The Possibility of Evil: The Fiction of Shirley Jackson

John Gordon Parks

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This dissertation, directed and approved by the candidate's committee, has been accepted by the Graduate Committee of The University of New Mexico in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

THE POSSIBILITY OF EVIL: THE FICTION OF SHIRLEY JACKSON

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1973
THE POSSIBILITY OF EVIL:
THE FICTION OF SHIRLEY JACKSON

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DISSERTATION
Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the
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in the Graduate School of
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ABSTRACT OF DISSERTATION

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John Gordon Parks, Ph. D.
American Studies Program
The University of New Mexico, 1973

The dissertation is a critical study of the fiction of Shirley Jackson. It uses a story published shortly after her death in 1965 to express the key to the main themes and concerns of her fiction: "The Possibility of Evil." It is the thesis of the study that Shirley Jackson's fiction portrays the many incognitoes of evil and the demonic in contemporary life. Through the use of gothic conventions Jackson reveals the contours of human madness and loneliness in a disintegrating world generally bereft of the meliorating power of love and forgiveness.

Each of her six novels is treated fully: The Road Through The Wall (1948); Hangsaman (1951); The Bird's Nest (1954); The Sundial (1958); The Haunting of Hill House (1959); and We Have Always Lived in the Castle (1962). In addition, the study explores her two collections of short stories collected under the titles The Lottery (1949) and Come Along With Me (1968), as well as numerous uncollected stories.

Shirley Jackson's fiction is part of the American tradition of the gothic romance or tale of terror, and her relation to such authors as Poe, Hawthorne, Henry James, and Flannery O'Connor, among others, is shown throughout the study. With these authors she shares a dark view of human nature. But through the use of gothic, terror, and the grotesque, Jackson's fiction not only explores the inner experience of contemporary life, but also suggests that the recognition and confrontation of the evil in man may be the first step in transcending it.
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"Mad World! Mad Kings! Mad Composition!"

--King John

"I am not the poet of goodness only, 
I do not decline to be the poet of wickedness also."

--Walt Whitman, "Song of Myself"

"The time is out of joint: O Cursed Spite, 
That ever I was born to set it right!"

--Hamlet

Hor.: "O day and night, but this is wondrous strange!"

Ham.: "And therefore as a stranger give it welcome. 
There are more things in heaven and earth, Horatio, 
Than are dreamt of in your philosophy."

--Hamlet
CHAPTER I

THE BEST OF TIMES, THE WORST OF TIMES

Shirley Jackson would have met with wry amusement, her typical attitude towards most things in life, the black-hooded disciple of the devil whose picture served as the cover of a recent Time magazine. As she read of the tremendous growth of satanism, witchcraft, and other forms of the occult in contemporary America, she would have smiled knowingly. For what has just now emerged in bizarre and garrish liturgical form in American culture she has been charting and chronicling in her fiction between 1945 and 1965, the year of her death. A lifelong interest and concern of Miss Jackson was to explore and delineate the many incognitoes of evil and cruelty in modern life. Like Hawthorne, in whose tradition she ably follows, she sought words and images for those "shapes that haunt thought's wilderness." These restless and violent times, which summon up the devil's legions to the surface of life, are reminiscent of an earlier time of uneasiness in our history. Shirley Jackson made a study of that time in her 1956 book entitled The Witchcraft of Salem Village, which she wrote primarily for a junior-level audience. The study is significant in that it reveals her profound interest in the eruption of contagions of irrationality in times of uneasiness and insecurity, and it further shows her connection with that tradition of American literature that reveals the contours of the dark
side of man's being. In her Salem study she concludes that "... once people started doubting that the devil had his converts, it was possible to begin to believe that the devil was not an actuality, walking the earth with his demons." 2 The dark-hooded convert of Satan on the Time cover would seem to suggest that this lesson needs to be recalled, and that America's darker side remains a perplexing problem. But before we begin a detailed examination of Miss Jackson's work the burden of this chapter is to present the background and context of American fiction since 1945, and then to proceed into a discussion of the tradition in which Shirley Jackson follows.

The emergence and growth of the several varieties of the occult in modern life should be seen against the backdrop of an apocalyptic sensibility that has been growing since the end of the Second World War, but has been especially pronounced during the last decade. With the exception of B. F. Skinner's Walden Two (1948), there have been no significant fictional representations of utopia since World War Two, except for perhaps Richard Brautigan's novel In Watermelon Sugar, the tone of which does not make it very positive. Instead the imagination has been obsessed with dreadful apocalyptic possibilities which have driven it to probe the depths of the self, to make an uneasy peace when and where it can, or to mockery, satire, and nightmarish anti-utopias. In short, the future has become highly problematical as the present has become increasingly brutal, absurd, and uncontrollable. The situation has become one in which, to use William Irwin Thompson's provocative words, "the future is beyond knowing, but the present is beyond belief." 3 The contemporary writer comes to this situation feeling at a loss in knowing
what to do. As Philip Roth puts it: "... the American writer in the middle of the 20th century has his hands full in trying to understand, and then describe, and then make credible much of the American reality. It stupefies, it sickens, it infuriates, and finally it is even a kind of embarrassment to one's own meager imagination. The actuality is continually outdoing our talents, and the culture tosses up figures almost daily that are the envy of any novelist." And Roth wrote this before the decade of the sixties was barely underway. This condition in the culture has led several writers into a kind of journalism or into fictions based upon events of the recent past, for instance some of the recent work of Truman Capote, Norman Mailer, and William Styron.

What has happened is that the future has become one more fundamental boundary of human existence which has become blurred or has broken down. This breakdown of fundamental human boundaries, as Robert Lifton argues, is due to several important "psychohistorical" developments which have become overwhelming since 1945. One is "the world-wide sense of ... historical, or psychohistorical dislocation, the break in the sense of connection men have long felt with vital and nourishing symbols of their cultural traditions--symbols revolving around family, idea systems, religions, and the life cycle in general." A second major force is "the flooding of imagery produced by the extraordinary flow of post-modern cultural influences over mass communication networks." The third factor that Lifton discusses is "the impact of nuclear weapons" which constitute a grave and pervasive threat to the self, its symbolism, and to the boundaries of destruction. These forces, especially the third one, have brought about what Lifton calls an "Age of Numbing," a
new orientation of the self towards feelinglessness and apathy. Rollo May describes the contemporary experience in similar terms. In our age of radical transition he argues that the "general condition of our culture and the tendencies of people which make it up" can be described as schizoid, by which he means "out of touch, avoiding close relationships; the inability to feel." There is also a close connection between deepening apathy, anomie, unfeeling detachment and the outbreak of violence. May writes: "There is a dialectical relationship between apathy and violence; and . . . violence promotes apathy. Violence is the ultimate destructive substitute which surges in to fill the vacuum where there is no relatedness . . . . When inward life dries up, when feeling decreases and apathy increases, when one cannot affect or even genuinely touch another person, violence flares up as a daimonic necessity for contact, a mad drive forcing touch in the most direct way possible." In the same vein R. D. Laing writes: "at this moment in history, we are all caught in the hell of frenetic passivity," creating a man who is "a half-crazed creature in a mad world." These serious appraisals of the post-war experience furnish insight into the treatment of contemporary life in the fiction of the period. The subtle dissections of the self, the severity of tone, the picaresque plots, the nightmarish landscapes, the often distorted or grotesque characters, the sense of absurdity, and, more recently, the development of a grisly comic Black Humor, become more comprehensible in light of recent psychological and social criticism.

The title story of John Updike's collection Pigeon Feathers (1962) begins with this line: "When they moved to Firetown, things were
upset, displaced, rearranged." It is a fitting description of the beginning point of most fiction since the Second World War. Because of the profound sense of loss and dislocation the age has become, in Peter Marin's words, a "chamber of yearning," and "what disappears in the midst of it is the sense of any hold on life, any touch with the physical world, any feeling of ease or belonging." Judith N. Shklar comes to the same conclusion from another perspective, noting the demise of the utopian spirit, when she says "man has become a foreigner wandering aimlessly around unknown territory; the world ... has become meaningless." The theological critic of literature, Nathan A. Scott, Jr., decries the increasing profanization of life due to the processes of secularization. This has brought about a certain cast of mind which is "distinguished by an inability to descry in the world any reality that evokes a sense of ultimacy or of radical significance." Moreover, Scott continues: "Secularization of consciousness ... entails not so much the loss of God as the loss of connection with anything resembling ... 'the numinous'; what is basically lost is the Sacred, and the great impoverishment of the human spirit consists in the death of all awareness of any animating power or presence amid and within the familiar realities of nature and history." The loss of such "numinous thresholds of experience" has resulted in a general leveling and dulling of the human experience, a general "platitudinizing" of everything. The human imagination has become one-dimensional. The image of man has become characterized by amorphous vacuity.

This continuing drain of the dignity of man in this era has led some critics to what Wylie Sypher calls a "post-existentialist humanism"
following the guidance of Albert Camus. Sypher argues that the old romantic concept of the self is dead and beyond recovery. To try to re-instate it would itself be absurd. Instead he tries to see his way to a new kind of humanism. He accepts Jean Grenier's verdict—"We now walk in a universe where there is no echo of 'I'"—as given, and concludes that what we need now is "a new impersonal sense of the person, a retreat to a self that appears after the assassination of the self occurring in an age dominated by nuclear physics."^{14} By impersonalizing the self, by neutralizing it, as it were, it is possible to develop a new strategy for human life in these turbulent times. "The main post-romantic task," Sypher believes, "is to identify the irreducible minimum of our experience that can be honestly identified as our own. Thus the question of our identity is the question of our authenticity."^{15} Literature and art reveal this decomposition of the self, and it is proving, he asserts, that a romantic notion of the self is not necessary. Most of Sypher's evidence is taken from European authors and artists such as Beckett, Sartre, Camus, Sarraute, Ionesco, and Dubuffet. Saul Bellow sees many American writers engaged in a similar attack on the romantic notion of the self, the solitary individual whose will is paramount and can make a difference in human affairs. But he is critical of what he detects as a tone of unearned bitter complaining in many American novels. Too many contemporary writers, he feels, have created too great a gap between the public and private worlds, and have not attempted to offer adequate answers as to what constitutes the human being after the old conceptions of selfhood have been destroyed.^{16}

The study of the deeply probing "time novels" of Proust and Joyce led Leon Edel to argue that the most characteristic aspect of
twentieth century fiction is its inward turning to convey the flow of mental experience. The new novelists since World War Two have continued and extended the concern while lacking the cultural and historical framework which supported the earlier novelists. Recent writers have turned away from social facts and from naturalism, and have focused upon the self, the individual personality. Most critics have noted this emphasis, but all do not approve of it, as we have seen in the remarks by Saul Bellow. Jonathan Baumbach sees a Dostoyevskian schema of guilt and redemption in the best of post-World War Two novels. He argues that "since 1945 the serious American novel has moved away from naturalism and the social scene to explore the underside of consciousness . . . delineating in its various ways the burden and ambivalence of personal responsibility in a world which accommodates evil—that nightmare landscape we all inhabit." The social critic Irving Howe writes sensitively of the plight of the post-war novelists: "How to give shape to a world increasingly shapeless and an experience increasingly fluid; how to reclaim the central assumption of the novel that telling relationships can be discovered between a style of social behavior and a code of moral judgment, or if that proves impossible, to find ways of imaginatively projecting the code in its own right—these were the difficulties that faced the young novelists. It was as if the guidelines of both our social thought and literary conventions were being erased." While Howe's idea of what the "central assumption" of the novel should be is debatable, he does note the oblique approach the novelists have taken toward their common subject—the quest for personal identity and freedom. Because the new novelists view society as virtually invulnerable,
Joseph J. Waldmeir argues, they believe one's attitude toward it is irrelevant, which has led them to depict disaffiliation from society in their fiction. More recently, Helen Weinberg has seen in the preoccupation with the private and personal world of the self a Kafkaesque concern. She argues that "Kafka was the spiritual pioneer of the territory explored by the novelists of the fifties and sixties... the territory of the quest for meaning, of the quest for access to the spiritual world, and of the human assault on the divine."  

Writing on the new novelists appearing after the Second World War, John Aldridge criticizes them for abandoning society for private concerns. After excoriating the New Yorker style of many of the new writers, including Shirley Jackson, John O'Hara and others, Aldridge argues that in "turning away from the world of social manners," these writers have escaped the problem of giving significance to evil and guilt within the context of a valueless society. They have been able to create a separate and private moral context for each of their books and to find a meaning for the moral dilemma of their characters within that context. It should not matter if the meaning they find lacks reference in the social world. By making their books something other than reflections of that world, they should by rights, have relieved themselves of all obligation to it. But even in the most perfect novel of privacy there always comes a time when purely contextual meaning ceases to be enough and one begins to wish for a kind of significance that will expand beyond itself and illuminate the universal issues of life.

The concerns, styles, and purposes of the new generation of writers after the war do not readily conform, if at all, to a criticism from the perspective of social realism. William Barrett takes issue with Aldridge at this point also. He could see that the very fiction Aldridge criticized "does tell its own truth about American life." He says that many of the New Yorker stories provide "snapshots of the nihilism of a middle
class bored with itself, tepid in its emotions, fighting the uncertain battle of cocktail parties, divorces, and fragile family memories.\textsuperscript{23}

As such, the stories reveal the loss of traditional values and record the passage to something new.

A clearer interpretation of the post-World War Two movement in literature occurs in Chester Eisinger's study \textit{The Fiction of the Forties}. While there was a concern for moral-ethical problems in the decade, its focus was increasingly related to the inward, private being, as the quest for self became intense. By the end of the decade the war novel, naturalism, and fiction based upon stereotypes of social liberalism became worn out as literary movements. The newer writers, especially after the war, returned to America's oldest literary tradition—the romance and the gothic novel. In such writers as Paul Bowles, Truman Capote, and Carson McCullers the gothic tradition is carried on, and in whose work is seen "the world of flight, childhood terror, estrangement, and perverted love."\textsuperscript{24} Naturalism lost favor because the writers rejected its impersonal and deterministic elements. Kafka's works became available in the forties and influenced the already growing impulses of the mythic, symbolic, pessimistic, and the gothic. The new writers demonstrated a great interest in form and craftsmanship in writing, but made no new innovations in fictional form. While the fictional heroes became increasingly diminutive, the child emerges as a key figure in fiction, suggesting a yearning for innocence when the culture again suffered the end of innocence.\textsuperscript{25} The writers rejected a world of much confusion and hopelessness, and turned to art as a filter for horrors that could not be faced directly. This explains, Eisinger believes, the
renewed interest in the gothic, the fantastic, and the subjective. It is out of this milieu that Shirley Jackson emerged as a writer in the late forties, her well known story "The Lottery" being first published in the New Yorker in 1948.

Shirley Jackson's work belongs to that long American tradition of the romance, what Richard Chase refers to as "that freer, more daring, more brilliant fiction that contrasts with the solid moral inclusiveness and massive equability of the English novel."²⁶ It is Chase's conviction that "the history of the American novel is not only the history of the rise of realism but also of the repeated rediscovery of the uses of romance, and that this will continue to be so."²⁷ The romance has been most amenable to an imagination shaped and inspired by a culture of contradictions, of disharmonies, of what Chase calls "radical disunities." Tocqueville commented upon the disparities in the American culture between thought and experience, the tendency to deal with reality in either/or terms. Chase traces the American contradictoriness to certain historical facts, especially the solitary position of man due to Puritanism and the exigencies of the frontier, and the Manichaean quality of American Puritanism, about which he writes:

For, at least as apprehended by the literary imagination, New England Puritanism--with its grand metaphors of election and damnation, its opposition of the kingdom of light and the kingdom of darkness, its eternal and autonomous contraries of good and evil--seems to have recaptured the Manichaean sensibility. The American imagination, like the New England Puritan mind itself, seems less interested in redemption than in the melodrama of the eternal struggle of good and evil, less interested in incarnation and reconciliation than in alienation and disorder.²⁸

The third source of contradiction in America stems from the relation between the Old World and the New. Thus in American literature can be
found the "profound poetry of disorder," and its characteristic form, the romance, signifies "the peculiar narrow profundity and rich interplay of lights and darks" as well as "the penchant for the marvelous, the sensational, the legendary, and in general the heightened effect." It was important to list these qualities in some detail in order to see that the fiction of Shirley Jackson belongs to that major stream of American literature beginning with Charles Brockden Brown and moving through Irving, Cooper, Poe, Hawthorne, Melville, James, Faulkner, and, more recently, John Hawkes.

It was the gothic conventions in literature that Shirley Jackson often employed to give shape to her fiction. Leslie Fiedler has argued that "the American novel is pre-eminently a novel of terror," and that taken as a whole American literature seems a "chamber of horrors." The Faustian pact with the Devil is close to the essence of the American experience as her authors see it. In American literature terror and the power of darkness are essentials. Thus, as Fiedler writes: "It is the gothic form that has been most fruitful in the hands of our best writers: the gothic symbolically understood, its machinery and decor translated into metaphors for a terror psychological, social, and metaphysical."

This is certainly counter to those critics who hold up social realism as the ideal of the novel. Fiedler concludes: "Our fiction is not merely in flight from the physical data of the actual world, in search of a (sexless and dim) Ideal; from Charles Brockden Brown to William Faulkner or Eudora Welty, Paul Bowles or John Hawkes, it is, bewilderingly and embarrassingly, a gothic fiction, non-realistic and negative, sadist and melodramatic—a literature of darkness and the grotesque in a land of light and affirmation."
The tradition of the tale of terror, as Edith Birkhead points out, is as old as the history of man. The earliest tale of terror may have been the universal myth of world destruction by a great flood. The terrors of existence are recorded in the folk literature of all ages. It is a fiction in which the known and familiar become superseded by the strange and supernatural. It is often concerned to explore the effect of the inexplicable, the mysterious and the uncanny on human thought and emotion. In an age filled with confusion and dark threats the tale of terror or the gothic novel can be a meaningful vehicle for the expression and exploration of the human condition. Perhaps, as Miss Birkhead suggested in 1920, the modern age has become a kind of "dark ages," a technological middle ages haunted by spectres of nuclear or, now, biological plagues to lay in ruin the citadels of civilization. But as Shirley Jackson, Flannery O'Connor and John Hawkes, among others, show, while there are such general and cosmic threats, the actual devastation, destruction, and deterioration may occur and be brought about by forces all too familiar--the faces of everyday life. And perhaps, as these same authors reveal, this is all the more terrifying because it lurks behind and within the ordinary.

The Book of Job presents a vivid description of the nature of horror: "Amid thoughts from visions of the night, when deep sleep falls on men, dread come upon me, and trembling, which made all my bones shake. A spirit glided past my face; the hair of my flesh stood up. It stood still, but I could not discern its appearance. A form was before my eyes; there was silence, then I heard a voice . . ." (Job 4:13-16). It was just such primitive feelings of dread and awe that most gothic
novelists delighted in evoking. But in the process they soon discovered that the gothic can be used for a deep penetration into the nature of human experience. Thus for the more serious gothicists terror and horror were not ends in themselves, but means by which they could explore the nature of man, especially the dark side. Terror and horror are not the same and should be distinguished. Devendra P. Varma in his study The Gothic Flame argues that "the difference between Terror and Horror is the difference between awful apprehension and sickening realization: between the smell of death and stumbling against a corpse." The evocation of terror relies upon obscurity. "Terror thus creates an intelligible atmosphere of spiritual psychic dread, a certain superstitious shudder at the other world. Horror resorts to a cruder presentation of the macabre: by an exact portrayal of the physically horrible and revolting, against a more terrible background of spiritual gloom and despair. Horror appeals to sheer dread and repulsion, by brooding upon the gloomy and the sinister, and lacerates the nerves by establishing actual cutaneous contact with the supernatural." Horror was generally characteristic of the second wave of gothic fiction after Ann Radcliffe. Some gothicists use both terror and horror, as, for example, Charles Brockden Brown. There is a point where terror and horror merge, and it is thus often a matter of degree. Generally terror dominates in the fiction of Hawthorne, in some of Henry James's stories, and in Shirley Jackson's work. The novel of terror and the use of the gothic have been important to the American imagination caught, as Harry Levin suggests, "In a state of suspense between wanderlust and nostalgia." The grotesque, as was mentioned briefly earlier, is a common feature in much of post-war fiction. It has antecedents in earlier
American literature—in Poe, Crane, Norris, London, Edgar Saltus and Ambrose Bierce—and is closely connected with the gothic romance. The modern grotesque, as William Van O'Connor shows, merges the tragic and comic in perverse ways seeking to discover the sublime. It is a literature of reaction against a bourgeois world based upon science and the belief in progress. Chester Eisinger also argues that literature emerging after the war was an attack upon the old liberalism and its belief in the perfectibility of man, the ideals of freedom, rationality, and human dignity. The enormous crimes of the war and the tremendous growth of centralization strained the old liberalism to the breaking point. The new writers began with a world out of joint, a sense of "cosmic pointlessness" was their given. Like Crane they faced a universe that felt no sense of obligation to the fact of their existence. They faced the American dualism squarely. O'Connor writes: "For the modern creator of the grotesque, man is an inextricable tangle of rationality, irrationality, love and hatred, self-improvement and self-destruction. He appears caught in his own biological nature." Thus, O'Connor concludes, the modern grotesque is the result of the attempt to combine opposites into a form which offers a glimpse of the sublime.

In the fiction of Shirley Jackson, and of that of many other post-war writers who follow in the gothic tradition, including Flannery O'Connor, Truman Capote, and John Hawkes, among others, can be discerned new features and patterns constituting what Irving Malin calls a "new American gothic." It shares with other modern literature the priority of the psyche over society, or, as Malin suggests, "the disorder of the buried life must be charted." To this end it employs a microcosm.
Love is a primary concern in the new American gothic, where "there can be no terror without the hope for love and love's defeat," to use Leslie Fiedler's phrase. The weakling characters struggle with narcissism which often destroys others as well as themselves. Their narcissism leads them to make reality into a reflecting mirror of their own compulsions. The chief microcosm is the family, which "dramatizes the conflict between private and social worlds, ego and super-ego." Just as in older gothic there is often a confused chronology and dream quality about the narrative. The old conventions of the gothic--the haunted castle or house, the voyage or flight, and the reflection--function now as images of narcissistic love and antagonism. Nearly all journeys end in failure or disaster. The narcissism of the characters intensifies their isolation and loneliness, a kind of vicious, self-destructive cycle is in effect. Various mechanical images recur in new American gothic. How these several aspects of the new gothic show up in Shirley Jackson will be seen in greater detail in succeeding chapters.

The modern muse, as Leslie Fiedler has written, is "demonic, terrible and negative." For this reason it has been the writer's obligation to give the "Hard No." For this task the modern writer has abandoned realism, which has been superseded largely by the film, for what Robert Scholes calls "fabulation." This is essentially a return to a truer, more verbal form of fiction, often didactic, but also fanciful and truly imaginative. The best expression still of this spirit, which is an old spirit, is by Blanche DuBois in Tennessee Williams' A Streetcar Named Desire. Blanche shouts to Mitch: "I don't want realism. I want magic! Yes, yes, magic! I try to give that to people. I
misrepresent things to them. I don't tell truth, I tell what ought to be truth. And if this is sinful, then let me be damned for it!—Don't turn the light on." Turning the lights on, the modern writer believes, would prevent us from seeing what only shimmers in the darkness, and he is willing to risk damnation to show it. What Scholes says of John Hawkes is applicable to many modern authors, including especially Shirley Jackson: he "seems in search of ways to liberate images from the heart of darkness so that they may awake in the reader an emotional consciousness of evil along with a shock of recognition."
NOTES TO CHAPTER I


6 Lifton, p. 33.


8 May, p. 30-1.


15 Sypher, p. 29.


25. Eisinger, p. 17.


27. Chase, p. xii.

28. Chase, p. 11.


36 O'Connor, p. 18.


39 Malin, p. 8.


CHAPTER II

THE POSSIBILITY OF EVIL

I

Shirley Jackson enjoyed referring to herself as a witch, and for good reason. She knew a lot about witchcraft, demonology, and other black arts, which she wove finely into her fiction. She made a lifetime study of the occult and diabolism and collected a huge multi-lingual library dealing with them. She kept this library and did most of her writing in a huge house in North Bennington, Vermont, which she shared with her husband Stanley Edgar Hyman and their four children.

She was born December 14, 1919, in San Francisco and spent most of her early life in California. In 1933 her family moved to Rochester, New York. After graduating from high school in 1934 she enrolled in a liberal arts program at the University of Rochester. After two years she dropped out for a year, and wrote "a thousand words a day." In 1937 she resumed her studies at Syracuse University. While there she published stories in campus literary magazines and edited the campus humor magazine, The Syracusan. In 1939 she met classmate Stanley Edgar Hyman with whom she founded and edited a new literary magazine, Spectre, and surprised the university by showing a profit. After graduation from Syracuse in 1940 she married Mr. Hyman, and moved to New York where Hyman worked for The New Republic. She soon began publishing her stories
in national magazines. In 1945 the Hymans began residence in North Bennington, Vermont, where Stanley Edgar Hyman taught at Bennington College. And except for a two-year stay in Connecticut, while Mr. Hyman worked on the staff of *The New Yorker*, they lived in their Vermont home until her death in 1965 from heart failure.

Miss Jackson generally wrote two kinds of fiction. One kind was light and humorous narratives of family and domestic life. She published two books, largely collections of stories published in magazines, in this vein: *Life Among Savages* (1953), and *Raising Demons* (1957). She also wrote children's books and plays as well as occasional non-fiction articles. In 1956 she published the non-fiction study *Witchcraft of Salem Village*, mentioned earlier. The second major type of fiction, and her more important work, dealt with serious issues of psychological complexity in the tradition of the gothic novel of terror. Her most famous story of this type is "The Lottery," published in *The New Yorker* in 1948 and prompting 450 letters to the editor from twenty-five states, two territories, and six foreign countries. She won several awards for her stories, including the Edgar Allen Poe Award, and many have been selected for best-story anthologies. Miss Jackson wrote six novels: *The Road Through the Wall* (1948); *Hangsaman* (1951); *The Bird's Nest* (1954), which met with critical acclaim, and was made into a film entitled *Lizzie* in 1956; *The Sundial* (1958); *The Haunting of Hill House* (1959), which was adapted to film under the title *The Haunting*; *We Have Always Lived in the Castle* (1962), which became a best seller, and was adapted to the stage in 1965. In 1949 a collection of her stories was published under the title *The Lottery; or, The Adventures of James*

After the first few years of publishing Shirley Jackson refused to give interviews or to try to explain her work. She parodied one interview in a little sketch called "Fame" written in 1948 after her first novel was published. The interviewer was shown to have no interest in Miss Jackson's book and had no comprehension of what she was told. She would thus give only basic information about her life and work. She would tell interviewers: "I was married in 1940 to Stanley Edgar Hyman, critic and numismatist and we live in Vermont, in a quiet rural community with fine scenery and comfortably far away from city life. Our major exports are books and children, both of which we produce in abundance." Outside of reviews and occasional critical articles and references, and, of course, the many comments upon "The Lottery," her fiction has received scant critical attention and recognition. She had a large and loyal audience, but her work, as her husband believed, was probably little understood. Indeed, one *New Yorker* cartoon showed two middleaged ladies talking about a Shirley Jackson novel, and one says to the other that the book is about a crime and nobody knows who did it. After her death Stanley Edgar Hyman wrote:

Her fierce visions of dissociation and madness, of alienation and withdrawal of cruelty and terror, have been taken to be personal, even neurotic, fantasies. Quite the reverse: They are a sensitive and faithful anatomy of our times, fitting symbols for our distressing world of the concentration camp and The Bomb. She was always proud that the Union of South Africa banned The Lottery, and she felt that they, at least, understood the story. Obituary references to her in such terms as the 'Virginia Werewolf of science-fiction writers' show a considerable obliviousness to her meanings and purposes.

About her career and life in general, Hyman relates, she held an attitude
of "wry amusement." Whether she will achieve the recognition she deserves is hard to say. But Hyman concludes: "I think that 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. That thought too, she would have found wryly amusing."

II

The theme and title of this study of the fiction of Shirley Jackson are taken from a short story published after her death in 1965.\textsuperscript{4} The story keynotes her fiction and sets the tone for this study. It contains also most of the basic elements of her work: a sensitive but narrow female protagonist, a gothic house, economy of language, intimations of something "other" and "more," a floating sense of depravity, experiences of dissociation, and a final turn about in events or a judgment.

Miss Adela Strangeworth, at 71, lives alone in the house on Pleasant Street built two generations earlier by her family. She is proud of her house--"the neat, the unbelievably trim lines of the house itself, with its slimness and its washed white look" (p. 63)--and especially proud and protective of the beautiful, multi-colored roses that lined the front of the house. When tourists came to town and visited her house she would never give them any of her roses. "It bothered Miss Strangeworth to think of people wanting to carry them away, to take them into strange towns and down strange streets" (p. 62). She knew everyone in town, and she loved her town so much that she had never spent more
than a day away from it her entire life. In fact, "she sometimes found herself thinking that the town belonged to her" (p. 61). As she goes about her daily routine she wonders about the well-being of her fellow townsmen, and sometimes feels compelled to comment, if not to them directly, then to herself. For a year now Miss Strangeworth had been sending little notes to various townspeople, not on her own stationery, of course, and not under her signature. She would use common colored writing paper and write her note with a dull stub pencil in a childish block print. "She was fond of doing things exactly right" (p. 64). The notes were cruel, gossipy, and vicious, based on half-truths or on none at all. "Miss Strangeworth never concerned herself with facts, her letters dealt with the more negotiable stuff of suspicion." After all it was her duty to spy and tell on what her neighbors were up to. She was always after the "possible evil lurking nearby." It was her belief that "as long as evil existed unchecked in the world, it was Miss Strangeworth's duty to keep her town alert to it . . . . There were so many wicked people in the world and only one Strangeworth left in the town. Besides, Miss Strangeworth liked writing her letters" (p. 64). This was her secret contribution to keeping her town sweet and clean, her private war with the forces of evil. After her nap and dinner she took her evening walk in order to mail the notes she had written that day. Pre-occupied with the thought of her notes, she did not notice when one of the letters fell outside and onto the ground. She was thinking: "There was so much evil in people. Even in a charming little town like this one, there was still so much evil in people" (p. 69). Two teenagers saw the letter drop and picked it up, but Miss Strangeworth did not hear
them when they called her. They decided to deliver the letter to the address for Miss Strangeworth because they thought: "Maybe it's good news for them." Miss Strangeworth awoke the next morning happy with the thought that three more people would receive her notes that day: "Harsh, perhaps, at first, but wickedness was never easily banished, and a clean heart was a scoured heart." But when she opened her own mail that morning she found a little letter very much like the ones she sends. "She began to cry silently for the wickedness of the world when she read the words: Look Out at What Used to Be Your Roses."

Like many Jackson stories this one has a parable-like quality about it—we do not know where or when the story takes place, and she gives us just enough information to see the universality of the human problem involved. Even with the undercurrent of comic irony the story is reminiscent of many of Hawthorne's tales, his characters haunted by the idea of a knowledge beyond knowledge and so utterly committed to achieving it that they become perverted in the process, such as Goodman Brown and Ethan Brand. Here, Shirley Jackson summons up one more fierce Puritan who personally takes on the forces of evil, and who thus demonstrates, in William Van O'Connor's phrase, "the evil lurking in the righteous mind." Miss Strangeworth was not aware of the corrosive effects on her own humanity from making the struggle against evil her sole reason for living. She is corrupted by her own narcissism. As Lionel Rubinoff writes: "It is almost certain that by pretending to be angels we shall surely become devils . . . . [Because] the possibility of real virtue exists only for a man who has the freedom to choose evil." This freedom Miss Strangeworth cannot and will not give, because she herself
holds an evil belief: "a belief that one cannot do wrong," to use D. H. Lawrence's remarks about one of Hawthorne's characters. Lawrence concludes: "No men are so evil to-day as the idealists, and no women half so evil as your earnest woman, who feels herself a power for good." Miss Strangeworth has got herself in the paradoxical position where she is doing evil in order to further good. She is like one of the knitting ladies who sat before the Guillotine during the French reign of terror watching calmly and with knowing smiles as "justice" was meted out. Miss Strangeworth reveals the unscrupulosity of the devout, and the only people more unscrupulous than the devout are the frightened, and they are often the same people.

Shirley Jackson is revealing a very fundamental problem here, and one especially crucial in American culture. This is the revelation of the imagination that sees evil only out there, and which thus must be smashed at any cost. Her Miss Strangeworth does not see that evil is a component within us all, and that it can be transcended only through its recognition and acceptance. Heinrich Zimmer, writing of the meaning of an ancient tale, says:

Those who are innocent always strive to exclude from themselves and to negate in the world the possibilities of evil. This is the reason for the persistence of evil--and this is evil's secret. The function of evil is to keep in operation the dynamics of change. Co-operating with the beneficent forces, though antagonistically, those of evil thus assist in the weaving of the tapestry of life; hence the experience of evil, and to some extent this experience alone, produces maturity, real life, real command of the powers and tasks of life. The forbidden fruit--the fruit of guilt through experience, knowledge through experience--had to be swallowed in the Garden of Innocence before human history could begin. Evil had to be accepted and assimilated, not avoided.

Accordingly, Lionel Rubinoff observes: "It is the excessively rationalistic and abstract apocalyptic imagination that defines evil as an object
of scorn, or as an incurable disease. The apocalyptic imagination is sober, passive, and detached. It seeks to reduce mystery to rational order. It sits in judgment, protected by certainty, and condemns."¹⁰ This is Miss Strangeworth before she opened her mail that fateful morning. The receipt of her own judgment that morning may have torn the veil of innocence from her imagination and opened her to a reconsideration of "the possibility of evil." Shirley Jackson here is reminiscent of Flannery O'Connor, who frequently brought a "moment of truth" to her characters, usually at the moment of its being too late, as in her story "Greenleaf." It may be useful to see Shirley Jackson as a northern and urban Flannery O'Connor. Writing about her own work Flannery O'Connor said: "St. Cyril of Jerusalem, in instructing catechumens, wrote: 'The dragon sits by the side of the road, watching those who pass. Beware lest he devour you. We go to the Father of Souls, but it is necessary to pass by the dragon.' No matter what form the dragon may take, it is of this mysterious passage past him, or into his jaws, that stories of any depth will always be concerned to tell."¹¹ This very aptly describes what Shirley Jackson is doing in her fiction. She brings many of her characters past or into the dragon, or, to change the image, she brings them to the edge of the abyss: some fall off, some cling desperately to the edge, and only a few find their way to safety. In this light, then, we will deal with each of her major works.
NOTES TO CHAPTER II


4Shirley Jackson, "The Possibility of Evil," The Saturday Evening Post, CCXXXVIII, 25 (18 Dec. 1965), 61-69. The citations to this story will be taken from this source and cited in the text.

5William Van O'Connor, The Grotesque, p. 27.


8Lawrence, p. 142.


10Rubinoﬀ, p. 205.

CHAPTER III

AN AMERICAN CUL-DE-SAC

Mrs. Mack was the crazy old woman who lived alone with her dog in an old shack behind an apple orchard. The children of Pepper Street were afraid of her, and some, including their parents, believed her to be a witch. But she never harmed anyone, and was seldom seen away from her house. Mrs. Mack read from the big book each night to her dog:

"If you're not going to pay attention," Mrs. Mack said severely to her dog, looking at him over the top of the book, "we won't have any lesson tonight at all." When the dog pulled his gaze hastily back to her, Mrs. Mack looked down at the book and began to read: "So will I break down the wall that ye have daubed with untempered mortar, and bring 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 will I 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, wither they that daubed it." She let the book fall to her lap, and said to her dog, "You remember about how the Lord destroys evil people?"

Mrs. Mack's prophecies of doom and destruction run like an ominous refrain through Shirley Jackson's first novel The Road Through the Wall (1948). Each prophecy reinforces the central metaphor of the wall and intensifies the destruction of the social unit by lending it a kind of cosmic backdrop. But this wall is real as well as metaphorical. It serves as the physical boundary between Pepper Street and the wealthy estates beyond, and it makes of Pepper Street a cul-de-sac in which is played out a tragic drama.
The story takes place in a fictitious suburb of San Francisco named Cabrillo in 1936. It concerns a group of families and single individuals who live side by side on Pepper Street in relative privacy and in apparent harmony, a kind of cross-section of middle-class and upper-class aspiring families. Their children attend school together and share the street in play. Some of the parents gather weekly for sewing, and less frequently for parties. The apparent security and equilibrium of this community are broken and destroyed by a series of events. The first important event is the tearing down of the wall in order to extend and join Pepper Street with the one beyond the wall. This serves as a kind of catalyst for the rest of the action and the climax of the story. A three-year-old girl is discovered missing from a party at one of the homes, necessitating an all out search. Missing also is a thirteen-year-old boy who "acted funny." Panic and wild imaginings spread. The little girl is soon found dead, her head smashed in by a rock. The boy is accused of murder, but before anything is found out he hangs himself. The important thing about the novel is not the plot, but, rather, as in most Shirley Jackson stories, the gradual unfolding of the layers of human personality, sometimes in response to, other times causative of, events.

She begins, characteristically, by introducing the houses first and their inhabitants second. Houses, she feels, are essentially extensions of their occupants, and as such reveal nearly as much about them as they do themselves. Later, as Miss Jackson fills in the outlines of the portraits of the human characters, we see how appropriate they are to their respective houses. What we are given at first is an image of a
street, ostensibly integral, but giving a sense of disjunction, of uneasiness and incompatibility beneath the surface. On one end of the street is the simple but modern elegance of the Desmond home, the largest on the street. Next to it, but beyond the apple orchard, is the shack-like house of old Mrs. Mack. The Byrnes live in "a recent regrettable pink stucco," which they rent. The Roberts occupy a mishmash of a home which reflected an inconsistent tampering with the architecture. The Perlman, the only Jewish family on the block, live in a rented house "sheltered under their masses of bougainvillea." The Ransom-Jones live in a house smaller than their desires, but slightly compensated for by a large rambling garden. The Donalds rent a square brick house, "ample enough for Mr. and Mrs. Donald and their three children, and pretentious enough for Mr. Donald's wife and daughter to feel at home." The sore spot on the street is the house-for-rent which changes tenants every few months. The old single woman, Miss Fielding, lives in a small house that "seemed to be set high above ground, as though she were living in a tree, or on a houseboat." The Merriams live in a "grey and weatherbeaten" house looking much older than it is. Finally, the Martins live in a house "defiantly on Cortez Road, not being quite good enough to be on Pepper Street."

The novel operates on two complementary levels. On one level the novel presents an exposure and examination of the social morals and manners of a community. The presence of a Jewish family and the incipient and, at times, outright anti-semitism of the community, and the hidden envies due to economic differences are instances of this. These are symptomatic of what is going on at a deeper level--the level of the
inner workings of the personality, and this is ultimately what the novel is seeking to delineate. The real world of the novel is not the world of social realism. There are enough features about it to indicate otherwise. The way the novel begins gives it the quality of the fairy tale or fable: "The 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" (p. 7). And the use of the old gothic convention of the old woman making prophecies is further evidence that the novel is not just concerned with social conflicts. Its concern is with the inner demonic cancer of the community and how it eats away and destroys not only individuals, but families and the social unit as a whole. In short, beneath the mask of the ordinary lies unrecognized terror. Jackson uses the gothic, then, because of her conviction, in Chester Eisinger's words, that "... the truth is there beneath the monstrous trappings: the secret necrophilia made public, the necessity for flight confessed, the sadism no longer contained, the horror of real life recognized. To perceive this truth of the gothic vision, one must strike through the mask to discover that all men are victims or cripples. The mask not so much hides as symbolizes the essential flaw." 2

The Road Through The Wall fits well Irving Malin's description of the new American gothic. There is the microcosm, which, in this case, is the street. There is the debilitating and destructive effect of the family on the individual. There are instances of flight, and of the narcissistic reflection.
The lives of those who live on Pepper Street, this seemingly invulnerable cul-de-sac, are examined with considerable detachment. The language is restrained, and, as one reviewer put it, the story is set down with "neither hope nor despair." The author presents a series of short glimpses into each of the houses in the neighborhood, essentially vignettes of the fabric of human life on that street. The author's shifting from one home or family to another, and then back again, picking up threads, revealing tangles in relationships, gives a kind of cinematic effect and allows her to slow or increase the tempo to reflect the emotion and action of the story. In addition, the microcosm of the street permits the examination of several interplays: children and adults, neighborhood and society, permanence and change. The children are often reflections of their parents and are badly dominated by them. Harriet Merriam is a case in point. She is caught participating in a love-letter-writing episode with other girls in the neighborhood. She was not caught accidently, her mother went through her most personal and private notebooks, which she was later made to burn. Parental prejudices are shown to come out in sometimes cruel and vicious ways. Helen Williams, who lived in the house-for-rent and was a kind of ring-leader among some of the girls, led a coterie of girls to capture Marilyn Perlman, the Jewish girl on the block, and ask her about Christmas. Later in the novel Marilyn Perlman becomes good friends with Harriet Merriam, but when Harriet's mother finds out, she is made to break off the relationship in the name of "standards." More cruelty by children is seen when the more permanent residents tease and take advantage of the new girls in the neighborhood. Shirley Jackson's children are not shown to
be the kind that make up the kingdom of heaven, but their evil is not entirely their own doing. The interplay between neighborhood and society is shown in several ways. All of the men commute to the city to work, and most of them aspire to a position of wealth that will allow them to move to the elegant estates beyond the wall. And yet the neighborhood takes pride in its privacy and impregnability. That this is an illusion becomes clear when the wall is torn down for the new road. It sets off a series of events which culminate in two needless deaths.

"It was the destruction of the wall which put the first wedge into the Pepper Street security, and that security was so fragile that, once jarred, it shivered into fragments in a matter of weeks" (p. 130). And it is the impact of this event which shows the true substance of the ordinary, trivial, and hollow lives of the people of Pepper Street. Art Roberts felt his life restricted ever since cavalry days in 1917. He felt choked and frustrated by the tedium of the street and the nagging of his wife. His wandering restlessness led him into various amorous relationships, even to flirtations with the high school girls Mrs. Roberts brought in to do the housework. But with the wall down Mr. Roberts one restless evening stepped behind it into the darkness with the young widowed Mrs. Martin. The Merriam anti-semitism becomes more intense, the feeble-minded sister of Frederica Terrel is cruelly exploited, and the pubescent daughter of Mrs. Martin tries to run away to the city in search of love not always present at home. The tearing down of the wall also made Mr. Desmond consider moving, and the Ransom-Jones discussed putting in a high hedge around their property. The people felt suddenly vulnerable and exposed. Mr. and Mrs. Ransom-Jones gave a
"neighborhood" party, but excluded the Perlmans, Martins, Terrels, and old Mrs. Mack. It was also a party to celebrate the wall coming down. It is during the celebration that little three-year-old Caroline Desmond disappears, and Tod Donald is discovered missing. In the ensuing confusion and hysteria the truth at the heart of Pepper Street is exposed at last. No one knew what to do because no one knew what the situation called for: "... Either it was a great climactic festival over nothing, in which case they would all go quietly home, or else it was an emergency, a crisis, a tragedy, in which case they were all called upon to act together as human beings, to be men and women in a community, the men out on dangerous business, the women waiting, wringing their hands" (p. 180). The people of Pepper Street thus gathered "on what was traditionally their forgotten village green," and waited for some guidance. "The prevailing mood was one of keen excitement, no one there really wanted Caroline Desmond safe at home ... Pleasure was in the feeling that the terror of the night, the jungle, had come close to their safe lighted homes, touched them nearly and departed, leaving every family safe but one; an acute physical pleasure like pain, which made them all regard Mr. Desmond greedily, and then turn their eyes away with guilt" (p. 180). The street was to suffer more than it yet realized.

Another important feature of the new American gothic is the detrimental effect of the family on the individual. There is not a truly wholesome family on Pepper Street, except perhaps the Perlmans. Each suffers from its own kind of lovelessness, each producing its own poison that strangles and chokes off spontaneous life. Taken together they form, not the protected, self-contained world they believe they
have, but a prison of their own making. The vicious bigotry couched in
genteel language of Mrs. Merriam, and its effect on her daughter has al-
ready been discussed. Because Tod Donald is apparently responsible for
the death of Caroline Desmond, a closer look at his family is necessary.
Tod is the butt of his family. He lives in the shadows of his pretty
sister and his athletic older brother. No one pays any attention to
him, except to criticize or chase him away. His father, Stephen Donald,
"had no pity to waste on anything so distant as his youngest child" be-
cause "he had absorbed too much disappointment already to jeopardize
himself needlessly for his children" (p. 37). Tod's brother James
thought of himself and Tod in terms of good and evil respectively: "Tod
was inefficient and a bad sport, which was evil; he was smaller, and
could not be struck, which was a delineation of good. Consequently,
James never required himself to include any form of evil in his own per-
sonality; such things belonged naturally to Tod, and were accepted numb-
ly by Tod as his portion" (pp. 37-8). His sister Virginia thought Tod
disgusting and pretended that he did not exist. His mother is too
wrapped up in her own world of fantasy to do any more for Tod than to
see that he eats and sleeps regularly. Tod is so desperate for atten-
tion that he is willing to risk punishment to get it. Tod is driven in
to himself, a world of chaotic fantasies and acute yearnings, filled
with self-loathing and hatred and love.

It was perhaps inevitable that the son of a man who was to spend
"all his life living in the patterns set out by other more enterprising
men" (p. 9) would touch the lives of the most prestigious family on the
street, that Tod, the boy given the least attention and regard, should
come in contact with Caroline Desmond, the girl given the most attention and regarded as precious. In one particularly poignant scene Tod Donald steals into the Desmond home when no one is there. He is awed by what he sees, and nearly everywhere he looks he sees his own reflection, another feature of the American gothic. He sees his face reflected in the polished wood of the table, in the silver coffee service, and "his face became more distorted, elastic in the long coffee-pot; he looked into the table and found his face there, back to the coffee-pot and found his face again" (p. 67). Moving through each room in the Desmond home Tod sees his face reflected in something: in the piano, in the toaster, in the many mirrors of Mrs. Desmond's bedroom, and when he saw a framed picture of Caroline "he saw his own face again, reflected sharply against Caroline's" (p. 69). He then poured out some of Mrs. Desmond's perfume onto his hand, crawled deeply into her closet and shouted all the dirtiest words he knew. Later the realization of the reflections of his face frightened him.

Could such a boy commit a heinous crime against a three-year-old girl? Could a self so shrunk, so starved for love lash out against one his opposite? Could negative and perverted narcissism lead him to try to destroy, and then replace, the child deemed so precious? Several on Pepper Street had no doubts. Mr. Desmond believed Tod did it. Mrs. Merriam, typically, whose bigotry never entertained a doubt, knew for sure that Tod not only killed little Caroline but also violated her.

"'I think,' Mrs. Merriam said, leaning forward to emphasize her point, 'that when you get a young boy like Tod, who's obviously, well, not right, somehow, taking a little girl like that into a deserted spot.
... Well.' She nodded again and leaned back" (p. 189). Some on the street are not so sure of Tod's guilt. Mr. Merriam, in contrast to his wife, and Mr. Perlman both question the theory that Tod killed Caroline. The rock was too big for Tod to use as a weapon and Tod himself had no blood on him, which opens the possibility of an accident or another person altogether. But generally the street is willing to accept the idea of Tod's guilt. The crime or accident, and Tod's resulting suicide, raise an important issue. Who is responsible for the deaths of Caroline Desmond and Tod Donald? Can any one person or family be singled out to bear the blame? The novel depicts a community so fragile and sick that the responsibility is diffuse and all are implicated, no one is innocent. The novel also seeks to show that the responsibility extends beyond the street to unseen people and institutions, as the decision to tear down the wall makes clear. "Like those who live directly in contact with the ground, like the people who had, more or less long ago, been ancestors to everyone on Pepper Street, their lives were quietly governed for them by a mysterious faraway force" (p. 127). No one and no community exists in total independence, but rather each exists in varying degrees of dependence. As a result some people can make decisions which intimately affect the destiny of others, but finally everyone lives "from the depths of their own private unowned lives" (p. 129).

Pepper Street is a community filled with empty and trivial lives. Miss Jackson coldly dissect them for us. She shows us the horrors and subtle anxieties of everyday life, the hidden, never-expressed fears and doubts that pulsate unannounced to the surface. Miss Fielding, for example, lives only waiting for her death, which she knows will
cause no ripples in anyone's life. Her life is one long convalescence from birth to death, and it is so regulated by the minute trivia of her daily life that she fears answering the door for fear she will overcook her eggs and spoil her tea. Miss Tyler, who was once courted by her sister's husband, now lives with them, and shares with her sister a life of recrimination and vindictiveness. Most families on Pepper Street engage in a kind of undeclared war, where their threats and counter-threats are couched in moralistic and genteel language which barely covers the cloying hostility, hatred, and malice. The community itself is the protagonist (and its own antagonist) of the novel which follows a tragic form. The community moves from order to chaos but does not transcend itself by any illumination of its predicament. A tragedy, to use Stanley Edgar Hyman's words, has three important moral ingredients: "the flawed protagonist swollen with pride; peripeteia, the sudden pitiable and terrifying change in his fortunes; and a cathartic climax that Herbert Weisinger in Tragedy and the Paradox of the Fortunate Fall, borrowing a phrase from Isaiah, has called the 'small moment,' that desperate awaiting of the fateful outcome when all seems in doubt." In Shirley Jackson's novel that "small moment" endures and the entropic processes of dissolution continue to their inevitable end. It betokens a community whose imagination is exhausted and whose morals are bankrupt.
NOTES TO CHAPTER III

1Shirley Jackson, The Road Through the Wall (New York: Macfadden, 1969), p. 121. Subsequent quotations to this novel will be taken from this edition and cited in the text.

2Chester E. Eisinger, Fiction of the Forties p. 236.


CHAPTER IV

CLOVEN FEET

The short story is principally an American genre, having its beginnings in the work of Edgar Allen Poe. Because of the American magazine market, and the qualities of the short story itself—compression, economy, selectivity, and discipline—the short story has been adaptable to a fast moving and growing culture. Despite the shrinking of the magazine market in the last twenty-five years, as William Peden notes, the short story has made its greatest development and achievement. "The prevailing tone of the recent American short story has been somber, and... our major short story writers have from the beginning tended to depict the dark rather than the light." Because of the increasing pace of life, the crisis in values, the many threats and anxieties of everyday life, the short story has become an excellent literary gauge of the times, and, Peden believes, it may be seen by later historians to have been the dominant form of literature in the post-World War II years. In these same years short story authors found new subjects in the abnormal and grotesque, as suggestive of the inner nature. According to Peden, "emotional violence, the desolation of the human spirit, madness, man's capacity for self-destruction, loneliness, withdrawal, separation, isolation, Oedipal fears, atavistic tyrannies, and all their attendant ills supplied subject matter and theme for more and more fiction writers."
The depiction of the mentally ill and the emotionally maimed became one of the major directions taken by the American short story since 1940.\textsuperscript{2} These remarks are a way of introduction and background to the fiction of Shirley Jackson, especially her short stories which will be discussed in detail in this chapter and in chapter ten.

In a letter to Longfellow, Hawthorne wrote: "Sometimes through a peephole I have caught a glimpse of the real world." The short stories in Shirley Jackson's *The Lottery* (1949) are her "peepholes" through which we can catch glimpses of her sometimes startling visions of the world. As will be seen her peepholes are not very different from Hawthorne's own.

Running through several of the stories in the collection is the elusive character James Harris, and his presence provides Jackson with the subtitle "adventures of the Daemon Lover." The source for the "Daemon-Lover" is "Lenore," the celebrated ballad of Gottfried August Burger (1747-94), a German poet. The heroine is carried off on horseback by the spectre of her lover after his death and married to him at the grave's side. One of Sir Walter Scott's earliest poetical works was a translation or imitation of the ballad. It appeared as "William and Helen" in "The Chase and William and Helen" and was published anonymously in 1796. The American version of the ballad comes from an older English child ballad. Stanley Edgar Hyman made a study of the American ballads, and writes: "None of the enormous number of American versions of 'James Harris (The Daemon Lover),' so far as I know, keeps the lover convicingly demonic or retains his cloven hoof. In the American texts the wife of a house carpenter elopes with her sailor beau, the ship
springs an accidental leak (in one Virginia text nothing happens to it at all), and the wife regrets her impetuosity. Hyman argues that in adapting to the American experience the ballads lose the sense of tragedy and the demonic and avoid the harsh realities of death.

By thus making James Harris a recurring figure in several of her stories, Shirley Jackson seeks to convey a suggestion of the diabolical and the macabre beneath the veneer of the ordinary, to give her tales a quality of disturbing otherness. Several critics did not understand her intention in this regard, or, if they did, they did not believe it was effective. John Aldridge complained: "James Harris, the ghostly protagonist of several of Miss Jackson's stories, is a demon lover who thrives on the frustrations of lonely women. Yet he is neither a Freudian fantasy nor a true sexual symbol. Like Capote's creations he is the embodiment of horror we can never quite define." Orville Prescott, writing in the New York Times, said: "Harris is an exceedingly minor character in five of these stories . . . . How he could be dignified with the description of 'satanic' and 'urbanely evil,' as he is on the jacket of this book is hard to see." Donald Barr criticized her use of James Harris as giving a false unity to the book and confusing the meaning of the various stories. Closer to Jackson's intention but still disapproving is Robert Halsband's remark about the figure of James Harris: "Nowhere does he show the cloven hoof that he sports in the ballad, and his lack of consistency and purpose is, one supposes, ambiguous in the Empsonian sense." It is, however, that very elusive, shifting, indefinable, ambiguous and suggestive quality that Shirley Jackson is after in her use of the Harris figure, and it is this that these
critics do not seem to comprehend or appreciate. R. W. B. Lewis has noted that one of Satan's masks in the contemporary novel is "a faceless, impersonal, plural anonymity." Out of the twenty-five stories in the collection seven contain the figure of James Harris in varying degrees of prominence, but his presence hovers invisibly in others.

The stories in this collection can be classified in various ways, and in nearly every grouping there will be some overlap. Robert Halsband suggested that the stories fall generally into three groups: the slight sketches, social-problem sketches, and fantasy and terror stories. Some of the stories fit into more than one category. By slight sketches is not meant to refer to theme or degree of seriousness, but rather a story "... dealing with episodes which are trivial in terms of plot but which by means of her precise, sensitive, and sharply focussed style become luminous with meaning. They deal mostly with the rich adventures of children and the emaciated emotions of adults." The social-problem stories explore penetratingly the subtle ways prejudices operate, not only racial but also social, the country-city conflict. The final group comprises the stories involving James Harris, and several others including "The Lottery." While fantasy and terror generally dominate the stories of this last group, these qualities are not missing from stories of the other groups as well. As James Hilton has noted about the stories: "... there is in nearly all of them a single note of alarm which reminds one of the elemental terrors of childhood ... "

In discussing the role of children in literature Leslie Fiedler observes that the American public is generally afraid to regard children as instruments of the demonic, rather it prefers to think of them as
embodiments of innocence, or, at least, innocent perceivers. Such a
color thinks Shirley Jackson is only being funny when she writes two
books dealing with her family called Life Among the Savages and Raising
Demons. "For a long time, however, quite serious writers have suggested
that children may indeed be instruments of the diabolic rather than em-
bodiments of innocence."10 One thinks of Henry James's The Turn of the
Screw as a classic study of the duplicity within the child, and the pos-
sibility of possession. In the last chapter it was noted that Shirley
Jackson does not sentimentalize children. In this collection also she
probes the depths of childhood experience. In the first story, "The In-
toxicated," a drunken adult staggers into the kitchen from the party go-
ing on in the living room. He falls into conversation with the host's
teenage daughter who is seated at the kitchen table. She tells him that
she is writing a paper on the future of the world. He amusedly asks her
what her predictions are. She says that the world will come to an end
soon and that it will never be the same. It is doomed because of the
way generations of men have lived. He patronizes her and tries "to say
something adult and scathing," but really cannot. He leaves her and
joins his host who says, "Kids nowadays." The girl's proclamation of the
end of the world may be her reaction to a family life she finds intoler-
able, a generalizing of her secret wish. But the story more concretely
exposes the perennial, but often unnecessary, gap between generations.
The story suggests that she knows more about the adult world than it
would care to admit, and so it disregards what she has to say. In a
later story, "All She Said Was 'Yes'" (1962), Miss Jackson returns to
the theme of the prescient girl and the oblivious adults to suggest some
other rather frightening possibilities.
Two stories reveal some rather grisly qualities about children. In both "The Witch" and "The Renegade" children are shown exulting in the possibilities of violence and death, apparently not really aware of the implications of their fantasies. A four-year-old boy, in "The Witch," is traveling on a train with his mother and baby sister. The man sitting next to him tells him about how he killed his little sister by cutting her head off and feeding it to a bear. The mother becomes appalled and furious, but the little boy is thrilled and concludes that the man was probably a witch. "The Renegade" is more complex, revealing not only the innocent evil of children, but also the cruelty in adults that leads them to take advantage of others. In this story, also, Miss Jackson is exploring the conflict and tension between the country and the city, a favorite theme of hers. A young family has moved from the city to a small country town. One morning Mrs. Walpole receives a call that her dog is killing chickens. Her husband is at work and the twins are at school and she does not know what to do. "They had not lived in the country long enough for Mrs. Walpole to feel the disgrace of washing on Tuesday as mortal; they were still city folk and would probably always be city folk, people who owned a chicken-killing dog, people who washed on Tuesday, people who were not able to fend for themselves against the limited world of earth and food and weather that the country folk took so much for granted. In this situation as in all such others ... Mrs. Walpole was forced to look for advice." Each of the "good country folk" she asks for help stoically gives her incredibly bloody advice, such as tying a dead chicken around the dog's neck, putting the dog in a pen with a hen that has chicks to protect, or shooting it.
When the children return they tell Mrs. Walpole some advice someone told them about on the way home from school. They are so excited they compete with one another to tell about it. The solution is to put a spiked collar around the dog's neck and tie him up near some chickens. Every time he tries to get the chickens he cuts his neck, until finally he cuts his own neck off. At this the children laugh, and Mrs. Walpole feels sick. This story is reminiscent of some of Flannery O'Connor's stories, such as "Good Country People," where she demolishes the illusions of existence perceived through clichés. In Jackson's story the urban sensibility appears more sensitive and humane than the country's, which seems to delight in cruelty and death. The grisly but rich fantasy world of children is superbly portrayed in both of these stories, and prompts two observations. First, such fantasies of violence and death greatly unnerve adults, which reveals their inability to integrate such experiences into a mature sensibility. Second, while such fantasies of death, violence and cruelty are essentially innocent in the children, they are nonetheless evil and must be recognized as such.

In "Charles," "Afternoon in Linen," and "Dorothy and My Grandmother and the Sailors" other facets of the imagination of children are explored. The little kindergartener in "Charles" has a truly inventive imagination. He wants to tell his parents the truth about what is happening in school, but cannot quite bring himself to be direct. So he invents a little boy named "Charles" who is the bad boy in the class and the one who the teacher scolds the most. Ten-year-old Harriet in "Afternoon in Linen" is caught between adult pretensions and is forced to choose the world she belongs to. Her grandmother wants her to read her
poems for Mrs. Kator and her little boy Howard. Harriet is frozen with fear that Howard will tell all the kids on the block. In utter defiance Harriet repudiates her poetry and says that she took them all out of a book. No adult must break the secret, but well known, conspiracy between him and the child. The exquisite ambivalences and ambiguities of girls on the verge of adolescence is caught beautifully in "Dorothy and My Grandmother and the Sailors."

Showing the self-mired lives of adults and their mixture of pain and humor are the sketches "The Dummy," "Come Dance With Me In Ireland," "Got a Letter from Jimmy," and "My Life with R. H. Macy." In the Christmas rush of 1940 Shirley Jackson worked as a clerk at Macy's, and, according to Macy policy, she was fired on Christmas eve. Her story "My Life with R. H. Macy" humorously recounts life working for a big company, the use of countless numbers, arcane abbreviations, endless procedures, a stocking system that baffles logic, and the all-important salesbook. The character in the story does not return for her third day of work. "The Dummy" is a story with two focusses. It begins with two middle-aged ladies, Mrs. Wilkins and Mrs. Straw, being taken to their seats in a nice restaurant. They are respectable and fastidious in their dress, speech, mannerisms, and tend to be rather critical of other people. They soon spot a girl in a low-cut dress with a man who "looks like a monkey." The man turns out to be a ventriloquist with a dummy that was a "grotesque wooden copy of the man." After his act he returns to the table where the girl in the low-cut dress is sitting. An argument ensues which the two ladies overhear. The man makes the dummy do all the talking for himself against the girl. He makes a nasty remark to the
girl, whereupon Mrs. Wilkins marches over to their table and slaps the dummy across the face. Miss Jackson often blends the hilarious with the serious, but they are not meant to cancel each other out. Leslie Fiedler writes suggestively about contemporary writers who pursue a genre "which suggests that the ludicrous is the source of pity and terror, and that pity and terror themselves are the heart of the ludicrous." In the story the man cruelly transfers his evil to his dummy while the officious Mrs. Wilkins metes out punishment to that same grotesque image of a man, and in the ensuing shock the man and woman are left to reflect on their plight in the light of the new situation.

If the officiously good and respectable won a round in the last story, they take a licking in "Come Dance With Me in Ireland." An old man comes to the door of Mrs. Archer's apartment selling shoelaces. He appears on the verge of collapse and Mrs. Archer brings him in with help from her friend Kathy and Mrs. Corn. They give him a glass of sherry and fry him some eggs and potatoes. The ladies, except for Mrs. Corn who is against the whole thing, believe they are being charitable to a bum: "I guess we're really doing a good deed" (p. 161). The old man suddenly speaks up and tells the ladies that he knew Yeats, quoting them a line of his poetry: "Come out of charity, come dance with me in Ireland." Upon leaving the apartment he turns on the ladies and unleashes an unexpected judgment. He tells Mrs. Corn that he hates old ladies, and criticizes Mrs. Archer for serving bad sherry. At that the givers of charity are ready to tear him apart, but he escapes out the door reciting poetry. In the last story of the set, "Got a Letter from Jimmy," Miss Jackson exposes the subtleties and frustrations of a woman trying
so hard to outwit her husband that she outwits herself. If thinking can create a hell, the woman in this story creates one. In trying to get her husband to read a letter from Jimmy, apparently his son, against whom he has held a grudge, she infuriates herself by trying to second-guess him and trips over her own impetuosity.

Several of the stories in the collection examine social problems, such as racial discrimination and the country-city conflict, sometimes both at once. The ingenuousness and innocence of the children expose the cheap stereotypes of the adult world in "After You, My Dear Alphonse." Johnny Wilson invites his new friend, Boyd, who is Negro, over for lunch. They are having a grand time together, behaving as two small boys generally do. Mrs. Wilson assumes that because Boyd is a Negro he must be poorly fed and lack sufficient clothing. Johnny tells her that Boyd does not like tomatoes. Mrs. Wilson says, "Boyd will eat anything." She is surprised to learn that Boyd's father is a foreman in a factory and that his sister is going to college. It does not occur to her that Boyd's family is generally well-off and does not need handouts to live. She offers Boyd some old clothes and when Boyd says that they have plenty of clothes and can buy whatever they need, Mrs. Wilson becomes irate at what she takes to be ingratitude. But she is really angry at the fact that Boyd and his family will not accept the stereotypes that she has for them, and she is at a loss to know how to relate to a real situation. Both the little boys conclude that parents are "screwy sometimes." A more subtle exposure of a pattern of prejudice, this time anti-semitism, is seen in the story "A Fine Old Firm." A Mrs. Friedman stops by to meet the family of the friend her son is always writing about from
overseas. She speaks animatedly of the boys' friendship and of how much she has been told about the family. She is surprised to learn that they live only a few blocks apart. Mrs. Concord greets the whole thing with the most reserved courtesy. Mrs. Friedman tells Mrs. Concord that her husband, who is a lawyer, would be glad to find a position for Mrs. Concord's son in his law firm. Mrs. Concord says that her son is already scheduled to go into another firm—"a fine old firm." In both of these stories Miss Jackson presents brief encounters which successfully reveal the utterly brittle, complacent, and shallow lives of people so self-contained that they are unable to respond to the humanness of others, largely because so much of their own has been choked off.

There are several variations of the city-country theme in Jackson's stories. She likes to build a story around strangers in an alien environment having to cope with the unfamiliar with little, if any, human help. Her country people generally are rather narrow, inbred, provincial, superficially friendly but secretly resentful of newcomers, and, at times, diabolical. We saw a sample of this in her story "The Renegade." But she also takes her country people into the city, as in "Pillar of Salt" and "The Tooth," where the city becomes the alien and, ultimately, horrifying environment. In either case, the strangers are unable to relate to, or are unaccepted by, the existing community. The former city dwellers in "The Renegade" appeared more sensitive and humane in the face of country ferocity. This is also the case in the story "Flower Garden." Near the old Winning manor house in Vermont there is a small but charming cottage that the young Mrs. Winning always coveted for herself. She always dreamed of owning it and fixing it up
the way she wanted and putting in a nice garden. The cottage is bought by some people from the city, a widow and her five-year-old boy named MacLane. The two women soon become friends and Mrs. MacLane seems on her way to a place in the community. She is rejected and snubbed when she hires the only Negro family in town to work her garden. At first it is hinted to her that it is inappropriate for her to be too friendly with the Negro man and his son. Mrs. Winning is caught in the middle and has to choose between the values of the community and Mrs. MacLane's values. She is utterly afraid of losing her place in the community and soon turns her back on the MacLanes. The story contrasts a world of openness with one where certain things are done and where "there's not much you can do," which means there is nothing you will do. In this case Mrs. Winning's prejudice is augmented by her envy of Mrs. MacLane and the cottage. The story portrays well how minds become trapped and closed. Mrs. Winning, at one point, thinks to herself that "it had been a very long time since young Mrs. Winning had said the first thing that came into her head" (pp. 82-3). Her life had become nearly totally calculated, which the small community reinforced. The MacLanes finally move away.

Another form of entrapment is depicted in "Men with Their Big Shoes." Again, a young family has moved from the city to live in the country. The young wife, Mrs. Hart, is pregnant, and her husband hires Mrs. Anderson to do the housework each day. Mrs. Anderson gradually plays upon the natural sympathies and graciousness of Mrs. Hart until she is trapped into letting Mrs. Anderson live in the house: "Looking up at Mrs. Anderson's knowing smile across the table, Mrs. Hart realized
with a sudden unalterable conviction that she was lost" (p. 191). At times in Miss Jackson's stories one wonders how people become so involved, so mired in such suffocating nets. Why doesn't anyone speak up!? Her characters are often so torn by conflicting pressures and values that they simply cannot speak up and declare themselves. To do so appears to be the more terrifying possibility. Soon, though, it is too late to speak at all.

A couple from the country takes a holiday in New York city in the story "Pillar of Salt." And this time the author shows the terrors of city life, which is to say that her real concern is to depict the patterns of decomposition in contemporary life. The first few days in the city went well for Brad and Margaret. But soon Margaret begins to become conscious of certain differences, certain losses. At a party she notices changes: "There were other people there; they sat and talked companionably about the same subjects then current in New Hampshire, but they drank more than they would have at home and it left them strangely unaffected; their voices were louder and their words more extravagant; their gestures, on the other hand, were smaller, and they moved a finger where in New Hampshire they would have moved an arm" (p. 175). Margaret also notices the loud noises of the city. When some people shout to them that their building is on fire Margaret tries to tell everyone, but is virtually ignored. "They don't listen to me, she thought, I might as well not be here . . ." (p. 176). Later she tells Brad that she felt trapped. Her consciousness is quickly becoming a nightmare. It is interesting to note that in the city the country people are as afraid to speak up as were the city people in the country, as we saw in the stories
above. Margaret gets trapped in a bus and cannot get out: "'No one
listens to me,' she said to herself, 'Maybe it's because I'm too polite'"
(p. 177). During Margaret's shopping trip the author presents a vivid
description of the condition of modern culture as seen through the toys
of children:

The toys for children filled her with dismay; they were so
obviously for New York children: hideous little parodies of
adult life, cash registers, tiny pushcarts with imitation fruit,
telephones that really worked (as if there weren't enough phones
in New York that really worked), miniature milk bottles in a
carrying case . . . .

She had a picture of small children in the city dressed like
their parents, following along with a miniature mechanical civi-
lization, toy cash registers in larger and larger sizes that
eased them into the real thing, millions of clattering jerking
small imitations that prepared them nicely for taking over the
large useless toys their parents lived by (p. 177).

Margaret notices more and more signs of decay and decomposition as she
moves about the city. She feels also the increasing tempo of life that
strains the "solid stuff" to the breaking point: "She knew she was
afraid to say it truly, afraid to face the knowledge that it was a vol-
untary neckbreaking speed, a deliberate whirling faster and faster to
end in destruction" (p. 178). When visiting some friends on Long Island
she and Brad take a walk on the beach. A girl comes up to them looking
for help--she found a man's leg on the beach. To Margaret it is further
evidence of people starting to come apart. After returning to the city
Margaret is left alone while Brad attends to some business. She cannot
stop feeling that things are falling apart all around her. On her way
back to the apartment from buying some cigarettes Margaret is unable to
cross the street, her fright has paralyzed her so. She tries to cross
the street five times before running desperately to phone Brad. Here is
truly a world where "Things fall apart; the center cannot hold;/ Mere
anarchy is loosed upon the world," to use Yeats's words from "The Second Coming." Social and personal entropy have increased to the point that people are becoming just so much detritus. The dynamo of Henry Adams is running unchecked and seemingly out of control. It is in the dynamo of disintegration that Shirley Jackson's women are caught, and her stories delineate the painful attrition of the personality that result from it.

The same terror of a dissolving world is present in the short sketch "Colloquy." Mrs. Arnold goes to a psychiatrist and asks him how a person knows if he is going insane. Mrs. Arnold is really responding to the madness in the world all about her and she does not understand what is happening. For each thing she mentions the doctor has a rational, intellectualized answer. She says to the doctor: "'What is going to help?' ... 'Is everyone really crazy but me'" (p. 110). The doctor in effect tells her that she must adjust to a disoriented world, advice to which she responds by walking out. The story anticipates what R. D. Laing, among others, has written about the modern world. He has argued that it is the height of madness to try to adjust to a mad world. Mrs. Arnold senses this, but the psychiatrist does not, and counsels her to adjust to his view of normality. Laing reminds us that "normal men have killed perhaps 100,000,000 of their fellow normal men in the last fifty years." Jackson's story suggests that in a world that is mad, sanity desperately needs redefinition as does the problem of what it means to be a human being.

An interesting portrayal of a self-created trap embellished with lies is the story "Trial By Combat." Emily Johnson is living in an apartment alone and working while her husband is overseas. She discovers
several items stolen from her apartment and knows who is doing it. Finally she decides to confront the woman in order to put an end to it. Instead she becomes vague and indirect. While searching the lady's room for her things she is caught by the lady's return. Emily lies by telling her she was looking for aspirin for a headache. The lady accepts the lie and they part agreeably. Again we see a character trapped by her own timidity. This sense of weakness and fear haunts many a character in contemporary fiction. Sometimes her characters reach what David Galloway, following Camus, calls the absurd experience: "The feeling of the absurd is born when suddenly the chain of mechanical daily gestures is broken, and in the voice which results man has the opportunity to ask himself, 'Why?' Out of this moment consciousness is born." The choice after consciousness is either suicide or life. For many of Jackson's characters the absurd consciousness is almost too much to bear; some thus choose to live a lie, others choose suicide.

Serving as epigrams to three sections of the collection are excerpts from Sadducismus Triumphantus, the work of Joseph Glanvil (1636-1680), one of the Cambridge Platonists. While generally a skeptic, he produced works which defended the pre-existence of souls and belief in witchcraft. The use of such quotations further adds an aura of mystery and otherness to the collection, as well as the presence of the figure of James Harris. One of the Glanvil excerpts is an apt description of what Shirley Jackson is after in her fiction: "We are in the Dark to one another's Purposes and Intendments; and there are a thousand Intrigues in our little Matters, which will not presently confess their Design, even to sagacious Inquisitors" (p. 49). The darkness of human
purpose and the myriad intrigues of the soul that will not and cannot be quantified is the subject especially prominent in those stories where James Harris plays a role. In "The Daemon Lover," just as in the old ballad, James Harris is the absent lover who has abandoned a young woman on their wedding day. The story traces the developing painful awareness from great expectation and hope to the despair of loss. In her waiting she "tried to think of Jamie and could not see his face clearly, or hear his voice" (p. 15), and she remembered his laughter on the stairs as he left her the night before. In desperation she goes searching for him only to be led to a dingy apartment house, where she stood outside a door from which she could hear voices and occasional laughter but no one ever answered. Here is a world where the only answer for the lonely and desperate is the echo of their own yearning. Another variation of the individual trapped in, and largely by, his own weakness is the story "Like Mother Used to Make." James Harris is in the guise of a gross and vulgar man who helps take advantage of a young man. The effeminate David Turner gets ousted from his own apartment by his dinner guest and James Harris simply by not being able to speak up. James Harris comes to visit Marcia who is in David's apartment. Harris believes that he is in Marcia's apartment and Marcia subtly coerces David into going along with it. The story ends with the fastidious David cleaning up Marcia's dirty apartment.

The two stories "The Villager" and "Elizabeth" tell of two women who have become jaded, bitter, and cynical about life. Each has fled the country for the city in search of fulfillment, and instead have had their ambitions frustrated and their dreams thwarted. Hilda Clarence,
at 35, longs for that time when she dreamed of being a dancer. She meets the young, ambitious, budding writer, James Harris, whose earnestness throws into relief her own empty life. In "Elizabeth" James Harris is present more as a possibility to the protagonist than as a coercive or threatening force. Elizabeth has been in New York for eleven years and has worked for the same man, an unsuccessful literary agent. She senses that their lives have become stultified and she wants out. She calls James Harris, a former partner and quite successful, and tricks him into taking her out to dinner. She too is haunted by what might have been, and sees in James Harris a chance to break out of her suffocating existence. In its low-keyed way the story suggests that Elizabeth is about to make a Faustian pact.

The ambiguity of intention is explored in "Seven Types of Ambiguity." A middle-aged couple comes into a bookstore operated by James Harris. The man is interested in doing a lot of reading, as he now has the time for it. While compiling his book list he meets a college student who is saving up to buy Empson's *Seven Types of Ambiguity*. After the student leaves, the man adds the Empson book to his list without any clear indication why except that it was wanted by another. His action suggests the secret fear that gnaws at one who suspects that someone knows something terribly important that he does not know, and therefore he must know.

With an acutely sensitive ear for dialogue, recalling the best of Hemingway, Miss Jackson in "Of Course" reveals the way our language is often not adequate to the task of representing our reality and that we can often get caught in our words without knowing how to get out.
This is true of many of Shirley Jackson's characters. They are weaklings and are too intimidated to speak up, but they also suffer from not knowing exactly what to say. Mrs. Tylor falls into a pattern of response that she cannot control when she meets her new neighbor Mrs. James Harris. "Mrs. Tylor recognized finally the faint nervous feeling that was tagging her; it was the way she felt when she was irrevocably connected with something dangerously out of control" (p. 169). While physically absent, James Harris is quite present in the form of negations as represented by his wife. Mrs. Harris tells Mrs. Tylor that James forbids movies, newspapers, and radios, because "he's a scholar." To each of these revelations Mrs. Tylor can only say "of course." The prospect of having a fanatic as a neighbor sends chills through her.

One of the finest evocations of the spirit of the old James Harris ballads is the surrealistic story "The Tooth." Dorothy Scarborough reminds us that dreams, visions, and ghosts are important features of gothic literature, and Jackson's story is a strange mixture of dream, fantasy, and reality. In the story a strange night journey is heightened by dreams and visions ending virtually in the supernatural. Irving Malin writes of the gothic: "In Gothic, order often breaks down: chronology is confused, identity blurred, sex twisted, the buried life erupts. The total effect is that of a dream." Carla Spencer takes a bus from her country home to New York to have a very painful tooth removed. She takes a sleeping pill and a codeine pill before getting on the bus. When the bus gets under way she soon falls into a "fantastic sleep." She awakens each time the bus stops and soon falls under the attentive care of a strange man. He takes her off the bus and buys her coffee and
food, and puts her back on the bus and urges her to sleep on his shoulder. As she sleeps the man whispers descriptions of a place that seems like paradise. His name is Jim Harris. When she reaches the city, he disappears. On another bus to the dentist's she meets Jim again and he continues his seductive chant and shows her a handful of pearls. Her journey is further complicated by her inability to stay awake. Her very waking seems like a dreamy sleep. Jim reappears virtually at will. When she finally reaches the dental surgeon's chair, she dreams under the anesthetic of Jim laughing and calling to her. The doctors and nurses float around her like ghosts. She is in a different dimension from everyone else. Recuperating after the operation she says to the nurse, "'God has given me blood to drink,'... and the nurse said, 'Don't rinse your mouth or it won't clot!" (p. 203). After leaving the dentist's office she goes into a ladies' room, and is shocked when she looks into the mirror and does not know which reflection is hers. She wishes that she could choose which reflection she wanted. Such narcissism is part of the gothic as Malin argues: "In dreams we often meet a distorted reflection of ourselves. People have the wrong heads or bodies. There is a dark stranger we know we have met but we can't remember where." Clara does not remember who she is or was and, in effect, throws away her previous identity. Later walking in a crowd Jim comes to her and takes her hand, and "she ran barefoot through hot sand."

A certain undeniable beauty attends this fanciful escape from concrete reality into the rich world of dream, vision, and imagination. But a certain sadness follows as well, for it contrasts with our bleak onedimensional world that alienates human experience so that the faculties of fantasy and imagination are denied to us as human possibilities.
The startling reaction to the initial publication of "The Lottery" in *The New Yorker* in 1948 provides a rare glimpse at the way fiction is received and understood by the public. Miss Jackson received some 450 letters regarding her story, and only 13 of them were friendly. The story prompted many readers to dislike her and to regard her as an embodiment of the demonic. Her mother even disapproved: "'Dad and I did not care at all for your story in *The New Yorker,*' she wrote sternly; 'it does seem, dear, that this gloomy kind of story is what all young people think about these days. Why don't you write something to cheer people up?'"\(^{18}\) Such is, and has been, a frequent complaint against serious American writers. Jackson discovered this about most of her readers: "Judging from these letters, people who read stories are gullible, rude, frequently illiterate, and horribly afraid of being laughed at" (p. 224). Many of the letter writers refused to let their names be printed if their letters were published, and some refused to be published altogether. *The New Yorker* never published any of the letters, but forwarded them to Miss Jackson. She said there were three basic themes running through the letters: bewilderment, speculation, and abuse. The early letters, she notes, show "a kind of wide-eyed, shocked innocence." Typically, many wanted to know where such lotteries were held so they could go and watch (and perhaps also join in?). Many of these readers forgot that the story was fiction and took the whole thing as a realistic documentary. Again and again a reader would ask, "Is the story based on reality?" One psychiatrist expressed interest in the "psychodynamic possibilities" of such a ritual, no doubt for therapeutic purposes. She received a letter from a man barely acquitted of murdering his wife with an ax in California.
The letters speculating on what the story meant show a wide divergence. One writer felt that Jackson meant that Americans should not be too harsh on their presidential candidates. A letter from New Jersey read: "Please tell me if the feeling I have of having dreamed it once is just part of the hypnotic effect of the story" (p. 228). Many letters made their interpretations in the form of questions: is it a parable? is it allegory? is it the post-atomic age? From California came this suggestion: "I don't know how there could be any confusion in anyone's mind as to what you were saying; nothing could possibly be clearer" (p. 230). Many letters were surprised that the people in the story were so casual about their deed. As Yeats said, "the worst are full of passionate intensity," and this is certainly the case in many letters of abuse. A friendly Canadian urged her not to come for a visit. Some demanded an apology, some dropped their subscriptions to The New Yorker. From New York: "We are fairly well educated and sophisticated people, but we feel that we have lost all faith in the truth of literature" (p. 231). One man considered suicide after reading the story. Some indicted the editor for pandering to evil ways. The story was condemned as "cunningly vicious" and the author a "perverted genius." Her favorite letter is stranger than fiction. It comes from a relative of one who is in the "Exalted Rollers," and he sees the story as prophecy. He wants to know when the "next revelation" will be published. The letter came from Los Angeles, of course.

Critical response has been generally favorable, and the story is frequently anthologized. It is generally regarded as a classic in form and expression of theme. Because of the story's evocation of the ancient
scapegoat rite most critics concentrate on its symbolism and irony. An early commentator, Robert B. Heilman, argues that the shock of the story comes from the radical shift in the story from realism to the symbolic. To him, however, there was not sufficient preparation in the story for so abrupt a shift, and that the shock at the end left "a sense of an unclosed gap." While he realizes that the story is concerned to show the coexistence of the sinister and the innocuous, he feels that "the symbolic intention of the story could have been made clear earlier so that throughout the story we would have been seeking the symbolic level instead of being driven to look for it only retrospectively, after it has suddenly become apparent that a realistic reading will not work." In my judgment he puts too great a stress upon a symbolic reading. The violence is shocking to the reader precisely because of the ordinary, matter-of-fact way that it is carried out. It is not shocking to the community, and it is not a symbolic act or ritual to them. All of that has long been forgotten. It really has no significance beyond itself. The lottery box is worn and tossed casually around when not in use. There is nothing sacred or holy about it or the action itself. It is just done, and few see reason to quit it. This is why the story is finally shocking to the modern mind. We do not like to admit a demonic side to our natures. The story suggests that basically we are beasts, that a fine line divides us from the demonic. We like to believe in progress, that mankind has progressed tremendously from its origins. We tend to believe that countless layers of progress and improvement separate us from the primitive. The story suggests otherwise--we can slip back to barbarism hardly batting an eye. This is the gruesome realistic
reflection Shirley Jackson holds up before us. To make the story symbolic or allegorical detracts from its cold literalness. Of course, there are the brushstrokes of the symbolic, it does indeed employ the scapegoat pattern. But to lay the story along side Frazer's *The Golden Bough*, where he explains the scapegoat ritual, as does Seymour Lainoff in *The Explicator*, is to give too mechanical a reading. Lainoff does essentially capture the story's theme: "beneath our civilized surface, patterns of savage behavior are at work." But the story is not just concerned with what we do, but with what we are. It is this that the reader is asked to ponder.

John Aldridge criticized the story for lacking clear social referents. He writes that the people in the story "illustrate the savage frenzy that can take possession of simple minds when stimulated by superstition and folk ritual. The story is a perfect image of a relentless and terrifying violence, made more terrifying by the innocence with which it is enacted . . . . [However,] its meaning never extends beyond its own borders to illuminate the life we know." A sounder interpretation is that by Brooks and Warren who see the story in the form of a parable: "In a parable the idea or truth is presented by a simple narrative in which the events, persons, and the like, of the narrative are understood as being directly equivalent to terms involved in the statement of the truth." Because of this, characterization is at a minimum, and plot is simple. They also note the story's examination of the scapegoat motif, the human proclivity to externalize evil in the form of our neighbors and then unleash our violence upon them. They are careful, however, not to try to tie the story to any particular social or
historical activity, incident, or event. They see the story's intention in making a statement of universal significance. But the story also shows some particulars of human behavior in the various types of people in the village, which makes the story analogous to the New Testament parable of the sower. The violence is enacted by kindly and decent folks who are only following tradition. Old man Warner is the reactionary who hates the thought of change, and who cannot see his own barbarism. The Adams are the "liberals" who at least question the lottery's validity, but nevertheless join in. Only the ultimate victim is concerned with justice, everyone else is simply relieved that it is not they. The use of details and an undramatic style creates an aura of credibility and increases our sense of grim terror. As in her novel The Road Through The Wall, the protagonist of the story is the community itself. Brooks and Warren conclude that "the author's point in general has to do with the awful doubleness of the human spirit—a doubleness that expresses itself in the blended good neighborliness and cruelty of the community's action. The fictional form, therefore, does not simply 'dress up' a specific comment on human nature. The fictional form actually gives point and definition to the social commentary."23 One other thing is suggested by "The Lottery." Not only is human nature presented as fundamentally double, a universe is depicted where life and death are decided by chance and not human volition. This too is terrifying to modern man, but increasingly difficult to refute.

In the stories of The Lottery Shirley Jackson portrays a world where embarrassment or the fear of embarrassment is often the ruling passion in human affairs, where individuals are increasingly unable to
handle the burden of the ordinary, and where the ordinary is mixed with the macabre to reveal a hell lurking near. Like Hawthorne, Miss Jackson turns "different sides of the same dark idea to the reader's eye." She is a modern blend of Poe and Hawthorne, about whom Edith Birkhead wrote: "Poe, like Hawthorne, loved to peer curiously into the dim recesses of conscience. Hawthorne was concerned with the effect of remorse on character. Poe often exhibits a conscience possessed by the imp of the perverse, and displays no interest in the character of his victim." Darkness and loneliness place her characters at the mercy of terror. The unknown invades the known and leaves its marks. In the many stories where there are acts of violence or threats of violence, Miss Jackson depicts a world where violence has become dehumanized. There are no crimes of passion, no ideology spurring violent assault. It is rather impersonal, as a mob or a machine, or finally it pervades the landscape. This is the final stage in the dehumanization of violence, of which Frederick J. Hoffman writes in The Mortal No. The landscape of violence in modern literature gives definition to what Ihab Hassan calls the literature of outrage. In a "low-keyed and quiet nihilism," to use Eisinger's description, which presumes the presence of evil, Miss Jackson records her own form of outrage.
NOTES TO CHAPTER IV


2Peden, p. 88.


4John W. Aldridge, After the Lost Generation, p. 196.


10Leslie Fiedler, No! In Thunder, p. 286.


12Leslie Fiedler, No! In Thunder, p. 17.


16Irving Malin, New American Gothic, p. 9.

17Malin, p. 12.

18Shirley Jackson, "Biography of a Story," in Come Along With Me, ed. Stanley Edgar Hyman (New York: Popular Library, 1968), p. 223. Other references to this article will be cited in the text.

20 Seymour Lainoff, "Jackson's 'The Lottery,'" The Explicator XII (Mar. 1954), item 34.

21 John Aldridge, After the Lost Generation, p. 196.


23 Brooks and Warren, p. 76.


CHAPTER V

SACRIFICE AND INITIATION

"Hanged man," said Tony suddenly. "Hanged man."
"It is not," Natalie said indignantly. "It's not fair to use a toy."
"We never said it wasn't fair."
Natalie stopped and stared at Tony's hanged man. It was a toy in the shop window, a tiny figure on a trapeze which turned and swung, around and around, endlessly and irritatingly.
"Hanged man," Tony insisted.
"The tree of sacrifice is not living wood," Natalie pointed out.
"You can't ever tell," Tony said, peering. "They make extraordinary things for children these days. Dolls that can walk, and birds that can lay eggs, and I suppose animals with real blood for butchering. Not to mention--"
"Reversed?"
"Reversed, probably not practical for any smart child," said Natalie, and walked on.¹

Natalie Waite and her strange friend Tony see manifestations of the Tarot cards in reality. This particular sighting of the "Hanged Man" is indicative of the theme of the novel. The Hanged Man Tarot card depicts a human figure suspended head downward from a living gallows shaped like a Tau cross. The figure is hanging by one foot with the free foot crossed upon it to form an inverted triangle or a fylfot cross. In some a nimbus rings the head, in others he drops golden coins from his hands. The face suggests deep entrancement, and not suffering. The figure, as a whole, suggests life in suspension, but definitely life and not death. It is a card of profound significance, but that significance is veiled. Some interpreters see the card denoting initiation through sacrifice of
self, learning humility. Others say only that it expresses the relation, in one of its aspects, between the Divine and the Universe. The Tarot card is one of the sources for the title of Shirley Jackson's second novel, *Hangsaman* (1951), and suggests the novel's theme: initiation into life. It is thus a novel in the tradition of the *Bildungsroman*, the novel of moral education, of personal development.

The novel, as Stanley Edgar Hyman suggests, is an example of "the Huckleberry Finn framework of the rites of passage, the series of ceremonial initiations leading to maturity."² The protagonist, Natalie Waite, who spends half her time in an imaginary world where she is being questioned by a detective regarding a murder, leaves family and home for college, and faces loneliness, hostility and rejection by most of her peers, encounters the duplicity of institutions and adult life, falls into a relationship with a strange girl named Tony, who may herself be wholly imaginary, and comes near to homosexuality before finally emerging from the woods, literally as well as figuratively, to a new self-understanding and a new approach to tangible reality. Natalie makes the frightful transition from innocence, of a sort, to experience, to the beginning of adult life. Leslie Fiedler writes of the passage: "Most serious writers in the twentieth century . . . have given up the notion of seduction as well as that of redemption; they are no more moved by the concept of corruption than they are by that of salvation, substituting for the more traditional fable of a fall to evil that of an initiation into good-and-evil."³ While seduction and sex figure in Natalie's initiation, her final crossing is a kind of death and rebirth into a world solid but devoid of moral absolutes.
Many of the elements, outlined by Irving Malin, of the family in new American gothic literature are present in *Hangsaman*. The family "dramatizes the conflict between private and social worlds, ego and superego." In new American gothic there is often a quest for a surrogate family or substitute parents, largely because the original family is so confusing and fragmented. Self-love stunts the members of the family, and many are never able to grow up. A narcissistic parent seeks to impose his will upon the child who, in turn, reflects the parent. If the parent succeeds the result is destructive to both. Natalie Waite is the precocious seventeen-year-old daughter of Arnold Waite, a successful critic and writer. He is an overbearing figure in the family and the dominant influence in Natalie's life. He has been meeting with her each morning in his study to go over her writing. He is helping develop her talents as a writer. He is also supremely egotistical: '"God,' Mr. Waite said this morning, and laughed. 'I am God,' he added" (p. 5). He is also egocentric in the way he has created dependency in Natalie, evaluating her work, her thoughts and feelings, explaining and intellectualizing everything that happens to her, each stage she reaches.

"When you were born, and when Bud was born, I realized, even though your mother did not, that there would come a time when you would both rebel against us, hating us for what we represented, fighting to get free of us; it's a reaction so natural that I am ashamed to think that now I have a pang, a twinge, when I recognize it at last; it has been slow in coming, but I am as unprepared for it as I have ever been. Natalie, you must remember that it is natural, that hatred of me does not imply that you as a person hate me as a person, but only that the child, growing normally, passes through a stage when hatred of the parents is inevitable. That is your stage now." ........ If it's happening why does he tell me? Natalie thought briefly . . . (p. 15).

His egotism fears the mystery he professes to know so much about. Later,
while Natalie is at college, and he learns of some of her problems, he writes: "It has been my plan, Natalie, all of it, and when you approach despair remember that even your despair is part of my plan. Remember, too, that without you I could not exist: there can be no father without a daughter. You have thus a double responsibility, for my existence and your own. If you abandon me, you lose yourself" (p. 104). But abandon him she must if she is ever to become an individual in her own right. Such suffocating fatherly love no daughter needs. It is such cloying attention which drives her to the brink of Lesbianism with Tony. Her mother is of little help to her either. Mrs. Waite has long been alienated from the intellectual world of her husband and has taken to drink on her own. Her only advice to Natalie is never to go near a man like her father. She uses Natalie to confess her bitterness and disgust with marriage in intolerably self-pitying tones. It is against such a home that Natalie has created an imaginary world so real it rivals what is supposed to be real. When her mother and father bicker, she transplants herself through time to strange expeditions, she takes the sights of nature and uses them as "a carrier of something simultaneously real and unreal to set up against the defiantly real-and-unreal batterings of her family" (p. 22). Since she was fifteen Natalie had created a world of her own that not even the intrusive assaults of her father could touch. Natalie's alternating between the world of her family and the world of her own imagination is superbly presented in the novel and reflects a keen understanding of the mind of an adolescent.

The journey of Natalie Waite towards maturity is presented, as John O. Lyons notes, with the use of "effective thematic repetitions."
In both the beginning and ending of the novel Natalie is led into the woods for real or imagined seductions. At one of her father's regular Sunday cocktail parties Natalie is led off by one of her father's guests to the woods near the Waite house. But because of Natalie's rich fantasy life the reader is not altogether sure it really happens. Natalie believes that it did, and it becomes an event which precipitates a crisis period of her life. While at college Natalie meets Arthur Langdon, her English professor, who reminds her of her father. Her fantasy of the investigating detective recurs throughout the novel until he is replaced by her relationship with Tony. At the end her real or imagined friend Tony, an apparent Lesbian, leads her to a dark woods and tries to seduce her, from which Natalie is shocked back to reality.

Some of the finest writing in the novel deals satirically with the college to which Natalie is sent. As would be expected, Arnold Waite himself selected the college for Natalie. It is near their home in rural Vermont, and probably modeled after Bennington College where Stanley Edgar Hyman taught English. The college was young and progressive and announced to the world its exaltation of experience over theory. However, in order to survive it found that "certain compromises with conservatism were desirable." It was found necessary to have some required courses, faculty members had to attend student affairs, and adult head residents were provided for each resident hall. It was now a school that "retained privileges where it had lost principles" (p. 104). But, as the author observes, it is the way of all flesh: "Anything which begins new and fresh will finally become old and silly" (p. 43). This is the context in which Natalie Waite must discover herself:
The college to which Arnold Waite, after much discussion had decided to send his only daughter was one of those intensely distressing organizations which had been formed on precisely the same lofty and advanced principles as hoarier seats of learning, but which applied them with slight differences in detail; education, the youthful founders of the college had told the world blandly, was more a matter of attitude than learning. Learning, they had remarked in addition, was strictly a process of accustoming oneself to live maturely in a world of adults. Adults, they pointed out with professorial cynicism, were tough things to come upon suddenly. As a result, they concluded... going to college must be, for girls and boys something of a drastic experience.

The college had been in existence for perhaps fifteen years. Its founders had thought they were cutting their problems in half, originally, by eliminating men from the student body and women from the faculty. They had told one another honestly over beer in the clever apartments where the idea of the college had first seen light that they all of them believed in informality, that more information was derived from one casual conversation than from a dozen lectures, that education was after all a thing of give and take and should be a pleasure as well as a duty. Words like "mature" and "sustained" and "life" and "realistic" and "vision" and "humanities" were used lavishly. It was decided to construct the college buildings entirely out of shingle and "the original beams"; it was supposed that modern dance and the free use of slang in the classrooms might constitute an aura of rich general culture. It was decided that anyone who wanted to study anything should be accommodated, although gym was not encouraged, and it was regarded as extremely fortunate that no one spoke up for microbiology before the fifth year of the college's life... It was not believed among the science people that information came before experiment, except in the most extreme cases; "Theory is nothing, experience all," was a phrase used most effectively in the college prospectus (pp. 43-45).

And here is "experience" in action:

A very brief enthusiasm sprang up for bringing tiny bottles of rum into the dining room and adding the rum to the dinner coffee. This was replaced by an inexplicable and childish two-day enthusiasm for pig-latin. Also in the dining room one evening, an entire tableful of girls rose and walked out in the middle of the meal because they were refused more bread. A girl on the third floor who was seen crying was reported faithfully as suffering from a venereal disease, and a petition was sent to Miss Nicholas to require the girl to use the basement lavatory. Miss Nicholas was reported to be secretly married, and the Peeping Tom identified as her husband, looking for her on the top floor. Two girls in another house tried to kill themselves with double doses of the infirmary sleeping medicine. An unnamed girl,
also in another house, was said to have died of an abortion.

It was generally believed that it was completely possible to become pregnant by using the same bathtub as one's brother, although not necessarily at the same time (pp. 101-2).

Natalie also discovers it is social suicide to challenge a professor, which she dared to do to her music teacher. He slices her up with patronizing sarcasm. She observed much the same thing in her philosophy class:

In the class named philosophy, Natalie appeared two mornings a week, although it was not proven that Mr. (Doctor by ambition, although his thesis--"The Probable Intention of the Subjunctive in Plato"--had not yet found a completion) Desmond noticed, particularly, whether or not Miss Waite had chosen to attend any given morning. Under her father's tender care, Natalie had been formally introduced to both Plato and Aristotle, but had never, until now, been required to digest such ideas reduced to the probable, or diagram, level of the school girl mind. The man--that would be Mr. (to be Doctor) Desmond--who taught this class, and who had named it philosophy, obviously felt that anyone who had spent years studying his subject should by rights end up as something rather better than a man trying to teach ideas to girls, or at least as something more reconciled; he was bitter and impatient, and made his own intimate Plato as disagreeable as possible . . . (p. 64-5).

When one of his fatuously given statements was challenged, all he could do was smile.

It is apparent that the ideal that "experience is all, theory nothing" is really little more than their theory, not quite applicable in all situations. And the experiences which will lead to adulthood and maturity are really rehearsals in miniature of adult games. This is quite evident in the episodes surrounding Arthur Langdon, Natalie's favorite teacher, surrogate father and fantasized lover. Arthur Langdon was the most popular teacher on campus, and was recently married to one of the prettiest of his former students. Natalie is at first quite enamored by him. She sees him in her mind as "the slim figure which
moved gracefully before the class, speaking with humorous informality of Shakespeare" (p. 68). As she comes to know Arthur, and his wife Elizabeth, she sees that he is selfish and cruel toward his wife who drinks too much and has tried suicide. She is used by two older girls to take Elizabeth home from a party drunk so that the girls can be alone with Arthur. She also discovers that Arthur's success is due more to his personal charm than his intellect. She does not fail to see that her own father shares many of the same qualities as Arthur. These experiences and the whole college context are related well to Natalie's own quest. As John O. Lyons points out: "Natalie begins to realize that the life of the free spirit the college aspires to inculcate is burdened by horrible realities."

When Natalie arrives at the college, she senses that she has a new start, but her own shyness, intellectual ability, and rebellious spirit spoil her initial chances for popularity and friendship. When all the new girls are brought before the masked upper-classmen for initiation, Natalie could sense "the intoxication which comes of a deed hallowed in tradition but uncertainly remembered in detail," and refuses to go along with it, calling it "silly." Her fellow new students do not follow her lead and thus Natalie successfully estranges herself from the girls of her own house. Rejecting and being rejected leads Natalie farther into herself and her rich fantasy world. She writes fervently and often in her secret journal. She dreams of a time when people will fear her and she will be revered and respected. She lives with the feeling that something momentous is about to happen to her. Much of this is, of course, a cover-up of her friendless state. After her unfortunate
and disappointing experiences with the Langdons, and a negative reaction to her own family, she enters firmly into a relationship with another despised girl on campus, Tony. To Natalie Tony is exotic, clever, intelligent, and self-possessed. She is more attractive to Natalie than the other girls who appear to her as social snobs. As Natalie's involvement with Tony deepens, the novel becomes more and more dream-like. The crisis within Natalie is heightening to a climax. She is haunted by real and imagined events of her past, as well as hurting from her loneliness on campus. Tony comes to Natalie naked in the middle of the night, and their relationship borders on the homosexual, which Natalie does not see as yet. Natalie becomes so confused that she is never sure who she is or what is real: "... suppose that some minute, any minute, she should suddenly turn, move her head, speak strangely, and find herself not at all real" (p. 132)? She fears that she may be dreaming her world. In one fantasy she sees herself as "the most incredible personality of our time," showing her increasingly buried within her ego. In another fantasy she is a giant tearing the college apart and eating its occupants. She turns to the girl Tony in desperation, nothing else in her world appears solid or tangible. Together they read the Tarot cards.

Natalie and Tony go out together on the town. It is as if they are Alices in Wonderland as they make their way through the city. They play games, and see the Tarot card characters everywhere. A private world of their own making is growing tightly around them. They regard others as threats to their safety, and Tony takes Natalie to a place where no one will bother them. Natalie feels suffocated by the crowd in the bus, and paranoid that everyone in the world is involved in a
conspiracy to undo her. They were all involved in a pattern, "a tiny step in the great dance which was seen close up as the destruction of Natalie, and, far off, as the end of the world" (p. 176). Personal death and cosmic destruction are identical at this point in Natalie's narcissism. The bus takes them to "Paradise Park," the winter-abandoned recreation area. From there Tony leads Natalie into the dark woods. Tony expresses to Natalie a dream of nihilistic immortality: "'All I need,' said Tony, 'is a desire so strong that the world, all of the world, has got to bend itself and forget itself and break out of its circles and rock itself crazy, all to do what I want, and there's got to be a great crash when the ground under me crashes itself wide open and the fire inside is forced to crawl away from my feet and the sky too turns back so that there is nothing above me and nothing below me and nothing in all time except me and what I know'" (p. 182). Here in "the deep natural darkness which comes with a forsaking of natural light" (p. 184), in the woods near Paradise Park, Tony readies Natalie for her fall. Tony is like Twain's mysterious stranger, for whom to remember was to create, to dream was to live. Natalie senses her fate, her destiny, has been leading her to this point. As Tony closes in on her Natalie says, "I thought it was a game" (p. 187). It is not entirely clear, as W. Tasker Witham suggests, whether Tony is trying to seduce Natalie "to Lesbianism, to suicide, or to complete retreat from reality," but at the last moment Natalie repels Tony's embrace and returns to the school alone. As she nears the campus, she thinks: "As she had never been before, she was now alone, and grown-up, and powerful, and not at all afraid" (p. 191). While this conclusion may be too reassuring—we feel
that Natalie will continue to face difficulties—she does seem to have passed a hurdle into a new stage of life. She has rejected the childhood world of fantasy and dream, and dared to encounter a world more ambiguous yet somehow also more tangible and real. Natalie fell into the garden of experience, of the knowledge of good-and-evil. It is interesting to note that Jackson’s Tony is like several of Hawthorne’s dark ladies who are destroyed, either by suicide or events. Tony and Natalie are similar to Zenobia and Priscilla of The Blithedale Romance. Natalie, after her dark lady is destroyed, has a fresh opportunity, whereas Priscilla is doomed to serve the weakened Hollingsworth.

Natalie’s initiation into maturity is essentially convincing. She overcame many burdens and obstacles, and her experience isironically more genuine than that proffered by her self-serving college whose program, as Lyons notes, ”is based upon romantic half-truths about the goodness of man’s essential spirit and spontaneous inspirations.”8 This opens the wider question of what is really involved in education. R. D. Laing argues that much of what takes place under the aegis of family and education is productive of madness, largely because these institutions see their role as bringing about adaptation to the world without regard for the fact that the world is mad. Lionel Rubino defines education in this way: ”Education is a discipline of self-mastery, an experience through which each individual comes to terms with the demonic.”9 This definition becomes clearer when the meaning of the demonic is properly understood. Rollo May gives an excellent definition: ”The daimonic is any natural function which has the power to take over the whole person. Sex and eros, anger and rage, and the craving for power are examples.”10
Both Rubinoff and May show that the demonic can become either good or evil depending upon how it is handled. The important thing is that it cannot be repressed or denied, but only faced, integrated, and thus transcended. Shirley Jackson writes that "the mere process of learning is allied to mutiny. Moreover, the mere process of learning is so excruciating and so bewildering that no conceivable phraseology or combination of philosophies can make it practical as a method of marking time during what might be called the formative years" (p. 43). In Hangsaman she shows not only an initiation of a girl into adulthood, but also a coming to grips with the demonic, which much of her fiction is concerned to explore.
NOTES TO CHAPTER V


3Leslie Fiedler, *No! In Thunder*, p. 279.


6Lyons, p. 65.


8Lyons, p. 67.


CHAPTER VI

THE POSSESSED

In 1957 Drs. Corbett H. Thigpen and Harvey M. Cleckley published *The Three Faces of Eve*, their study of a young woman plagued by a divided personality. The study became a minor best-seller and was soon adapted to film. But three years before, in 1954, Shirley Jackson published her third novel, *The Bird's Nest*, which dealt with a young woman fragmented into four competing personalities, and which met with considerable critical acclaim. It would be inadequate to regard the novel as just a fictionalized study of psychological deterioration. It is much more, as we have already learned to expect from Miss Jackson's work. One reviewer wrote that "Miss Jackson borrowed from psychiatry only as much as she needs, that for the most part this book--though vastly more complex, sophisticated, witty, and subtle--is in the genre of *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde.*"¹ William Peden suggested that the novel was a kind of "twentieth-century morality play."² The old notion of madness as a form of demon possession is surely one the author wishes us to recall. The title, and a partial source of the novel itself, comes from the seventeenth-century riddle:

Elizabeth, Lizzy, Betsy and Bess
All went together to seek a bird's nest;
They found a nest with five eggs in it;
They each took one and left four in it.
Another more modern source of the novel is the 1905 study by Morton Prince entitled *The Dissociation of a Personality*, which recorded the case of a person with several successive personalities. About this study Stanley Edgar Hyman noted that the author may not have been aware that the successive personalities his patient developed might have been artifacts of his own creation, an idea, as we shall see, which is suggestive of our deeper understanding of *The Bird's Nest* as well.

As was noted in Chapter Four many of Shirley Jackson's characters are lonely, desperate women caught in the dynamo of modern life, whose personalities show the fissiparous results. Elizabeth Richmond is no exception. She is twenty-three years old when we first meet her in the novel, and lives with her eccentric maiden aunt, Morgen Jones, in an ugly, almost gothic, house. Her mother died when she was nineteen, and since that time she has not spoken intimately with anyone. "She had no friends, no parents, no associates, and no plans beyond that of enduring the necessary interval before her departure with as little pain as possible." She went to work in the upstairs office of the local museum simply because her aunt felt the job would give Elizabeth a more definite identity. Of late, this seat of great learning had begun to sag, a definite list to the west was observable. Such an occurrence did not bother most of the personnel of the museum as they spent their lives "almost out of earthly equilibrium" anyway. The learned personnel, "who dwelt among unperishing remnants of the past," were not troubled at all; they laughed and "made little wry jokes about disintegration." But such a change was not easy for Elizabeth Richmond to handle, especially because the wall beside her very neat desk on the third floor was removed
in order to repair the sagging building. While no indisputable connection can be made, it was about this time that Elizabeth's personal equilibrium lost its balance. Because the others in the museum were "engrossed daily with the fragments and soiled trivia of the disagreeable past, or the vacancies of space," they were able to keep "a precarious hold on individuality and identity" (p. 10). Elizabeth, however, was virtually anonymous, and people generally found her "blank and unrecognizing." She was a candidate for a form of "possession" all too common in the modern world. As Rollo May describes it: "Loneliness and its stepchild, alienation, can become forms of demon possession. Surrendering ourselves to the impersonal daimonic pushes us into an anonymity which is also impersonal; we serve nature's gross purposes on the lowest common denominator, which often means with violence."5 The violence Elizabeth indulges, as her demons come to the surface to haunt her, is a convoluted kind turned against her own fragile self.

As Elizabeth's hold on reality becomes increasingly slippery--she begins receiving nasty and intimate notes, she hurl5s an obscenity at her aunt's friends, but does not recall it, and is accused by her aunt of going out at one o'clock in the morning, which she also does not remember--her aunt seeks professional help. The family doctor refers Elizabeth to a kind of odd-ball meta-psychiatrist, who patterns himself after Thackery, named Dr. Victor Wright. Elizabeth is under Dr. Wright's care for two years. He uses hypnotism to discover her problems and is surprised to find several competing personalities emerge which he calls Elizabeth, Beth, Betsy, and Bess. The doctor favors some of these personalities more than others, and sees his task as no less than creating
a new person, for which he later engages the help of aunt Morgen. Elizabeth as Betsy goes on a journey to New York city in search of her mother. She is brought home battered by her own other selves, and finally, after more madcap episodes, she is exorcised and, with a brand new self, given a new start in life. Such in outline is the plot of The Bird's Nest, which Miss Jackson relates employing several fictional methods and devices: straight narrative, stream-of-consciousness, a Thackeray-like journal, epistles.

What Shirley Jackson shows us in this novel, and not without wit, humor, and satire, is the journey of a soul through hell. It is an account of a voyage into inner space and time. Such a voyage, as R. D. Laing argues, is not the illness, but rather the natural way of healing alienation in a world gone mad. The schizophrenics are the true explorers of our time, as they may be truer reflectors of the madness about them and revealers of a process to overcome the madness. Laing also suggests that the etymological meaning of the term schizophrenia should be recovered: broken soul or heart. Both Laing and May, among many other psychologists, argue for an existential approach to therapy, and an ontological view of human psychology, one that includes all aspects of human experience and behavior. They advocate a concept of man that takes into account the full organismic reality of human experience. Such a view is implicit in the work of Shirley Jackson, as well as of other modern writers. The story of Elizabeth Richmond, then, is the story of the struggle for recovery of selfhood of a broken soul. Her inner warfare may in a real sense be seen as a microcosm of the society as a whole.
Under Dr. Wright's hypnotic treatments, the several personalities of Elizabeth Richmond reveal themselves successively. The distraught and aching Elizabeth gives way to Beth, a fresh, sweet and charming girl but impotent, and Beth surrenders easily to the loud and vulgar Betsy. Later the personalities vie for dominance and slip in and out of consciousness almost at will. A fourth personality reveals itself about midway through the novel as a new challenger to the control of Elizabeth Richmond. The doctor calls this one Bess, and she is described as "arrogant and cheap," greedily and selfishly guarding and using her money. The good doctor likes to treat each of these as individuals in their own right, but in actuality they are only partial individuals or selves, and as much as each would like, none can stand on its own, none can take over the whole Elizabeth. From each of the four Elizabeths, and by pushing through layers of forgotten life, the doctor discovers a tawdry affair involving Elizabeth's mother, whose name also was Elizabeth, and her lover Robin (the dirty bird at the heart of Elizabeth's bird's nest). The incidents surrounding the affair are never made fully clear, but much is hinted at.

Each of the Elizabeths are repressed aspects of the whole, driven under at various ages due to the traumatic events of Elizabeth's early life. Elizabeth is the superego-like figure who closed around her truncated life and endured through time. Beth is what she might have been—light and gay and open, but utterly vulnerable. Betsy is apparently ageless, but on her journey to New York she at times appears as a sixteen-year-old girl. It is hinted that Elizabeth at sixteen may have been seduced by her mother's lover Robin. Betsy is also the one who
remembers her childhood when Robin did not want her around. Elizabeth's mother died when she was nineteen. Aunt Morgen locked her in her room the night her mother died. Bess is Elizabeth at nineteen, three weeks after her mother's death, and still showing the shock of grief. Reviewing each of these in his mind the doctor writes:

I perceived that no one of these could possibly be permitted to assume the role of the true, complete . . . Miss R., and, equally, none of them could be judged "imposters"; Miss R. would be at last a combination in some manner of all four, although I must admit that the contemplation of a personality combining Elizabeth's stupidity with Beth's weakness, Betsy's viciousness with Bess' arrogance, left me with an urge to throw the blankets over my face and hide myself!

I saw myself, if the analogy be not too extreme, much like a Frankenstein with all the materials for a monster ready at hand, and when I slept, it was with dreams of myself patching and tacking together, trying most hideously to chip away the evil from Betsy and leave what little was good, while the other three stood by mockingly, waiting their turns (pp. 141-2).

The many scenes depicting the chameleon-like changes and shifts in Elizabeth Richmond's personality are among the best writing Shirley Jackson has done. She handles the slippery moves so deftly, and has made her character so convincing that the reader is held spell-bound and unable to let his attention waver. Near the end of the novel the doctor tells Mr. and Mrs. Arrow and Morgen that "witchcraft is little more than the judicious administration of the bizarre" (p. 247). Such could well characterize the novel itself. When Betsy escapes to New York city, for instance, in order to locate her mother, the full poignancy of the child-like mind is captured beautifully. She shows the strange mixture of innocence, fright, curiosity, awe, and enthusiasm of a young girl lost in a big city. The whole scene is a blend of dream, nightmare, and reality. A woman on the bus tries to con Betsy out of her money; she stops people on the street and asks them if they know where her mother is; in the
crowds and concrete and steel of the city Betsy wonders: "... perhaps there were some, searching face after face with eager looks, wondering when Betsy would be there" (p. 95). She invites a stranger to have lunch with her in the hotel and tells him all about herself, but runs away frightened when she finds out that he is a doctor. She follows desperate clues from her childhood memory of a world and situation that no longer exists, and perhaps never existed in quite the way she believes. She wants to fade away so no one will find her and take her back. She must, however, fight to keep Elizabeth and Beth under control and seeks a new identity for herself. "It was, then, urgently important to be some person, to have always been some person; in all the world she was entering there was not anyone who was not some particular person; it was vital to be a person" (p. 88). But Betsy cannot become this person on her own. She cannot outrun or escape her own inner demons, and they return to her with a vengeance. She is found unconscious in her hotel room after a ferocious battle—the mirror was smashed, and deep scratches were in her throat. When she awakened, another personality, Bess, had arrived at consciousness and threatened dominance.

There is considerable humor in Elizabeth's possession, suggesting once again Jackson's belief in the close relation between pity and terror and the ludicrous. In one session with the doctor Betsy aggravates the normally sedate man, and quickly submerges leaving the poor, sweet Beth to take the doctor's wrath. Old Morgen Jones is also befuddled by the many-sided Elizabeth. One morning she awakes to find mud in her refrigerator. On another occasion Morgen witnesses four separate
baths, one right after the other, by the four tenants of Elizabeth. Betsy would play practical jokes on the others for fun and spite. She would take long brisk walks and then switch over to the weary Elizabeth to walk back. To torment Bess she put spiders in the bed.

Serving as referee, guide, and healer to this sometimes raucous crew is the Thackeray-loving, pompous, antiquarian gentleman, Dr. Victor Wright. Nearly half of the novel is told through Dr. Wright's Thackeray-imitated style. The doctor tells his readers that his practice has dwindled because most of his patients are dead—he will have his little joke, he insists. They are dead, of course, only because they grew old along with him and he outlived them. His journal is full of little puns, such as his remark that "matters among these several personalities were coming to a head" (p. 137). He is an inmodest man who regards his work as a form of philanthropy. He first words to us are:

I believe I am an honest man. Not one of your namby-pamby doctors, with all kinds of names for nothing, and all kinds of cures for ailments that don't exist, and none of them able to look a patient in the eye for shame—no, I believe I am an honest man, and there are not many of us left. The young flashy fellows just starting out, who do everything except put their names in neon lights and run bingo games in the waiting room, are my particular detestation, and that is largely why I am putting my notes on the case of Miss R. into some coherent form; perhaps some one of your young fellows may read them and be instructed, perhaps not .... It is gratifying to know that the extraordinary case of Miss R. was taken and solved and lies transcribed here for all the world to read, by an honest man; gratifying, at any rate, to myself (p. 34).

The doctor is basically a benevolent and gentle figure, with no malice or evil intent toward his patient. The deeper he gets in the case of Elizabeth he takes sides—he definitely likes some of Elizabeth's personalities more than others, and he sees himself in the position, almost like a god, of recreating a new person. To Morgen the doctor says:
"our responsibility is, clearly, to people this vacant landscape--fill this empty vessel, I think I said before--and, with our own deep emo-
tional reserves, enable the child to rebuild. We have a sobering duty. She will owe to us her opinions, her discriminations, her reflections; we are able, as few others have ever been, to recreate, entire, a human being, in the most proper and reasonable mold, to select what is finest and most elevating from our own experience and bestow" (p. 243)! And because the doctor is starry-eyed by his own idealism and captive of his own rhetoric he is oblivious to the frightening possibilities inherent in his own project.

As suggested earlier, the doctor may have been doing as much creating as he has been discovering. That is to say, the several Eliza-
beths may to a great extent be artifacts of his own imagination. In short, the demons of Elizabeth may also be extensions and projections of the doctor's own mind. Indeed, the doctor fears the demonic and recoils from it. When he first saw the soft Elizabeth merge into the coarse, sensual, and gross Betsy, and heard her rough, evil laughter, the doctor pulled away in disbelief: "What I saw that afternoon was the dreadful grinning face of a fiend, and heaven help me, I have seen it a thousand times since" (p. 52). He tells us that he fears that face instinctively; to him she was a demon whose evil appeared unconquerable. When the doc-
tor seeks to overcome and destroy Betsy, and, later, Bess, in the name of good Beth, he may not fully understand what he is doing. He is, be-
nevolently, yes, tampering with a human soul, the unforgivable sin as Hawthorne revealed it. The doctor thinks, as he listens to Betsy:
"... all I could do, as one does with a difficult child, was to pretend
doctor finds the house an abomination, characterized by "a kind of ruthless ornamentation." It had many little embellishments on the outside, wooden lace and turrets. The inside was equally a mishmash of ornamentation, which, to the doctor, exhibits "much the same random unbeautiful physique as Miss Jones." The doctor is revolted by the "great mounds and masses of bright colors, the overlarge furniture," the "great splashing decorations," and "a chair covered over with orange peacocks." The doctor finds that "everything in this house seemed to have an air of seizing at a person." Later, the house is described as never having "strayed from the basic pattern of the architecture: one of extreme and loving ugliness." In new American gothic, according to Irving Malin, the house stands as "the metaphor of confining narcissism, the private world." Another element of the gothic is the voyage or the flight from imprisonment. We have seen this in Betsy's escape to New York in search of her mother. The voyage, Malin argues, "represents movement, exploration not cruel confinement. But the voyage is also horrifying because the movement is usually erratic, circular, violent, or distorted." The protagonist moves between imprisonment and violent movement, which is quite apparent in Elizabeth. The many reflections of self are another aspect of the gothic appearing in The Bird's Nest. The house, in general, is a reflection of the characters of its occupants, in this case, especially aunt Morgen. But there are more specific reflection as well. Just before Elizabeth loses control she is with Morgen visiting the Arrows. While there, Elizabeth sees her reflection in all the shiny surfaces in the room, and these distorted, glittering reflections serve to precipitate Elizabeth into a condition where she no longer is under
control. At the end of the novel she does not have multiple reflections any more, which indicates that she has recovered her integrity. Serving as both a reflection and as a minor symbol—and it is another common element of gothic literature—is the black, wooden statue in the front hall of Morgen's house. It is a life-size, Nigerian ancestor figure that Morgen herself chose to adorn her hall. The doctor, as expected, thinks it hideous and wants it removed. Its presence is indicative of the blackness of the demonic possessing the house. At the end, the statue is removed and stored in the attic, symbolic of Elizabeth's regaining a new self.

Old Morgen Jones is not like any maiden aunt we are likely to conceive. She grew up in the shadows of her prettier sister (Elizabeth's mother), and got by on her quick, but masculine and coarse, wit.

Her manner was free, her voice loud, she loved eating and drinking and said she loved men; she took toward her sober niece an attitude of avuncular heartiness, and among her few friends she was regarded as fairly dashing because of her fondness for blunt truths and her comprehensive statements about baseball. She had reached an age where sustaining this character was no longer quite such a strain as it might have been when she was, say, twenty, and had reached a position of comparative complacency, discovering how the pretty girls of her youth had by now become colorless and dismal, and sometimes blushed when she spoke (pp. 13-14).

Morgen did not disguise her loathing for her prettier sister, whose affairs and antics led to her death and to Morgen gaining custody of Elizabeth. Morgen felt it part justice that she should gain charge over Elizabeth, for Morgen was looked at first by Elizabeth's father who then, of course, married her sister. To Morgen, her sister was no less than "a brutal, unprincipled, drunken, vice-ridden beast" (p. 175). In spite of this Morgen did not hate her, but she felt little remorse in
her passing. To the doctor, or anyone, she will admit no fault in her raising of Elizabeth, and she defies heaven and hell to say any differently. The doctor thus sees Elizabeth living between "a foul-living mother and a foul-tongued aunt." But this untameable old shrew the doctor secures as an ally in the cure of Elizabeth. Despite her gruffness she is genuinely loving and compassionate toward her niece, and is the source of a good deal of the humor of the novel. When the doctor waxes eloquent over their great opportunity to recreate Elizabeth, Morgen quips, "You can be her mommy, and I'll be her daddy . . ." (p. 243). The long brandy-drinking scene with her and the doctor is also hilarious. The doctor, proceeding seriously and pontificatingly as usual, is made fun of by Morgen, with both of them ending up drunk from innumerable glasses of brandy.

Before the final resolution of the novel Morgen makes an observation about herself that helps make one of the main points the author is after. She has been generally accepting of the multiple personalities of Elizabeth because she has often been aware of her own several selves. As she put it: "She thought with humorous self-deprecation of the times she had seen in herself a Jekyll-and-brandy personality, of the wise Morgen at midday who at evening turned into a cynical Morgen and at morning became a snarler over breakfast, and when she had identified this in herself, she was prepared to countenance it in Elizabeth" (p. 196). The Erinyes pursuing Elizabeth are finally subdued in a scene reminiscent of Jacob's wrestling the angel. Elizabeth, as Bess and as Betsy, is wrestled to the floor in Morgen's hallway, in front of the on-looking black statue, by Dr. Wright and Morgen. In the process it is
learned that Elizabeth had shaken her mother physically the night she died and had felt responsible for the death. Morgen tells her that it was not her fault, which she finally believes and accepts. The strength finally goes out of her and she falls asleep. In the next three months Elizabeth fuses into one person again, but not resembling any of her former selves. Rather her mind is like a clean slate, and she has the experience of being reborn, of looking at the world for the first time. Her first thought was that she was now all alone, her second was that she had no name. While the doctor and Morgen are visiting the Arrows, Elizabeth sits in the garden—an Edenic image—and names the flowers and stars. At the very end she is given a name by the doctor and Morgen. They call her "Victoria Morgen," to which she responds: "'I know who I am,' she said, and walked on with them, arm in arm, and laughing" (p. 250). This ending is not unambiguous for this "new creature" is a product, at least partially, of Dr. Wright and aunt Morgen, which suggests that the demons may rise again. And no matter how good their intentions, and loving their concern they still were tampering with a human soul, and the consequences may not be to their liking.
NOTES TO CHAPTER VI


7Laing, p. 75.


9Malin, p. 106-7.
CHAPTER VII

WAITING FOR THE END

The mood of American fiction in the last two decades has been increasingly apocalyptic. This has been not just a response to the threat of nuclear destruction or ecological forms of disaster, though these threats are certainly not forgotten. Rather, the fiction reflects a more generalized sense of foreboding, of the coming of catastrophe, the movement of human life towards the inanimate. In his provocative essay, "Days of Wrath and Laughter" (1964), R. W. B. Lewis discusses this theme at length. He notes that in fiction there is "a pervasive sense of the preposterous: of the end of the world not only as imminent and titanic, but also as absurd." He illustrates his argument by showing the influence of Melville and Twain on Nathanael West, who produced "the vision of the ludicrous catastrophe and who searched out and bodied forth some of its human sources."1 We are to the point, Lewis argues, where "... our literature and our spiritual history are in fact caught between the wrath and the laughter; and our survival, in many meanings of the word, may hang upon the outcome." The comic nihilism of Melville's The Confidence Man and Twain's The Mysterious Stranger has influenced the contemporary American black humorists who seek to confront disaster with the comic mask. It is a crucial question of our time whether the comic, the weapon of laughter, can cope with apocalyptic
threats and fears. During this time of the final loosening of Satan's forces, a time of confusion and tension, our situation demands clear perception; as Lewis writes: "... a true view of reality in our time depends, I think, not only upon an unflinching confrontation of horror, but also upon the measuring and accommodating power of laughter— that is, of what Hawthorne called 'the tragic power of laughter'" (p. 191). To do this the novelist must discern truly what the New Testament calls the "signs of the time," and know the difference between this and the daily weather report. This is what Emerson meant when he wrote in his address on "The American Scholar" that we need to know the difference between a pop gun and the crack of doom, no matter who may be proclaiming it, for such knowledge is true wisdom. Accordingly, today's novelists, as Lewis notes, have sought "to reveal the essential fraudulence within the horror, to uncover the ridiculous within the catastrophic; in the hope, at least, of letting in a little light" (p. 212). It is Lewis' contention that by alerting the imagination with apocalyptic visions the novelist may provide "weapons for averting the catastrophe" (p. 235). This same hope is shared by the novelist Walker Percy, who discusses the role of the Christian novelist in today's world: "Perhaps it is only through the conjuring up of catastrophe, the destruction of all Esso signs and the sprouting of vines in the church pews, that the novelist can make vicarious use of catastrophe in order that he and his reader may come to themselves." 2

In this same vein, Susan Sontag, in her essay "The Imagination of Disaster," which explores the cultural significance of fantasy and science fiction films, writes: "Ours is indeed an age of extremity.
For we live under continual threat of two equally fearful, but seemingly opposed, destinies: unremitting banality and inconceivable terror."^3 When both of these elements are combined in one novel, you have the makings of what Richard Poirier refers to as "the comic apocalyptic."^4 This is an apt description for Shirley Jackson's fourth novel, *The Sundial* (1958). Again showing her ability to find pity and terror in the ludicrous and the ludicrous in the terror, Jackson creates a fantasy of the end of the world, which parodies the apocalyptic imagination, while at the same time portraying it. The novel is a full exposition of the poem by William Empson, entitled, "Just A Smack At Auden," especially this verse:

Shall we go all wild, boys, waste and make them lend,
Playing at the child, boys, waiting for the end?
It has all been filed, boys, history has a trend,
Each of us ensiled, boys, waiting for the end.

At the end of the novel they are all there waiting, with Mrs. Halloran dead and propped up against the sundial on the lawn of the great Halloran estate, the windows and doors battened down from the inside as protection against the growing winds of doom, eleven self-elected survivors of the imminent end of the world. Some play bridge. Others talk of the realism of a recent movie. A few drink scotch and yawn in anticipation. "'My.' Mrs. Willow stretched, and sighed. 'It's going to be a long wait,' she said."^5 Indeed it is, for we leave them feeling that they will still be waiting to enter their hoped-for brave new world when the supplies they have stored in the library have been used up. The disconfirmation of apocalypse will lead only to new "revelations" and to new calculations for their waiting game. No matter, for they have already sealed their doom, which is the purpose of this grisly tale of comic horror and fantasy to reveal.
The novel is concerned with the nature of belief, with the way desperate people grasp a belief and make it their truth, with how belief and madness combine and lead to desperate behavior, with how belief is a form of madness itself, making people into grotesques. Sherwood Anderson speaks profoundly of such grotesques: "It was the truths that made people grotesques. The old man had quite an elaborate theory concerning the matter. It was his notion that the moment one of the people took one of the truths to himself, called it his truth, and tried to live his life by it, he became a grotesque and the truth he embraced became a falsehood."6 Shirley Jackson's The Sundial shows twelve such grotesques believing in the apocalyptic visions of a mad woman. They become grotesque because they need, and desperately want, to believe in the revelations of the spinster Aunt Fanny, who herself is in a desperate contest, a power struggle, with the matriarch Mrs. Halloran for control of the massive Halloran estate.

Mrs. Halloran, after the death of her only son and child, Lionel, and it is implied by her daughter-in-law that she pushed her son down the stairs, is now in full control and possession of the Halloran estate, which has been her goal since her marriage. She plans to dispose of the people around her, and to raise her grand-daughter, Fancy, by herself in regal solitude. Her husband, Richard, is a wheelchair-ridden invalid and offers no resistance to her machinations. But before Mrs. Halloran can carry out her banishments and solidify her usurpation, Aunt Fanny is visited by the ghost of her father, the first Mr. Halloran and founder of the estate, telling her of the impending end of the world with the only survivors being the residents of the Halloran mansion. After the
holocaust, Aunt Fanny is told, the survivors will enter a new and better world. Mrs. Halloran, of course, does not believe in this revelation and does not hesitate to scorn it. As she does, however, a small snake appears out of the fireplace, crawls across the floor, and disappears behind a bookcase. This is quickly seen as a sign by everyone but Mrs. Halloran that Aunt Fanny may be right. Mrs. Halloran now faces a dilemma; her authority is challenged by what she calls "prophetic lunacy," but she cannot afford to ignore Aunt Fanny. It is at this point that the novelist spells out what could be called the thesis of the novel:

The question of belief is a curious one, partaking of the wonders of childhood and the blind hopefulness of the very old; in all the world there is not someone who does not believe in something. It might be suggested, and not easily disproven that anything, no matter how exotic, can be believed in by someone. On the other hand, abstract belief is largely impossible; it is the concrete, the actuality of the cup, the candle, the sacrificial stone, which hardens belief; the statue is nothing until it cries, the philosophy is nothing until the philosopher is martyred.

Not one of the people in Mrs. Halloran's house could have answered the question: "In what is it you believe?" Faith they had in plenty; just as they had food and beds and shelter, they had faith, but it was faith in agreeably concrete things like good food and the best beds and the most weathertight shelter and in themselves as suitable recipients of the world's best. . . . Not-dying from day to day was as much as Mr. Halloran could be fairly expected to believe in; the rest of them believed in what they could--power, perhaps, or the comforting effects of gin, or money.

... Being impossible, an abstract belief can only be trusted through its manifestations, the actual shape of the god perceived, however dimly, against the solidity he displaces. Not one of the people around Aunt Fanny believed her father's warning, but they were all afraid of the snake (p. 33).

In consultation with her courtier and sycophant, Essex, originally hired to catalogue the Halloran library, Mrs. Halloran tries to resolve her quandary. She feels that she has no choice but to accept Aunt Fanny's revelation as fact, even though she does not really believe
it and wishes that Aunt Fanny had never thought of it: "Authority is of some importance to me. I will not be left behind when creatures like Aunt Fanny and her brother are introduced into a new world. I must plan to be there. Oh, what madness, ... why could he not have come to me?"

Mrs. Halloran is too vain, greedy, and prideful to possess the necessary courage to refute Aunt Fanny's madness: "... I insist upon being saved along with Aunt Fanny. I have never had any doubt of my own immortality, but put it that never before have I had any open, clear-cut invitation to the Garden of Eden; Aunt Fanny has shown me a gate." Essex then expresses their choice clearly: "When we believe ... we must do so wholly. I am prepared to follow Aunt Fanny because I agree with you: it is the only positive statement about our futures we have ever heard, but once I have taken her side I will not be shaken. If I can bring myself to believe in Aunt Fanny's golden world, nothing else will ever do for me; I want it too badly." To this Mrs. Halloran replies: "I wish I had your faith" (pp. 40-41). Thus, Mrs. Halloran is forced to allow everyone to stay, and makes the fateful decision to act on Aunt Fanny's visions as true, and to try to maintain control over a household of people who regard themselves as a new chosen people.

Deciding to live upon the apocalyptic visions of a mad woman is risky business. This, coupled with the grasping hubris of an usurper, essentially seals Mrs. Halloran's fate, for on the night before the promised new day Mrs. Halloran herself falls or is pushed--perhaps by Aunt Fanny or even by her grand-daughter, though nearly everyone had a motive to kill her--down the same stairs her son died upon. It is her fate which constitutes what Stanley Edgar Hyman referred to as a tragedy
of the rich: "In Shirley Jackson's The Sundial, a fantasy about the end of the world, the matriarch Mrs. Halloran brings on her death by donning a golden crown, precisely as King Agamemnon in the Oresteia of Aeschylus incurs the wrath of the gods and his death by treading on the carpet of royal purple." When it is calculated--by a virgin peering into a mirror covered with olive oil, of course--that the holocaust will occur on August thirtieth, Mrs. Halloran proposes a barbecue for the villagers to be held on the lawn of the Halloran estate on August twenty-ninth. She announces further that she will sit on the terrace under a gold canopy wearing a gold dress and donning a gold crown. Aunt Fanny calls it disgraceful. Mrs. Halloran's old friend Augusta Willow calls her a fool. Mrs. Halloran answers: "You have not perceived, then, Augusta, that I wear a crown on August twenty-ninth to emphasize my position after August thirtieth. . . . I shall probably never remove the crown . . . until I hand it on to Fancy" (p. 137).

Mrs. Halloran is committed to supply the law and order for this band of believers. To insure this she draws up a list of instructions pertaining to community behavior both before and after the last day. She expects everyone to dress up for the occasion, except that no one may wear a crown but her. She will lead everyone out of the door on that first new day, with "everyone following in sober procession." She abolishes the old calendars and proclaims the morning after August thirtieth to be known as The First Day. She forbids the eating of vegetation until it is determined safe to do so. She will assign everyone tasks; she will assign the mates and forbids "indiscriminate coupling." She also emphatically forbids any wanton play or "manifestations of irresponsibility." "It is expected that all members of the party will
keep in mind their positions as inheritors of the world, and conduct themselves accordingly. A proud dignity is recommended, and extreme care lest offense be given to supernatural overseers, who may perhaps be endeavoring to determine the fitness of their choice of survivors" (p. 152). A few moments before her death Mrs. Halloran tells the party to go and dress for the long night's wait, and gives them her vision of the future: "When I step out of this house tomorrow morning, I want to know that I am bringing with me into that clean world a family neat, prepossessing, and well-groomed" (p. 185). Mrs. Halloran is determined never to relinquish her dearly won possessions and will never leave her house in her lifetime. When Essex suggests that she may have compromised her authority, Mrs. Halloran expresses her determination: "it is my house now, and it will be my house then. I will not relinquish one stone of it in this world or any other. Everyone must be made to remember that, and to remember that I will not relinquish, either, one fraction of my authority. Perhaps ... just as you have lost the ability to leave, I have lost the ability to serve" (p. 155). Indeed, for Mrs. Halloran's hubris blinds her to her own limitations, causing her to miscalculate, to gamble for the highest stakes in a situation she could not control. As Marilyn Zorn suggests, "One feels that Mrs. Halloran has sinned not so much by grasping and holding on for dear life to the things of this world as she has by attempting to arrange things in the next." Mrs. Halloran sought control over the future the way she tried to control the present, and failed at both.

All the way through the novel there are warnings or signs of which Mrs. Halloran is oblivious, because her sole occupation is to
secure her hold on the Halloran estate. Perhaps the chief sign or symbol is the words engraved upon the sundial, "set badly off center" on the broad lawn before the house. The engraved words are: "What is this World?" Each time she walks by the sundial she asks Essex to tell her where the words are from. Essex recites from Chaucer: "What is this world? ... What asketh man to have? Now with his love in his colde grave, Allone, with-outen any companye" (p. 14). Mrs. Halloran dislikes the words, and never comes to any comprehension of their possible relevance to her situation. The words, fittingly, become her epitaph, for Essex recites them again over her body as she is laid out on the lawn on the last night of the world. But there are numerous other signs and occurrences which Mrs. Halloran fails to discern as possible warnings to her. Not long after Aunt Fanny's first vision, Mrs. Halloran discovers a framed photograph of herself with a rhinestone-headed hatpin stuck through the throat. Mrs. Halloran guesses that it must have been Fancy, her ten-year-old grand-daughter, but is not concerned about it. One of the funniest episodes in the novel is when a group in the village called "The True Believers" hears of Aunt Fanny's apocalyptic expectations and pays a call on Mrs. Halloran. This group tells Mrs. Halloran that they received messages that the spacemen from Saturn are coming at the end of August to "translate" to a higher state of being all those who believe in the revelations and abstain from the use of all metal, meat and intoxicating beverages. Mrs. Halloran replies to their offer of joining forces that she and her group prefer earth, and cannot give up meat, metal or wine. Mrs. Halloran sees quite clearly the ridiculousness of the True Believers but cannot see that her own belief is lunacy also.
Perhaps to the eyes of the non-believer all belief contains madness. Jackson's burlesque here certainly underscores that possibility. Mrs. Halloran does not see the mirror here for her own folly.

Another warning comes with Aunt Fanny's second revelation. Aunt Fanny tells the household that "a night of horror, a night of terror" is coming but that her brother will be safe. She then predicts "a night of murder and a night of bloodshed" (pp. 89-90), which no one, including Mrs. Halloran, takes as referring to them. In addition, Mrs. Halloran has a dream, and like many another tragic character in literature she is disturbed by it but cannot learn from it to avert her fate. She dreams that she lives alone in a small house deep in the woods. Two children looking like Essex and her niece Gloria come upon her house and begin to eat it. She tricks the children into the house and locks them in closets. Soon the children's mother, who looks like her friend Mrs. Willow, comes and releases the children. They all call Mrs. Halloran a witch and threaten to return to destroy her and the house. In the dream Mrs. Halloran looks at her house and sees that it was not made of candy at all. This little Hansel and Gretel-like dream reveals Mrs. Halloran's unconscious fears and insecurities that all she possesses, indeed, her very self, will be consumed and she will have nothing. Her daughter-in-law, Maryjane, and one of Mrs. Willow's daughters, Arabella, discover Fancy's grandmother doll filled with pins sitting on the sundial, but Mrs. Halloran never sees this warning. She does learn of the dead garter snake with one of her handkerchiefs tied around its neck. A final opportunity to repudiate her arrogance comes at the barbecue when she is wearing her crown and greeting guests under her golden canopy.
In response to her crown one of the spinster sisters of the village, Miss Inverness, remarks that she was taught to "believe in nobility of character, and to disdain baubles of rank" (p. 160). Miss Inverness looks for her crown only in Heaven as a reward for virtue. Mrs. Halloran ignores her. Finally, over the great steps within the Halloran mansion are engraved in gothic letters the words: "When shall we live if not now?" Such a question serves as a counterpoint to what they all are doing in forsaking their lives for their anticipated bright new world.

Waiting for the end with Mrs. Halloran, her invalid husband, Richard, and the apocalyptic Aunt Fanny are nine of the strangest people ever expected to be gathered in one place. Miss Ogilvie is the overly sensitive and genteel governess to Fancy, who used to exchange little notes with Mr. Halloran before he took to his wheelchair. Essex is the librarian, but serves as Mrs. Halloran's spy and courtier. Maryjane is Lionel's widow and mother of Fancy, whose greed wishes daily for Mrs. Halloran's demise. Ten-year-old Fancy has been taught to lie and to hate her grandmother, but because she is still a child she retains more good sense than the whole bunch. Mrs. Willow is the old con artist friend of Mrs. Halloran, who invites herself and her two daughters to the Halloran estate to get whatever she can out of Mrs. Halloran, and refuses to leave when she hears of Aunt Fanny's "good news." Her older daughter is the dull but pretty Arabella, the younger Julia is clever but plain. Climbing over the wall with her letter of introduction is the seventeen-year-old Gloria Desmond whose father is Mrs. Halloran's cousin. Lastly, there is the "captain," who is no captain at all, but
a stranger in town Aunt Fanny picked up and invited to inherit the new world. Most of these people share several important qualities. They fear and hate the world, and are unable to function independently within it. They have no clear sense of their future and grasp eagerly at Aunt Fanny's apocalyptic visions, for which they willingly bet their lives. Not only weak, they are also utterly selfish, self-centered and greedy. Early in the novel, when Essex poses the question of what is real, each has a different idea or none at all. Because they are in the twilight zone of waiting, neither the present nor the future world is quite real to them, and they do not know what to do. Aunt Fanny says, "I think...that we are like people at a summer resort, waiting for their vacations to end. We have never had anything to do, you know, but now we are waiting besides, and it is almost unbearable" (p. 54). To Essex's question of what is real, Aunt Fanny answers truth, which is ironic in light of her apocalyptic visions. Mrs. Willow says comfort. Miss Ogilvie really cannot say since she lacks experience. To Maryjane reality is that which is not in the movies. Reality is a dream world to Arabella. Clever Julia throws the question back at Essex, who answers: "I am real...I am not at all sure about the rest of you." Mrs. Willow bursts in again, and says that reality is "mostly money" and "a man in your bed" (p. 55). And it is the physical-minded Mrs. Willow who presses Aunt Fanny for more proof of her father's warnings and promises. It is her idea to have Gloria peer into the olive-oiled mirror.

The supernatural is not something Mrs. Halloran counted on. That it chose to manifest itself to Aunt Fanny, her chief antagonist, is beyond her belief. To Aunt Fanny its visit to her is more than natural.
In fact, she regards it as a sign of her good breeding, of a refinement that she feels is sorely lacking in her sister-in-law. The siege of the "supernormal," as she calls it, gives her a basis for a superiority that is difficult to challenge. While she pontificates on how the "human experiment" is over and how "the imbalance of the universe is being corrected. Dislocations have been adjusted. Harmony is to be restored, imperfections erased" (p. 39), she is fundamentally concerned to keep, and perhaps improve, her place within the Halloran home. The initial feeling of horror she felt after her revelation is quickly replaced by a feeling of "righteous complacence," which reinforces her tendency to become "autocratic and demanding." She knows intuitively that she at last has a weapon that Mrs. Halloran cannot control.

When Aunt Fanny was a child she would often play in the maze, another part of the Halloran grounds. In the center of the labyrinth are a stone bench and a marble statue named Anna after her mother. The secret of the maze is connected with the name Anna, all the turns corresponded to the letters in the name. Because Aunt Fanny could never forget the secret, she could never lose herself in the maze. Crying, she would think: "Was she to be disappointed, always, because she could not forget the answer? Was she never to escape into the mad labyrinths and run confused" (p. 86)? But now she is lost at last. In wandering through the maze, she thought: "there is so much that everyone has forgotten, or never been told in time" (p. 87). It is this sense of loss and of the possibility of recovery that each within the house feels in hearing of Aunt Fanny's revelations of a coming new Eden. But for Aunt Fanny the revelations bespeak of a personal longing for the recovery of
her forever lost childhood. On the unused third floor of the Halloran mansion Aunt Fanny has recreated the four-room apartment she and Richard lived in with their mother and father before they moved to the big house. Everything is as it was—the old furniture, beds, dishes, pictures, toys. This little house of the past within the Halloran mansion is Aunt Fanny's secret "doll house," an image recurring throughout the novel. It is here that she is tempted and longs to return, to live and play with her brother, to leave the others behind and live alone. It is here Aunt Fanny takes Fancy in a poignant scene. Aunt Fanny tells Fancy that it is her mother's house. Fancy remarks: "A big doll house, but no dolls" (p. 143). Aunt Fanny then begins to play house. She becomes her mother and tells Fancy to play her as a child. In the little dialogue between them Aunt Fanny reveals a deep yearning for her mother's love and for the loving protection of a father-like husband. She also envisions her brother Richard never marrying so that he might stay by his mother and her. Aunt Fanny was barely six when her mother died, after living in the big house only three months. It is obvious, then, that much of Aunt Fanny's madness stems from her experience of childhood loss and betrayal, when she was abandoned and neglected, causing her to create a world of fantasy within.

One of Aunt Fanny's three revelations occurs just after she runs frightened out of the dark maze, yelling for Essex to help her. It seems to have been provoked by her fear of being lost and the childhood memories it conjured up. After the encounter she warns that the end is coming but that "the father will watch over his children" (p. 89). Her other two revelations occur after a particularly disagreeable experience
with Mrs. Halloran. These scenes are among the most effective writing in the novel, and are reminiscent of those dealing with Elizabeth's fragmented personality in *The Bird's Nest*. Her first revelation occurs the morning after Mrs. Halloran's threatened banishments, and it secures her position as it forces Mrs. Halloran to permit everyone to stay and to act upon her revelation as fact. The last experience with the supernatural occurs after Aunt Fanny received a carbon copy of Mrs. Halloran's list of instructions for the tribe as they prepare to inherit a new world. This action of Mrs. Halloran infuriates Aunt Fanny more than any other thing, for it opposes Aunt Fanny's vision of the future world. To Aunt Fanny, the new world will be clean, harmonious, whole, a new Eden—childhood again. To Mrs. Halloran, that new world will be orderly, neat, responsible, structured, because she herself will legislate and enforce her rule. To Aunt Fanny it is her father who is saving them. To Mrs. Halloran it is she who is bringing her people through to safety.

At one point in their preparations Mrs. Halloran remarks: "I wonder what nonsense we would be engaged in, if we were not doing this," to which Essex replies: ". . . It is probably just as well that we have some nonsense to occupy us; think of the harm we could do if we were bored" (p. 100). Mrs. Halloran and Essex, on one level at least, still realize that what they are engaged in is a fiction, a masquerade, a game, and can indulge in irony about it. But as they continue to play, the game becomes reality, each player acts in deadly earnest, they become trapped in their own fiction and lose the capacity to change it. What began as "harmless nonsense" evolved into a game involving unimagined consequences.
Evocative of the tone of some of Hawthorne's tales, such as "The Ambitious Guest" and "Ethan Brand," is Essex's confession to Arabella, whose density protects her from any comprehension, that he is filled "with a kind of unholy, unspeakable longing." Essex has looked inward and is sickened by what he has found—a heart of longing beyond appeasement. He speaks of it as a form of original sin: "It is abominable to need something so badly that you cannot picture living without it." It takes over the self: "It is a longing so intense that it creates what it desires, it cannot endure any touch of correction . . ." (p. 62). It is this longing that all within the Halloran house feel, in varying degrees, and is the basis for their belief in Aunt Fanny's visions. It continues to animate the contagion which gives the disparate group cohesion, creating a "they" versus "us" syndrome. It reinforces Mrs. Halloran's power of coercion when various members of the group begin to doubt and desire to leave. When Julia and the captain attempt to break away, Mrs. Halloran buys off the captain not just with money but with the appeal to the captain's secret longing. Julia then tries to go off alone, but gets lost in dense fog and wanders through the night only to be found the next morning at the Halloran gate chastened and obedient. Even Essex is momentarily tempted to flee with Gloria, whom he has begun to love, but when he is forced to decide, he refuses to go. The longing of the group reinforces Aunt Fanny's belief in her own revelations as well. Aunt Fanny goes on a shopping spree, ordering tons of supplies—such as, canned peaches, olives, umbrellas, sunglasses, suntan lotion, salted nuts, instant coffee, and, remembering Robinson Crusoe, a grindstone, several shotguns and hunting knives. All of these supplies
are stored in the library, and the books are burned— in the new world, knowledge of the old will be unnecessary. The only books deemed unburnable are Boy Scout survival manuals, an encyclopedia, a French grammar, and a World Almanac.

It is their longing and their contagion of belief which leads them to push Gloria into being their medium by peering into an oiled mirror. Gloria indeed "sees" the lovely new world, as well as locates the cataclysm on August thirtieth, but the reader feels that much of what she sees is influenced by what all those around her desperately desire her to see. Gloria begins her stay at the Halloran home with that healthy skepticism and freshness of an adolescent, but soon becomes caught-up in Aunt Fanny's contagion. While Essex wants Aunt Fanny's world more than the present one, Gloria is willing to take either, she can believe in either world. It is the child Fancy who sees to the heart of the matter. She accuses Gloria of making up what she saw in the mirror, and believes that everyone is foolish for believing in Aunt Fanny's dreams. Fancy tries to show Gloria that the people following Aunt Fanny's dreams fail to see that the present world is lovely and green too, and that the new world will contain the same crazy people the present one does. In other words, Fancy argues, "...it doesn't matter which world you're in" (p. 132). Fancy sees that a new world will not create new people, for Aunt Fanny's world is not more real than the present one. But the imagination committed to apocalypse cannot accept such simple wisdom.

House imagery, a common feature of the gothic tradition, which we have observed before, in the form of doll houses, little houses in
the forest (as in Mrs. Halloran's dream), houses within houses, and the
mansion itself, recurs throughout the novel, and generally serves to in-
dicate the presence of a deadly narcissism. Aunt Fanny, as we noted
earlier, creates her "doll house" out of her past. Gloria likens the
present world outside the Halloran mansion to a doll house. To her this
world is phoney, artificial, unreal. Being safe has become her only
goal. Fancy, on the other hand, knows the difference between her toy
doll house--a miniaturized version of the adult world--and the real
world, of which she is not afraid, and eagerly desires to encounter.

The Halloran mansion is another of Jackson's gothic houses. It
is a three-story monstrosity situated upon a massive estate containing a
man-made lake, complete with swans and grotto, numerous gardens, walking
paths, marble statues imported from Europe, an intricate maze of hedges,
and acres of lawn, all surrounded by a high stone wall. Mr. Halloran,
not the lionized figure of Aunt Fanny's revelations, but a petty tyrant
who took what he wanted without remorse, declared that his house would
contain everything, it would be complete. It was thus endlessly decor-
ated and embellished. And since he was a man who lived by maxims, he
wanted them inscribed all over his house, much to the chagrin of his
architects. A mediator, and M. A. in English from Columbia University,
persuaded the old man to tone down a few of his requests. Instead of
putting on the wall, "you can't take it with you," Mr. Halloran agreed
to substitute, "When shall we live if not now?" Everything in the man-
sion was symmetrical. The only thing off center was the sundial, which
came from a firm in Philadelphia inscribed with the words: WHAT IS THIS
WORLD? Mr. Halloran, after a while, convinced himself that it was a
remark about time, as is traditional with sundials, rather than a ques-
tion about the nature of reality, something with which all in the house
have trouble.

The Halloran estate is not the only thing the villagers can
point to with pride. Indeed, even before the mansion was built the vil-
lage was the subject of considerable publicity. A fifteen-year-old girl
was believed to have murdered her father, mother, and two younger
brothers with a hammer. Even though Harriet Stuart was acquitted she
was enshrined by the villagers as their murderess, drawing in droves of
tourists, from whom the villagers made a nice living. The villagers al-
so tried to give the old Stuart house the reputation of being haunted,
which brought in occasional scholars in search of material for articles.
One writer referred to the village as "'a quiet place, untouched by time
or progress'" (p. 66).

Recalling Irving Malin's typology, we can see several features
of the new American gothic in this novel. Again, a microcosm serves as
the arena where universal forces collide. The gothic house, as we
noted, functions as an image of authoritarianism, of imprisonment, of
what Malin calls "confining narcissism," as well as a receptacle of
lost values. The voyage—as when Julia attempts to flee to the city—is
an attempt to escape the cloying authoritarianism of the house. The
journey is also dangerous and terrifying, as Julia found out. Nearly
all of the characters of new American gothic are narcissistic, in one
form or another, weaklings who try to read their own preoccupations into
reality, as do the followers of Aunt Fanny's visions. Thus, for them
"reality becomes a distorted mirror." And especially apropos of Mrs.
Halloran, "new American gothic uses grotesques who love themselves so much that they cannot enter the social world except to dominate their neighbors." In new American gothic the family is frequently used as a microcosm and is the source of the members' disfiguring love. The family tends to stunt the full development of its members, who become arrested in narcissism and are unable to grow up, as we saw in Aunt Fanny. The reflection, another convention of the gothic, occurs frequently in The Sundial. Essex hates mirrors because of his awareness of duplicity. Gloria's many visions in the mirror reflect the narcissism of the whole community that it has been chosen to survive the holocaust and inherit a new world. Most of the characters of new American gothic, Malin argues, are isolates who are unable to belong to the world outside their family or home. While they would like to be a part of the big world, they are too afraid to leave the little world, as is certainly the case of the Halloran group.

In connection with our discussion of the gothic conventions present in The Sundial, it is interesting to note that one reviewer suggested that the novel could possibly be seen as anti-Catholic. Jean Holzhauer, writing in the Catholic journal Commonweal, outlined a rather strained allegorical interpretation of the novel, likening the Halloran realm to the Catholic Church "with its wealth, enclosure, certainty of superiority and survival, revelation in one branch of the family and organization in the other (with the two branches genteely at war), sycophants, rebellious rational minds." While this line of interpretation may not be tenable, the intuitions of the reviewer that a gothic novel may be anti-Catholic reflects an older defensiveness Catholics may have
felt about gothic literature. Leslie Fiedler reminds us that the early
gothicists were "anti-aristocratic, anti-Catholic, anti-nostalgic," re-
reflecting their critical rationalism toward superstition and history. At
the same time, the gothicists were enamored with what they purportedly
detested, which their attitude toward Catholicism reveals. As Fiedler
observes,"... the gothic romance is Protestant in its ethos; indeed,
it is the most blatantly anti-Catholic of all, projecting in its fables
a consistent image of the Church as the Enemy..."^13 Its focus on
the ritual, pageantry and mysteries of Catholicism reveals a secret ad-
miration, which perhaps reflects a basic duplicity in the gothic imagi-
nation.

The Sundial is a nicely woven novel, where imagery and technique
work together well. Through the use of various motifs, such as the house
imagery, references to time, Jackson is able to juxtapose character,
theme, and incident in startling and ironic ways. One such motif is the
reading of Robinson Crusoe to the senile Mr. Halloran by his nurse. The
passages often contrast ironically with the increasing madness of the
characters in the novel. As in her earlier work, Jackson employs a deft
kind of cinematic focussing, creating a simultaneity of effect and cap-
turing well a room-full of conversation. Of course, throughout there is
satire of the folly and vice of human beings in rather non-specific ways.
The novel satirizes a human condition where gullibility, cupidity, and
culpability reign virtually unrestrained by moral principle, and create
a community of the survival of the worst. But the satire is not without
rich humor. The barbecue for the villagers begins with all due decorum,
with the guests properly and orderly filing by the now-queen Mrs.
Halloran and mingling sedately upon the lawn. But as the beer and champagne start flowing, the gathering becomes a veritable bacchanal, with Essex running around spreading wild rumors about Miss Ogilvie and Aunt Fanny, spinster villagers trying to seduce the captain, raucous dancing, and the maudlin Miss Ogilvie trying to give the revelers a last minute warning. Above it all, Mrs. Halloran watches with regal eye. The whole scene is suggestive of the biblical story of the Hebrews, who, growing tired of waiting for Moses, made a feast to worship their golden calf. When the expected last day nears, the Halloran tribe begin to see "signs" of the imminent disaster, which could be the reportage from nearly any daily newspaper:

A woman in Chicago was arrested for leading a polar bear clipped like a French poodle into a large downtown department store. A man in Texas won a divorce from his wife because she tore out the last chapter of every mystery story he borrowed from the library. A television set in Florida refused to let itself be turned off; until its owners took an axe to it, it continued, on or off, presenting inferior music and stale movies and endless, maddening advertising, and even under the axe, with its last sigh, it died with the praises of a hair tonic on its lips (p. 157).

These, they fervently believe, are surely signs of apocalypse!

Because the novel depicts heartless, greedy, and selfish people becoming more so under a mad delusion, some critics reacted unfavorably to it. William Peden concluded: "For all its wry humor, the novel seems to me to be primarily a bleak inquiry into what can only be called the idiocy of mankind."14 To Harvey Swados the novel reflects contempt for the human race, and lacks a moral vision of a good human being.15 But like Flannery O'Connor, Shirley Jackson is never sentimental in depicting the wages of sin in human life. Sometimes the correct moral vision must be described indirectly, by the use of opposites. To be able to
look at the underside of human experience and still find laughter is never a mean feat, and may help us come to our senses.

In The Sundial Shirley Jackson portrays the elitism of the apocalyptic mind that sees only itself as being worthy of survival and salvation. It is an imagination essentially nihilistic because it forsakes positive reformatory action for a passive waiting that can easily move into despair. It is an imagination which accepts powerlessness, and surrenders human responsibility to what it regards as an overpowering destiny, in the name of which all crime is possible. To the Halloran household the world will end and begin again with itself as the inheritor. This is an example of what John R. May calls the "presumptive eschatology" of a secular imagination which sees a simple continuation of history after the cataclysm. Here, there is no sense of judgment and renewal in connection with the cataclysm as in traditional apocalypse. A new world is expected, but no personal renewal is promised or demanded, which, as Fancy suspected, will mean no change at all in the human condition. The people gathered in the Halloran mansion have indeed experienced the loss of world and suffer the debilitating effects of anomie. They despair of history and turn eagerly to Aunt Fanny's apocalypse because of a fundamental loss of nerve. This leads them to a distortion and misuse of apocalypse, as Walter Wink points out. "Apocalypticism has had a gruesome history of empty promises and useless bloodbaths. All too often it has offered a simplistic cop-out from sustained efforts at reform. It has too quickly viewed needed change as impossible and used its more grandiose vision as an excuse for disengagement. Worst of all, it has offered the deranged a divine justification for all manner of brutal schemes."
As we have seen, the Halloran clan did not shrink from murder on the eve of their new day. Their self-deception began as a potentially humorous masquerade party, but in their desperate belief it quickly led to the burning of books, the disengagement from life, and to the declaring of themselves as a new race of men. For the rest of mankind they feel little more than pity, or, more than likely, contempt. To Wink, May and others apocalypse, properly conceived, is a message of hope for a people in stress and crisis, for it provides a context for the faithful to understand themselves and to act. But this understanding of apocalypse, essentially a theological and biblical one, contrasts sharply with the apocalyptic pretensions of the Halloran party. They long for a revelation without theology, a revelation without judgment, and thus without renewal as well. Because they lacked courage to live responsibly in the present world, and because they lacked hope for the future, they abdicated their humanness for the apocalyptic visions of a mad woman, and chose to live appearances for reality, a dangerous fiction for life. They should have been listening when the nurse read from Robinson Crusoe to Mr. Halloran: "A little after noon I found the sea very calm, and the tide ebbed so far out that I could come within a quarter of a mile of the ship, and here I found a fresh renewing of my grief; for I saw evidently, that if we had kept on board, we had been all safe..." (p. 41). Believing themselves to have escaped time, history, and death, they fail to see that the question on the sundial is still their riddle: "WHAT IS THIS WORLD?"
NOTES TO CHAPTER VII

1R. W. B. Lewis, Trials of the Word, pp. 184-5. Further references to this essay will be cited parenthetically in the text.


8Marilyn Zorn, "Fall Down Babylon," rev. of The Sundial, by Shirley Jackson, Northwest Review 1, 4 (Summer 1958), 85.

9Irving Malin, New American Gothic, p. 80.

10Malin, p. 6.

11Malin, p. 79.


13Leslie Fiedler, Love and Death in the American Novel, pp. 124-5.


17May, p. 24.

CHAPTER VIII

DARING EVIL

With the feeling of taking positive action of her own at last, Eleanor Vance, secreting away in the little car she owned together with her sister, begins her journey to Hill House. For Eleanor time is beginning anew, and as she drives past charming old homes and flower-filled fields, she imagines whole lives for herself. Eleanor reads omens in the things she sees along the road. At one point, she sees evidence of an old fair ground where motorcycle races were held, the signs still bearing fragments of words. On one sign she reads DARE and on another EVIL, and then laughs at herself when she realizes that the original sign referred to daredevil drivers. It is nevertheless a fitting omen for what Eleanor Vance encounters at Hill House, and forms the substance of Shirley Jackson’s fifth novel, *The Haunting of Hill House* (1959).

In this novel, the supernatural again encounters madness, or hastens its coming. It recounts the story of the gradual crumbling of a human personality. It depicts the hell of schizophrenia, in the sense suggested by R. D. Laing of "broken soul or heart." It is the story of the journey of a broken soul on a quest for love, her struggle with disintegration, and her ultimate failure and surrender to entropy. Eleanor Vance is a desperately lonely, utterly life-starved and loveless woman.
Eleanor Vance was thirty-two years old when she came to Hill House. The only person in the world she genuinely hated, now that her mother was dead, was her sister. She disliked her brother-in-law and her five-year-old niece, and she had no friends. This was owing largely to the eleven years she had spent caring for her invalid mother, which had left her with some proficiency as a nurse and an inability to face strong sunlight without blinking. She could not remember ever being truly happy in her adult life; her years with her mother had been built up devotedly around small guilt and small reproaches, constant weariness, and unending despair. Without ever wanting to become reserved and shy, she had spent so long alone, with no one to love, that it was difficult for her to talk, even casually, to another person without self-consciousness and an awkward inability to find words.¹

On her way to Hill House Eleanor recalls an old tune but cannot remember all the words. When she reaches Hill House, they come back to her: "journeys end in lovers meeting" (p. 27). These words run like a refrain throughout the novel, and describe Eleanor's great hope to be someone somewhere, to belong, to be valued, to love.

Eleanor Vance was one of four people taking part in an experiment inaugurated by one Dr. John Montague, a Ph. D. in anthropology, whose real interest lay in "supernatural manifestations." When he heard that a certain Hill House had a reputation for inexplicable activity, he eagerly sought to lease it for examination that would lead to his writing of a definitive work. He took a three-month lease during the summer and looked for assistants. He compiled a list of people "who had, in one way or another, at one time or another, no matter how briefly or dubiously, been involved in abnormal events" (p. 6). He wrote to a dozen people and heard from only four, to whom the doctor sent invitations to join him at Hill House beginning on June twenty-first. Of those four, only two finally accepted his offer. One was Eleanor, who qualified because when she was twelve years old, living with her sister
and mother, her father being dead nearly a month, showers of stones fell on the house. Her mother blamed the neighbors, who, she believed, had it in for her. After three days the mysterious stones stopped falling and never returned again. The doctor believed this to be a "poltergeist phenomenon." The second person to accept Dr. Montague's invitation was Theodora (she used no other name), who qualified because of her uncanny ability to identify cards held up out of sight and hearing. It was Dr. Montague's hope that the talents and experiences of Theodora and Eleanor would "intensify the forces at work in the house" (p. 52). Luke Sanderson was the nephew of the owner of Hill House, and had to come as stipulated in the lease. His aunt was anxious to get rid of him for a few weeks, for she saw him to be a liar and a thief, indulging in petty dishonesties. Mrs. Dudley was the cook and her husband the caretaker. They always left Hill House before dark.

The presence of Hill House is felt on nearly every page of the novel, and it is in a real sense the major character of the book. When Eleanor passes through the "tall and ominous and heavy" gate, travels up the rutted, unpaved road to the house, her first thought upon seeing the house is that it is vile and diseased and she should leave at once. The house is over eighty years old and carries an unsavory reputation of death, madness, revenge, and suicide. The house is marked by "clashing disharmony." Some of the best description in the novel is of the house: "No human eye can isolate the unhappy coincidence of line and place which suggests evil in the face of a house, and yet somehow a maniac juxtaposition, a badly turned angle, some chance meeting of roof and sky, turned Hill House into a place of despair, more frightening because
the face of Hill House seemed awake, with a watchfulness from the blank windows and a touch of glee in the eyebrow of a cornice" (p. 26). It is a house "arrogant and hating, never off guard," and seems to have "formed itself, flying together into its own powerful pattern." It rushes upon any unsuspecting spectator and engulfs him within it. The house ". . . reared its great head back against the sky without concession to humanity. It was a house without kindness, never meant to be lived in, not a fit place for people or for love or for hope." Like Hell the ground floor is laid out in concentric circles, with a central room surrounded by other rooms, which, in turn, are surrounded by more rooms. The house is made entirely at "wrong angles," everything is a little bit off center. All of the small aberrations add up to a rather large distortion, which Dr. Montague calls "a masterpiece of architectural misdirection" (p. 76), and gives its occupants a feeling of being off balance. Doors, not propped up, close of their own accord. At the entrance to the nursery is an inexplicable cold spot that defies measurement. The library is in the tower containing thousands of molding books and an iron spiral staircase going up to the trapdoor of the tower room.

Unconsciously adopting the posture and mannerisms of the college lecture hall, Dr. Montague recounts the sad and sordid history of Hill House. The house has not been fit for human habitation for over twenty years. Past tenants could only stay for a few days. One tried to flee at night and was crushed against a tree when his horse bolted from the road. None of them would discuss the reasons for their quick departures from the house, but all urged the doctor to stay away from it. The doctor cannot explain these things, but theorizes that some houses are
literally "born bad," and partake of that ineffable quality that makes some places or houses unclean, forbidden, or sacred. To the doctor, it may not be too fanciful to regard some houses as sick, leprous, deranged or disturbed. A scandal, involving suicide, madness, and lawsuits, is associated with Hill House. The house was built by a man named Hugh Crain for his family as a country home. His wife died in an accident on the driveway to the house, and the man had to bring up his two little girls in the house alone. Later, the second Mrs. Crain died of a fall, and the third Mrs. Crain died of consumption while traveling in Europe. Hugh Crain closed the house, sent his two daughters to a cousin, and remained in Europe, dying there not long after his third wife. The house was left jointly to the two sisters, who fought over it for the rest of their lives. The younger sister married, and the older one returned to live in the house, with only a girl from the village as a companion. After the older sister's death, a lawsuit began over the ownership of the house. The companion claimed it was left to her, but the younger sister insisted it was hers. The court decided in favor of the companion, who was beleaguered by the sister for the remainder of her life. She claimed that the sister would sneak into the house at night and steal things, write her letters, and threaten her. Out of desperation and terror the companion killed herself by hanging herself from the turret on the tower. The house then passed legally into the hands of the Sanderson family, cousins to the companion, who have never lived in the house. Eleanor is appalled and shocked by the story, and the doctor believes that the house is evil, "a place of contained ill will" (p. 59).

In classic gothic fiction, as Devendra P. Varma reminds us, "the element of terror is inseparably associated with the Gothic castle,
which is an image of power, dark, isolated, and impenetrable." To the Romantic Movement and in gothic fiction "the castle stands as a central image of the lonely personality."² It is the terror and loneliness of Eleanor Vance that is the real story of The Haunting of Hill House. It is her guilt-ridden and loveless life which seeks and finds a welcome in the dark corridors of Hill House. It is she who finds in Hill House a home, and surrenders willingly to its embrace, her own personality dissolving and fusing with the substance of Hill House. It is Eleanor's experience which recalls Ligeia's poem from Edgar Allen Poe's story: "And much of Madness and more of Sin/ And Horror the soul of the plot."

From the very beginning Eleanor feels that Hill House has been waiting for her. While waiting for the others to arrive, she feels like a small creature consumed whole by a monster that feels her every movement within it. She does not believe that she is the type for Hill House, but also does not know anybody who would be. But Eleanor bears the burden of "the hell of unsatisfied desires turned inward," to use the words of Dostoyevsky's nameless narrator from Notes from Underground, and has been waiting nearly all her life for something like Hill House to happen to her. Strangely enough, Eleanor has a feeling of déjà vu about Hill House, and she confesses to Theodora that she has been there before in a fairy tale or dream.

In an earlier chapter we noted that Rollo May likens loneliness and its result, alienation, to forms of demon possession. May writes that "... acute loneliness seems to be the most painful kind of anxiety which a human being can suffer. Patients often tell us that the pain is a physical gnawing in their chests, or feels like the cutting of a razor
in their heart region, as well as a mental state of feeling like an infant abandoned in a world where nobody exists." This applies quite well to Eleanor, who comes to Hill House after a protracted bondage to an invalid mother. She can hardly believe that she is really there, participating, speaking and joking freely. She can barely contain herself, and finds herself saying things without thinking, and even making up a life for herself when Theodora asks her where she lives. During the first evening in Hill House Eleanor is overwhelmed with feelings of amazement that she belongs, that she is an individual human being possessed with certain qualities and abilities all her own. She falls asleep filled with questions, fears, and the thought, perhaps a hope, that "journeys end in lovers meeting." Dr. Montague takes Richardson's Pamela to fall asleep with, and the first night in Hill House passes without incident.

Theodora suspects that Eleanor gets foolishness and wickedness mixed up. The prescient Theodora early gets a hunch that Eleanor ought to go home, for she can see Eleanor's propensity for hysteria and for seeing things always in a too personal way. In examining the cold spot, Eleanor says to the others: "'I felt it as deliberate, as though something wanted to give me an unpleasant shock!'" (p. 86). The doctor reminds them all that they are involved in a "scientific" experiment, exploring the nature of "psychic phenomena," and he urges them to be discreet, sensible, and to take notes. But an objective stance is difficult for the overly sensitive and acutely self-conscious Eleanor, who suspects others of patronizing her, questions the motives of looks, statements, and questions directed to her, as well as feeling that she
carries the burden of fear for them all. Before any strange activities begin, Dr. Montague says to Eleanor: "I think an atmosphere like this one can find out the flaws and faults and weaknesses in all of us, and break us apart in a matter of days" (p. 89), and he makes Eleanor promise, as he did the others, that she will leave if she begins to feel the house possessing her. The doctor warns her that he will feel no hesitation in sending her away if it becomes necessary. But Eleanor really has no place to go. When Theodora asks whether she is homesick, Eleanor answers: "'I've never been away from anywhere . . . so I suppose I've never been homesick.'"

After their first supernatural experience, occurring on their second night in Hill House, and consisting of the doctor and Luke chasing what appeared to be an animal into the garden, and Theodora and Eleanor being besieged by loud banging and pattering noises against their door, along with waves of freezing cold, each of them feels excitement and utter enjoyment from the whole experience. Eleanor, especially, is ecstatic, feeling that her joy is earned and deserved, coming after so long a wait. In trying to interpret the experience she says: "'... The sense was that it wanted to consume us, take us into itself, make us a part of the house, maybe ... .'" Missing this comment, Dr. Montague assures them all that no physical danger exists, for ghosts do not hurt anyone physically. It is the victim himself that brings about the damage: "'... No, the menace of the supernatural is that it attacks where modern minds are weakest, where we have abandoned our protective armor of superstition and have no substitute defense'" (p. 99). This little bit of useful wisdom soon becomes forgotten and
then remembered too late, for incidents of terror continue, and Eleanor feels singled out by the house. In chalk on the wall of the hallway is written: "HELP ELEANOR COME HOME" (p. 103), to which Eleanor responds with horror that "It knows my name!" (p. 104). From this point on Eleanor feels herself to be the outsider, the chosen one. For Eleanor, now, there is no other world but Hill House.

There are essentially three levels of experience going on in the novel. On one level is the doctor, Luke, and Theodora. Dr. Montague is an intellectual voyeur, knowing very much, but really understanding very little, especially when it comes to the mysteries of the human personality and the human heart. Terror and fear, the fatuous doctor believes, can be explained and controlled in terms of logic and will: "'Fear... is the relinquishment of logic, the willing relinquishment of reasonable patterns. We yield to it or we fight it, but we cannot meet it halfway" (p. 113). When it becomes apparent to him that Eleanor has lost control over herself, his only response is to banish her from the house. Theodora and Luke are motiveless in coming to Hill House, they see it as a kind of extraordinary lark. They experience horror and fear, but their egotism and selfishness protect them from succumbing to it, as well as desensitizing them from feeling much, if any, compassion for Eleanor. Indeed, they cruelly tease and mock her.

On another level, and providing a satiric and comic counterpoint to Dr. Montague, suggesting by implication that the doctor's imagination may be playing a greater role in his "scientific" investigation than he believes, is the arrival of Dr. Montague's wife and her companion, Arthur Parker. Mrs. Montague is an officious woman who specializes in communicating "pure love" to departed spirits. She demands the most "haunted"
room of Hill House for herself, and plans a systematic and thorough investigation of Hill House. Her aide, Arthur Parker, is the supercilious headmaster of an all-boys' school, who will stand guard all night long with his loaded revolver. Their first "systematic" act is to use planchette—a form of automatic writing, similar to a Ouija Board—which the doctor ridicules, but not, of course, to his wife's face. Oddly enough, Mrs. Montague and Arthur receive a "message" from their planchette that confirms the one the doctor and his assistants read earlier on the wall. Mrs. Montague reports that a "Nell" is lost and seeks a home.

The third, and deepest, level of experience is, of course, that of Eleanor, who comes to Hill House with very tenuous self-control and loses even that to the terrors of the house. After each experience Eleanor shows growing dissociation and fragmentation. The second inexplicable incident is the discovery in Theodora's room of what appears to be blood all over her clothes, bed, and on the wall, where another message is scrawled again calling for Eleanor to help and come home. Reflecting upon this later, Eleanor tells the others: "'Look. There's only one of me, and it's all I've got. I hate seeing myself dissolve and slip and separate so that I'm living in one half, my mind, and I see the other half of me helpless and frantic and driven and I can't stop it, but I know I'm not really going to be hurt and yet time is so long and even a second goes on and on and I could stand any of it if I could only surrender--" (pp. 113-114). During that night there are more sounds, but it is not clear whether anyone hears them but Eleanor. Her journey is into "inner space and time," where the real spectres lay in
wait, as R. D. Laing describes the schizophrenic experience:

Sometimes, having gone through the looking glass, through the
eye of the needle, the territory is recognized as one's lost
home, but most people now in inner space and time are, to begin
with, in unfamiliar territory and are frightened and confused.
They are lost. They have forgotten that they have been there
before. They clutch at chimeras. They try to retain their bear-
ings by compounding their confusion, by projection (putting the
inner on to the outer), and introjection (importing outer cate-
gories into the inner). They do not know what is happening, and
no one is likely to enlighten them."

As Eleanor's madness deepens, her self-consciousness becoming paranoia,
the others watch, stand by helpless and unhelping. Eleanor seeks to
learn the "pathways of the heart," turning to Luke for love, but he has
none to give. With the secular and much experienced Theodora, Eleanor
is often confused, for some of Theodora's ministrations verge on the
Lesbian. After being ridiculed by Theodora, Eleanor runs out of the
house into the darkness. Theodora joins her and together they share an
evil epiphany, reminiscent of the horror at the end of Poe's Narrative
of Arthur Gordon Pym. As they walk, all around them is the "awful
blackness and whiteness and luminous evil glow" (p. 125). They are sur-
rounded by the "annihilation of whiteness," as they follow the dark path
to a vision of a luminous garden where a family is having a picnic--
this, at any rate, is what Eleanor sees. When they return, Eleanor
feels that time, as she has always known it, has stopped.

During the next night's terror, which she shares with the others,
with only Mrs. Montague and Arthur missing it, Eleanor is ready to give
herself up to the house: "It is too much, she thought, I will relinquish
my possession of this self of mine, abdicate, give over willing what I
never wanted at all; whatever it wants of me it can have" (p. 144).
Eleanor cannot tell the noises outside her head from those inside. She
also has become actually sensitive to the house, like Poe's Usher: "She could even hear, with her new awareness of the house, the dust drifting gently in the attics, the wood aging" (p. 158). But before her dissolution into the house is complete, Eleanor tries to reach out to Theodora. She tells Theodora that after they leave Hill House she wants to come with her, because "'I want to be someplace where I belong'" (p. 147). Theodora puts her off: "'Do you always go where you're not wanted?'" Eleanor's response is pitiful: "'I've never been wanted anywhere!'" (p. 148). Eleanor desperately needs forgiveness for the responsibility she feels for her mother's death. Her experiences in the house serve mainly to aggravate her guilt, and when no one responds to her with any real understanding, she has no recourse but the house itself—the final regressive step. Now Eleanor haunts the house, roaming through it at night, dancing, pounding on the doors of her faithless friends. Eleanor is no longer an "I," but a "we"—"... I have broken the spell of Hill House and somehow come inside. I am home, she thought, and stopped in wonder at the thought. I am home, I am home, she thought; now to climb" (p. 164). And time, at last, is ended. Such is the depth of the schizophrenic experience, from which Eleanor has no guide to return.

When the others catch up to Eleanor, she is at the top of the spiral staircase in the library. The normally cowardly Luke manages to bring her down. To the lover of departed spirits of the other world, Mrs. Montague, Eleanor's "ridiculous performance" destroys any chance of receiving supernatural manifestations that night, which underscores her utter blindness to the very real "manifestations" in this world. The next morning, Dr. Montague tells Eleanor she must leave, for he "can't
take chances." But Eleanor cannot leave, she has no other home, she has never been so happy: "It's the only time anything's ever happened to me. I liked it!" (p. 171). She is forced into her car, and, as she drives off, she wonders whether there had ever been another word for her to say than "good-by." Eleanor steps hard on the accelerator, and just before she crashes into a tree, she has a kind of absurd epiphany, when she asks, "Why am I doing this? Why don't they stop me" (p. 174)? In Camus the absurd epiphany is that high moment of consciousness, when the person must choose between suicide and life. Eleanor did not have that choice, or it was too late to choose. Lionel Rubinoff writes that "modern man has been so violated that he is virtually looking for an excuse to go mad, and he will seize every opportunity to do so."\(^5\) Eleanor certainly has been violated, and exhibits that pattern Alfred Kazin suggests about many of Jackson's women--assault, deception, and betrayal.\(^6\) R. D. Laing asserts: "There are sudden, apparently inexplicable suicides that must be understood as the dawn of a hope so horrible and harrowing that it is unendurable."\(^7\) In the case of Eleanor, what the "unendurable" hope may be constitutes the real horror of the novel.

The structure of the novel is essentially circular, with the internal imagery reinforcing the overall structure. For Eleanor time begins with her journey to Hill House and ends with her fusion into it. The house itself is structured in concentric circles, and is full of enclosure images, which leads Luke to refer to the house as "a mother house." Eleanor's whole experience is like a whirlpool, moving from the outer rims of the house to its depths, which corresponds with her move from the lonely and loveless girl to her ego-fusion with the house. And
the novel ends as it begins, with the same words, to complete the circle: "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" (p. 174).

The title is suggestively ambiguous. It is the "haunting" of Hill House, not the "haunted," which implies that the haunting activity may not be proceeding only from the house, but also from the overly receptive occupants, whose imaginations may create as much as they discover in the house.

In her lecture "Experience and Fiction," given often at creative writing workshops, and collected by Stanley Edgar Hyman in the posthumous volume Come Along With Me, Shirley Jackson gives us an insight into the origin of the idea for The Haunting of Hill House. She writes:

I was working on a novel about a haunted house because I happened by chance, to read a book about a group of people, nineteenth-century psychic researchers, who rented a haunted house and recorded their impressions of the things they saw and heard and felt in order to contribute a learned paper to the Society for Psychic Research. They thought that they were being terribly scientific and proving all kinds of things, and yet the story that kept coming through their dry reports was not at all the story of a haunted house, it was the story of several earnest, I believe misguided, certainly determined people, with their differing motivations and backgrounds. 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.

The idea for the house itself, she says, came to her when she spotted an ugly burnt-out building from the train into New York City, which had stopped briefly at the 125th Street station. Later, reading books on architecture, magazines, and newspapers, she spotted a picture of a
house that resembled the hideous one she saw in New York City. She said that "it had the same air of disease and decay, and if ever a house looked like a candidate for a ghost, it was this one." She later learned that the house in the picture was in a California town, had been built by her grant-grandfather, and was gutted by fire, and probably set by the townspeople. She could not keep herself from writing the novel after learning this. An unacknowledged, but very possible, influence on The Haunting of Hill House is Henry James's novel Washington Square, which develops the theme of the young, defenseless protagonist trying to escape from the tyranny of an older, often more knowledgeable adult, and ends with the heroine living alone in her big house.

One of the most pervasive fears in contemporary American fiction, Tony Tanner, among others, observes, is the "nightmare of being totally controlled by unseen agencies and powers ... ." Ihab Hassan argues that the contemporary novelist can handle the bizarre and absurd texture of modern American life only by adopting deflection, both as vision and technique. To Hassan, the fiction of deflection is a spiritual gesture in response to the crisis of nihilism. Similarly, Alvin Greenberg argues that the "novel of disintegration" has been one of the primary responses to the sense of entropy and decay in contemporary life. While Shirley Jackson's fiction certainly is aware of the nightmarish quality of contemporary life, the social and institutional threats to the human self, her primary interest lies in that terror and horror found in the gap between our rationalistic pretensions and our primordial fears--the sense of individual powerlessness, of being caught up in something vast, mysterious, and evil, which antedates contemporary
fears of disintegration. Her novel *The Haunting of Hill House*, which recalls the subtle terror of Henry James's *The Turn of the Screw*, illustrates her fundamental awareness very well, and her sensitive portrayal of the descent into madness of a lonely and love-starved woman recalls the insight of another American writer, who also charted the depths of terror, Emily Dickinson:

One need not be a Chamber--to be Haunted--
One need not be a House--
The Brain has Corridors--surpassing
Material Place--

Far safer, of a Midnight Meeting
External Ghost
Than its interior Confronting--
That Cooler Host.

Far safer, through an Abbey gallop,
The Stones a'chase--
Than Unarmed, one's a'self encounter--
In lonesome Place--

Ourself behind ourself, concealed--
Should startle most--
Assassin hid in our Apartment
Be Horror's least.

The Body--borrows a Revolver--
He bolts the Door--
O'erlooking a superior spectre--
Or More--13
NOTES TO CHAPTER VIII


7Laing, p. 43.


9Jackson, "Experience and Fiction," p. 213.


CHAPTER IX

MAD COMPOSITION

On June 7, 1972, Dory Previn was interviewed on NBC's "Today Show." She was recently divorced from André Previn, who left her for Mia Farrow, in a rather publicized affair. She had been going through hell, and had recently been in a mental hospital for a nervous and emotional breakdown. As a songwriter, she put into her extremely honest lyrics much of the pain and torment she felt within her and observed about her in Hollywood. The interviewer, Barbara Walters, asked Dory if she could forgive those who had hurt her. Dory's answer was quite interesting, and in itself a telling commentary on modern life. She answered that there was no such thing as forgiveness. In her judgment she alone was responsible for her pain, and she felt no need to forgive herself, but, rather, needed to face herself and coexist with herself. She said that she had to learn how to live with that within her which caused pain and torment. This thing within, she argued, cannot be denied, for it is there like the crazy sister in the tower and cannot be escaped. For Dory Previn the world was without forgiveness, and she had to discover resources within herself to endure. There was no forgiveness in Eleanor Vance's world either, as we saw in The Haunting of Hill House, Eleanor had not the internal resources for self-preservation in a world devoid of love and concern, which stood by and watched her sink into madness and suicide.
Dark and mysterious are the ways of guilt and innocence, crime and punishment, forgiveness and atonement. No dogma or creed can define them wholly, though great divines have tried for thousands of years. Perhaps beneath the dynamics of sin and forgiveness there lies the sense, rarely conscious, of the sin unforgivable, of the stain that cannot be removed, which gives rise to continual, and often inexplicable, bloodletting, to mindless scapegoating, to madness and violence. Some such sense is the source for the dark power and ultimately wordless quality of works such as Macbeth, Hawthorne's The Scarlet Letter, and some of his tales. It is this sense of primal sin and darkness that obsesses much of the fiction of Shirley Jackson. It animates "The Lottery," and is the real substance of her sixth and last complete novel, We Have Always Lived in the Castle (1962). Here too is a world where forgiveness is lacking, where love is ambiguous, where hatred and hostility are all too ready to surface into action.

The movement of the novel is from a precarious and volatile form of order through chaos to a new order of things, also fragile and precarious, but perhaps enduring. The novel moves from a situation where the Blackwoods are caught between internal fear and external anger, through the chaos of terror and violence, during which time the top story of the Blackwood mansion is gutted by fire and the house ravaged by hostile villagers, to a new order, not wholly of this world, which is referred to as "life on the moon."

The novel begins six years after a terrible, unsolved crime—the mass murder by arsenic poisoning of four members of the Blackwood family. Constance Blackwood, now 28, who was accused but acquitted for
lack of evidence, lives in the stately Blackwood home with her younger sister Mary Katherine, better known as Merricat, and with the sole survivor of the murders, the aging, senile, and decrepit Uncle Julien. Life in the home is nearly idyllic. The house is immaculate and luxurious. Constance, as her name suggests, is a virtual handmaiden of nature, raising vegetables and fruits for her exquisite cooking and canning. Beautiful flowers adorn the house and grounds. Merricat is free to roam and play all over the Blackwood estate, which stands behind fences and locked gates. The sisters receive only a few callers for tea once a week. All appears to be love and happiness.

In contrast to Jackson's previous novels, We Have Always Lived in the Castle is narrated in the first person by the obviously insane Merricat, whose distorted vision paradoxically provides accurate and truthful views. She gives us one of the most startling openings in contemporary literature:

My name is Mary Katherine Blackwood. I am eighteen years old, and I live with my sister Constance. I have often thought that with any luck at all I could have been born a werewolf, because the middle fingers on both my hands are the same length, but I have had to be content with what I had. I dislike washing myself, and dogs, and noise. I like my sister Constance, and Richard Plantagenet, and Amanita phalloids, the death-cup mushroom. Everyone else in my family is dead.¹

It is through Merricat's eyes that we see the life of the villagers, which stands in polar contrast to life in the Blackwood mansion. She must go to the village twice a week for groceries, which fills her with dread, so much so that she wishes she "could walk home across the sky instead of through the village." While it is a sunshiny, late April day, she sees only that "the false glorious promises of spring were everywhere, showing oddly through the village grime" (p. 4). In this
village the women show only "grey evil weariness," and live in "dirty little houses." Because, Merricat tells us, "the people of the village have always hated us" (i.e., the Blackwoods), they do not receive mail or have a telephone, largely because they were besieged with insults, hecklers, and threats after the murders. The sunshine in the village is "misleading," for all is ugliness--"whatever planned to be colorful lost its heart quickly in the village" (p. 9). Merricat wishes the villagers a most painful and dreadful death, so great is her fear and loathing. To shop, she must face "their flat grey faces with the hating eyes," wonders why it was worth while for them even to exist, and feels so vulnerable that she says: "I stopped in the doorway of the grocery, feeling around inside myself for some thought to make me safe" (p. 13). It is against "the ugly people with their evil faces" (p. 15) that she must steel herself to endure the shopping trip. And nearly always she is heckled or laughed at. In Stella's lunch room she stops for coffee and must endure the sharp sarcasm of Jim Donell, the village fire chief, who goes out of his way to hate the Blackwoods deliberately. To escape such viciousness, Merricat fantasizes a life on the moon, where she lives in peace with her sister, where they "spoke a soft, liquid tongue, and sang in the starlight, looking down on the dead dried world" (p. 23).

The volatile tension between the lovely, pastoral Blackwood home and the hostile, resentful village wasteland cannot endure. The tension breaks into violence not long after cousin Charles Blackwood comes to visit. Cousin Charles, thirty-two, ostensibly comes to help the Blackwood sisters. He tells Constance that he would have come sooner but his father forbade any contact with her branch of the family after the
murders. Now that his father is dead he is free to come to their aid. Constance believes him and comes under his influence. Merricat can see that Constance is captivated by Cousin Charles; it is "almost as though in the house of her life there had always been a room kept for Cousin Charles" (p. 92). Merricat's greatest fear is that Constance will break her self-imposed exile and imprisonment and return to the outside world. Whenever Constance speaks of leaving "the castle," Merricat is chilled and terrified. She asks Constance, "'Where could we go?... What place would be better for us than this? Who wants us, outside? The world is full of terrible people!'" (p. 78). But Constance is not worried, and appears to be gaining courage that she could return to the outside world. To Merricat, Cousin Charles is a direct threat to her welfare, but she also sees through his apparent helpfulness to his real nature--she calls him a "ghost and a demon." Merricat must reseal the magic she believes was broken when Cousin Charles had come in the house; she must break his spell upon the house and cleanse it of his presence.

Cousin Charles's true designs soon become evident. He takes upon himself the role of master of the house, sleeping in the bedroom of his deceased uncle, whom he resembles. He rummages through the house looking for the Blackwood fortune, since his father left nothing at his death. His venality becomes furious when he uncovers a box of silver dollars which Merricat had buried on the edge of the creek, and finds the solid gold watch and chain nailed to a tree. This is proof enough for him that he is dealing with a madhouse. He realizes Merricat's opposition to him, and he is disgusted by Uncle Julien dribbling his food, and plans to dispose of them both. But before he can carry out his
threats, Merricat's increasingly desperate subversive activities lead to a fire in Charles's room, where she tossed his still-hot pipe into the wastebasket. To Merricat the fire will cleanse their house of the defilement that Charles brought to it with his endless talking that "made a black noise" in the house. When Charles discovers the flames, he runs to the village for help.

Throughout the novel Uncle Julien is the voice of the past. His mind is arrested on the fateful day of the murders, and he keeps going over and over all the events and details of that day. He has all the newsclippings, and has made extensive notes, dealing with the murders and trial, from which he plans to write a book. At one point, he tells Constance of his plans for a particular chapter: "'I shall commence, I think, with a slight exaggeration and go on from there into an outright lie..."' (p. 90). Cousin Charles tries to reprimand his snivelling uncle for talking about that day all the time; he says it should all be forgotten. Because Cousin Charles refuses to tell what he knows of the day of the murder, Uncle Julien fears that he "'shall be forced to invent, to fictionalize, to imagine'" (p. 95). The memory of that event is virtually all that Uncle Julien has left, since his survival of the poisoning left him a cripple. He keeps turning to Constance for reassurance—"it did happen, didn't it?" he continues to ask. Constance assures him that it did happen, it was real. But the lonely Constance cannot see the real nature of Cousin Charles that even the senile Uncle Julien can see, when, in a flash of lucidity, he calls Charles a dishonest bastard.
The scene of the fire at the Blackwood house is one of the most horrifying in all of Shirley Jackson's fiction. It goes beyond the sinister reaction of the neighbors to the loss of Caroline Desmond in Jackson's first novel *The Road Through the Wall*. It equals in horror the climax to her story "The Lottery." It summons up the nightmarish dimensions of the witches' Sabbath at the heart of Hawthorne's "Young Goodman Brown." The fire becomes the occasion for a virtual celebration of village discontent, hostility, and hatred. The hateful Jim Donell, dressed in his fire-chief's hat, leads the villagers to the house. Uncle Julien wheels himself to his room, and Merricat and Constance hide in the vines on the porch. The only lights are from the fire and the headlights of the cars. Merricat sees a mass of nameless faces, and hears waves of laughter as the house burns. Among the smoke, shouting, and laughter could be heard occasional laughing calls: "Why not let it burn?" As the damage increases, the glee spreads through the crowd. When the fire is finally put out, the crowd is disappointed, but waits quietly. Jim Donell, symbolically, removes his hat, takes up a rock, and smashes it through the tall windows of the Blackwood drawing room. This is the signal the crowd awaited: "A wall of laughter rose and grew behind him and then, first the boys on the steps and then the other men and at last the women and the small children, they moved like a wave at our house" (p. 155). During the rampage, when chairs are smashed against walls, curtains torn, carpets soiled, china and silver broken, and food thrown all around, Cousin Charles could be heard asking for help to remove the safe. Merricat and Constance try to escape, but are thwarted and surrounded at every turn by the dancing and singing villagers. Jim Clarke,
an old Blackwood friend, tries to stop the villagers: "What the holy goddam devil is going on here? . . . Crazy fools, . . . crazy drunken fools. . . . Has everyone gone crazy in here?" (p. 156)? But the villagers continue to taunt and threaten the sisters until they are told that Uncle Julien is dead from heart failure. Only then does the crowd stop and leave for home. Merricat leads Constance, who had covered her eyes through it all, to her secret hiding place in the woods. Merricat thinks: "Someday we would go to the moon" (p. 160). It is interesting that during all of this—the fire and ensuing mob violence—a kind of role reversal occurs. The usually dependent Merricat becomes guide and protector of Constance. It is Merricat also who needs to confirm the reality of what happened for Constance who believes she dreamed it all.

Before their lunar existence takes shape, while in the forest Merricat confesses to Constance what the reader has suspected all along. When Merricat threatens "to put death in all their food and watch them die" (p. 161), Constance asks her if that was what she had done before, and Merricat answers yes. It comes out that Merricat had put arsenic in the sugar, knowing that Constance never used it, and she herself was in her room at the time. It is this terrible secret that the accused, acquitted, but never exonerated, Constance has kept silently for six years. She also blames herself for all that had happened.

The next morning the sisters return to the house, "trying to understand its ugliness and ruin and shame" (p. 167). They have only one floor left to live in and most of that is destroyed. They clean up what they can, board up their windows, blockade the pathways to the backyard, and bolt the doors. Well-meaning friends come to help, but the sisters
remain silent to their calls. Many of the villagers return at night and leave baskets of food, some with notes of apology: "'This is for the dishes,' or 'We apologize about the curtains,' or 'Sorry for your harp'" (p. 204). Cousin Charles makes another attempt to get at the Blackwood safe, claiming that unrequited love was the cause of everything. But he too finds only silence when he knocks, and then laughter when he drives away. Strangers continue to come, some picnic on the lawn, often children run and play. One woman tells vile stories to her children of the sisters who torture and eat children. Merricat can see that she is one of the "bad ones," and she observes that the woman's mouth was like a snake. Another woman comments that the house "looks like a tomb," for the vines had nearly covered the burned roof of the house. Later, the house is so covered over that it was barely recognizable as a house. Commenting on the strangers who come to the house, Merricat says: "'Poor strangers... They have so much to be afraid of'" (p. 214). This is life on the moon—a new order, with new patterns and rules, has emerged—but it is not quite what Merricat supposed it would be. Merricat assures us, however, that they are very happy, never again having to relate to the world, and living in a kind of monastic renunciation, an exile symbolizing deep human alienation.

The novel closes with the image of a ruin nearly completely covered with vines with two sisters huddled in fragile happiness within it. As we have seen throughout our discussion of Jackson's fiction, the gothic is an architectural literature, the house symbolizing many things. In old gothic literature, as Devendra P. Varma tells us, "a ruin is not only a thing of loveliness but also an expression of Nature's power over
the creations of man. . . . Ruins are proud effigies of sinking great-
ness, the visual and static representations of tragic mystery. . . .\textsuperscript{2}
There is indeed a sense of tragic mystery about the fall of the Black-
wod house. One feels that it is not so much the triumph of nature over
human arrogance and pride that the vine-covered ruin represents. Rather
it can be seen as nature covering and protecting her own against the as-
saults of a vengeful and violent world. In a very real sense, the Black-
wood sisters are children of nature, though not in perfect harmony with
it because of the lingering guilt-burden of the murders. Constance, as
we have noted earlier, is a kind of goddess of the hearth--planting,
preserving, cooking and cleaning, all done in complete joy. Her favor-
ite books deal with gardening and cooking. Merricat, too, in her mad-
ness, is a child of nature, running freely about the Blackwood farm,
playing in the tall grass, listening to silent cat-stories her pet cat
Jonas tells her. But she will suddenly shift into a violent act--killing
a whole nest of baby snakes, for instance, because she does not like
them. And her favorite reading is history and fairy tales. But the
Blackwood girls did commit a crime and their house fell. The ruin, how-
ever, not only symbolizes their crime, but also the crime of dark retri-
bution perpetrated against them in anarchic passion by the maddened vil-
lagers.

Of all the novels of Shirley Jackson, We Have Always Lived in
the Castle comes closest to being what Richard Chase calls "the profound
poetry of disorder." It exhibits that quality Ihab Hassan sees in the
gothic: "The Gothic insists on spiritualization of matter itself, and
it insists on subjectivism."\textsuperscript{3} This quality is the result of a sensitive
blending and fusing of the gothic with the tone and structure of classic fairy tales. This is no accident, for Shirley Jackson was keenly knowledgeable of ancient tales and folklore, and her husband, Stanley Edgar Hyman, was a folklorist of considerable note. We have seen features of the fairy tale in her earlier work. Mrs. Halloran's dream of a kind of reverse "Hansel and Gretel" story in The Sundial is one example. She employs variations of the "Rapunzel" tale in several of her short stories, such as in "The Visit." In many other modern novels there are underground connections with fairy tales, which Alison Lurie has excellently pointed out.4

Throughout We Have Always Lived in the Castle there is evidence that we are dealing in part with a fairy tale. We have just noted Merricat's preference in books for fairy tales, after which she may be patterning her life. The story she narrates is her own fairy tale that she is telling to us. To Merricat, Constance is "a fairy princess" "with long golden hair and eyes as blue as the crayon could make them." When she and Constance escape to the woods after the fire, she likens themselves to "children in a story." She describes her house as "a castle, turreted and open to the sky" (p. 177). When they first begin to explore their gutted and damaged house, they are appalled and shocked. Merricat tells us her reaction: "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" (pp. 167-8). It is the right fairy tale, all right; it is the only one they have. The basic structure of the plot is similar to that of a fairy tale, as well, with, of course,
significant differences. It can be summarized as follows: Once there were two sisters who lived in a castle with their aged uncle. For six years an evil spell existed over their castle, for one of the sisters committed a crime, the other kept it a secret, the uncle survived it. All around them lived hostile and hateful people. One day their distant cousin came to help them. However, he brought them distress, from which he promised to deliver them. During a great fire, all the villagers came and ravaged the castle. The two sisters escaped, the uncle died. But the spell at last was broken, and the two sisters returned to live in their castle, locked in more securely than ever. Did they live happily ever after? They would often say that they were happy.

Throughout this discussion of the fiction of Shirley Jackson, we have observed characters beginning in, or brought into, madness, often as a result of the disintegrative pressures of modern society and culture. With R. D. Laing we have learned to ask who is mad and who is insane. No clear line can be drawn between madness and sanity, for in a fragmented and alienated world it is madness to adjust, to rationalize the abundant terrors about us. As we have seen in many of Jackson's characters, the desperate struggles with the demons of modern life—loneliness and alienation--often lead to the loss of self, madness, and defeat. Madness, paradoxically, thus has revealed significant truths about the conditions of contemporary existence. In addition, we have seen the many incognitoes of evil, which lay not far beneath the surface of our daily lives, and give rise both to small cruelties and to unbridled terror, but cannot be explained in psychological or sociological terms. In *We Have Always Lived in the Castle* we deal with the dark
ambiguities of madness and love, of guilt and innocence, which cannot be traced to anything tangible and rational. The use of the childlike protagonist—and both Merricat and Constance are childlike—points to a central paradox present in many novels of disintegration, which Alvin Greenberg observes: "The central paradox of the novel of disintegration is its demand that in a decaying universe where all will eventually be reduced to chaos, its protagonist must struggle against the irresistible stream of events to maintain (at times even to achieve) the integrity of a self already doomed." In such a world, Greenberg argues, the adult is a metaphor of decay, while the child or childlike protagonist represents wholeness and associationism. While this applies, on one level, to much of what Merricat and Constance struggle to do, the situation is complicated by the fact that while Merricat is childlike, she is also mad, dissociated, doubtless as a result of many factors: the treatment she received from her parents, her crime, and the continual harrassment by the villagers. This makes her struggle all the more difficult and virtually hopeless.

Near the end of the novel the well-intentioned Jim Clarke comes to the Blackwood home to check on the welfare of the sisters. He fumbles around in the dark trying to get an answer, and says to the doctor who accompanies him: "'Black as sin out here!'" (p. 187). Inside the house all is warm, bright, and clean. This kind of polarity exists through the novel, and is the basis for the interpretation Stuart C. Woodruff gives to it. To Woodruff the real horror of the novel lies not in Merricat's mass poisoning, as terrible as that is, but rather in the virtually inexplicable madness and violence of the so-called normal and ordinary people of the world outside the Blackwood home. Through Merricat
we come to see the Blackwood house as a sanctuary of love against the
world's meanness, cruelty, and terror. Woodruff places great emphasis
upon Constance as a truly sacrificial figure whose forgiving love trans-
formed the Blackwood tragedy into a life where the fragile qualities of
love and devotion are allowed to flourish. Woodruff argues: "The pur-
pose of the novel is not to shock us with Merricat's bizarre crime, but
to define the quality of new life that is its aftermath." The conflict
between Merricat and Cousin Charles and between the Blackwoods and the
villagers underscore the difference between the two worlds. While this
reading is essentially valid, I think it makes the contrasts, at some
points, too clear-cut, thus also missing another dimension to the novel.

Woodruff claims that Merricat's murders are more defensible,
based on more understandable motives, and make more sense than what Jim
Donell and the other villagers do after the fire. Despite the fact that
life in the Blackwood home does appear to be superior to the village
wasteland, there is not enough firm evidence to conclude that Merricat's
crime was more justifiable than the violence of the villagers, which, in
my judgment, is just the point--neither crime is fully comprehensible,
in neither case can we ascertain the motives. It is true that we glean
some clues that indicate a rather less than happy homelife for Merricat.
Her father emerges as a cold and arrogant figure, who was resented by
both family and villagers. Merricat, apparently, was exposed to a good
deal of family arguments and shouting. But she herself was no angel--
Constance refers to her as "'a wicked, disobedient child,'" who was sent
to her room without dinner many times, as she was on the night of the
murders. In a rather ambiguous scene, Merricat goes into the old sum-
merhouse and imagines herself at the table with all her family. Woodruff
sees this scene as a re-enactment of the last evening at the dinner table, and interprets the imagined remarks to be "brutal sarcasm" directed at Merricat by her father. While this interpretation is possible, another reading makes more sense. Rather than memories of sarcasm, the remarks can be seen to be wishful projections of a mind burdened with guilt and longing for love. They are exaggerated fantasies of a mad mind trying to create for herself a self that is loved, respected, and so good that punishment will never be necessary. "'Mary Katherine will never allow herself to do anything inviting punishment!'" (p. 139). The fact is, however, she did do punishable acts, including murdering her parents and brother and aunt, for which she was never punished.

The character of Constance is not as constant as Woodruff portrays it. She is indeed warm and loving, and did take upon herself the guilt of Merricat's crime. Her love and forgiving nature did create a sanctuary for Merricat and Uncle Julien. She is, however, a kind of accomplice to Merricat's crime. At the time of the poisonings, she washed the sugar bowl that contained the lethal arsenic, which she bought to kill rats. When she was arrested, she told the police that her people deserved to die. While she continues to help Uncle Julien recall that last evening, she herself is blind to what is real in other situations. She is completely taken in by Cousin Charles, while Merricat senses his evil two days before he arrives. When the villagers attack the house, she covers her eyes, refusing to see their evil. She is, as Woodruff suggests, too good to be true, but she changes somewhat in the end. After the fire, Constance can see more clearly--she can see Cousin Charles for what he is, and even wishes that he would shoot himself in
their driveway. While her nature is still loving and selfless, she is no longer blind to the evil in the world, nor so naive as to trust only appearances, which makes her final isolation even more tragic.

To comprehend why the villagers went berserk, Woodruff rightly observes, we need to reflect upon "the still larger mysteries of hatred and violence in the human heart." But he goes on to say: "There is no rational explanation for such things, or if there is, it is one we would prefer not to contemplate."8 This is precisely the point. The force of the novel is such that such mysteries are all we have to contemplate. Not to face these dark questions of human nature is to miss the deep intent of the novel.

In the beginning of this chapter I indicated that We Have Always Lived in the Castle, as does "The Lottery," has to do with a kind of primordial sense of sin and defilement, which casts an ambiguous character upon love and forgiveness. Ihab Hassan hints at something like this in his remarks about the novel. The conflict in the novel brings into focus "the human ambiguities of guilt and atonement, love and hate, health and psychosis. There is nothing illusory about these ambivalences, and also nothing final."9 The novel explores the dark dynamics of a virtually pre-ethical level of human experience--defilement, dread, retribution, revenge. This is a level where evil and personal suffering are still connected. Paul Ricoeur's lucid analysis of the symbolism of evil is helpful at this point. He writes: "Dread of the impure and rites of purification are in the background of all our feeling and all our behavior relating to fault."10 Fault gives rise to the anticipation of punishment, which strengthens the bond between doing evil and suffering
ill. Dread is the result of the connection of defilement with vengeance: "suffering is the price for the violation of order; suffering is to 'satisfy' the claim of purity for revenge," or, to summarize: "Suffering evil clings to doing evil as punishment proceeds ineluctably from defilement."\footnote{11}

The ultimate clash in the novel is that between an ethical order of innocent sacrificial love and forgiveness and a pre-ethical sense of defilement and vengeance, a sense of stain that can be cleansed only by punishment. Constance seeks to regenerate through love and forgiveness by taking the guilt upon herself. The villagers, representative of the world, cannot or will not forgive without an act of vengeance, or retribution--hence, the mindless outbreak of violence and rage against the helpless Blackwood sisters. All through the novel there are references to cleaning--Constance cleans the house and kitchen constantly, Merricat feels compelled to cleanse the house of Cousin Charles' evil stain, the villagers try to cleanse by fire and damage. The forgiveness Constance wrought was somehow not complete, it left matters somehow unsettled. It was not quite a real atonement. Perhaps, then, unconsciously, the madness and violence of the villagers was somehow necessary, it had its role, its part to play in the mysterious dynamics of forgiveness and atonement. Must we conclude that chaos is necessary for a new order? It did produce Merricat's confession. It did lead to gestures of penance and forgiveness on the part of some villagers who realized their wrong-doing. And it led to a new order of love, though fragile and precarious because the world about it is still uncomprehending and unable to accept a world where forgiveness obviates retribution. Love
again seeks to bring order out of chaos and strength out of weakness, and perhaps the ruin of the castle will symbolize that, as well as the shame of lovelessness.

What John Hawkes wrote of several authors influential to him could apply equally to Shirley Jackson's work. There is "a quality of coldness, detachment, ruthless determination to face up to the enormities of ugliness and potential failure within ourselves and in the world about us, and to bring to this exposure a savage or saving comic spirit and the saving beauties of language. The need is to maintain the truth of the fractured picture; to expose, ridicule, attack, but always to create and to throw into new light our potential for violence and absurdity as well as for graceful action."12 This applies well to We Have Always Lived in the Castle, where disorderly or mad love summoned up evil darkness, setting in relief the bright light of forgiveness. As Paul Ricoeur declares: "The fear of not loving enough is the purest and worst of fears."13 In Shirley Jackson's tale, poetic justice and moral virtue do not win out as in many gothics and fairy tales, for she is true to her vision of the evil of our time. And she places her trust in the fact that if a fairy tale is good and powerful, one need not explain or defend it, one need only tell it.
NOTES TO CHAPTER IX

1Shirley Jackson, *We Have Always Lived in the Castle* (New York: The Viking Press, 1962), p. 1. Further references to this novel will be cited parenthetically in the text.


7Woodruff, p. 156

8Woodruff, p. 159.


11Ricoeur, pp. 30-31.

12Quoted in Tony Tanner, *City of Words*, p. 204.

13Ricoeur, p. 45.
CHAPTER X

SUPERNATURAL DABBING AND OTHER FUN

I

The short story, as William Peden and other critics note, is a perfect vehicle to reflect and capture the bizarre and bewildering complexity of our increasingly fast-paced and ever-changing culture. The study of the short fiction of a period can provide the reader with a good sense of the ground flow of human consciousness and the period's sense of human possibility. Too often, however, short fiction does not receive sufficient attention by reviewers and critics as it is published, but receives comment only when several years of stories are gathered under one title, usually by a noted author. The critical bias favors the novel over the short story, thus pressuring most writers to attempt novels, as L. E. Sissman points out. In addition, the number of magazines publishing new short fiction has declined in recent years. The danger in this is that we will lose an important gauge to our times through neglect.

One of the finest craftsmen of the short story was Shirley Jackson, who wrote scores of short stories in many magazines, from the lofty and sedate Atlantic Monthly to the ephemeral Woman's Day, which thousands of women buy at the supermarket checkstand. Of these hundreds of stories, only a little over forty have been collected. Some were
collected in her two books dealing with raising a family: *Life Among Savages* and *Raising Demons*. She wrote generally three kinds of short story: the domestic or family narrative, usually in a light vein; a more serious story which seeks to delineate the horror and cruelty in the ordinary, and often probing social issues; finally, a story which employs fantasy or the supernatural to reveal human madness and the darkness of human nature, in often ordinary and everyday situations. In chapter four we discussed her first collection of stories gathered under the title *The Lottery* in 1949. In this present chapter we will explore a novel fragment and fourteen stories collected posthumously by Stanley Edgar Hyman in 1968 under the title *Come Along With Me*. The fourteen stories are a miscellany from all periods of Jackson's career, and provide an interesting cross-section of her work. In addition, we shall consider several uncollected stories to fill out our analysis of her short fiction.

II

At the time of her death in 1965, Shirley Jackson was working on a novel, which her husband, Stanley Edgar Hyman, described as "savagely comic in tone," and was entitled *Come Along With Me*. And what an invitation this was to be! Abnormality and the supernatural combine to produce a comedy that is funny, as Granville Hicks puts it, "in a high-pitched, furious, somehow menacing fashion." In these pages, we meet one of the strangest characters in all her fiction. An as-yet nameless widow gets off the train in a strange city in quest of "fine high gleefulness." She has just buried her artist-husband Hughie, and, after selling everything she could (storing Hughie's things, in case he came
back!), she took off to renew the talent she possessed (or possessed her) as a child, some sort of supernatural clairvoyancy: "Ever since I can remember ... I have been seeing and hearing things no one else could see and hear. By now I can control the nuisance to some extent. It disappeared entirely when I married Hughie; I have reason to believe now that it is coming back."3 At the train station, she meets a lady who tells her about her sister who has "this little crippled kid," and who might rent her a room. Her age and size are both forty-four ("in case it's absolutely vital to know"), and as she walks up the steps to the big rooming house on Smith Street, she gives herself the name Mrs. Angela Motorman, "who never walked on earth before" (p. 18). Her landlady, Mrs. Faun, whose son Tom is crippled, asks Mrs. Motorman what she does. Mrs. Motorman answers: "'I dabble in the supernatural. Traffic with spirits. Seances, messages, psychic advice, that kind of thing!" (p. 20). D. H. Lawrence, at the end of his remarks on Hawthorne's The Blithedale Romance, writes: "And they are all disintegrating, so they take to psychic tricks. It is a certain sign of the disintegration of the psyche in a man, and much more so in a woman, when she takes to spiritualism, and table-rapping, and occult messages, or witchcraft and supernatural powers of that sort. When men want to be supernatural, be sure that something has gone wrong in their natural stuff. More so, even with a woman."4 Here, then, is our clue to what is going on in Come Along With Me--human fragmentation and the desperate, often comic attempts to prevent it.

Through the first-person narration of the newly self-created Angela Motorman we are taken on a madcap tour of our increasingly
disjunctive world. Through her we see the strange discontinuousness of things in a non-consecutive universe, the gaps of which are filled in by a supernatural fancy. Angela is a protean figure, an inventive witch, creating as she goes along, which, she says, is her way with almost everything. While she says that she is "starved for strangers," and wants to talk to people, she has never needed companions--"all I had was myself" (p. 23). She tries to make the most of every encounter, no matter how slight. After agitating the streetcar driver, and provoking from him a dirty look, she says: "... I must say I like it better when they look at you; a lot of the time people seem to be scared of finding out that other people have real faces, as though if you looked at a stranger clearly and honestly and with both eyes you might find yourself learning something you didn't want to know" (p. 15). Her inventiveness, however, does not shirk from the truth. When Tom, the landlady's crippled son, says to Angela that "'Motorman's a funny name,'" Angela tells him that she just made it up, which, of course, she really did. After the rather poor showing at her first seance, during which she only made contact with a few lonely spirits carrying messages mostly for herself, she decides to try her hand at shoplifting. The salesgirl sees Mrs. Motorman put a candle in her pocket, and then comes up to her and asks her if she needs any help. Mrs. Motorman replies, "'No, just trying my hand at shoplifting,'" (p. 37) and puts the candle back laughing. As can be seen, thus far, Mrs. Motorman is a rather inept dabbler. Even as a girl, when she first started with her supernatural experiences, she was confused. One girl hung herself after being given a message from the prescient Angela. She tells us: "I knew a lot about people
that they never knew I knew, but I never seemed to have much sense, probably because one thing I never really knew was whether what I was doing was real or not" (p. 27).

Mrs. Faun is the counterpoint to Mrs. Motorman. She is the voice of practicality, and her orientation is wholly this-worldly. When Mrs. Motorman tells Mrs. Faun that she wants to do a seance, Mrs. Faun asks her, "'Are you sure . . . that you are not tampering with things better left alone!'" (p. 31)? After the seance Mrs. Faun remarks about the people who attended: "'If they were interested in real life they wouldn't have come to you. You'll find out . . . They're all crazy, . . . all they want is to be told what to do. They wait for some crack-pot to give them the word'" (p. 34). Mrs. Faun's cynicism comes out in other ways as well. When her crippled son is wheeled home from school, she remarks: "'Little early today. . . . Must have run all the way'" (p. 21), and then laughs to herself. Her other conversations with Mrs. Motorman reflect the rather blackish hue of the novel's humor. In one, they compare notes over diseases and death:

"I had a friend who had cancer," I said, "but they cut off her right leg."
"That's never enough," she said. "Mark me, she'll be back for her other leg. I knew a woman once who lost both arms that way."
"My uncle fell under a truck," I said. I wondered if I should tell her about my great-aunt (p. 20).

And when the two women first meet they exchange these words:

"I've just buried my husband," I said.
"I've just buried mine," she said.
"Isn't it a relief?" I said.
"What?" she said.
"It was a very sad occasion," I said.
"You're right," she said, "it's a relief" (p. 19).
It is unfortunate for us that we shall never know where Mrs. Motorman's dabbling and meddling would have taken us, but it is clear that a good deal of sharp comedy lay ahead. It is also clear that the possibilities of evil were to be revealed in their all too familiar human shapes by a woman exchanging one form of isolation and loneliness for another, perhaps deeper, loneliness. As Guy Davenport suggests, her new loneliness may be more tolerable only because it is her choice and on her terms: "Only things haunted by our own touch are worth having; our hell is to live with things haunted by another's hands. Shirley Jackson knew better than any writer since Hawthorne the value of haunted things."5

III

Shirley Jackson wrote scores of stories in a generally light vein dealing with domestic or family life. Most of these were based on, or reflect, her own experiences of child-raising and married life. She could capture well the tense, almost fantastic world of children and adolescents. Most of these stories appeared in such magazines as Woman's Day, McCall's, Ladies' Home Journal, and Good Housekeeping. In all of these stories she could skillfully touch the appropriate human chord without ever falling into sentimentality. To the burdens and anxieties of family life she brought the leavening ingredient of laughter. One instance of this kind of story, and one of her husband's favorites, is "The Night We All Had Grippe," which appeared initially in Harper's in 1952, and then became a part of Life Among the Savages. It is reprinted also in Come Along With Me. It very funnyly recounts the passage of grippe through the family and all the adjustments a family makes during
an illness—sleeping in different rooms, in different beds, losing pillows and blankets, spilling juices, and making incredible demands on mother. The story humorously illustrates that "we are none of us, however, capable of solving the puzzles we work up for ourselves in the oddly diffuse patterns of our several lives . . . ." A similar story is "Pajama Party," which shows the strains on the family when five pre-adolescent girls have a pajama party lasting to all hours of the night.

The occurrences of daily life are so filled with improbabilities that if they did not constitute much of what we call reality we would suspect an unnecessary tampering with the plot. Many of Jackson's lighter sketches take this as a given, and show that even in such an improbable world as ours many people still fall in love, make up after arguments, and win unexpected prizes. Two small girls turn a dime, given them by a man down on his luck, into a "magic dime" that gives the holder three wishes in the story "The Wishing Dime." The imagination of the children turns the dime into a token of reconciliation for two teenagers and brings a little luck to the man who gave them the dime. After a whole series of misadventures due to misunderstandings, two young people, who live in adjoining apartments, and whose phone numbers are only a digit off, end up getting married in the story "About Two Nice People."

Richer and more penetrating are the stories "The Lovely Night" and "Journey with a Lady." The first one recreates the plight of a shy but lovely teenage girl, who is new in town. She falls in with two fat, ugly, and loud girls, who try to dominate her socially, because they are unpopular. While the timid Natalie feels for the boorish and crude
girls, she knows that she must break from them or be forever trapped. The story captures well the longings and ambivalences of adolescence, the little acts and posturings which seek attention and recognition. Natalie realizes that she has to make the break on her own, that she cannot wait for others to take care of her. In "Journey with a Lady" we are shown the exciting, adventurous world of a nine-year-old boy going alone on a train to visit his grandfather. Joe is thrilled about his trip, has a dollar in his pocket, and is embarrassed over his mother's doting attentions at the train station. On the train a woman sits next to him and begins talking with him. At first, he is put off, thinking that she is a typical adult who can only ask questions. Soon, however, he learns that she is being sought by the police for stealing $2,000. This makes the lady more attractive, and he plays along with her when she tells the policeman that the boy is her son. They become friends and exchange confidences, the boy confessing the theft of a dime from his mother's purse. When the train stops, the lady is taken into custody, and Joe meets his grandfather, who does not believe his adventure.

In "Aunt Gertrude," Jackson draws a fine portrait of the kind of old woman of whom children are afraid and suspect of being a children-eating witch. The narrator brings her children to meet her aged aunt, who lives alone among her cats and roses. When she hears the crusty old voice, she "recognized clearly that Aunt Gertrude was very likely still the wickedest and liveliest old lady in the world." Another aspect of human emotion is rendered sensitively in the story "Most Wonderful Thing." It is a touching portrait of a woman in the hospital after
losing her third baby, a loss, perhaps, that only a woman can fully fathom. She shares a room with a young woman who just delivered a baby she did not want. Elizabeth, who lost her baby, feeds the baby for the young girl who did not want it, and tells her of her loss. The young girl takes a new attitude toward her baby girl, and even names her after Elizabeth.

A second grouping of Jackson's short stories contains the more serious ones, which explore the many faces of everyday terror, the evil in the ordinary and familiar, and often probing social problems, such as prejudice, the city-country conflict, and the force of repression and subtle betrayal in marriage. In the volume *Come Along With Me*, there are some of Jackson's earliest stories, indeed, one was written when she was an undergraduate at Syracuse University in 1938. Some of these are little more than skillful character sketches. One instance of this is the story "Janice," which, in a little over one page of dialogue, tells the plight of a girl who tells her friends that she nearly killed herself because she could not return to school. It recalls the economy of some of Hemingway's dialogues, such as in his story "Hills Like White Elephants." In the story "Tootie in Peonage" an ultimately sympathetic portrait emerges of a crude, unkempt, and ill-bred eighteen-year-old girl. The backwoods Tootie comes to work for the city-bred folks who need child care and housework done. But instead of doing her work, Tootie sits around smoking cigarettes, and reading movie magazines and children's books. Her social betters refer to her as an ape and cannot do a thing with her. Tootie asks the woman the "stuff about babies," and goes back to live with her parents when she realizes that she is
pregnant. The story provides a brief glimpse at the gap in human understanding and sympathy.

Four stories in the collection *Come Along With Me* and one uncollected story work variations on the themes of repression and longing, especially as they occur in married life. Perhaps almost flippantly in "A Cauliflower in Her Hair," Jackson probes beneath the facade of marital bliss and order to reveal frustrated longings and subtle betrayals. The Garlands are the perfect suburban family, living properly and well. But when daughter Virginia invites a new girl over to do homework, Mr. Garland teases and flirts openly with her, forcing his wife to send the girls to the store in order to regain control over the situation. The story hints openly of the repressive strains of marital life. In "A Day in the Jungle" and "The Beautiful Stranger" these themes are more deeply drawn. Elsa Dayton, the frustrated housewife in "A Day in the Jungle," packs up and leaves her husband for what she hopes will be a freer and more exciting life. She registers in a local hotel and spends her new time in reverie and fantasy over her new, self-chosen life: "I want to wear pretty clothes all day long, . . . I want to be beautiful and free and luxurious" (p. 146). Her husband, Don, finally traces her down and asks to meet her. She plays coy, but agrees to meet him for dinner. On her way to the restaurant, she initially feels "free and at peace," but soon fear and terror crash down upon her. As she walks along the street she imagines things falling apart and giving way all around her, and she has no control over it at all. After a series of paranoid fantasies, perhaps death wishes, she sees the world fall back into place, and joins her husband "so wonderfully safe and familiar," feeling that she had
"been alone for so long." The story graphically reveals the consequences of a repressive marriage, the stultification of life, the truncated sense of possibilities, as well as implying a sense of mystery in such an intimate relationship as marriage. It records the dilemma of a woman yearning for a freer existence but lacking the courage to effect it. Even more ambiguous is the story "The Beautiful Stranger," in which a woman creates a "beautiful stranger" to replace her husband. The stranger looks and acts a lot like her husband, but she and he secretly know that he is not. This fantasy liberates her from her sense of boredom and frustration that has been her lot. All would be well, she felt, as long as he remained a stranger, for she shows contempt for the familiar and feels the appeal of the exotic, a quite universal experience. Every now and then, her fantasy is broken by a sudden return "to her former lonely pattern," and she feels frightened and doubtful. Each time he leaves for work she dreads the thought of "another long afternoon with no one but the children, another afternoon of widowhood" (p. 71). Such reflections suggest that the whole story may be an elaborate and desperate fantasy of a grief-stricken woman, longing to fill the emptiness of her life, but the story is too ambiguous to say for sure. The implication that marriage leaves many modern women disenchanted and living a kind of widowhood is also valid, especially in light of recent women liberationist thought. The story ends with the woman lost and searching for her home with "the beautiful stranger inside."

In "I Know Who I Love" we see the bitter and frustrated longings of a spinster, whose life was thwarted by her fanatically religious parents. From her father, who became a minister because he felt in that
way "he was somehow certain of being right, and virtuous, and easily sure of his authority" (p. 53), and who really preferred a boy, Catherine Vincent received only refusals, ought-nots and should-nots, for she did not need "expensive entertainments," such as pretty clothes and birthday parties. By protecting her from worldly evil they created in Catherine "the hell of unsatisfied desires," which would plague her and embitter her all her life. After her parents' deaths, all Catherine has left are tokens of memories of what life might have been, in short, regret and isolation. Another instance of longing and wasted life is seen in the story "It Isn't The Money I Mind."13 A balding, middle-aged man walks around showing newspaper clippings of child actresses and well-known prize-fighters to strangers in the park claiming that they once belonged to him, but due to one reason or another he lost them—a pathetic characterization of a lonely and life-starved man. In the story "The Strangers," Jackson works a variation of the theme of repressed longings and frustrated aspirations by combining it with resentment, defensiveness, and hostility. Mrs. Webster is another of Jackson's frustrated and brittle housewives. She is overly critical and punctilious about her house and neighborhood, and worries about respectability, cautioning her younger sister about the way she dresses, which she fears might influence her sixteen-year-old daughter. A large family moves in across the street, and Mrs. Webster's sister observes how good looking the mother is even though she has five or six children. When things go wrong, the attractive new neighbor is able to laugh. Mrs. Webster feels defensive about the subtle comparisons between her and the new neighbors, and is too busy to pay them a welcoming visit. Later they learn that
the strangers are living polygamously, the man having three wives. This knowledge pleases Mrs. Webster, who is glad that she did not pay them a visit, and she laughs heartily. But the rigid Mrs. Webster harbors a secret fantasy life: "If they had not all of them known Mrs. Webster so well, they might have perceived in her laughter Mrs. Webster's first faint glimpse of a bright new world, a world where perhaps the wild Mr. Websters buried themselves at their offices and the Mrs. Websters, in groups of two or three, sat peacefully over their afternoon tea, their mutual housework done, their common children fed and clothed, their long and comfortable hours spent in unending leisure."14 Shirley Jackson could delineate the Walter Mitty character of the life of the modern housewife better than any other recent American author.

Beneath the respectable surface of modern man, Shirley Jackson would often discover a rather grisly, often vicious, interior. This is exemplified well in her story "Behold the Child Among His Newborn Bliss". Two very proper and respectable women are waiting in a doctor's office with their young children. They exchange banalities about child raising until "an enormous middle-aged woman" backs in through the door, holding it open while trying to coax her child into the office. Both the other mothers are irritated that the door is left open threatening the health of their children. A boy of ten finally enters the office, and the mother says that he has never been to a doctor before. It soon becomes evident that the boy, who is called "Girlie" by his parents, is not quite normal—he does not talk very much or very well and lacks control over his actions. Without thinking, he charges at a little boy and knocks him down. The little boy's mother is shocked and furious and
demands an apology. The retarded boy's mother says that he meant no harm and that he is a good boy. When the big woman and her boy go into the doctor's office, the little boy's mother turns to her son: "'Thomas, . . . do you know what you were playing with? Do you know what Mother had to sit here and watch you playing with? Do you know that boy was an idiot?'" The little boy does not know what to say to his mother, who is becoming livid. He is quite shocked when his mother slaps him across the face and says that he was playing with "a dirty little idiot!" Jackson never shrinks from showing what often springs from the dark reality beneath the apparent kindness and propriety.

In the stories "On the House," "When Things Get Dark," and "The Little House," Jackson takes us on further explorations of the perverse and sinister in man. Good hearted Artie Watson, in "On the House," is a clerk in a liquor store who gets trapped between his generosity and the perversity of a customer. A blind man comes in with a woman seeking a bottle to celebrate their recent marriage. Artie offers to give the couple either scotch or brandy for only four dollars. They decide on the brandy and the blind man gives Artie three one's and one five, thinking they are four one's. Artie tries to explain, but the woman gives him hell about doubting her man's word. Artie shrugs, rings up the sale and gives the change to the woman. A little later the blind man comes back in fuming mad demanding his money, for he remembered that he had only three one's and the one five. Artie tries to tell the man that he gave the change to the woman, but she denies it. Ironically, trying to protect the integrity of the blind man, Artie is trapped into giving four one's to the blind man, who then walks out with the money
and the brandy. The woman uses her blind husband for her perverse purposes twice, first to get Artie to go along as if the blind man were right, and second, by denying that she had received any change. More subtle is the sinister character of the story "When Things Get Dark." Young Mrs. Garden is newly married and pregnant and her husband just went overseas. She is anxious and worried about her future. She has a letter from one "A. H." commending her for her courage in the face of trouble, and telling her that there are friends wishing her well "when things get dark." Mrs. Garden, seeking advice, comes upon the address of Mrs. Amelia Hope in a matchbook. Mrs. Garden goes to the address and finds an "incredibly small" Mrs. Hope living in a tiny room in a dingy rooming house. Mrs. Hope tells Mrs. Garden that she is the only one who has ever come to see her. It is her life's work to write virtually anonymous "comfort notes" to desperate people. She even wrote one to Hitler when he began the war, and told him "to look into his heart and find love." Mrs. Hope returns the letter to Mrs. Garden to read "when things get dark," and goes back to her little notes, whereupon Mrs. Garden runs wildly "out into the warm noon sun." The story suggests that when it gets dark, there may not be anyplace to turn that is truly efficacious.

Human perversity and human vulnerability combine in an unnerving story entitled "The Little House," in the *Come Along With Me* collection. A city woman has just inherited her aunt's little house in the country. As she walks through the house, which she had not visited since her childhood, she feels uneasy and tries to reassure herself that "... it belongs to me and I can do anything I want here and no one can ever make
me leave, because it's mine" (p. 180). She brings to the house her ex-
perience of "... cynicism and melancholy and the wearying disappoint-
ments of many years" (p. 181), and seeks to recover her childhood gaiety.
She is chilled by being alone in an ill-lit house that had so recently
known death, and is tinged with feelings of guilt for neglecting her
aunt and not even coming to the funeral. She is startled from her rev-
eries by the two old spinster Dolson sisters knocking on the door. The
two old officious women subtly convey their disapproval of the niece and
gossip to her about their suspicions that the aunt was murdered rather
than dying of heart failure. They leave telling her to be sure and keep
the backdoor locked. In a woman already feeling out of place and alien,
the suspicions of a murderer increase her sense of vulnerability and
fear. Over tea at home the two old women discuss the possibility that
the niece will leave. The theme of the sensitive woman, subtly deceived
by sinister sources, and left in lonely vulnerability is a favorite of
Jackson's, and recurs in many forms throughout her work.

Two faces of old age are portrayed in the stories "Whistler's
Grandmother" 18 and "Island." In the first story, a little old lady,
with a "sweet, grandmotherly old face," is on a train from Albany to New
York City to meet her grandson, who is returning home from the Pacific.
In talking with her fellow travelers--two sailors and two other people--
the old woman reveals some bitterness about her grandson's wife, whose
dress and manners she does not approve of. She tells the group that her
grandson's wife "used to get letters from men" when she came to visit
upstate, and the grandmother plans to tell her grandson her suspicions
about his wife. One of the sailors advises against it, and the others
agree. But the old woman knows what she knows, and is determined "to see she gets what's coming to her." Her fellow travelers urge her to be fair, to give the girl a chance to explain. But the old woman is vindictive and tells the group to mind their business. When it is time to leave the train, the four passengers stand glaring at the "fragile black figure" as though trying to block her way. Here, again, is another old Puritan, whose sense of selfish righteousness is bent upon exacting her pound of flesh, and is beyond appeals of justice and human kindness. For her "true is true," but her truth is blackened by her own hatred and malice. This characteristic, we saw, is shared by the Dolson sisters of "The Little House," and, of course, Mrs. Strangeworth of "The Possibility of Evil," among many other of Jackson's characters.

One of the most penetrating presentations of old age is the story "Island" in the *Come Along With Me* collection. The image the title gives is fitting for the utter isolation and desolation of old age and its continual losses, dependency, and the often pathetic madness of senility. Old Mrs. Montague is well cared for by her son, who lives a thousand miles away, but pays the bills for his mother's scrupulous care by her companion Miss Oakes. The story essentially is not about neglect, even though the dry and loveless Miss Oakes, who envies Mrs. Montague's wealth, gives her ministrations as if she were caring for a spoiled child or pet dog. The real tragedy is in the fact that no real comfort exists in old age, except perhaps in lingering memories of the past. To escape her loneliness, the indignity she dimly perceives in her dependency, Mrs. Montague creates an elaborate fantasy world. On her daily walk, she imagines living on an incredibly beautiful island, where she
removes her clothes, buries them in the sand, and runs gleefully over the bright, hot sand. When she is hungry she eats delicious fruit, cheese, and cakes. A parrot, at first, irritates her with its call to "eat, eat." But soon she does not mind its noise. After sleeping, she runs and plays upon the sand, and awakens to the city streets and Miss Oakes's ever-guiding hand. Her fantasy imagines everything Mrs. Montague no longer has—the naked freedom of childhood, and life with few encumbrances, the love of family, the pleasures of good food, rather than the oatmeal she spills daily down her expensive dresses. In fact, her fantasy is really all she has left, and it is to that she returns in her coloring book when Miss Oakes orders her steak and martini and the oatmeal and prune juice for Mrs. Montague.

While the boundaries between Shirley Jackson's stories are not hard and fast, a third kind of story explores the outré dimension in a variety of ways. In the stories in this grouping, we most commonly experience what Arthur Miller referred to as catching wonder by surprise. In these stories, fantasy and the supernatural are used to explore the shadows of human experience, sanity's thin veneer, reason's helplessness, unexpected reversals, the terror of human vulnerability, the horror in déjà vu. Our experience of these stories is not only shock, or fright leading to sober reflection, but also sheer delight in how some improbabilities lead to human affirmation. Barry Gross has noted how Jackson's use of the shadows of human experience leads often to the experience of a double reversal—"the realization that the apparently ordinary is full of surprise and then the understanding that the apparently surprising could not, of course, have been otherwise."\(^\text{19}\)
In the story "The Intoxicated," the first story in *The Lottery* collection, and discussed in chapter four, Jackson explores the theme of the prescient girl who predicts apocalypse to uncomprehending and unsympathetic adults. In *The Sundial* we see a fuller treatment of the apocalyptic sensibility. The mood of apocalypse is evoked again in the story "All She Said Was 'Yes,'"²⁰ where a fifteen-year-old girl is told by a rather callous neighbor that her parents were just killed in an automobile accident. When Vicky is told, she tells her neighbor that she knew it would happen two months ago, and tried to warn her parents, but they would not listen. Because she knew, she already got over being sad.

The neighbor woman is dismayed by Vicky's attitude. Vicky tries to warn the woman against taking a trip on a boat, but the neighbor ignores her. The neighbor is only concerned about the delay in leaving on vacation. She makes cruel comparisons between Vicky and her own daughter, and gossips viciously about the dead neighbors. Vicky has a red notebook in which she records "sad little stories" of peoples' futures and of the future of the world. She appears to be able to predict a person's future by just looking at him. After the funeral for Vicky's parents, the neighbors finally get away on their vacation--a boat cruise. One comes away from this story feeling that Vicky's predictions will come true, but the real disturbing element is the inability of the modern mind to cope with apocalyptic warnings and threats. We usually regard them as products of confused or crazed minds, and therefore of no consequence to us. What does one do or think when faced with "horror tales about atom bombs and the end of the world?" How does one think about the unthinkable? The story does not provide any answers to these questions, but rather calls for reflection.
One of Shirley Jackson's favorite situations is to take people into a new, strange, or alien environment, where the local people are settled in their ways, and see what happens. Often this takes the form of moving city folks into the country, as we saw in "The Little House," and earlier in "Renegade," which we discussed in chapter four. There is a natural gap in this situation which Jackson builds upon to portray human isolation, alienation, and vulnerability. "Home,"¹²¹ a story published in the month of her death in 1965, employs this basic situation, but with the added dimension of the supernatural, which gives the story its quite disturbing quality. Jim and Ethel Sloane are newly moved into the country from the city, and are living in the old Sanderson place outside town. In town one rainy day, Ethel is warned about using the road to her house during the rains. She does not believe there is any danger, for she feels that she belongs now, she is "country" and can manage. On the way home through the rain she sees a very old woman and a little boy standing on the side of the road. She stops and makes them get in the car. The old lady tells her that they want to go to the Sanderson place; the child wants to go home. Before Ethel reaches the house the old lady and boy vanish from her back seat, leaving no trace of having been there. Her husband tells her that sixty years ago a little Sanderson boy was believed stolen by a crazy old woman and never found. It was believed that they were drowned in the river, for it was raining the day the boy disappeared. Ethel believes that she saw ghosts, and is intrigued by the whole story. On her way back into the village the old woman and child reappear in the back seat of her car again. The old woman says that strangers are in the house so they can not come home. The presence of the two figures in the back nearly drives Ethel
into having an accident. When she finally stops the car, the figures are gone. In town, the normally extroverted and talkative Ethel does not say a word about what she saw. Again the rather narrow self-set boundaries of our senses, and the helplessness of our reason have been shown up by an unexpected visit of a cold otherness, which at least invites a pause.

A variation on the stranger-in-an-alien-environment theme is the story "Strangers in Town."\(^{22}\) The story is reminiscent of Twain's "The Man Who Corrupted Hadleyburg," for Jackson moves a family of strangers into a narrow-minded little town, filled with self-pleased and gossip-dismaying gossipers. The new family is strange not just because it is new, but also because it appears to possess magical qualities or powers not found in the general populace. Old Addie Spinner, her name emblematic of her knack for spinning tales untroubled by truth, knew right away that the new people were foreigners and crazy. She could tell by their furniture that they will probably carouse around ("and you can't tell me any different"). The new people are called West, they are vegetarians, and have a cat they feed donuts and chickens. Addie and her neighbors observe many strange things that never happened before, and are quite suspicious. To Addie, people do not have a right to live the ways the Wests do: "Folks should go to bed at a sensible hour and get up at a sensible hour and spend their days doing good deeds and housework." But the Addies of the town are blind to the good deeds the Wests do. Not so the children of the town, of course, who just love the new people, and are always going over with fresh berries and dandelions, and claim to have heard their cat talk. Addie and her cohorts are ready to
pounce, and when the Acton baby is missing they have their opportunity. The Wests found the baby, and it was quite safe, but the village mothers are not satisfied. The women shout and threaten Mrs. West in front of her house, to which Mrs. West says: "'It's not the way we thought it was going to be.'" The women stop short of violence and the strange Wests are soon gone. Addie Spinner's eleven-year-old cat has kittens, which the children call "fairy kittens" because they are bright yellow with orange eyes. Addie is unnerved by the way the cats seem to watch her all the time. Visited by devils or angels, this story delightfully suggests, people are going to be as mean as ever--their vision as obscured to grace as to wickedness, especially their own.

Shirley Jackson wrote four rather unclassifiable stories for the magazine Fantasy and Science Fiction, and each one is a delight in its own way. "Bulletin" is a satirical vignette consisting of "evidence" brought back on a time machine from the Twenty-Second Century, and suggesting the same vice and folly then as now, as well as parodying scholarly pretensions regarding the nature of history and reality. In the story "One Ordinary Day, With Peanuts," a husband and wife do nothing else but take turns at being good or evil, either working to bring people together or to tear people apart, but acting in any event amorally. In an even more serious vein is the story "The Missing Girl," which exposes human callousness and unconcern. A girl at a camp tells her cabin-mate that she is going out, and is never found again. When it is realized that the girl is missing, no one can quite recall even knowing her, she was virtually a non-entity. During the search for the girl, the townspeople suspect sexual foul-play, and the camp suspects that a
townsman is responsible. The girl's real parents cannot even be determined. A year later, a girl's body is found, but identification is uncertain. The story suggests a world where anonymity swallows persons up, where human concern is a sham, and where no one is responsible for anyone else. The world is not quite so sinister in "The Omen," which is a delightful tale of improbable coincidences, where a senile woman loses her cryptic shopping list, only to be found by a confused young woman who sees it as an omen leading to her decision to marry her boyfriend of three years.

Several of the reviewers of the stories in the Come Along With Me collection comment upon what Barry Gross calls Shirley Jackson's "acute environmental sense," her ability to show the strange relationships between people and places. Because of her effective use of solid and convincing details, she breaks down reader disbelief, and creates a setting that carries much of the meaning of the story. The cumulative effect of tenebrous horror is seen in the story "The Rock." It is an excellent example of Jackson's moving from solid detail to the implication of a dark otherness which intrudes extraordinarily into our lives. Paula Ellison, her brother Charles, and his wife Virginia, are on their way to a rock island resort so that the recently-ill Charles can convalesce. Paula, at first, refuses to look at the island to which they are being conveyed. But "... Paula at last forgot her resolution and turned to look; she saw, looming impossibly large over her head and with the sunset behind, a great black jagged rock, without signs of humanity or sympathy, with only dreadful reaching black rocks and sharp incredible outlines against the sunset ..." (p. 123). This large
image is reinforced by other concrete images of a room carved out of solid rock and lighted only by sunlight or fire. The furniture is huge, solid, and wooden. The dishes are wooden trenchers. There are few distractions on the island, there is "only a very clear and distinct effect of an island out of sight of the mainland, sharp and strong alone on the water, and nothing below but solid rock and nothing more to do, perhaps, than endure the constant and incessant triumphs of water over rock, rock over water" (p. 127). We are thus prepared for Paula's meeting of the odd little man, who has been waiting there for a very long time. He originally expected to meet Virginia, but Paula came in first, so he takes her instead. In conversation with the little man, it becomes clear that Paula has been very close to her brother, and quite helpful during his illness, but now that he is well, Paula is no longer needed. Later, when she is visiting her brother and Virginia, the little man comes for her--no one else can see him but Paula, and she knows that he is there only for her. A story so highly emblematic is difficult to pin down. The little man may be a personification of death, or the protean face of Satan, whose diabolic task is literally to tear apart, to confuse and isolate his prey, leaving him helpless and, most horrible of all, alone. Here, indeed, is a world where man exists "out of sight of the mainland," and must confront a conspiratorial universe where human will ceases to be effective.

Mark Twain's mysterious stranger tells us that our universe consists of "dreams, visions, fiction." Harry Levin comments: "If life itself is no more than a dream, then works of imagination must constitute 'a dream within a dream.'"28 This is the sense we have in reading
Shirley Jackson's story "A Visit," which combines, as so much of American fiction does, darkness with splendor, and whose characters move as in a dream and take their places as so many figures in a carpet or tapestry. The story appeared originally in New World Writing, Second Mentor Selection, 1952, under the title "The Lovely House," suggested by the magazine, but in the Come Along With Me collection, it is given its original title. It is an elaborate story of a young girl's visit to her school friend's lovely home, a visit that may never end. After much planning and hoping, Margaret comes for a visit to Carla Rhodes' home, and Margaret herself feels that she has come home "to a place striven for and earned." The house is massive, and elaborately decorated and embellished, with a tall tower rising high above the trees. The house within is filled with tapestries woven and embroidered by generations of the Rhodes women. The tapestries are almost invariable of the house itself in various aspects—as seen in sunlight or moonlight, and during the four seasons. One room is done entirely in gold, another is silver. One room is walled in mirrors, giving infinite, and diminishing, reflections of its inhabitants, and its only contents are a series of self-enclosed tables and bowls. Carla's mother shows Margaret the room with the tiles set into the floor to form a picture of the house, with a picture of a girl's face and a saying written beneath it. Margaret steps back to read: "'Here was Margaret . . . who died for love!'" (p. 104). Following her curiosity, Margaret climbs the tower, which her hosts ignored each time she mentioned it, to meet an old woman and her cat in the wind and rain swept tower room. The old woman tells her that her name is Margaret too. When Margaret tells the old lady that Paul is back, the old lady says cryptically: "'He should have come and gone
sooner. . . . Then we'd have it all behind us" (p. 111). When Margaret presses her for what she means, the old woman is evasive, but says that "...we don't always see ahead, into things that are going to happen" (p. 113). Before Margaret leaves the tower, she takes hold of the old lady's hands and hears voices in the rain saying "good-by," and "all is lost," and "I will always remember you," which are the very words she and Paul exchange as he leaves. Paul, at first, appears to be the returning son of the Rhodes, and is treated that way until the end, when his friend, the captain, turns out to be the son. During the ball, the old woman of the tower comes down to visit Paul, and they appear to resemble one another. At the end, the captain points out how the house is decaying and cracking, which the elder Rhodes deny. When Margaret mentions the same thing to Paul, he denies it violently: "'The house is the same as ever... It does not change' " (p. 110). Paul says that they cannot replace anything, they can only add to the house. After the men leave, Carla and Margaret go and sit on the lawn to be "models of stillness" as Mrs. Rhodes embroiders their figures in her tapestry.

This enigmatic story weaves a strange and portentous allegory. Here is spun a universe of endless repetition, of the past and the future woven into the present. Is one anticipating the future, or reliving the past? Or are they the same, thus obviating the question? Is life not meaningless and hopeless in such a universe? Here is a narcissistic universe, where identities and roles change, yet remain the same, where everything is reflected endlessly in everything else. Can such a world endure, or will it crumble into itself, as the captain implies? The story anticipates in 1950 what Thomas Pynchon's novel _The Crying of_
Lot 49 explores in 1965. In the novel, also, there are images of endless tapestries of a reality from which one cannot escape. Is reality only what one spins oneself? It is narcissism to regard our version of reality as the definitive reality for all. Tony Tanner comments on this issue in his analysis of the novel: "The fact that other creatures accept the embroidery as reality is an indication that many people live unquestioningly inside other people's versions or pictures." Is there no escape then from the lonely tower of the self? It is only through an act of love that escape is possible. But in the story, as in the novel, no love is found, and no knights of deliverance come—in fact, they leave, and refuse to stay. Here, as Tanner suggests, "may be a conspiracy of the imagination, which cannot stand too much nothingness or loneliness."

Many of Jackson's characters believe they have the ability to will a new life, to walk out of their skin, as it were, and create for themselves new personalities with new histories and futures. Eleanor Vance tried to do this, but her journey ended in death. Angela Motorman tries it in Come Along With Me, but we do not have enough of her story to know what the outcome might have been. In the story "Louisa, Please Come Home," another young girl, aged nineteen, walks out of her home one day and tries to create a new life for herself. She had planned this move for months, and she is very careful in executing her plan so as "to fade into some background where they would never see me" (p. 165). Her plan is nearly foolproof, for, she says, "... I always tried to think as hard as I could the way that suited whatever I wanted to be, and I liked to have a good reason for what I was doing" (p. 169). She moves
to a nearby city, finds a room, takes a job, and gives herself a new name. Every year her mother goes on radio to call her back home. After three years in her new life, she meets an old neighbor boy who takes her back home, hoping to collect the reward. When she sees her parents and sister again, she realizes that she wants to stay and take up her rightful place in her family. However, her parents do not recognize her and regard her as an imposter. She reflects: "Maybe they were so used to looking for me by now that they would rather keep on looking than have me home; maybe once my mother had looked in my face and seen there nothing of Louisa, but only the long careful concentration I had put into being Lois Taylor, there was never any chance of my looking like Louisa again" (p. 177). Thus, she must leave, accept the fact that there is no place for her at home any more, and make her own way in the world alone, listening to her mother's broadcast once a year.

The story is a modern version of Hawthorne's "Wakefield," which told of a man who walked out of his house one day, and lived, disguised and in secret, only a block from his home, watching his wife and family through his window. Hawthorne calls Wakefield the "Outcast of the Universe," because he dared cut himself off from his place within the natural fabric of human life. The worst isolation is that which is self-imposed. But Hawthorne let his Wakefield go home and take up his former life, as much as was left. Jackson's Louisa cannot return, she is forever cut off from her past, and must create what life she can from her own imagination. Is this a restatement of the notion that we cannot go home again, that once we leave, we lose our connections, and are truly on our own without support of history and tradition? This certainly
describes the experience of modern man, who finds himself in radical solitude, lacking the nurturing connection and continuities to his past and fellow humans. The story suggests that our solitude is a product of our choice, our deliberate wish to create a life out of ourselves alone, and breaking radically from our past. The story asks us to ponder not only whether we should have chosen as we did, but also what we can do about our isolation, which seems to have become our lot.

In the stories "The Bus" and "The Summer People," we see variations of the theme of human vulnerability in an essentially demonic world. In "The Bus," similar to "The Visit" in its implication of nightmarish iteration, an old woman boards a bus for her home. She falls asleep and dreams of being awakened by the bus driver and left off at a strange place named Rickett's Landing in the pouring rain. She is picked up by two young men in a truck, who take her to an old house made over into a tavern, where she is put up for the night. The house reminds her of her childhood home. When she tries to sleep, she is disturbed by clattering noises in the closet. When she investigates she finds her old toy dolls alive and about to attack her. She runs from the room yelling for her mother. The bus driver awakens her and leaves her off at Rickett's Landing. Again, here is a human being caught up in something vast and incomprehensible, and where he is helpless, abandoned, and unable to tell dream from reality. The utter terror of abandonment is also depicted in "The Summer People." The Allisons are an aging couple who have been coming to their summer cottage for seventeen summers. Each summer they left for the city right after Labor Day, but this summer they decide to stay on for another month. When they announce
their decision to the native, year-around people, they tell the Allisons that it has never been done before. When they return from the village to their cottage to continue their stay, they find that they are no longer delivered any provisions. Their mail is not delivered. Their phone is disconnected. When Mr. Allison tries his car, it will not start, and he feels that it was tampered with. The story closes with the image of an old couple, huddled together, nothing left to do but wait, listening to the news of a world to which they no longer belonged, and under a sky as indifferent to them as to the rest of the world. While there is no outbreak of violence in the story, as there is in "The Lottery," the horror is almost as great, and just as incomprehensible. On one level, the story exposes the hidden hostility of the country people for the city people, who dared break tradition by staying longer than usual. But more deeply, the story exposes us to the precarious and fragile nature of our condition in the world. The structures of our existence may appear solid and trustworthy, but all too easily they can give way, often from human perversity, and we are left abandoned, alone, and helpless—a condition documented and given shape throughout Jackson's fiction.

Shirley Jackson insists that fiction must begin and end in experience. After reading many of her stories, one wonders just what experiences they arose from! To see the normal so suddenly become abnormal, the natural reveal the supernatural, and vice versa, is to be left without landmarks and bearings, to have to stumble along in the darkness of our sight, trying to find our way. Here is created a void, a gap in comprehension, a hiatus in reason. Here old names for familiar reality
no longer are useful. New names are needed. We do not know the words, our cries are voiceless, and we hear only the echoes of our shouts. To write such tales is sorcery, but perhaps only a sorcerer can help us break the spell upon our times.
NOTES TO CHAPTER X


6Shirley Jackson, "The Night We All Had Grippe," in Come Along With Me, p. 215. Future references to the stories in this volume will be cited parenthetically in the text.


12———, "Most Wonderful Thing," Good Housekeeping CXXXIV (June 1952), 49f.


14———, "The Strangers," Collier's CXXIX (1 May 1952), 71f.


20 Shirley Jackson, "All She Said Was 'Yes,'" Vogue CXL (1 Nov. 1962), 142-143ff.


27 Barry Gross, p. 485.


29 Tony Tanner, City of Words, p. 175.

30 Tony Tanner, p. 176.
CHAPTER XI

A TIME FOR GATHERING STONES

Out of the disturbing darkness at the end of Herman Melville's *The Confidence Man* comes the startling question to the men who mumble of apocryphal things: "What's that about the Apocalypse?" The confidence man openly acknowledges old and new truths, but manipulates to his advantage that which is of uncertain credit and of doubtful origin to create a crisis of confidence and trust, leaving open the possibility of apocalypse. Here is a world where nothing is certain, identity protean, the future dark. It is a fitting image of the situation of the modern novel, where the "Masquerade" has continued. The modern writer struggles with the dark muse to give shape to the nightmares, terrors, anxieties, and absurdities of our age. Leslie Fiedler writes: "The vision of the truly contemporary writer is that of a world not only absurd but also chaotic and fragmentary. He tries in his work to find techniques for representing a universe in which our perceptions overlap but do not coincide, in which we share chiefly a sense of loneliness: our alienation from whatever things finally are, as well as from other men's awareness of those things and of us."1

Our age has been one of continuing crisis, which stems in large part from the way we have become accustomed to think about our time. Frank Kermode argues that the idea of apocalypse has ceased to be imminent and has instead become immanent, and the Joachite period of
Transition has been elevated to the status of an age in itself, thus making human life in the midst one of "eternal transition, perpetual crisis," while the end has become a predicament of the individual rather than of a community or of the world. The disjunction due to perpetual crisis makes our relationship to the past and future problematic, and we are often without a sense of boundaries and direction. This has not been without rather telling consequences upon our lives. Rollo May writes of the schizoid state of the world, where our ability to love, feel, or will has become negligible. Robert Jay Lifton refers to our time as an age of numbing, due largely to the massive bombardment of stimuli and the unthinkable prospects of terror. Similarly, Norman Cousins writes of what he called "the age of desensitization": "The greatest threat to the splendid variety of humans on earth is not represented by the pulverizing power of the bomb. An even greater threat is the numbness caused by the bomb. Our original sense of disbelieving horror has not been sustained; perhaps it could not be sustained. For we live in an age remarkable less for its destructiveness than for its desensitization. People have learned to make their accommodations with the irrational. The missiles and the megatons have been metabolized inside the consciousness. . . . The beginning of the end is adjustment to the idea of the end." To Cousins we have become as numb to evils and horrors as we have to possible glories and opportunities.

The so-called normal condition of man, as R. D. Laing sees it, is characterized by false-consciousness, alienation, and self-violation, and only by a radical rethinking of ourselves and our world will we begin to regain our wholeness: "If we can stop destroying ourselves we
may stop destroying others. We have to begin by admitting and even accepting our violence, rather than blindly destroying ourselves with it, and therewith we have to realize that we are as deeply afraid to live and to love as we are to die."4 In this same vein, the philosopher Lionel Rubinoff writes: "To be an individual in a collective society is to suffer a kind of madness. But to be part of it, which is normal, is to live without purpose, to worship platitudes and empty truths, to be mediocre, and to exist without love, which is hell. Hell is the suffering of being unable to love, and hell is the anomie and the powerlessness of living under the shadow of the apocalyptic vision."5 It is only through an act of imagination, Rubinoff argues, an act that enables us to see and accept our own evil and violence, that we can thereby transcend and transform them into love. Without recognizing our fundamental duplicity, we will continue to externalize and project our evil onto the world, and violate not only our neighbors, but ourselves. It is this recognition that the fiction of Shirley Jackson has sought to renew. For, as Leslie Fiedler writes: "The final horrors, as modern society has come to realize, are neither gods nor demons, but intimate aspects of our own minds."6

As one of the dark ladies of American fiction, Shirley Jackson has captured in her style the emotional and spiritual autism of our times. With her typical character a sensitive woman in an alien environment, she has shown how human language is often not adequate to the task of representing reality, and how persons, trapped within their language, are unable to speak or are too terrified to speak. She has shown how this state of wordlessness is one of the final forms of
contemporary isolation. Accordingly, her descriptions are sparse, and she uses no unnecessary words. She often moves from solid, graphically drawn images to the implication of otherness and terror. Her language is crisp, precise, often giving the reader the impression of detachment and dissection. In other contexts, she employs a kind of cinematic technique of shifting focusses, which allows her to control narrative time and flow, as well as to give the effect of simultaneity. Beneath and within the rather ordinary, concrete, and parabolic quality of her style, there is the implication of the archetypal and universal in the form of rite or ritual. She will often blend legend, fairy tale, or fable with the ordinary and supernatural for generally surprising results.

Her dissection of the ordinary, the familiar, and the quotidian links her to other contemporary writers, such as Nathalie Sarraute and Evan Connell, Jr. Many of her characters reflect what Heidegger calls Verfallen, or the descent into prattle, the banal and petty concerns of the moment, at the loss of a fuller perspective on our existence. With Mme. Sarraute Jackson has tried to show the often "tropicist" character of much of human experience. In her fiction she seeks to reveal the mystery and the sinister in the everyday and familiar. Wylie Sypher writes of this concern: "We are now vulnerable to the usual--perhaps we have been ever since Kafka startled us by his over-response to what seems normal and customary. Our most acute anxieties are aroused by what the nineteenth century took to be natural. For us, nothing is more suspicious than the obvious." Moreover, as Sypher argues, it has been the contemporary writer's task to reveal such things: "The contemporary
writer must of necessity present the significance of what is utterly habitual."

To a large extent, Shirley Jackson's fiction chronicles life in a schizoid world. Many of her characters are or become numb and desensitized by the real and imagined terrors of the world around them. Many of her characters lead lives so self-contained and complacent that their chief emotion is that of embarrassment. Others are barely able to endure the burden of the ordinary, and are often trapped in and by their own fictions. In her explorations of marriage, she reveals the many unconscious longings, silent repressions, exotic fantasies, subtle betrayals, and secret hostilities that combine inexplicably with love. Beneath the facade of propriety or friendliness she would uncover the ugliness of violence and malice. Her probing would show that, as numb as people are, human emotions remain mysterious, and that dread and awe are still human possibilities.

One of the chief contributions of her fiction is her delineation of the contours of loneliness, and the patterns of disintegration and madness so prevalent in contemporary life. So many of her characters are caught up in the ever-increasing pace of the modern dynamo, which makes of human beings only so much detritus. Nearly all of her characters are narcissistic, and experience a distorted world. They struggle over their loss of self and identity, and find it almost impossible to live in community. Indeed, in many instances the community, or a mass mind, becomes protagonist and antagonist against helpless individuals. The lonely inhabit a nightmare landscape, where the only answer to their loneliness and desperation is the echo of their own yearning. Guilt,
memory, regret, and lovelessness, combine to haunt an individual striving for identity, meaning and worth. Jackson portrays an America where people are as alone in a wilderness of their own making as they were in the wilderness of the land they came to conquer.

Running through nearly all of Jackson's serious fiction is her portrayal of the evil in man, and the many forms this takes in daily life. In her fiction evil is not only an inherent part of human nature, it is also a potent and active force in the universe. However, the most horrifying face of evil is that which reveals itself in and through the ordinary and familiar. Like Emily Dickinson, Shirley Jackson could domesticate horror, and reveal the horror in the domestic. Her fiction portrays the coexistence of the sinister and the innocuous in subtle and disturbing ways. Many of her stories give shape to Hannah Arendt's notion of the "banality of evil," which Arendt came to while observing the Eichmann trial in Jerusalem. Philipp Fehl challenges Arendt's notion and makes a qualification, which also illuminates Jackson's approach to evil. Fehl argues: "However small a man a murderer may be, however few the words he may be able to stammer on the Shakespearean stage of his guilt, the blood he shed absolves him from the petty reproach of banality. Guilt, far from degrading a man, elevates him to a capital responsibility. He ceases to be average, however much he may look it, and however pointless his conversation. The blood he shed stains him with an excellence he would gladly rub off but cannot. If the dimensions of the guilty acts become universal and their record necessarily becomes repetitious and ceases to be interesting, the guilt itself can never be contemptible." Fehl suggests the replacement of the phrase "banality of evil" by the phrase the "shapelessness of evil." "It is a many-
faceted shapelessness, and it has its own dimensions which swell and
shift and elude us as we try to take its measure or even simply name it."
I think this describes well the nature of evil often explored in Jack-
son's fiction--its free-floating, elusive quality and sense of otherness,
the presence of the diabolic and the macabre as human possibilities.

Lurking behind much of Shirley Jackson's fiction is the sugges-
tion of the archetypal in the form of ritual or myth, so that her tales
come to adumbrate the secret rituals of human cruelty and evil. She is
uncompromising in her depiction of unaccountable malice and perversity.
For her, a good deal of human behavior stems from a sense of primal sin
and darkness. In "The Lottery," most notably, but also in her novels
The Road Through the Wall and We Have Always Lived in the Castle, we
have seen her use of the scapegoat motif to imply the unconscious, pri-
mordial need for revenge or retribution, as well as the unthinking force
of tradition cut off from its origins. Often, this motif is connected
in her work with the portrayal of eruptions of irrational contagions of
violence, which often occur in times of uneasiness and insecurity.
These apparently inexplicable outbreaks, in individuals as well as in
groups, occupied a good deal of her imagination. To her, centuries of
human progress cannot fully hide the fact that men can become savage and
barbaric in the twinkling of the eyes.

In her fiction, Jackson liked to portray an apocalyptic mind
that believes it is in full possession of the truth or virtue so that,
in its name, it can do no wrong. She liked to show how zealous minds
conjure up a conspiracy theory of evil so that any means necessary to
overcome it is justified. Such minds externalize evil in the form of
their neighbors and unleash their violence upon them, ironically and paradoxically in the name of good. Her fiction exposes the dangerous elitism of the apocalyptic mind, and its connection with ignorance.

Camus, in his novel _The Plague_, writes meaningfully of this issue:

The evil that is in the world always comes of ignorance, and good intentions may do as much harm as malevolence, if they lack understanding. On the whole, men are more good than bad; that, however, isn't the real point. But they are more or less ignorant, and it is this that we call vice or virtue; the most incorrigible vice being that of an ignorance that fancies it knows everything and therefore claims for itself the right to kill. The soul of the murderer is blind; and there can be no true goodness nor true love without the utmost clear-sightedness.10

In Jackson's world, evil is not merely the product of the ignorant or the misguided, it is also the act of those who know exactly what they are about and delight in doing it. In short, in Jackson's world Satan is an active force. And such a presence sets up a dialectic between evil and change, from which a bewildering array of confusion may result, as well as a number of positive possibilities. In any event, Jackson is never guilty of what Burton Feldman accuses many Black Humorists of doing: "... the saddest side of Black Humor is that it can find no compliments to pay its enemy. For all the violence of its assaults on American culture, Black Humor gives no sense that this enemy is worth attacking. It is only there, a vast middle-class moonscape; and then Black Humor slips off into fantasy and parody."11

Much of Jackson's fiction depicts a world that is apparently damned and irredeemable. Ruth Nanda Anshen writes that "damnation is nothing but absolute loneliness."12 Death and damnation are synonyms for "absolute, unrelated loneliness." And the lord of loneliness, Anshen tells us, is the Devil. Jackson's fiction shows the suffering of life
in such a world, where human community is virtually an impossibility. In such a world things do not hold together, even seemingly solid reality threatens to give way. Such a world is discontinuous, full of gaps, so that often even the simplest conversations are rendered incomprehensible. One often has little more to do in this world than to wait, which, for many, is as close as they can come to belief. In a desolate, waiting world people will often confuse or combine foolishness and wickedness, giving rise to strange and wild beliefs, which Jackson roundly satirizes. In a desolate world the black arts flourish, for, as Jackson's good Dr. Wright, of The Bird's Nest, tells us, witchcraft is the "judicious administration of the bizarre." To give an image to this condition, Jackson typically employed an "architectural imagination" to create countless houses in the gothic mode, which serve as analogues of human neurosis, fear, hatred, and pride; in short, to stand for our haunted world.

In his Notebooks (1840) Hawthorne writes: "I used to think I could imagine all the passions, all feelings and states of the heart and mind, but how little did I know! Indeed we are but shadows, we are not endowed with real life, and all that seems most real about us is but the thinnest shadow of a dream--till the heart be touched." Hawthorne's work is haunted by the evil that consciously or unconsciously violates the sanctity of a human heart. This idea, R. W. B. Lewis reminds us, has continued to agitate the American novelist from Hawthorne's generation to our own. Many of Jackson's characters are violators in this sense, and are often motivated by sheer perversity. In Hawthorne, however, many of his violators receive some kind of judgment or punishment.
as a consequence of their sin, but in Jackson most of her violators get away unscathed, which may suggest a movement of the perception of evil from the personal and individual to the impersonal and mass, as well as a shift in the conception of a moral universe.

That Shirley Jackson chose to write in the gothic tradition may have limited her audience and popularity, especially within the critical community. But to evoke and give shape to the spectres which haunt our crisis-filled, and rapidly changing world, Jackson found the gothic mode quite amenable. The gothic began as a literature for an age of revolutionary change, which may partly explain America's continuing attraction to it throughout its literary history. Devendra P. Varma argues that the emergence of the gothic novel was "symptomatic of the confused feelings of nostalgia and terror awakened by the times." The gothic was the perfect vehicle for the artistic fascination with what Lowry Nelson calls the "guilt-haunted wanderer." Nelson describes the typical gothic hero in these terms: "The gothic hero easily shades into what is commonly called the romantic hero; or, perhaps to put it better, both are members of the same genus. Both share an essential loneliness and feeling of incommunicability; both are generally scapegoats or guilt-haunted wanderers." The gothicists probed the depths of human nature to expose the warring between good and evil forces, and found that those capable of great good are also capable of great evil. Nelson points out the gothic character's solipsistic struggle within himself, which corresponds to Irving Malin's analysis of the narcissistic preoccupations in recent American gothic literature. Nelson suggests that "the gothic novel has begun to suggest a mythology of the mind." Thus, for a
world where the old orders are collapsing, and no new orders appear to be taking firm hold, a world where God is in absentia, the gothic seeks to express the human condition. Nelson notes: "In a universe without the presence of divine justice or retribution, notions of good and evil lose their simple polarity and generate shadowy and unexpected complexities." Varma makes more lofty claims for the gothic novel. He argues that the gothic novels "arose out of a quest for the numinous. They are characterized by an awestruck apprehension of Divine immanence penetrating diurnal reality. This sense of the numinous is an almost archetypal impulse inherited from primitive magic. The gothic quest was not merely after horror . . . but after other-worldly gratification. . . . They were moving from the arid glare of rationalism towards the beckoning shadows of a more intimate and mystical interpretation of life, and this they encountered in the profound sense of the numinous stamped upon the architecture, paintings, and fable of the Middle Ages." While this may be too much to claim for recent American goths, including Shirley Jackson, it does suggest an area of reflection of possible relevance to the quests of our own time.

In common with many of the writers of the post-war generation, Shirley Jackson shared an interest in the grotesque. While her use of it does not generally take physical forms, as in some of the work of Flannery O'Connor and Truman Capote, among others, her characters are grotesques emotionally, psychologically, and spiritually. Many of her characters are grotesque in their single-minded devotion to one idea or truth, as we saw in *The Sundial* and in many of her short stories. Along with the gothic, the grotesque also has a long tradition in America, but
has become quite prevalent in the post-World War Two writing. It is a useful image for a time of frustration, discontinuity, disbelief, and alienation. The German scholar, Wolfgang Kayser, seeks to define the meaning of the grotesque in modern literature, and his insights are quite relevant to Jackson's fiction. One of the basic experiences of the grotesque, as Kayser sees it, is the encounter with madness, which leads him to state: "THE GROTESQUE IS THE ESTRANGED WORLD." Accordingly, "suddenness and surprise are essential elements of the grotesque"; it comes out of "a situation that is filled with ominous tension," and it instills "fear of life rather than fear of death." Because of our disorientation due to the absurdity of our world, the grotesque expresses "our failure to orient ourselves in the physical universe." When it is used for caricature, parody, or satire, Kayser calles it "A PLAY WITH THE ABSURD." The grotesque, as Kayser understand it, has emerged in three historical periods: the sixteenth century, late-eighteenth and early-nineteenth centuries, and in the twentieth century. It comes as a response to a crisis in belief, in human self-understanding. His final definition is quite significant and applicable to Jackson's fiction: "In spite of all the helplessness and horror inspired by the dark forces which lurk in and behind our world and have power to estrange it, the truly artistic portrayal effects a secret liberation. The darkness has been sighted, the ominous powers discovered, the incomprehensible forces challenged. And thus we arrive at a final interpretation of the grotesque: AN ATTEMPT TO INVOKE AND SUBLIME THE DEMONIC ASPECTS OF THE WORLD." In a similar way, William Van O'Connor writes of the grotesque in modern American fiction: "Modern literature has sought to incorporate
the antipoetic into the traditionally poetic, the cowardly into the heroic, the ignoble into the noble, the realistic into the romantic, the ugly into the beautiful. . . . The grotesque, as a genre or a form of modern literature, simultaneously confronts the antipoetic and the ugly and presents them, when viewed out of the side of the eye, as the closest we can come to the sublime."22 These interpretations of the grotesque are fitting descriptions of the whole thrust of Shirly Jackson's fiction.

In Jackson's portrayal of human duplicity, and of the force of the demonic in human life, she stands against an American grain which posits the indefinite perfectibility of man. Her fiction stands as a critique of America's Manichaean tendencies, the proclivity to devolve often uncompromising dualisms with respect to human nature and reality, a tendency noted as early as Tocqueville. In an essay calling for the end of the old dichotomies, and for a recognition of the coming new consciousness, Joyce Carol Oates writes: "An absolutely honest literature . . . must dramatize for us the complexities of this epoch, showing us how deeply related we are to one another, how deeply we act out, even in our apparently secret dreams, the communal crises of our world. If demons are awakened and allowed to run loose across the landscape of suburban shopping malls and parks, it is only so that their symbolic values--wasteful terror, despair, entropy--can be recognized."23 It is this serious recognition that Jackson sought in the "cleansing terror" of her fiction.

With John Senior, among a growing number of other recent thinkers in many fields, Shirley Jackson has shown that the way out of the painful
hell of our world is the way down; as Senior writes: "The true way down is out, out of the self altogether; and this means genuine pain, genuine self-destruction; and failure means confusion, terror, and despair." If the landscape Jackson charts for us is disorienting and terror-filled, it is ultimately to good purpose as art. Morse Peckham sees the charting of chaos as one of the chief functions of art: "Art is the reinforcement of the capacity to endure disorientation so that a real and significant problem may emerge. Art is the exposure to the tensions and problems of a false world so that man may endure exposing himself to the tensions and problems of the real world." Thus, we need such tales of terror and violence that Jackson could tell to call us back to what we are, to what we must recognize in order to grow. This function of the holy terror of tales is an ancient one, as Heinrich Zimmer shows us in his analysis of ancient tales. In one tale, an ancient spectre promises: "Neither ghosts nor demons shall have any power, whenever and wherever these tales are told." Perhaps this is too much to expect from Jackson's fiction, or from any art, for that matter. But such a view recognizes the power of language to name and give shape to the demons of our time as a way to overcome them, an apparent endless task. In this endeavor, Jackson's work is successful, and may yet be recognized as among the best of her generation.
NOTES TO CHAPTER XI

1Leslie Fiedler, No! In Thunder, p. 17.


4R. D. Laing, The Politics of Experience, p. 76.

5Lionel Rubinoﬀ, The Pornography of Power, p. 188.

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