into the prescriptive boxes dictated by the domestic contract, back to assuming their roles of docile and self-denying "happy" housewives. This contrast of the relatively unfettered women of Jackson's wartime stories and the inhibited women of her post-war stories could offer insight into some of the tensions that shape the predicaments of the latter: having tasted some freedom, if only momentarily, how do they reconcile themselves to a life significantly different, one in which their independence and their agency is to be permanently stifled? This difference is not at surface level, but is more fundamental: the lives still *look* the same, relatively speaking, but they operate differently – the *women* are operated, pressured to comply with the all-consuming domestic contract.

After the destabilising effects of the war on social and domestic categories, the post-war obsession with the home and family as the haven of safety and security reinforces the cult of domesticity: men (and women) return home, people get married, and the family becomes the nucleus of American culture. Consequently, the door is 'shut against the outside world'.²¹⁶ Women, whether having returned from employment or education or readjusting to a home with a newly returned husband, commit fully to their domestic occupations:

²¹⁶ Betty Friedan, *The Feminine Mystique*, (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2001), p. 226.

when the mystique of feminine fulfilment sent women back home again, housewifery had to expand into a full-time career. Sexual love and motherhood had to become all of life, had to use up, to dispose of women's creative energies. The very nature of family responsibility had to expand to take the place of responsibility to society.²¹⁷

The lie of the "happy housewife" is exposed in Jackson's post-war stories that depict women unsatisfied with their domestic lives: they want more, or simply want *out*. They fulfil their roles as housewives and mothers, are self-sacrificing, dutiful, yet there is a growing tension below the surface, festering, corroding the anchor that secures the women to their positions. With the all-encompassing role women were expected to assume as caretakers (and caregivers) of their homes, their children, and their husbands, the impact on their psyches is cumulative, like cracks: subtle at first, it grows over time and disrupts the infrastructure, unsettling their lives. The women of Jackson's stories may initially appear steady and collected, but there is a disorder that underlies their behaviours and propels their attempts at escape.

'Got a Letter from Jimmy' (1949),²¹⁸ focalised from the wife's point of view, contains a murder fantasy, an imagined release of pent-up frustration and resentment by a wife against her husband. The cause for the murder seems trivial: the unnamed husband is uninterested in reading a letter from an estranged 'Jimmy'. The wife appears heavily invested in the contents of the letter, convinced that she'll 'just die if [she] doesn't see what's in it',²¹⁹ but there is an urgency to her desperation that belies a deeper anxiety. Perhaps, for the wife, the letter is an escape from monotony, a piece of excitement in a life defined by routine and tradition, yet it is the husband's lack of interest in the letter, and less so its unread contents, that spurs her to imagine him 'under the cellar steps [...] with his head bashed in and his goddamn letter under

²¹⁷ Friedan, p. 261.

²¹⁸ Shirley Jackson, *Novels and Stories* (New York: Library of America, 2010), pp. 225-6.

²¹⁹ p. 225.

his folded hands'.²²⁰ Her fixation with the letter contrasts with his indifference towards it: he forgets about the letter mere moments after mentioning it, while she thinks of nothing else. Yet, is this obsession truly about a letter? The wife hardly seems concerned about its contents after her initial curiosity. There is no deliberation about the words the letter could contain, or the nature of the message. The focus is on the reply, on what she would *do* if she could respond: 'I would have figured out something nasty like tearing it up and sending it back in little pieces, or getting someone to write a sharp answer for me'.²²¹ The letter, and access to it, would grant her agency (however brief) that the process of answering a letter entails. There is power in imagining 'something nasty' to assert one's individuality, one's agency, but hers is simultaneously undermined by her reliance on having someone else produce the 'sharp answer' for her, perhaps because she is incapable of reading the letter or writing her own reply: the wife concentrates on what she would *do* with the letter, but never mentions reading it. Thus, the letter embodies communication she cannot access or partake in, a message only available to men. As a result, her imagined mode of defiance is nonverbal: tear up the letter, scramble it with her husband's eggs, murder him. She settles on murder, imaginatively: his head is 'bashed in' and his body is buried in the cellar.²²² The final image displays the letter as still unopened, still unread, with the wife affirming that killing her husband is 'worth it',²²³ even if she never gets to read the letter – she buries him with it folded in his hands. By murdering him, she disrupts the channel of communication between the men, and by burying the letter, she buries its role in that communication. Far beyond an overreaction to a singular moment, the wife's fantasy of her husband's death is the culmination of an ongoing denial of agency, moments, however small, that cumulatively contribute to the implosion unleashed in her imagination, in which agency is claimed forcefully and definitively. However, this

²²⁰ p. 226.

²²¹ p. 225.

²²² p. 226.

²²³ p. 226.

agency is a silent form of defiance that is exercised in her mind only, ultimately proving futile. Yet what it does communicate, and vociferously, is the dire condition of her predicament that presents murder as the only route available to attempt escape.

This precarious state is further explored in ‘What a Thought’²²⁴ that depicts an actual murder, seemingly without a trigger. In this story, the motivations seem less clear: a wife, outwardly content with her life, decides to murder her husband one evening while idly flipping through the pages of a book. There is nothing unconventional about the evening, or the book, or even her husband’s behaviour. And yet, ‘an odd thought crossed her mind: she would pick up the heavy glass ashtray and smash her husband over the head with it’.²²⁵ Initially stunned by the thought that ‘had never before occurred to [her]’,²²⁶ Margaret becomes increasingly consumed by fantasies of the murder: strangle him with the curtain cords, drown him in the goldfish bowl, pour poison into his morning coffee. The idea to murder her husband emerges abruptly, and once the thought grabs hold of her, it does not let her go. Margaret half-heartedly attempts to talk herself out of the act, but her husband’s fate is sealed the moment the idea of murdering him presents itself: she begins planning his death, picturing the part she would play as the innocent grieving widow. The murder appears impulsive, an abrupt eruption of mounting tension that has finally broken the surface. Even though Margaret’s husband is not like other men she ‘had heard about’ and ‘was always willing to do things to please her’,²²⁷ Margaret seems to possess a deep-seated restlessness with her life that leads her to disrupt it, however pleasant her husband may be. Thus, it is not the husband alone who is the source of unease. Outwardly, it isn’t ‘as though [Margaret has] a motive’ to kill her seemingly caring husband,²²⁸ yet there may be an amalgamation of

²²⁴ Shirley Jackson, *Just An Ordinary Day* (New York: Bantam Books, 1996), pp. 170-73.

²²⁵ p. 170.

²²⁶ pp. 170-1.

²²⁷ p. 170.

²²⁸ p. 172.

motives that fall like dominoes to hypnotically propel her into action. For the disharmony she feels lies in the life she lives, and her place in that life: her husband's monotony bores her, the book she reads is uninteresting, her days play on repeat, shaped by the routines of domesticity. Hence, murder intrigues Margaret, the various methods available to exact the kill are alluring. She tells her husband 'I've never loved you more' as she prepares to slay him,²²⁹ the irony of this statement intimating a darker truth: in his final moments, the thought of killing her husband excites Margaret more than anything else has for a long time, perhaps more than he ever has. But the compulsion to kill him stretches deeper: whatever is below the surface, whatever drives or energies have been compressed, need an outlet and burst forth destructively. Margaret utters 'I don't want to' as she strikes him with the ashtray,²³⁰ as if pulled by something beyond her own will begging release.

The story, together with 'Got a Letter from Jimmy', is reminiscent of Edgar Allan Poe's 'The Tell-Tale Heart' (1843), in which an unnamed and ungendered narrator provides an account detailing their murder of an old man whom they purportedly loved. Despite claiming that there was no 'object' or 'passion' for the murder,²³¹ the narrator gradually plans the old man's murder, burying his dismembered body parts under the floor boards after the deed has been committed. The murder is ostensibly spurred by the narrator's discomfort with the old man's eye: 'he had the eye of a vulture – a pale blue eye, with a film over it'.²³² The narrator's paradoxical attitude towards the old man is mirrored in Margaret's own feelings towards her husband: both victims supposedly do not deserve to be murdered, having 'wronged' neither of their murderers.²³³ Yet both protagonists seem to act on an impulse that, once observed, must be fulfilled. As demonstrated by the wife in 'Got a Letter from Jimmy',

²²⁹ p. 173.

²³⁰ p. 173.

²³¹ Edgar Allan Poe, *Classic Tales of Horror* (London: Arcturus Publishing, 2017), p. 167.

²³² Poe, p. 167.

²³³ Poe, p. 167.

the motives for the murders may stem from far deeper anxieties related to agency and autonomy. Margaret's motive is most ambiguous, but like her counterpart in 'The Tell-Tale Heart', for whom the old man's eye (and what it may represent) is the thing that they must rid themselves of, the murder may not be about her husband at all, but about the life that he embodies, a life she no longer desires.

Margaret's ostensibly abrupt escalation into murderous housewife reveals a complex predicament simmering below the surface of the idealised domestic image. Yet that one-dimensional image could save Margaret from condemnation: what motive could a contented wife possibly have to murder her loving husband? His final words to her before he is struck is 'set fire to the house',²³⁴ uttered casually, but the words may function as an instruction applicable post-murder: burn the house to dispose of the evidence. Doing so would not only serve to shield Margaret from incrimination, but also free her physically from the constraints of the home (and her life), albeit destructively. Her future is left uncertain, but there is no turning back once the ashtray has been swung: violent destruction in this story is necessary to render escape even possible.

'Louisa, Please Come Home' (1960) and 'A Day in the Jungle'²³⁵ present escape at two distinct junctures in the domestic path: before marriage and after it, respectively. The first story concerns a twenty-two-year-old Louisa Tether, who ran away from home at the age of nineteen to escape her life and the domestic destiny awaiting her. Now working as a shop assistant in a neighbouring town, she's adopted the name of Lois Taylor and listens every year on the twentieth of June to the radio broadcast from her mother imploring her to come home. Louisa confesses that she 'always knew [she] was going to run away sooner or

²³⁴ Jackson, p. 173.

²³⁵ Shirley Jackson, *Come Along With Me: Classic Short Stories and an Unfinished Novel* (New York: Penguin Books, 2013), pp. 174-92; pp. 146-60.

later',²³⁶ posing her escape as an inevitability, an eventuality that would occur when the ideal opportunity presented itself, in this case, on the wedding day of her sister. The day Louisa selects as the time to vanish is deliberate: not only do her actions spite her sister (which is her intention), they also disrupt an important domestic ritual (and the supposedly most important for women): that of marriage. While no clear reason is provided for Louisa's escape (even Jackson declined to give an answer when probed by her agent),²³⁷ the urge to run away appears to have been a permanent longing within her: 'I had been wanting to leave for so long, ever since I can remember, making plans till I was sure they were foolproof, and that's the way they turned out to be'.²³⁸ Persistently unsatisfied with her life, it seems that a complete removal from it is what Louisa seeks, to begin her life on her own terms, outside of the prescriptive box her old life demands. Most importantly, she craves anonymity: 'what I intended all along was to fade into some background where they would never see me'.²³⁹ No longer Louisa Tether, she untethers herself from her old life by embracing a new name, fabricating a new backstory, and finding a room (and surrogate mother) with Mrs Peacock, who becomes heavily invested in the disappearance of Louisa Tether but never considers Lois Taylor to be her. Apparently content with her sought freedom, Louisa has 'never a thought [...] about ever going back'.²⁴⁰ She is able to disappear easily into her new life, to blend into the background as she had hoped, without anyone ever suspecting she is the Louisa of the radio broadcasts.

This simplicity, however, comes at a price: when Louisa does return home after being recognised by her old neighbour, Paul, who coerces her to accompany him back to the

²³⁶ p. 174.

²³⁷ Ruth Franklin, *Shirley Jackson: A Rather Haunted Life* (New York: Liveright Publishing Corporation, 2016), p. 400.

²³⁸ Jackson, *Come Along with Me*, p. 180.

²³⁹ p. 176.

²⁴⁰ p. 186.

Tethers (so he can collect the reward money), her family does not recognise her, believing her to be an imposter capitalising on their grief (as Paul tries to do). While it is easy to shed her old identity, it is not quite so easy, it would seem, to reclaim it: she has irrevocably become the Lois Taylor she fashioned. In running away from her home and her life, Louisa forfeits her purpose and place. She achieves independence and freedom, but these alone are not enough to fulfil her. When she returns home she realises ‘that all [she] wanted was to stay [...] to stay so much that [she] felt like hanging onto the stair rail and screaming’,²⁴¹ but her accomplished anonymity has been damning: she is unrecognisable to the people who once knew her best – the people who still desperately await the return of Louisa Tether, but not Lois Taylor. Or, more horrifying: her family in fact do not wish for Louisa Tether to return at all, preferring to have her, and keep her, as a tragic memory instead of as a real person. Resigned to her reality, Louisa addresses her father (in her thoughts and speech) as ‘Mr Tether’ and tells her family before she leaves: ‘I hope your daughter comes back someday’.²⁴² Perhaps she, too, hopes to find the Louisa that has vanished? Yet it seems the die has been cast: she has escaped her life, and in so doing escaped what previously defined her, consequently losing the identity that had distinguished Louisa Tether to those who knew her. Surrendering Louisa Tether means surrendering her home, and thus her sense of belonging. Her old life confined her but gave her purpose, demarcating her position, her role, and her future. While her new life liberates her from the most confining domestic prescriptions and grants her independence and agency, Louisa becomes unidentifiable, the new version of her incompatible with her old life because it exists outside of its domestic parameters.

²⁴¹ p. 190.

²⁴² p. 191.

Yet what makes this story truly unsettling is the possibility that the story's narrator and the eponymous Louisa are not the same person. Perhaps, like the other young women Paul has previously brought back to the Tether home under the premise of having found Louisa, Lois Taylor is just another imposter whose purpose is to facilitate Paul's reward plan. As narrator, she assumes Louisa's identity, fashioning a story out of the radio broadcasts, newspaper articles, and speculations of strangers. She arrives at the Tether home as Louisa's double, but her "Louisa-ness" does not register with her family: '[i]t wasn't going to be any good. I ought to have known it'.²⁴³ She has seemingly failed her purpose – the Tethers are not won over by her performance – and is instructed by Mr Tether to go 'back home where [she] belong[s]'.²⁴⁴ But if this Louisa Tether is a fabrication, does "home" even exist? She is not the first Louisa to be presented to the Tethers by Paul either, signifying that she will be replaced by more imposters in the hopes that the next one or the one after her may finally prove convincing and earn Paul his reward money. Thus, outside of her identity as a Louisa-cipher, Lois Taylor is a nonentity, for her purpose has been expended, her ineffectual impersonation of Louisa rendering her insignificant and irrelevant. Consequently, she is left to roam as her fabricated self, unconstrained and mobile, but anchorless. Another possibility is that Louisa's story, from her name to her escape to her entire life, is a complete fabrication, and Louisa doesn't even exist at all, functioning only as a fiction created by Lois Taylor to indulge imaginatively in a life she wish she had, a life of agency and escape.

Elsa Dayton in 'A Day in the Jungle'²⁴⁵ escapes after she has reached the vaunted heights of domesticity, leaving her husband and her home behind. However, it seems that, having progressed further than Louisa on the domestic path, her identity is more firmly entangled with her domestic position. Her escape seems promising, but it begins to crumble

²⁴³ p. 189.

²⁴⁴ p. 191.

²⁴⁵ Jackson, *Come Along With Me*, pp. 146-160.

the very day she leaves. Elsa escapes to a hotel in the city while her husband is at work, and it soon becomes evident that the escape will not be entirely simple: ‘this was, after all, a new world for her, with new standards and probably new laws, and entering upon it suddenly, equipped with no more than a few dollars and a black evening dress in a suitcase, was a thing to be done warily and without prepared courses of action’.²⁴⁶ Her newly claimed independence carries with it independence from the security and stability of her home and domestic life – there is no one now to make the decisions for Elsa, to care for her financially. She has moved beyond the domestic sphere into one entirely foreign to her, where the unfamiliar governs her reality. Initially finding pleasure in her newfound freedoms – sitting alone at the bar, talking to strangers, occupying the role of visitor (as opposed to housewife) – she becomes increasingly unsettled as her stay in the unfamiliar lengthens.

The city, at first symbolising independence and freedom, converts to a perilous jungle when Elsa leaves the safety of the hotel to explore the city landscape:

The loving concern with which she put her feet down one after another on the sidewalk became without perceptible change, terror – was the cement secure? Down below, perhaps no more than two or three feet below, was the devouring earth, unpredictable and shifty. The sidewalk was set only upon earth, might move under her feet and sink, carrying her down and alone into the wet choking ground, and no one to catch her arm or a corner of her coat and hold her back.²⁴⁷

The unfamiliar, the unknown, is a great and endlessly terrifying space, embodied through the city that becomes a threat too overwhelming to endure as Elsa rapidly and frantically reads impending death everywhere she looks. It holds growing dangers that threaten to consume her with a terror that almost renders her immobile. A wrong step – or even a mere step – can result in dreadful disaster, and with no one to catch her or protect her, Elsa seems prone to

²⁴⁶ p. 149.

²⁴⁷ pp. 156-7.

catastrophe. Having to walk it alone, with practically nothing, seems impossible, while the home, a familiar space clearly defined and solid, becomes ever more appealing. It is hardly surprising, then, that Elsa returns to the very place she had been so adamant to escape. So utterly defined by her domestic role, the life she attempts to escape follows her, for she remains attached to the very things that entrap her: money and status. There is nothing to anchor her outside of her husband and her home, and no concrete path *forward* that materialises. Unlike Louisa, who escapes before complete compliance to domesticity is demanded, Elsa attempts escape after she has committed to domesticity through marriage. As a result, she is entirely consumed by her domestic role to the point that her agency has been siphoned by it, complicating her ability to assert it in unchartered terrain. Elsa's escape dislodges her from her defined purpose, removing her anchor to reality. Albeit that that anchor is heavy and immovable, it secures her to a role that provides definition (and entrapment). Severing herself from the anchor enables her to move beyond its limitations, but Elsa is significantly compromised by her domestic compliance. Who is she, if not a wife? Elsa is so intimately entwined with her domestic role that she begins to disintegrate the longer she's estranged from it, suggesting that she may need domestic prescriptions to function.

Elsa's escape is a failed experiment that demonstrates the pervasive nature of her domestic conditioning: the conditions that carve out her domestic role are the glue that keeps her together. As Richard Pascal aptly observes: 'in the family [...] the ties may chafe, but they do hold you together; in the city there are no ties, and *you* must hold you together – assuming there is a "you" which can exist independently, out of familiar context'.²⁴⁸ The Louisa of 'Louisa, Please Come Home' doesn't exist once severed from the family role that

²⁴⁸ Richard Pascal, "Farther than Samarkand": The Escape Theme in Shirley Jackson's "The Tooth", *Studies in Short Fiction*, 19.2 (1982), 133-139, (pp. 134-5).

defined her. Instead, she is assumed by countless Louisas who attempt to fill the role she abandoned, with each one failing to become their vanished namesake because they are fundamentally strangers who cannot belong. Perhaps even if the real Louisa were to return to assume her identity within her family, she would be received as another imposter, too far removed from the self that once belonged in the Tether home. For Elsa, her tether to her home and associated identity is never severed, only stretched, for ultimately it proves harder to leave than it is to stay, surrendering potential freedom for entrapment that is secure and familiar.

‘The Tooth’ (1949)²⁴⁹ is a convergence of imagination and reality, and it’s a story in which escape is not actively sought, at least not overtly. Clara Spencer embarks on a bus trip to New York to have the tooth that has bothered her intermittently for several years extracted. A wife and mother, she has been married almost as long as the tooth has troubled her, notably suffering a toothache on her honeymoon.²⁵⁰ Clara leaves for the city because she has to, not because she wants to, and spends the majority of her trip to New York in an anxious, drugged stupor. On her way, she meets the mysterious Jim who, in Clara’s sporadic consciousness, appears to lead her by the arm to nondescript restaurants all the while describing a place ‘even farther than Samarkand’ that promises luxury and unremitting rest,²⁵¹ a stark contrast to the consuming domestic life as wife and mother that awaits her at home. But is Jim real? The combination of medication, caffeine, and sleep would suggest that he is a hallucinatory effect, though he does serve to entice Clara into leaving her life behind. In this sense, he could be a manifestation of Clara’s repressed desires that are given expression in her trancelike state. Appearing in various forms throughout *The Lottery; or, The Adventures of James Harris*, Jim regularly embodies a “daemon lover” whose purpose is to lure the women away from their

²⁴⁹ Jackson, *Novels and Stories*, pp. 207-226.

²⁵⁰ p. 208.

²⁵¹ p. 211.

lives and often into ruin (like the James Harris ballad that Jackson appends as the epilogue to her *The Lottery* collection).²⁵² Showing up sporadically, this version of James Harris nudges Clara subliminally towards the enigmatic utopia as she falls in and out of consciousness. When under anaesthetic, Clara finds Jim at the end of a long clear hallway ‘holding out his hands and laughing’ and proceeds to run towards him before her dream is suddenly disrupted, forcing her to wake up and express to the nurse distressingly: ‘Why did you pull me back? [...] I wanted to go on’.²⁵³ In her anaesthetised state, effectively “going under”, Clara appears ready to embrace Jim, wanting to follow wherever he may lead her, but is prematurely pulled back to consciousness and to the world of her non-Jim reality.

Clara’s eventual escape, curiously, coincides with the loss of her tooth: after the extraction, Clara can no longer identify her own face in the mirror. In a public restroom alongside other women working on their reflections, Clara

realised with a slight stinging shock that she had no idea which face was hers. She looked into the mirror as though into a group of strangers, all staring at her or around her; no one was familiar in the group, no one smiled at her or looked at her with recognition; you’d think my own face would know me, she thought, with a queer numbness in her throat.²⁵⁴

Like Louisa Tether, Clara Spencer becomes unrecognisable, and it is a singular incident (the loss of her tooth) that leads to complete abstraction. As Clara peers into the mirror, everyone she observes is a stranger, including herself. She sees her reflection – her double – and yet cannot identify that it belongs to her. If she no longer recognises herself with her tooth gone, what does the tooth or, more specifically, its extraction, symbolise? Perhaps a literal and metaphysical unmooring. The tooth, at once a part of her and alien, is the anchor that secures her to her identity, and it seems that Clara was

²⁵² p. 239.

²⁵³ p. 219.

²⁵⁴ p. 221.

holding onto that identity by the skin of her teeth. The Clara who awakens from the anaesthesia appears to be a different Clara, as if the one who “goes under” is not the same one who resurfaces. Perhaps this other Clara is the only one who *can* escape, unmoored from the life of her double. This Clara subsequently leaves the building and is met by Jim, who grabs her by the hand and leads her away. The ‘occasional curious glances’²⁵⁵ of the people around them hints at the truth to their encounters: Jim is imaginary, only existing in Clara’s head. Yet imaginary or not, Jim facilitates her escape: ‘her hand in Jim’s, and her hair down on her shoulders, she ran barefoot through hot sand’.²⁵⁶ Born from Clara’s own subjectivity, Jim is a destabilising force whose only power exists as a fantasy. Clara relies on him for escape, but he is her creation, an invention that calls to desires within Clara herself.

Like ‘A Day in the Jungle’, the city symbolises independence, while simultaneously suggesting some form of dislocation in order to claim it. Clara does not visit New York with the intent of escaping into it, but it does set the stage for her eventual escape once she loses her tooth and her hold on her conditioned identity. Her fate is left uncertain, and her escape is hardly sustainable on imagination alone, but it seems unlikely that the Clara who left for New York will ever return. In losing her tooth, she is dislodged, and runs off with her Jim to the place ‘farther than Samarkand’ where this Clara seemingly belongs.²⁵⁷ The problem, of course, is that the place is fantastical, imaginary, begging the insoluble question: outside of domestic prescriptions, is belonging a fantasy, escape only possible if it is one into madness?

²⁵⁵ p. 224.

²⁵⁶ p. 224.

²⁵⁷ p. 211.

Come Along With Me, Jackson's novel unfinished at the time of her death, offers perhaps the most balanced – relatively speaking – answer to the question of escape, but this answer requires a death to loosen the shackles of domesticity. Following the death of her husband, Angela Motorman is finally able live a life outside of confining domesticity. Crucially, everything that used to belong to her husband becomes hers – his money, his home, his possessions. Angela chooses to sell it all and embark on a new journey, carrying only one suitcase, a pocketbook, and a fur stole with her. She even leaves her name behind – Angela Motorman becomes the name she adopts along the way. A 'first-rate cook' who settled for the country because her husband liked it,²⁵⁸ it appears that Angela has "paid her dues" and honoured the domestic contract until her husband's death. Now a forty-four-year old widow, she may be free to embrace a path of her own – and she does. Yet, it is unquestionably bleak that for a woman to be free, she has to wait for her husband to die; a freedom that is, of course, influenced by the financial position of her husband. Had Hughie not been a successful artist, Angela's trajectory would contain far fewer paths of choice.

In her escape, Angela feels compelled to leave herself behind and embrace an entirely new identity, someone with a new name and different background. However, this "rebirth" is marred by intrusions from the past – Angela is, quite literally, haunted by ghosts. An ostensible clairvoyant since childhood, Angela's "gift" disappears entirely with her marriage to Hughie, but gradually returns to her after his death. It seems that remnants of her old identity begin to resurface, complicating her endeavours to start completely anew and become 'Mrs Angela Motorman, who never walked on earth before'.²⁵⁹ Do these intrusions embody new pressures that supplant the domestic

²⁵⁸ Jackson, *Come Along With Me*, p. 5.

²⁵⁹ p. 11.

ones recently settled? Having seemingly escaped domesticity with Hughie's death and the subsequent sale of her home, Angela walks into a new life, but not, it seems, as a new person. She moves towards a new identity while being pulled back into an older one, and it is not quite clear if this conflict ought to be resolved, or if it ever would have been – the story, alas, remains unfinished.

Perhaps the most optimistic of Jackson's fictions, *Come Along with Me* presents another alternative to the escape proposed in '4-F Party': a progression of 'grass-widowed'²⁶⁰ that would allow a wife to completely separate from her entire life by becoming an actual widow. Also important in 'What a Thought' and 'Got a Letter from Jimmy', it seems the best of both worlds is not possible in a realm devoted to keeping the spheres distinctly separate, especially to the extent that murder presents itself as a viable solution. For a woman to step beyond her domestic parameters and embrace a new life, she is to leave her old life and herself behind. Yet, so defined by that life, what does she carry into her new one? While Angela Motorman is a new invention, she is shadowed by her past, a collision of fragmented identities that complicate her ambition to start anew as a completely different person, detached from her old life. Thus, even when escape is achieved, negotiation continues, an ongoing mediation of old anxieties and new ones as the fresh reality is navigated.

For many of the women of Jackson's fiction, domesticity is a prison, confining them to lives of uniformity and prescription. Their confinement offers them little mobility, engendering an atmosphere rife with unmet needs and stifled impulses. As a result, the women respond to their predicaments in diverse ways, often destructive, and always costly. Imagination plays a fundamental role in several of Jackson's stories, seemingly the only

²⁶⁰ Jackson, *Let Me Tell You*, p. 273.

avenue for many women to claim agency and power, to rebel against the conditions of a highly regimented domestic culture that suppresses their individual will. Escape is rarely guaranteed, and less so worth the sacrifices it demands, yet escape is so often attempted by the women who strive to negotiate their oppressive predicaments in the hope of claiming agency and independence. Negotiation manifests in entropic forms that dislodge the women from their lives, setting them adrift without an anchor to ground or stabilise them.

Consequently, the women move from one predicament to another, with escape an ever-shifting goalpost. But not all of Jackson's women strive to escape, not all of them are unhinged by their entrapment. Indeed, some of them need it, appealing to the structures that confine them to protect and secure them, no matter the cost.

4. Chapter Four: 'We Must Expect to Set a Standard': The (Un)Homeland

There were many Americans who, after the end of World War II and the revelations of the early Nuremburg trials in 1945 and 1946, smugly asserted that such atrocities could happen in Nazi Germany but not in the United States. After all, singling out one person, one religion, one race for pejorative treatment – these things just could not happen here.²⁶¹

In describing *The Road Through the Wall* (1948), Jackson's first novel, one reviewer would call the novel's true setting 'Sidestreet, U.S.A.',²⁶² its ubiquitous quality depicting a community not unique to the suburb in which it is situated. Indeed, the characters she presents tread unsteadily on the delicate line between fictional licence and cogent imitation. Although Jackson contrives a concrete location for this fiction, from the city down to the very street on which the majority of the novel takes place, the neighbourhood she portrays could serve, convincingly, as a suburban microcosm of American culture. Published only three years after the end of World War II, and during the early years of the Cold War, the novel explores domestic anxieties related to invasion and social contamination, while simultaneously exposing the inherent biases and hypocrisies of the American populace. So devoted to the nuclear family to preserve and protect the American ideal of freedom and safety, the community portrayed within the story illustrates the corrosive effect of social conformity on those who faithfully uphold it. What appears, on the surface, as domestic idyll, is undermined by underlying threats that jeopardise the idealised image of the "homely" family and the invulnerably moral American character. Thus, the American homeland, the supposed cradle of security and moral virtue, is threatened by forces from within, where danger lurks inside the ambit of tradition and ideology. The home, in this story, is not a

²⁶¹ Jay A. Yarmove, 'Jackson's The Lottery', *The Explicator*, 52.4 (1994), 242-5, (pp. 244-5).

²⁶² Ruth Franklin, *Shirley Jackson: A Rather Haunted Life*, p. 213.

haven, and its dangers render the space menacing and inhospitable. What do these dangers look like? What do they suggest about the American home(land)?

The Road Through the Wall presents a rather satirical picture of an American suburban community ostensibly comfortable in its middleclass enclave. Set in 1936 in the fictional suburb of Cabrillo, and focusing almost exclusively on Pepper Street, the story depicts an isolated neighbourhood with a ‘universal landscape’ resonating far beyond its fictional reality.²⁶³ The narrative is not so much plot-driven as episodic, providing vignettes of traditional family dynamics consumed with anxieties involving gender, race, class, and sexual expression. The prologue presents Pepper Street as a site of complacency and ambition, a walled neighbourhood bordered by large estates that produce a notable contrast to accentuate the intermediary status of the suburban development. Imbalance is introduced from the outset, but it is contextualised as divine, beyond the influence of human forces:

[t]he weather falls more gently on some places than on others, the world looks down more paternally on some people. Some spots are proverbially warm, and keep, through falling snow, their untarnished reputations as summer resorts; some people are automatically above suspicion.²⁶⁴

The neighbourhood also *looks* the image to shore up this perceived superiority. The residents deem themselves deserving of such status, interpreting their apparent ‘invulnerability as justice’.²⁶⁵ Yet the suggestion that this static image operates to some degree as a façade is promptly presented: ‘no man owns a house because he really wants a house, any more than he marries because he favours monogamy’.²⁶⁶ There is an investment in impression more than substance, in imitation over authenticity, conforming to conventional attitudes for the

²⁶³ Patrycja Antoszek, ‘The Suburban *Unhomely*: Alienation and Anxiety in Shirley Jackson’s *The Road Through the Wall*’, *Explorations: A Journal of Language and Literature*, 5 (2017), 12-24, p. 14.

²⁶⁴ Shirley Jackson, *Four Novels of the 1940s & 50s* (New York: Library of America, 2020), p. 5.

²⁶⁵ p. 5.

²⁶⁶ p. 5.

sake of maintaining the status quo. Therefore, the middleclass residents commit to presenting the idealised image of the “proper” and moral neighbourhood. Pepper Street is a typical suburban development: houses variously have tall hedges, Venetian blinds, glass brick, a ‘sweeping wide concrete porch’ and large, immaculate gardens.²⁶⁷ The street even contains an ‘orchard of apple trees which successfully [hide] the house of crazy old Mrs Mack’,²⁶⁸ the architectural design functioning, meticulously, as an instrument to uphold the street’s flawless image by concealing its problematic figures. Most important, of course, is the ‘thin high brick wall’ that sequesters Pepper Street from the rest of the town, a grand barrier delineating ‘an effective end to Pepper Street life’.²⁶⁹ Moreover, because Pepper Street was on the borderline between ‘a suburban development and a collection of large private estates [...] it possessed an enviable privacy’,²⁷⁰ isolating its residents from the surrounding environment and fortifying the seclusion demarcated by the great, towering wall. In this sense, Pepper Street functions as a suburban microcosm of American domesticity, and Jackson uses it to explore the darker undercurrents of American culture.

The Road Through the Wall contains a broad cast of characters that form the neighbourhood in which Jackson explores her microcosm. The novel moves between these characters to expose the foundations at the heart of the neighbourhood’s stasis and order. Some of the characters, such as the Jewish Perlman and the lower-class Terrels, pose as threats to this stasis, while others, like the prominently conservative Mrs Merriman and the always-polite Mrs Donald, serve to reinforce it. What is ultimately displayed is a fragile order sustained on tradition and coercion that dictates behaviour and tolerance. The family, the venerated model of American ambition, constitutes this microcosmic community that

²⁶⁷ p. 6.

²⁶⁸ p. 6.

²⁶⁹ p. 10.

²⁷⁰ p. 9.

presents conventional families embedded in a culture of exclusion and prejudice. These families contain predatory men who flirt with adolescent girls, anti-entropic women insistent on conformity, and nasty children who bully the street's outcasts. As a result, this "welcoming" neighbourhood is anything but, troubled by private threats that the enclosing wall keeps hidden and within.

Reading from the biblical book of Ezekiel, Mrs Mack recites what she terms a 'lesson' to her male dog, Lady:

[s]o will I break down the wall that ye have daubed with untempered mortar, and bring it down to the ground, so that the foundation thereof shall be discovered, and it shall fall and ye shall be consumed in the midst thereof: and ye shall know that I am the Lord. Thus I will accomplish my wrath upon the wall, and upon them that have daubed it with untempered mortar, and will say unto you, The wall is no more, neither they that daubed it.²⁷¹

A rumoured witch deemed 'crazy' by the neighbourhood,²⁷² her readings, always delivered to her dog, appear the ramblings of a senile recluse, but Mrs Mack's words are akin to prophecy that predict the downfall of Pepper Street, and the birth of a new order once the foundations of the old have been exposed. In this sense, the ending seems hopeful, but promises calamity in order to reach it. Mrs Mack's words invite scrutiny of the community fabric that appears to be the subject of her prophecy: the insular Pepper Street, comfortably enclosed by 'the wall' divined to be brought down with wrath. A part of Pepper Street but also separate from it, Mrs Mack occupies an agentic position within the novel, even though she is referenced more than she is seen. She is not directly (or overtly) involved in any of the neighbourhood drama that unfolds, yet her prophecies, scattered thrice throughout the latter half of the novel, frame the narrative's events and trajectory. Her 'lessons' are taught to her dog, Lady, which echoes the

²⁷¹ p. 115.

²⁷² p. 6.

association present in ‘The Renegade’ between the outsider Mrs Walpole and her own dog, also named Lady, in which the dog becomes the proposed object of punitive violence for ostensibly having killed a neighbour’s chickens. Through the villagers’ responses to her dog’s alleged misdemeanour, Mrs Walpole is taught a bitter lesson about the cost of disobedience. Conversely, Mrs Mack, also an outsider, *gives* the lesson – perhaps because the lesson to be learned is not one that can stem from the community in need of correction, but only from an outsider with an intimate knowledge of the community culture: Mrs Mack, who uniquely fits the bill. Mrs Mack precedes all of the Pepper Street residents, and seemingly the suburb itself, having ‘apparently always owned the little piece of land where she lived’.²⁷³ Thus – ironically – she is a resident outsider, because she is not a product of the suburban development and is excluded from (and hidden by) the community it has spawned. She presents her biblical lessons to her male dog who is assigned a feminine moniker that also connotes status: this queers Lady, and may suggest that, as an ambiguous amalgamation of both gender and class (constructs highly essentialised in Pepper Street), she is a symbolic stand-in for the street’s inhabitants, and that the messages of portent read to Lady are in essence meant for them.

A marginal, entropic character, Mrs Mack appears a harbinger of pending destruction, destruction that, once fulfilled, notably never touches her: even in the epilogue that details deaths and departures of many of the Pepper Street characters, ‘Mrs Mack’s house remained [...] while the neighbourhood changed around it’.²⁷⁴ As outcast, she ostensibly holds very little influence within the community she lives, but when juxtaposed with her status as a witch, Mrs Mack’s prophecies take on a deeper valency. At a textual level, she is an agent of change, one that foretells the necessary ruin of a community corrupted by the structures that

²⁷³ p. 61.

²⁷⁴ p. 183

shape and uphold it. At the narrative level, she may indeed be the very one who initiates the coming destruction, deeming violent rebirth vital to purge the community of its normalised evil.

Far from the benign and homely suburb, Pepper Street is a place in which exclusion, prejudice, and repression, are not only the norm, but the rule. What seems to validate commitment to all three is an abstract yet fixed prevailing standard that guarantees compliance and devotion. This imposed standard is perpetuated by the complicity of the residents who never interrogate its terms, who conform mindlessly to its imperatives and demand espousal by all within the fold, including the children. More than simply maintaining the status quo, there is an insistence on *setting* the standard, presenting as the model that gratifies dominant social tastes. As a result, errant desires are repressed, difference is rejected, and associations are policed. What *The Road Through the Wall* illustrates is the dangers implicit in such invasive control and exclusion: the wall faces demolition, but it proves to be the catalyst of a destruction long in the making, caused by the evil bred within the community itself.

There are overt instances throughout *The Road Through the Wall* when expulsion of Pepper Street's besmirching figures occurs or is attempted by the neighbourhood's residents. The old Mrs Mack lives in a 'shack far back from the street, with the heavy apple trees in front and a hedge in front of these',²⁷⁵ her existence carefully and constructively hidden away so as not to disrupt the idyll suggested by the rest of the block's houses. She is 'allowed' to continue living on Pepper Street because of this concealment,²⁷⁶ and because her status as a rumoured witch may engender fears of possible reprisal. Only venturing outdoors in the 'very

²⁷⁵ p. 61.

²⁷⁶ p. 61.

warmest weather’,²⁷⁷ she is a tolerated inconvenience whom the Pepper Street residents approach with a mixture of fear and pity. The Williams family, on the other hand, leave in the early chapters of the novel, and the impetus for their “expulsion” is apparent: Mrs Williams is a single mother with two children who catches the bus to the city for work, leaving her children in the care of their grandmother. “Mr Williams” is not in the picture, ostensibly travelling ‘everywhere [...] Maybe Paris, or New York’,²⁷⁸ uninterested in the family left behind. Not quite the becoming image, the Williams family occupy the house-for-rent that has garnered the status of the ‘one thorn in the side of the Donald women’ (the neighbours) because it ‘went up for rent regularly and was never suitably tenanted’.²⁷⁹ Leased ‘too cheaply for Pepper Street standards’,²⁸⁰ it appears that the house attracts unsavoury residents who never last long because they do not conform to the Pepper Street template. In the Williams family, this unsavouriness is exhibited in behaviour too: the teenage Helen Williams is the neighbourhood bully, and aggressively targets Marilyn Perlman with anti-Semitic taunts. While lower class, Helen still holds and exerts power over Marilyn, but Marilyn, when observing the tattered furniture during the Williams’s move, determines that her fear of Helen was irrational because ‘no one whose life was bounded by things like that was invulnerable’.²⁸¹ Yet Marilyn’s Semitic status relegates her to a lower social position than Helen’s, determined by a hierarchical system that prioritises racial status over wealth, enabling and facilitating Helen’s (and others’) anti-Semitism.

With Helen Williams’s departure, the nastiest of the neighbourhood children and the most aggressively anti-Semitic resident is expelled, freeing Marilyn of her primary tormenter while also restoring Pepper Street’s “polite” and more restrained form of prejudice. The

²⁷⁷ p. 61.

²⁷⁸ p. 25.

²⁷⁹ p. 7.

²⁸⁰ p. 7.

²⁸¹ p. 59.

Williams family are replaced by the Terrels, who are even less suitable than their predecessors: also a family of three consisting of a single mother and two daughters, there are hints that Mrs Terrel is a prostitute, and her younger daughter Beverley has a developmental disability. Thus the Terrels are the embodiment of the uncivilised and the dirty regularly associated with the lower classes. Beverley walks around the neighbourhood barefoot carrying money stolen from her mother and '[talks] like a six-year-old',²⁸² leading Miss Tyler to be of the opinion that 'a great big animal like [her] ought to be locked in a cage' and advises Beverley's older sister, Frederica, to commit her to an institution.²⁸³ What makes Miss Tyler's unsolicited advice particularly interesting is that she herself had been institutionalised, shut away – ostensibly by her sister and brother-in-law – for presumably errant behaviour. Yet she quickly takes care to emphasise the distinction between her own illness and Beverley's: Beverley is feeble-minded and 'apt to become dangerous',²⁸⁴ despite exhibiting no such signs; even the neighbourhood children do not fear Beverley because she 'smiles all the time'.²⁸⁵ Because she belongs to a class frequently considered primitive and unrestrained, Beverley is somebody who cannot be reformed and thus must be exiled for the sake of the community, whose well-being she is purported to threaten. Yet it is in fact the residents, and not Beverley, who pose the evident threat: Mary and Virginia exploit Beverley's innocence and kindness when they manipulate her for their own financial gains, and Caroline's murder at the end of the novel demonstrates exactly the type of danger Pepper Street poses to those who are innocent and vulnerable. While Pepper Street aspires to preserve its image as a wholesome and desirable haven, banishing those who cause disruption to the comfortable complacency of the neighbourhood, the immaculate picture it fashions

²⁸² p. 142.

²⁸³ p. 148.

²⁸⁴ p. 148.

²⁸⁵ p. 141.

functions as a façade that blankets the threats roaming unchecked beneath the community's "homely" character.

Pepper Street is a collective, but consists of factions often in disharmony with each other: the families are ruled by anxieties concerning racial purity and contamination that variously bond and divide them. When unity is found, it lies in prejudice or shared persecution, but even this unity is fragile and at risk of abrupt dissolution when select anxieties precede others. Harriet Merriman and Marilyn Perlman develop a friendship grounded in, or ostensibly grounded in, mutual rejection: Harriet doesn't quite "fit in" because of her weight, and Marilyn is terrorised by the bully, Helen, because she's Jewish. Marilyn feels a 'respectful sympathy' towards Harriet, aware that her status in the neighbourhood (as well as her own) subjects her to ill-treatment from others in the street. Their shared status as outsiders – Harriet for being overweight (and thus "ugly"), Marilyn for being Jewish (and thus "ugly") – bonds them, and they form an apparently even friendship that has both girls believing they will 'always be true friends' and 'never separate'.²⁸⁶ Yet Harriet never introduces Marilyn to her mother, never tells her mother of their friendship, and never invites Marilyn to her house despite visiting the Perlmans several times, seemingly all too aware of what a known association with the Perlmans will inspire from her parochial mother. Their friendship comes to an abrupt end when Marilyn and Mrs Perlman arrive unannounced at the Merriams' house and the friendship is exposed. Foreseeing her mother's disapproval, Harriet is first 'afraid and then embarrassed' when she meets the Perlmans at the door, and proceeds to chide Marilyn for visiting.²⁸⁷ When the Perlmans leave after a brief and awkward stay, Harriet is sent to her room, irate: 'I could kill her for coming here tonight, why did she think she had any right to come?'²⁸⁸ This unexpected (and unwelcome) encounter

²⁸⁶ p. 106.

²⁸⁷ p. 129.

²⁸⁸ p. 131.

results in Mrs Merriam compelling her daughter to cut ties with Marilyn and communicate a very particular message: ‘my mother hopes you won’t ever try to tell anyone I was your *friend*’.²⁸⁹

Marilyn and Harriet’s perceived ugliness may place them on common ground, at least temporarily, but their status as outsiders is never mutual, for their specific ugliness is not shared. The only instances in the novel in which “ugly” is used in a context not involving Marilyn or Harriet is when the narrator describes the ‘flat ugly goldfish pond’ in the Roberts’ backyard,²⁹⁰ and frames the teenaged ‘invader’ Hester Lucas’s behaviour as ‘menacing and ugly’ when meeting adults.²⁹¹ All other uses of the word are in contexts directly relating to Marilyn, Harriet, or both of them together. When Marilyn reflects on her appearance during an episode of Helen’s harassment, she imagines herself as ‘small and frightened and ugly’.²⁹² The narration variously calls attention to Marilyn’s face by describing it as ‘her wide ugly face’²⁹³ and ‘her ugly face angry’,²⁹⁴ seemingly complicit in framing Marilyn in such terms. When Harriet observes her friend in a renewed (anti-Semitic) light, she ‘realised how absolutely atrociously ugly Marilyn was’ and concludes that she and Marilyn ‘were both ugly’.²⁹⁵ Yet Harriet only seems to recognise this ugliness in her friend after her mother has reminded her of her social position and Marilyn’s inferior one. Because of this perceived ugliness, Harriet thinks that Marilyn is ‘neither more or less safe from the laughter of the *hoi polloi*’ than she is,²⁹⁶ but her words convey a disparity that exposes the terms of their individual predicaments: Harriet is subject at most to mockery, Marilyn to exclusion. While they may both be ugly, their ugliness is fundamentally different: Marilyn *is* ugly, as dictated

²⁸⁹ p. 149.

²⁹⁰ p. 6.

²⁹¹ p. 94.

²⁹² p. 19.

²⁹³ p. 104.

²⁹⁴ p. 105.

²⁹⁵ p. 149.

²⁹⁶ p. 149.

by anti-Semitic sentiment. What makes Harriet ugly is her weight: she's 'fat' and therefore 'gross',²⁹⁷ but hers is a condition that can change (ostensibly) and one that is not perceived as inherent. Most crucially, Harriet's ugliness is not deemed contaminating.

The girls' ugliness initially connects them, but ultimately proves too different when social status is prioritised over social bonds. For as ugly as Harriet considers herself to be, she still regards herself as superior to Marilyn, and is dumbfounded when Marilyn calls her a 'big fat slob' in response to Harriet's self-righteously anti-Semitic rejection.²⁹⁸ Believing that Marilyn 'didn't need to get so mad' and that her insult was 'a mean thing to say',²⁹⁹ Harriet's attitude demonstrates her pervasive bias that blinds her to her own hypocrisy and cruelty. It also reveals the impressionable nature of her – a child's – ignorance: she reiterates her mother's speech verbatim when rejecting Marilyn, relying on her mother's words to articulate what she might not actually understand but adopts anyway. Harriet exemplifies the insidious nature of indoctrination inherited by the children, who become products of the culture in which they're raised, carrying with them the learned prejudices that they perpetuate and practise within a community that venerates conformance to social mores.

After learning of her daughter's "inappropriate" friendship with the Jewish Marilyn, Mrs Merriam utters the following decree:

[w]e must expect to set a standard. Actually, however much we may want to find new friends whom we may value, people who are exciting to us because of new ideas, or because they are *different*, we have to do what is expected of us.³⁰⁰

Her counsel is uncanny: remove the context of the conversation and one could place this in 1936 Germany, spoken by a middle-class German about their Jewish neighbours. Yet such

²⁹⁷ p. 178.

²⁹⁸ p. 150.

²⁹⁹ p. 150.

³⁰⁰ p. 140.

rhetoric is not limited to one ethnic group, and these sentiments are not anachronistic. Mrs Merriam speaks with a polite and normalised voice that could be applied to many contexts in which minority groups are “considerately” excluded for the sake of maintaining the status quo. Notably, *The Road Through the Wall* was published in 1948 and written during a time when the atrocities of the Holocaust significantly occupied the global consciousness. It would not be unreasonable to assume Jackson, whose husband was Jewish, wrote the novel with recent history in mind, but pointedly explored its themes in an American context. While there is no mention of the war or the political landscape in the world of Pepper Street, such a mention is barely necessary when Jackson depicts a community governed by codes that exemplify a culture not unique to one location or continent. Her story is unsettling because of what it suggests: the culture that enabled the Third Reich is not exclusive to Germany alone. The story could stand, in distinct ways, as a prelude to the Third Reich, which didn’t arrive at the Final Solution instantly, but implemented its anti-Semitic policies gradually, aided by insidious propaganda and blind fidelity to Nazi ideology.

Mrs Merriam’s rationalisation for having her daughter end her friendship with Marilyn is prejudiced, but expected in a culture of entrenched racism (or “standards”) that demands discrimination of all those whose existence threatens established norms. Even Mrs Desmond, who has ‘never spoken a harsh word to or about anyone in her life’,³⁰¹ excludes the Perlman from the planned neighbourhood party under the pretext that reading Shakespeare’s *The Merchant of Venice* would be ‘unkind’ to the Jewish family,³⁰² despite Mr Desmond initially claiming that Shakespeare is ‘for everyone’.³⁰³ However, rather than changing the texts to something that would allow the Perlman to be invited, the Desmonds relegate the family to the ‘special list’ of community members for exclusion based on

³⁰¹ p. 70.

³⁰² p. 74.

³⁰³ p. 73.

‘Special Reasons’,³⁰⁴ along with the families of “lower” status: the poor Martins, the indecent Terrels, and the crazy Mrs Mack. What makes this list even more disturbing are its overtones: ‘Sonderbehandlung’ or ‘special treatment’ was a euphemism used by the Nazis when documenting the executions in the gas chambers.³⁰⁵ The Desmonds’ list, like the Nazi registers, contain the names of those individuals deemed “lesser than” and unworthy of belonging in the community fold. Furthermore, the ritualistic scapegoating found in ‘The Lottery’ is also present in *The Road Through the Wall*. Although the residents of Pepper Street do not brutally murder those whom they have made the objects of their hostility, they partake in routine practices that alienate and target individuals and groups based on prescriptive imperatives. Because compliance is the norm, the imperatives are espoused. Thus, although the Perlman may have ‘the wealthiest-looking’ home on the block,³⁰⁶ and their daughter may be deemed ‘a very sweet girl’,³⁰⁷ the standards that dictate social tolerance do not allow for accommodation of “presentable” outliers. Indeed, the Perlman’s financial status prompts consideration of early Nazi propaganda of the “avaricious parasitic Jews” and the anti-Semitic economic policies devised to financially disempower them. Already outliers, the Perlman’s financial status does not grant them concession from prejudice or exclusion for their Semitic status is overarching: associations with the lower class Williamses are moderately tolerated yet utterly opposed with the Perlman. In fact, the Perlman’s financial position might even serve to exacerbate their marginal social status, if Third Reich events before the Holocaust are to offer any insight. Thus, the family’s rank in the social order of Pepper Street will always necessitate exclusion, for every conforming

³⁰⁴ p. 74.

³⁰⁵ David Cesarani, *Final Solution: The Fate of the Jews 1933-49* (London: Pan Macmillan, 2017), p. 686.

³⁰⁶ Jackson, p. 18.

³⁰⁷ Jackson, p. 73.

family in the neighbourhood must do ‘what is expected of [them]’ and never allow themselves to ‘get carried *away*’ by anything beyond the norm.³⁰⁸

And yet the residents do ‘get carried away’. In symbolic terms, the wall that separates Pepper Street from its neighbours represents the repression of primal impulses, the sequestering of “unfamiliar” desires that threaten to disrupt the clean, clinical image of the suburban home and family. But a wall, while keeping things out, also keeps things in: the undesirable impulses are suppressed, not expunged, and are always at risk of erupting in unruly ways. With many of the residents, there is an unsettling delight in the grotesque. Harriet feels the need to protest when her mother appears to ‘enjoy so much’ her racist description of Chinese people’s houses as a terrifying space that entraps its inhabitants: “‘their houses are made with heavy walls, extra heavy, so you can’t get out and no one can hear you if you scream. Scream,” she repeated with relish’.³⁰⁹ One could assume Mrs Merriam is speaking of Pepper Street here, with its consumptive piety and encumbering atmosphere. The fact that Mrs Merriam seems to delight in the horror she describes gestures towards a suppressed transgressive urge that she has projected onto an Other, in this case an entire ethnic group. In so doing, she has *othered* the impulses as foreign by associating them with a foreigner, a Chinese man: it is Harriet’s encounter with a Chinese man that leads to this conversation. She is free to indulge in the feeling so long as it is separate from her, but her very “feasting” of the scene suggests that the errant impulse is not outside of her but within, buried under strict prescriptive convention and propriety (this is even further demonstrated after the novel’s climactic murder when Mrs Merriam implies, without any evidence to support her speculation, that baby Caroline had been sexually violated by the

³⁰⁸ Jackson, p. 140.

³⁰⁹ p. 55.

person who killed her).³¹⁰ Thus, the “foreignness” of the impulses are deeply familiar but forbidden in a society that condemns improper urges.

Virginia and Harriet’s visit with the apparently wealthy Mr Lee illustrates this as well, when Virginia’s excitement at an illicit encounter with the unfamiliar embodied by Mr Lee has her joining him for tea in his hotel room. Her excitement abruptly dissipates, however, when she learns of Mr Lee’s true status: he is ‘the help’,³¹¹ not a resident, and would not be able to live in the neighbourhood because he is *too* different: ‘I couldn’t rent an apartment in this house [...] Not in this neighbourhood. They wouldn’t rent an apartment to me’.³¹² Thus, he is suitable enough for cheap employment, but inappropriate for inclusion into the community fold because of the threat to its security he ostensibly poses. What is of fundamental import to the collective is to quell any urges that may disrupt the pure image directly linked to the family ideal and purportedly reflected by each member of the family unit. Upholding convention, maintaining that static domestic image of purity and virtue, holds a privileged position in the domestic playbook.

Suppression of errant desires is so essential to the community culture that potential triggers are policed and marginalised, but the feared triggers are projections that embody anxieties the residents feel about themselves: it is easier to “control” something if it is separate from them, more comfortable to condemn behaviour that they associate with an enemy or outsider. The fact that the Pepper Street residents may be so easily excited by mere engagement with an Other indicates the fragile security engendered by the persistent repression of “indecorous” impulses. The demolition of part of the wall initiates fear of invasion from ‘barbarian hordes’,³¹³ but the breach serves as a catalyst for the release of long-

³¹⁰ p. 181.

³¹¹ p. 79.

³¹² p. 79.

³¹³ p. 123.

suppressed urges, and the ‘change [that] was going to come about without anyone’s consent’ would prove to come from the inside.³¹⁴ The fissure disrupts the symbolic border between the neighbourhood and its unfamiliar and menacing outsiders, bringing an end to the ‘enviable privacy’ that presupposes safety and security from threatening influences.³¹⁵ But the enclave has never been safe, its security undermined by unfamiliar intrusions from familiar figures.

An early example of this is in the secret and sexualised letters the girls compose to boys in the neighbourhood which contain references to love, marriage, and a thousand kisses.³¹⁶ When discovered by the neighbourhood parents, they are deemed, predominantly by Mrs Merriam, to be ‘improper’ and ‘dirty’.³¹⁷ Naturally, the lower-class Helen Williams is blamed as the instigator, contaminating the more “decent” children with her dirty thoughts and having them participate in her transgressive conduct that sullies the supposed purity and safety of the communal space. Another example is provided in the perturbing segment that sees the thirteen-year-old Tod sneak into the Desmond home and explore the bedroom of Mrs Desmond and her three-year-old daughter, Caroline. Tod invades the feminine space, watching himself ‘tangled in the stirring mirror’ for an extended period of time.³¹⁸ He picks up Mrs Desmond’s perfume bottle and pours some onto his hand before smelling its ‘overpowering sweetness’.³¹⁹ Opening the closet to stare at the dresses of Mrs Desmond and Caroline, and subsequently

[h]alf-shutting the closet door behind him, he wormed his way in through Mrs Desmond’s dresses and negligees until he reached the most hidden part of the closet, and he sat down on the floor, his perfumed hand over his face. There, far back in the closet in Mrs Desmond’s room, he said, quite loudly, all the dirtiest

³¹⁴ p. 123.

³¹⁵ p. 9.

³¹⁶ p. 15.

³¹⁷ p. 17.

³¹⁸ p. 65.

³¹⁹ p. 65.

words he knew, all the words he had heard his brother James ever use, all the words George Martin taught the kids secretly and knowingly.³²⁰

Penetrating this ‘feminine interior’, the secrecy of the act and its illicit nature speak to the ‘unarticulated anxieties’ of not only Tod but the wider group.³²¹ He enacts repressed urges in a forbidden space that underscores the culture of repression in which he lives. Hidden away in a closet – a private, secret space – and holding the garments of a mother and her young daughter, Tod unleashes ‘the dirtiest words he knew’,³²² contaminating the space with transgressive utterances learned in secret from the fourteen-year-old George Martin – another of the lower class children – who intentionally disseminates the forbidden knowledge to the other kids in the street. This episode portrays the repressed other that lurks within, enacted clandestinely in a private space sheltered from the outside world. It is telling that it is the ‘imperfect’ and ‘undesired’ Tod who is the one to enter this space in secret and charge it with transgressive words,³²³ almost as if this closeted space is for those who do not quite fit in, do not conform to the prescribed behaviours and identities of the social order. Thus, from this private chrysalis sheltering the aberrant Tod, horror emerges, contaminating and ugly. In a similar way, the nature of the space resembles the hiding place of Marilyn and Harriet that holds their secret and transgressive ‘hopes and dreams’ on buried pieces of paper (and later discovered by Tod).³²⁴ Tod’s actions appear unseemly for a child belonging to the impeccable Pepper Street, but they are symptomatic of the community in which he lives that dictates expression and desire. The delicate clamp keeping unappeased impulses at bay eventually and inevitably snaps in a pressure-cooker environment of unexpressed anxieties. Thus, while ‘it was the destruction of the wall which put the first wedge into the Pepper

³²⁰ pp. 65-6.

³²¹ Antoszek, p. 17.

³²² Jackson, p. 66.

³²³ Jackson, p. 34.

³²⁴ p. 106; p. 155.

Street security’, at least on the surface, ‘that security was so fragile that, once jarred, it shivered into fragments in a matter of weeks’.³²⁵

The party, of course, illustrates this well, when it transforms into a hotbed of transgressive impulses that builds to the climax of the story’s grotesque conclusion. Planned by the Desmonds under the guise of getting the neighbourhood children together to read Shakespeare (except everyone on the ‘Special Reasons’ list), it becomes a carnivalesque scene of drunken revelry, with flirting, predatory men, and uninhibited admissions. The teenaged Virginia trespasses (or is perhaps invited?) into adult spaces: she drinks alcohol, flirts with Mr Roberts, and dances with the adult men at the party. Miss Tyler intentionally tries to instigate conflict between her sister Mrs Ransom-Jones and her brother-in-law Mr Ransom-Jones: she slyly tells Mr Ransom-Jones that her sister is ‘acting up’³²⁶ while later disclosing to her sister, unprompted, that ‘*he’s* in there [the house]. Drinking’.³²⁷ She also, rather ironically, advises the teenage Harriet to ‘*always* be polite’ because she’ll ‘never be pretty’.³²⁸ The opening of a section of the wall and the concurrent expansion of the suburban development causes the inhabitants of Pepper Street to believe that ‘it’s going to *ruin* the neighbourhood’³²⁹ but it becomes apparent that the source to the neighbourhood’s downfall lies within the community itself. The party facilitates catharsis of repressed urges that results in indulgent activities and conduct which lead to ‘a great climactic festival’ with the disappearance of the baby Caroline.³³⁰ Yet, instead of horrifying the residents, it thrills them:

[t]he prevailing mood was one of keen excitement; no one there really wanted Caroline Desmond safe at home [...]. Pleasure was in the feeling that the terrors of the night, in the jungle, had come close to their safe lighted homes, touched

³²⁵ Jackson, p. 124.

³²⁶ p. 161.

³²⁷ p. 163.

³²⁸ p. 161.

³²⁹ p. 159.

³³⁰ p. 171.

them nearly, and departed, leaving every family safe but one; an acute physical pleasure like a pain, which made them all regard Mr Desmond greedily, and then turn their eyes away with guilt.³³¹

What excites the community is the ‘sense of homeliness unrooted, the revelation of something unhomely at the heart of hearth and home’:³³² Pepper Street, once secure, with an ‘invulnerability’³³³ that fortified the oppositional categories of high and low, clean and dirty, resident and other, is disrupted by the intrusion of the unfamiliar into their (familiar) sanctuary: the suspected abduction of a baby girl during a neighbourhood celebration saturated with transgressive revelry. Yet the incident doesn’t quite terrify them. Instead, its unfamiliarity, its eeriness, excites them, making them wish, enviously, that they had been marked by whatever force selected the Desmonds for tragedy and horror. It is in Caroline’s death that a commingling of the familiar and the grotesque is embodied. Caroline’s body ‘was horribly dirty; no one had ever seen Caroline as dirty as she was then, with mud all over her yellow dress and yellow socks and [...] all over her head [was] blood’.³³⁴ This effect makes Caroline’s body ‘the epitome of the abject’.³³⁵ Soiled with dirt and blood (substances heavily associated with the “base” or lower classes), the child’s body dissolves the boundary between purity and uncleanliness, fusing the two in a grotesque scene that symbolises both perfect innocence and its destruction. It is telling that when Caroline Desmond’s bludgeoned body is found, the community looks within, not outside, to identify the culprit (or scapegoat), hinting towards its own propensity for grotesque violence it labours to quash. It hardly seems coincidental that the gruesome incident occurs on the same night as the party, in which long-suppressed impulses are given vent in reckless ways. That Tod is presumed to be the killer further disrupts the sanctity of the “homely” construct, with a thirteen-year-old child believed

³³¹ p. 171.

³³² Nicholas Royle, *The Uncanny* (New York: Routledge, 2003), p. 1.

³³³ Jackson, p. 5.

³³⁴ Jackson, p. 174.

³³⁵ Antoszek, p. 20.

guilty of the murder of a toddler. Yet ‘imperfect’ Tod may be the scapegoat of a coordinated attempt to expel irrepressible urges, the ideal selection as the unwanted outcast within the group who conveniently ‘acted funny’ before Caroline’s body was found.³³⁶ Tod’s suicide without a confession does not resolve the discord and insecurity injected into the community by Caroline’s murder, insinuating, perhaps, that the evil has not been despatched, but lies within the community, within the family, rendering anyone capable of committing the grotesque crime and making the home (and the family) inherently unsafe and, like ‘The Lottery’, holding everyone complicit in the evil unleashed.

At the story’s conclusion, after the events of Caroline and Tod’s deaths, Mrs Mack reads to Lady from the book of Habakkuk:

[w]oe to him that coveteth an evil covetousness to his house, that he may set his nest on high, that he may be delivered from the power of evil! Thou hast consulted shame to thy house by cutting off many people, and hast sinned against thy soul. For the stone shall cry out of the wall, and the beam out of the timber shall answer it. Woe to him that buildeth a town with blood, and stablisheth a city by iniquity!³³⁷

As was foretold by Mrs Mack’s first prophecy, it is the demolition of the wall that ‘puts the first wedge into the Pepper Street security’,³³⁸ which gradually unravels into the horrifying death of Caroline, and exposes the true character of the Pepper Street community. But this grotesque death is not the only manifestation of the community’s evil: it is a climactic embodiment of an evil that has always existed, one embedded in the community fabric, capable of contaminating and destroying innocence. A form of this evil is made manifest in Mrs Merriam’s directive to her daughter to break off her friendship with Marilyn Perlman for the sake of compliance to tradition that makes no room for association with those outside of

³³⁶ Jackson, p. 166.

³³⁷ pp. 181-2.

³³⁸ p. 124.

the social order. Another is found in the Desmonds' decision to exclude the Perlman family from the neighbourhood party under the façade of protecting them from insult. It manifests in the wicked children, already diseased by the culture in which they're bred. And it is exhibited in the grotesque delight of the Pepper Street residents in the abduction of the three-year-old Caroline.

While the wall has served to protect Pepper Street from the invasion of 'barbarian hordes',³³⁹ it has kept evil within, kept Pepper Street secure in its isolationist culture and toxic conformity. Talk of "the wall" is eerily topical in modern discussions about keeping people out and stopping "invasion" from unwanted quarters, in which everything beyond the wall is posited as threatening and everything within it as safe, thereby stoking and cultivating prejudiced sentiment and rhetoric. What makes Pepper Street uncanny is the potential of the evil it harbours. Anti-Semitic and governed by social compliance, it is a neighbourhood that could be located in the modern embodiment of extreme evil: Nazi Germany. The Nazis so regularly embody the ultimate villain, the evil to defeat, exacerbated by knowledge of their Holocaust crimes, the proven depths of their depravity. But the complicity of the Allies is seldom explored in us/them narratives that categorise the Nazis as evil and the West as, not only the vanquishers of deplorable evil, but the *humane* heroes, incapable of resorting to genocide with the objective of global extermination. Such depravity, it was (and is) believed, could not be found in the West. Arguably the thing that makes Pepper Street uniquely American is its given location, but its social fabric resembles many a community that relies on exclusion and oppression for its survival and progress, especially an insular one. Set in 1936, but written soon after WWII, *The Road Through the Wall* presents as an uncanny doubling of Nazi Germany. Pepper Street demonstrates the dangers of compliance that see ethnic groups and families of a lower order expelled and excluded from humane consideration because of

³³⁹ p. 123.

social norms that dictate their value and moral fibre. On the surface, it does not *seem* that the Perlmans and Mr Lee and the Martins and the Terrels are treated with anything less than civility, but they represent outliers who, with specific impetus from a calculating group, can become an embodied evil that must be annihilated to restore the “sanctity” and status of the community. For the residents’ politeness towards those they disparage can swiftly turn evil if or when the fabricated context demands it. The Chinese, after all, are already believed to have houses that entrap and drown out screams.³⁴⁰ it will not take much nudging to see those who are different or unfamiliar as the enemy, when they are already perceived as threatening to the social order (and the individual) of Pepper Street.

The Holocaust and 9/11 have already demonstrated the ease with which certain groups are scapegoated when other groups feel threatened by perceived risks they cannot control. This ease is enabled by a culture that prioritises certain groups over others and deems itself morally and biologically superior to those it persecutes and oppresses. Perhaps what makes Pepper Street most dangerous is the residents’ belief in their own supreme morality, because it facilitates contextualisation of any and all injustice committed for its sake as necessary and even “good”. The Pepper Street residents are *convinced* of their moral rectitude, and believe that their thinly-veiled (and often overt) prejudice is evidence of their supremacy and virtue, for they do not ‘get carried *away*’³⁴¹ by their “curiosity” or “kindness” and steadfastly uphold their duty to convention and entrenched norms. Jackson’s novel was written in the late 40s – a decade long past – but like ‘The Lottery’, *The Road Through the Wall* belongs both to its time and our own, for the moral corruption it depicts is not antiquated or unique: the community at the centre of the novel is one that holds deep-seated and prevalent biases, ones that still dictate behaviour and conscience today.

³⁴⁰ p. 55.

³⁴¹ p. 142.

Jackson's *The Road Through the Wall* embodies radical uncertainty in its portrayal of a community that represents suburban America and seems to resemble, in character, a German community one would find in the years preceding the start of WWII. This uncanny association brings into question comfortable notions about Western heroism and morality, demonstrating the insidious nature of collective and individual compliance with established standards. The culture that begot the Holocaust is perceived as uniquely Nazi, but the microcosm in *The Road Through the Wall* illustrates the dangers of American culture that is *politely* exclusivist, prejudiced, sanctimonious and, above all, traditional. With its overt anti-Semitism and class bias, Pepper Street thrives on its isolation that buttresses its belief in its own righteousness. Policing relationships across ethnic lines and limiting associations with those deemed inferior, the community exhibits a fervent commitment to preserving the status quo and conforming to what is expected, regardless of the cost. The women, particularly, play active roles in enforcing the standards of the community by demanding compliance and functioning as the "consciences" of their families, dictating the degrees of tolerance within the neighbourhood. Pepper Street does not stand as an aspirational measurement of moral virtue, but rather as a faithful reflection of the inherent prejudices and biases shaped by tradition and ideology. Most critics of *The Road Through the Wall* were put off by Jackson's 'negative depiction of humanity',³⁴² but a negative depiction does not preclude a realistic one: through the characters she portrays, Jackson exposes the nasty truths about American culture that renders its homeland an unhomely space, concealing its evil within the very constructs that shape it.

³⁴² Franklin, p. 220.

5. 'I Am Writing About Ambivalence': Conclusion

I am writing about ambivalence but it is an ambivalence of the spirit, or the mind, not the sex...It is fear itself, fear of self, that I am writing about, fear and guilt and their destruction of identity, and any means at hand will do to express them; why am *I* so afraid?...I am frightened by a word...but I have always loved (and there is the opposition: love) to use fear, to take it and comprehend it and make it work and consolidate a situation where I was afraid and take it whole and work from there. So there goes *Castle*. I cannot and will not work from within the situation; I must take it as given...I delight in what I fear. Then *Castle* is not about two women murdering a man. It is about my being afraid and afraid to say so, so much afraid that a name in a book can turn me inside out.³⁴³

What inspired Jackson's reflection above was the reference to her second novel *Hangsaman* (1951) in Jeannette H. Foster's, *Sex Variant Women in Literature* (1956), a book on lesbian critical theory that described Jackson's bildungsroman as 'an eerie novel about lesbians'.³⁴⁴ Characteristically for the period, Jackson was strongly opposed to the idea of lesbianism in her work, but a lesbian subtext is present in many fictions across her oeuvre, notably *Hangsaman*, *The Haunting of Hill House*, and *We Have Always Lived in the Castle*. Perhaps her unwillingness to consider the existence of lesbianism in her fiction was bound by a resistance to confront the disruptive possibilities it represented in a life governed by patriarchal imperatives, yet Jackson, whether consciously or not, explores this theme in work that figures queerness as a subversive and agentic force. Merricat and Constance develop a relationship grounded in mutual love and understanding that empowers them and releases them from patriarchal control. They are sisters, but their respective roles within Jackson's fairytale position them as archetypal counterparts whose happiness is secured together.

³⁴³ Shirley Jackson, quoted in Ruth Franklin, *Shirley Jackson: A Rather Haunted Life* (New York: Liveright Publishing Corporation, 2016), p. 441.

³⁴⁴ Franklin, p. 440.

Consequently, Jackson queers her fairytale to deliver her protagonist's happy ending, albeit one that is severely compromised.

One idea that Jackson's stories consistently point towards is that happy endings for women do not lie with men. When there are romances to be found in her work, they are undermined by the troubled realities of the women's predicaments that see them courted by treacherous "James Harris" figures and locked in marriages and lives they do not want. Men often ensnare the women of Jackson's fiction, but they alone do not confine them: the women's entrapment is moulded by the domestic contract and enforced by its agents, who are both male and female. While women are presented as the primary casualties of the patriarchal system that presides over them, Jackson's work illustrates the pervasive nature of the structures embedded in the social fabric that leaves no one within its sphere untouched. Like *Hill House*, everybody is susceptible to its influence, every person has a purpose that can be exploited.

Even men, the main beneficiaries of the patriarchal order, are not beyond its reach. Bert of 'The Paradise' dives along with seventeen-year-old Gladys into their premature marriage, seemingly as unprepared as her for what the arrangement may entail. His imminent enlistment, ordained by the state, hastily impels him to marry to secure an upgraded status as a man with a wife, yet the cost of this "investment" seems to outweigh the ostensible benefit of it: Bert spends much of his consignment on trips home in desperate attempts to save the vulnerable marriage and preserve his acquired status, even being granted an emergency furlough in a last-ditch effort to either fix or resolve a marriage supposedly on the rocks. The men of *The Road Through the Wall* settle for monogamy as determined by the norm, conforming to the standardised image of the suburban life and family despite desiring lives outside of it. John of 'The Beautiful Stranger' *may* be an imposter, or he may in fact have become so de-

personalised by his role and status that Margaret perceives him to be different to the John who seemingly possessed more individuality. While the patriarchal system in place privileges men, its pressures are so invasive that its influence is not restricted to the domain of women: men may not be deprived of their agency and relegated to fixed, confining spaces (war being the exception), but even they cannot escape the contract's reverberations entirely. Hill House calls the people it needs, and so does the presiding system. War is an overt example of this, shifting the priorities and purposes of men to the degree that extreme conformity is necessary: men are commanded to join the military body and risk their lives for its sake, regardless of the personal cost.

Wicked children are a common feature of Jackson's work, but their characterisations are far from incongruous. Like Jack and Judy Walpole and Fancy Halloran, or Merricat Blackwood and Helen Williams, the children are products of the families and the cultures they are bred within, each child capable of violence, sometimes even savouring it. If Jackson's representations of children are guilty of hyperbole, it is because they portray children getting away with murder, not because the children harbour grotesque thoughts and impulses that manifest in horrifying ways. The children of 'The Lottery' partake with relish in the blood ritual that sees every member of the community barbarically stoning the sacrificial victim, but nothing about their behaviour is out of place in a village culture sustained by violence. Helen Williams leaves Pepper Street in the first half of *The Road Through the Wall*, but her departure does not rid the neighbourhood of its bully: the title is succeeded by Virginia Donald, who slips into the role with an ease concordant with the ethos of an exclusionary and prejudiced community. As 'The Lottery' and *The Road Through the Wall* demonstrate, the characters are products of the cultures they help fashion. The status quo is

maintained because the majority keeps it that way, not because it is an independent entity that survives on its own authority: it is fed by all those who uphold it.

In Jackson's fictive world, anti-entropic characters and structures feed it – forces that foster conformity and stasis. 'The Lottery' is an extreme embodiment of this – *The Road Through the Wall* a resonant characterisation. Both microcosms explore communities complicit in the evil and destruction they perpetuate through their resolute allegiance to entrenched norms and rituals. The overarching domestic contract woven into the social fabric cultivates a culture of complicity and blind obedience that facilitates and endorses persecution and marginalisation. It is adopted collectively, and practised individually. Yet while pervasive, it is not unanimous: there are those who do not conform, be it by choice or circumstance. These individuals are disruptive to the intransigent order that prescribes one's status and purpose, but they do not negotiate it unscathed. Their status as entropic agents always comes at a cost: an unmooring that begets ambiguity and displacement.

Jackson, writing predominantly about women, explores entropy through female characters in disharmony with lives shaped by prescriptive imperatives, whose attempts to claim and exert agency variously lead to ruin, corruption, or punishing compromise. Eleanor in *The Haunting of Hill House* falls to Hill House in the battle for her agency, losing that agency definitively in the very same moment that she wields it. *The Sundial's* Orianna seizes her agency with her own hands by murdering her son and assuming his position as the Halloran monarch, but she replicates the very structures that demanded her compliance, greedily reigning from a throne that is merely a gendered inversion of the patriarchal order. Yet even when the order is recast, the sacrifice it requires seems extreme: self-determination is possible, but only within a prison of one's own making. For Merricat Blackwood, it is a price she's willing to pay,

even if it leads to self-destruction: a return to the old order is utterly intolerable to the extent that it is unliveable.

The possibilities that exist for the women of Jackson's fiction are influenced by their entropy, but these possibilities are fundamentally formed and deformed by the women's status within the structures they inhabit. As a result, escaping one's entrapment seems an illusion that can never be fully realised. While escape is attempted in many forms, it often necessitates fantasy, alienation, and destruction. Removed from the clutches of their domestic status, the women's roles seem opaque and their futures unknown. Jackson ends many of her stories with escape seemingly accomplished, but the women's fates are left ambiguous. What life will Margaret step into now that her husband is dead by her hands and her home ostensibly destroyed? Does Clara ever make it to Samarkand with the enigmatic Jim? Is Lois Taylor really Louisa Tether, or is Louisa Tether a complete fabrication, a fiction within a fiction about an escape that never occurs? The possibilities seem endless, but promise nothing beyond the certainty of the unknown.

Rather than providing comfortable resolutions to the predicaments that trouble her protagonists, Jackson explores their predicaments to illustrate the effects of her characters' entrapment that has them conforming to the point of automatism, or resisting to the point of murder or suicide. But this dichotomy does not exemplify every Jackson story: instead, the women are poised between those binaries in their negotiation of their individual predicaments. This negotiation entails some form of agency, but many times agency is forfeited when compliance is observed over disobedience. Anti-entropic women, moored to the inert status prescribed for them, sacrifice their agency for the stability and identification of the contract, perpetuating its terms by ingraining it in their children (especially their daughters) and imposing it on other women who dare to defy

it even slightly. If this is perceived as agentic, it is agency of an illusory kind: a minimal agency, performed not on the women's own terms, but on the terms prescribed and enabled for them by the structures that regulate them. Mrs Merriam appears to hold an influential position within Pepper Street, but the power she ostensibly carries does not belong to her: she fulfils the terms of her role within the neighbourhood in which she resides, a model citizen whose authority is limited only to upholding and perpetuating the "standards" established by the repressive system that values her compliance.

Populated with entropic and anti-entropic characters, Shirley Jackson's fiction portrays women in constant negotiation, who sacrifice something of themselves – and something significant – to claim agency or maintain consoling stability. Not purely products of their environments, Jackson presents characters who variously contribute to the fashioning of their contexts in ways that shape their predicaments and modify their possibilities. Jackson's oeuvre is an exhibition of ambivalence, of the seemingly contradictory forces that determine a woman's status and trajectory in the culture she inhabits. Her work exposes the inconvenient and often confronting truths about Western culture and the comfortable myths we choose to cling to. Jackson does not only write about women, but women feature in significant ways in stories that explore self-determinacy and the pervasive structures that envelop it. Rarely one-dimensional, Jackson's female characters emerge from her fictions as a mosaic of women nearing the edge or secured far away from it: women (un)moored.

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