THE NOVELS OF SHIRLEY JACKSON:

A CRITICAL-ANALYTICAL STUDY

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THE NOVELS OF SHIRLEY JACKSON:

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

Though Shirley Jackson led a full life as a housewife and mother of four children, she left an unusual literary legacy--numerous short stories and essays, three children's stories, six novels, and three non-fiction books. "The Lottery," title story of her first book of short stories, has become a classic in anthologies. It is a simply woven tale, spare and understated, of communal sacrifice in modern-day America. Her best novels are concerned also with the conflict between good and evil, the savagely basic struggle of every man. That a woman who could be concerned with the mundane chore of preparing seasonal clothes for her children--the "savages" in the family chronicle _Life Among the Savages_--could tell such a tale as "The Lottery" is a tribute to the perception and depth of the author.

Seemingly devoid of the literary excesses of many of her contemporaries, portraying few graphic scenes of violence or lust, she nevertheless is attuned to the concerns of twentieth-century man. Her fantastic literary settings are akin to the fantasy worlds in which many persons live. Themes of

alienation, lack of identity, search for a father or mother, and, always, man's inhumanity to man are what she is writing about. Her plots may sound ludicrous or bizarre, but the end results are often poignant. Even her view of her own children, and of the children she portrays often in her stories and novels, is not the saccharine affection usually ascribed to mothers. Some of the dialogue used by Shirley Jackson's characters had its beginning in the mouths of her children. The insight which allowed her to see her children as they were enabled Shirley Jackson to portray some of the most interesting characters in fiction. These characters, in their fantasy worlds, struggled, lived, and died.

A talent for irony, a light touch that avoids the desolation that pervades much modern work, was often used effectively in the omniscient author's comments and in the dialogue. Misuse of irony in an awkward juxtaposition of humor and horror, or allowing irony to become excessive, are problems Shirley Jackson had as a writer. Another one she shares with all other authors: how to end the tale being told. Sometimes the denouement is too contrived.

Shirley Jackson cannot be categorized as a naturalistic, realistic, ghost-story, or mystery writer; she is all of these and more. Newsweek magazine simply calls her a "school

of one."[1] She is not regional, either, in the usual sense; for she spent major portions of her life both on the western and eastern coasts of the country, and her writing shows no particular influence of either section.

Shirley Hardie Jackson was born December 14, 1919, in San Francisco, California, daughter of Leslie Hardie Jackson, a British subject, and Geraldine Bugby Jackson, a native of San Francisco. When she was four, Shirley Jackson's family moved to Burlingame, California; and when she was fourteen, they moved to Rochester, New York.[2] After graduation from high school and two years in the University of Rochester, Shirley Jackson spent a year at home writing. In September, 1937, she entered Syracuse University to complete her major in English. Here her talent began earning recognition.

Her first undergraduate story, "Janice," was published in The Threshold, a magazine sponsored by the creative writing class of A. E. Johnson. She was appointed fiction editor of the campus humor magazine. The next year, 1939, was especially busy. She came under the influence of

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[1]"School of One," Newsweek, LXVI (August 23, 1965), 83.

[2]Robert S. Phillips, "Shirley Jackson: A Chronology and a Supplementary Checklist," Papers of the Bibliographical Society of America, LX (April, 1966), 204. All factual biographical information, unless otherwise noted, is from this source.

Leonard Brown, professor of criticism and literature at Syracuse, to whom she dedicated her fourth novel; she won a second prize in the school's poetry contest; and she met Stanley Edgar Hyman. She founded and edited a campus literary magazine, *Spectre*, with Hyman as managing editor. Immediately after graduation in 1940, Shirley Jackson married Hyman and they moved to New York City. He became an editorial assistant for *The New Republic*, and she held several clerical jobs, including working as a clerk at Macy's for a month during the Christmas rush. The remainder of her life was divided between her family responsibility and the writing of short stories and books.

Beginning with "After You, My Dear Alphonse," January 16, 1943, many of Shirley Jackson's short stories were published in *The New Yorker* magazine. Later reviewers insisted that she could be a great writer of short stories if she would break out of that magazine's mold for story composition. The first of six novels, *The Road Through the Wall*, was published in 1948. It was followed by *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. *The Lottery; or, The Adventures of James Harris*, a collection of twenty-five short stories, appeared in 1949. All of the stories in

that collection had been published previously in The New Yorker.[3] Other short stories, three lectures on the art of writing, and a fragment of the novel, Come Along with Me, which Shirley Jackson was writing at the time of her death, were selected and published by her husband in 1968 under the title Come Along with Me. Two years earlier Hyman had chosen eleven short stories, The Bird's Nest, and the family chronicles--Life Among the Savages and Raising Demons--and published them under the title The Magic of Shirley Jackson. The family chronicles had first appeared in 1953 and 1957. An account of the witchcraft trials of 1692 and 1693 in Salem Village had been published in 1956. Shirley Jackson also wrote another book and a play for children.

The Haunting of Hill House and The Bird's Nest were adapted for the movies, the former successfully. "The Lottery" was dramatized on the stage in 1953 and has been dramatized on television several times. We Have Always Lived in the Castle was adapted for the Broadway stage in 1966 by Hugh Wheeler, but it proved to be a failure. According to the

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[3]Peggy Edge, "Shirley Jackson," Wilson Library Bulletin, XXXVIII (December, 1963), 352.

review in Commonweal, the version was only preposterous instead of being horrifying, as the novel had been.[4]

Shirley Jackson's name is not a household word, although her works cover a twenty-five year span. In the preface of The Magic of Shirley Jackson, her husband, the eminent critic Stanley Edgar Hyman, has this to say:

> For all her popularity, Shirley Jackson won surprisingly little recognition. She received no awards or prizes, grants or fellowships; her name was often omitted from lists on which it clearly belonged, or which it should have led. . . . After the first years, when several interviews and radio appearances failed to satisfy her, she consistently refused to be interviewed, to explain or promote her work in any fashion, or to take public stands and be a pundit of the Sunday supplements. . . . The only exception she made to this vow of silence was a willingness, even an eagerness, to lecture about the craft of fiction at colleges and writers' conferences, where she could assume an audience with some serious interest in such matters.[5]

In keeping with her interest in writers' conferences and lectures, Shirley Jackson lectured at the Syracuse University Writing Workshop in July, 1957; beginning in 1958, she lectured several summers at the Suffield Writers' Conference; she was a member of the teaching staff of the Bread Loaf Writers' Conference at Middlebury College in August, 1964; and the same

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[4]Wilfrid Sheed, "The Stage," Commonweal, LXXXV (November 11, 1966), 167.

[5]Shirley Jackson, The Magic of Shirley Jackson, edited by Stanley Edgar Hyman (New York, 1966), p. ix.

year she lectured at Columbia College and also addressed the New York State Teachers' Conference at Utica. The next year she spoke at the Syracuse University Festival of the Arts and at the University of Chicago. Shirley Jackson was too ill to receive in person the Arents Pioneer Medal for Outstanding Achievement which Syracuse University presented her in June, 1965, for on August 8 she died of heart failure at her home. The list of other awards she won is excessively short. Her short stories appeared in Best American Short Stories in the years 1944, 1951, 1956, and 1964. "The Lottery" won the O. Henry Award and was included in Prize Stories of 1949. The short story, "Louisa Please" took the Edgar Allan Poe Award in 1961. We Have Always Lived in the Castle reached number seven on the Best Seller List, and Time named it one of the "Ten Best Novels" of 1962.

In general, the critical response to the writings of Miss Jackson has been favorable. After her death, a critic said,

> Miss Jackson's novels and story collections had wide commercial and critical success as she fashioned witchcraft fantasy and pure literary art into brilliant tales that captured a sophisticated and loyal audience. In the rare genres of the Gothic romance and the intellectual horror story, Shirley Jackson early showed artistry.[6]

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[6]"Shirley Jackson," Publishers' Weekly, CLXXXVIII (August 23, 1965), 70.

Another side of her talent was illustrated in the "wildly comic memoirs of a mother amid a hilarious and chaotic family."[7] However, more than one reviewer agreed with the comment that "Somehow one expects more of Miss Jackson, who has after all, in her pre-Little League days, done some memorable short stories."[8] Surely the family reminiscences repelled some critics who might otherwise have considered her efforts more seriously.

Several interesting points were raised in the highly complimentary obituary Newsweek wrote about Shirley Jackson:

> In her art, as in her life, Shirley Jackson, who died last week at 45, was an absolute original. She belonged to no literary movement and was a member of no "school." She listened to her own voice, kept her own counsel, isolated herself from all fashionable intellectual and literary currents. She was not an urban, or existential, or "new," or "anti-. . ." novelist. She was unique. Her encyclopedic knowledge of the black arts was no mere clever eccentricity: it reflected her own abiding sense of the mystery of things.
>
> That sense of the uncanny, of the unspeakable, underlay all her best work. . . . Her haunted tales combined, in a paradoxical mixture that was her unmistakable signature, the nameless horrors of her beloved eighteenth-century novelists with an utterly contemporary sense of the mind's darkest terrors.
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> So powerful was the effect of this strain in her work that readers were surprised at her genial and delightfully funny domestic chronicles . . .

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[7] Ibid.

[8] Jeanne Campbell Jones, "The Writer as Mother," Saturday Review, XL (January 19, 1957), 54.

> in which she recounted the bizarre and hilarious tribulations of her private life. Those who knew her were not surprised; for she was the most benign, warm-hearted, humorous and generous of witches.[9]

Shirley Jackson surely did listen to her own drummer, for her work pops in and out of categories, from casual magazine essays to the aforementioned historical study of the witches of Salem. Previous comments also point to the conclusion that Shirley Jackson was isolated, not completely by choice, from the literary world and its current vogues; but her choice of subjects and her created worlds were wholly and joyfully her own, much as Yoknapawtapha County belonged to William Faulkner. Wit, based upon a clear knowledge of mankind's idiosyncracies, abounds in the Jackson worlds. In many of the major and minor characters a few deft words have given fullness to their pictures, a fullness which includes good and bad characteristics. The characters know and brood over their evil shortcomings, although they carry on their monologues and dialogues in sparkling conversations.

Dialogue, themes, and style have received special critical note in discussions of the writings of Shirley Jackson. The dialogue reveals characters, moves the story forward, and

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[9]"School of One," p. 83.

adds wit to the presentation. Everyday characters, as well as eccentric and mentally-ill characters, talk with vitality, insight, and revelation. Shirley Jackson noticed how people talk wherever she was and recorded her observations. Jeanne Campbell Jones was surprised by the Hymans' fourth child as represented in the family chronicle, Raising Demons: "The baby, 'Mr. Beekman,' is one of the most engaging two-year-olds ever set down on paper. This is not slight tribute to Miss Jackson's ability to work with dialogue. After all, a two-year-old doesn't say much!"[10] The Wilson Library Bulletin stated that "her dialogue seldom fails to be clever and often is very amusing."[11] Her themes, however, are far from amusing.

The uncanny, the unspeakable, and the terrifying are just under the surface of Shirley Jackson's major efforts. Where some authors occasionally allude to evil, she "quite matter of factly assumes its presence everywhere; indeed, her healthy-looking, apparently normal children reveal a particular appetite for contemplating violence and horror."[12]

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[10]Jones, "The Writer as Mother," p. 54.

[11]Edge, "Shirley Jackson," p. 352.

[12]Chester A. Eisinger, Fiction of the Forties (Chicago, 1963), p. 288.

The person who feels that children are angelic until they, at puberty, suddenly acquire adult shortcomings and evil characteristics could feel compelled to denounce the author for defamation of childhood. Because of the lack of a serious tone, sometimes the tidal wave of horror under the surface has been missed or ignored. Hyman felt that her work has been "little understood" and that Shirley Jackson wrote "fierce visions of dissociation and madness, of alienation and withdrawal, of cruelty and terror."[13]

Shirley Jackson's technique for writing her stories and novels was a straightforward narrative in a matter-of-fact manner, a method which usually made the paradoxical or horrifying atmosphere and events more effective. This failed if the paradox was too neatly twisted, as Chester Eisinger pointed out in his book _Fiction of the Forties_:

> Her unpretentious and rather colorless prose is a suitable vehicle for the laconic expression of an equation of disintegration: as the culture seems to be going to pieces in some of the stories [in _The Lottery_], so does the human personality. Her fiction is created out of this play on the incongruity between the ordinariness of her manner and the unreality of the reality she perceives. Her dedication to the pessimistic view of experience is everywhere explicit, but occasionally it is obscured by the manipulation of her paradoxes.[14]

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[13]Jackson, _Magic_, p. viii.

[14]Eisinger, _Fiction of the Forties_, p. 288.

This fault is more often a flaw of the short stories than the novels of Shirley Jackson; in many of them she had the grace to leave the endings understated and less precise.

This study will discuss each of Shirley Jackson's six novels. The discussions will concentrate on plot, setting, theme, characterization, and style. The last chapter will be a summation of the special strengths and weaknesses of the work of Shirley Jackson.

CHAPTER II

THE ROAD THROUGH THE WALL

The Road Through the Wall, the first of Shirley Jackson's six novels, is an excursion in the minds and worlds of children, adolescents, and their parents in suburbia. Their world looks serene and secure, but not one of the characters is satisfied; each is searching for self and social approval within his tiny community. The central conflict of the book revolves around the question of whether the characters can give to others or find for themselves loving acceptance. The problem begins with the parents. Bound in their own failures and limitations, the parents impose their views upon their children, who cannot withstand the parental pressures. Unsettled by job failures, unsatisfactory mates, or other home conditions, the parents war with themselves, with their mates, with their children, and with their neighbors. The children, some of whom have kind feelings at times, seldom are able to establish warm, loving relationships with others. Often they do not like themselves. They are isolated.

The first of two major plots in the novel involves Tod Donald, an unloved third child, who is ignored by both parents

and assailed by his older brother and sister, James and Virginia. By withdrawing into himself, Tod's father has abandoned his family except for his physical presence and monetary support. Mrs. Donald has assigned herself and her daughter, as her alter ego, the central position within her sphere; anything that does not contribute to their (meaning <u>her</u>) glory is of no interest to her. James excels in sports; therefore he contributes to his mother's glory and wins due approval. Virginia is a grasping fourteen-year-old who takes what she wants from others, bullying everyone she can in the process. Tod and his father have no place within their home.

Tod is also a social nonentity, for no one recognizes him as an individual. Without a feeling of self--something a child gains from the opinions of others about himself--Tod is defenseless. He always reacts to his situation because he is never in control of it or himself. Planning nothing, Tod finds himself doing one thing, then another. He throws rocks at a girl, wanting to be punished; her mother concludes that Tod would not hurt the girl deliberately. Tod invites one of two peers to the movies, but only one at a time; for, if he invites both, even though he pays their way, the boys play odd-man-out, with him always as odd man. He seeks the attention of Hester Lucas, the high-school-aged housekeeper of his

neighbors, out of primeval attraction to her redheaded earthiness. Hester does not notice him. He eats dinner at home, savoring the time to hate individually the articles and people within his life. Still dumbly reacting, Tod sees an open door on a neighborhood home and ends up in a closet in the house repeating the dirtiest words he knows.

Clearly Tod's world is not good, but it disintegrates even further after the removal of the wall, which separates his neighborhood from the outside world and stands as a symbol of the characters' various mental states of isolation. Always at the mercy of events, Tod is not consulted by the people who decide to remove the wall behind Pepper Street, even though "Tod Donald . . . was the one most terribly changed by it all."[1]

The climax of the novel occurs when Tod and three-year-old Caroline Desmond are missed from a neighborhood party and her brutally beaten body is found late that night. Tod tries to sell his bicycle to a neighborhood boy; then he hides behind a stack of bricks from the wall until he slips home to bed. His family finds him and summons the father of the little girl whom Tod is thought to have killed.

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[1]Shirley Jackson, The Road Through the Wall (New York, 1948), p. 180.

His family does not offer him solace or kindness. After police questioning, Tod is left alone in the kitchen where he has always hated everything that came into sight or mind. Later he is found, a suicide by hanging.

One of the weaknesses of the novel's structure is that Harriet Merriam's story overshadows Tod's, although the climax of the novel hangs upon his tale. Harriet's story is that of a fat fourteen-year-old who has several traumatic misadventures during a summer that is crucial to her life. Each of her activities causes a reaction within her home, and this focuses attention on her. Harriet's experiences are only slightly less disastrous for her than Tod's are for him. He murders someone and then takes his own life; Harriet assumes a living death.

Several misadventures lead Harriet to her death of spirit. Following a fad current among the girls on Pepper Street, Harriet writes "love" letters to a neighborhood boy. Instead of dismissing the incident as a usual teen-age phase, Mrs. Merriam considers the letters filthy erotica and punishes her daughter severely. In order to guide Harriet into what she considers proper activities, Mrs. Merriam encourages Harriet to establish a friendship with Virginia Donald, who comes from an acceptable family. But Virginia

is not nearly as good a companion as Mrs. Merriam thinks. Virginia forces Harriet to go to the apartment of a Chinese man who invites them to tea. During the visit, the man implies that the landlord of the apartment building would never rent an apartment to him, an Oriental. Virginia is incensed at the thought that she has wasted time on a mere servant. After this misadventure, Harriet avoids Virginia out of fear of where the friendship could lead her.

Harriet's friendship is sought by Marilyn Perlman, but Harriet does not tell her mother; the Perlmans are Jewish, and no one on Pepper Street cares to know them. After Mrs. Perlman and Marilyn incautiously drop in one evening, Mrs. Merriam demands that Harriet end the friendship on the grounds that it is not suitable. Harriet tells Marilyn that she cannot see her again, and Marilyn retaliates by reminding her that she is fat. Again Harriet is alone.

The climax of Harriet's summer, and of her life, comes at the neighborhood party which ends when Caroline Desmond is missed. Lillian Tyler, bitter and mentally unstable, explains to Harriet that she is lucky not to be pretty, for prettiness fades, but a fascinating personality does not. Then she voices the opinion that Harriet is not unattractive just because she is fat; Miss Tyler implies that Harriet is

naturally ugly and that losing weight would not make her pretty. Harriet knows that she is far from being fascinating; she is just a crushed teen-ager without emotional stamina to survive such experiences. Harriet begins the process of resigning herself to her isolation. She will not make her place in the world; she will eventually become only her father's housekeeper.

The novel has too many focuses, too many story lines, too many characters, and too many options. The reader is shocked to find the deaths of Caroline and Tod the climax of the novel. A steady focus on Tod and his problems would have made clear that his story was the major plot of the novel. Instead, the cohesiveness of Harriet's story causes the reader to follow it more closely. Several subplots also contribute to the lack of focus in the novel.

Although they blur the focus, the subplots contribute to the thematic observations of the book. Homes where no love lived; economic, social, religious, and ethnic prejudice towards others; self-hatred; and all of the forces which entangle Harriet and Tod are explored in various subplots. An example of such a subplot is the story of the Robertses. They married because they were good sparring partners: he chases other women; she is a shrew who waits to gloat when

he makes a fool of himself. She accuses him of desiring Hester; he flirts one evening with the widowed mother of two neighborhood children. He dances with Virginia Donald at the party, drinking so much that he cannot help later with the search for Caroline. While the Robertses serve to illustrate the moral emptiness of Pepper Street, their total presentation adds very little to the novel. Other subplots are equally as distracting. Too many stories are struggling to get told, and, naturally, too many characters are involved.

Forty residents populate Pepper Street during the 271-page novel, and other characters come and go. One critic notes that a "minor flaw in the story-telling is that the cast is so populous that the reader occasionally forgets their relationships. . . ."[2] Instead of being minor, the flaw is one of the chief defects of the novel. It grows out of the major failing of the novel, the proliferation of story lines. These, then, lead to too many options in the fragmented denouement.

The denouement mirrors the general fragmentation of the plot: one scene follows another, separated only by spacing. The scenes illustrate character reaction to events

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[2]Robert Halsband, "Streetside, U.S.A.," Saturday Review, XXXI (February 28, 1948), 15.

which occurred the preceding day, the day of the party. For instance, Harriet awakens to the knowledge that something terrible happened the day before and suddenly remembers the destructive criticism of Lillian Tyler. Harriet's mother is last seen expressing her attitude that Tod attacked the girl sexually and that all of the lascivious details should have been forced from him and circulated. Mr. Merriam and Mr. Perlman meet at the site of the murder and agree that the neighborhood was too hasty in condemning Tod and that a wandering tramp probably committed the murder. Other such piecemeal revelations are made, leaving the reader with too many options to choose from.

An author need not tie his plot too neatly, but he does need to point to some conclusion. A piecemeal structure and a piecemeal plot lead to a fragmented denouement in The Road Through the Wall. One critic says that Miss Jackson "fits together her jigsaw plot adroitly, and underlines every phrase with significance."[3] This is not altogether true, for some incidents, like the visit to the Chinese man's apartment, are forced; and some characters, like the Terrels, are unnecessary. It seems as if Miss Jackson combined several

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[3] Ibid., p. 14.

short stories in one vehicle meant to be a novel. Instead, the stories strain against one another, and, while many of them reach conclusions, the novel lacks enough unity to achieve an aura of conclusiveness. Happily, Shirley Jackson does not make this mistake in her later novels.

In a plot as complex as that of The Road Through the Wall, the omniscient narrator is the only practical point of view for the author to choose. This technique also made feasible an effective use of foreshadowing in the novel through the omniscient narrator's foreboding statements about the wall and through the Bible readings which Mrs. Mack uses to educate her dog about the wrath of God and the destruction of all man's walls. Mrs. Mack gives utterance to the Puritan teachings of sin, destruction, and salvation as she explains the selections to the dog:

> "That means," she said to the watching dog, letting the book lie open in her lap, "that means, let me see. Obscurity, that's when it gets dark. Desolate, that means there's nothing there. You see," she went on eagerly to the dog, "we are all evil blind people. Salvation means some way out. You see," she said again, "the Lord is watching us all the time, and watching for everything we do that is bad because the Lord won't stand for anything that's bad."[4]

The Bible readings further the thematic study of the book; moreover, they foreshadow the coming destruction. Obviously the

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[4]Jackson, Road, p. 123.

cruel situation on the walled-off Pepper Street will not be allowed to continue.

Each plot thread of The Road Through the Wall forwards the themes of isolation and alienation caused by prejudice. Many of the characters and all of the neighborhood are without hope or joy in life, and various kinds of prejudice lie beneath the vapidity. Religious, ethnic, social, and economic snobbery form the false bases of human judgment for the Pepper Street neighborhood. Several of the characters are so immured by these standards that they are unable to establish healthy relationships with themselves, their mates, or their children. The lives of Tod and Harriet especially mirror the situation. The morally corrupt atmosphere is not that of a hedonistic suburb, for no one there is depraved. The characters are unable to relinquish their isolation and move toward unselfish love of others. But the biblical readings sweep the conflict into one of puritanic good versus evil, love versus hatred, salvation versus damnation. The damnation found there is not that of eternal hellfire that a Puritan would understand. It is the hellishness of a pointless, wasted life that a modern Existentialist would recognize. The biblical readings of cataclysm counterpoint the modern view of man's isolation and alienation.

Shirley Jackson offers no hope of redemption. This accords with Richard Chase's comment that "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."[5] No one comes through the ordeals of Pepper Street prepared for a brighter tomorrow. The security of the residents of Pepper Street is shattered, but the epilogue gives no indication that the residents will learn from their experiences. The universal application of this thesis is that mankind does not learn readily from experience: just as Pepper Street residents begin rebuilding their old mental walls after disaster, all of mankind will build new mental walls when their old ones are devastated.

The chief symbol of the novel is the wall. Its physical reality discourages infiltration of the area by crass outsiders, while it symbolizes the residents' mental rejection of the real world. The wall is woven into the characterizations and actions as elaborately as any symbol can be in such a segmented structure. It is particularly well used when the

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[5]Richard Chase, _The American Novel and Its Tradition_ (New York, 1957), p. 11.

varied reactions of Pepper Street residents to its demolition are dramatized. The wall's major importance, though, is that it gives badly needed cohesiveness to the novel. Although there are too many diffuse elements in the novel, there is only one long, enclosing, apparently dependable wall. The overconvenience of the symbol is attacked by one reviewer, who says,

> In depicting the combined feelings of security and imprisonment which characterizes . . . a street for the children, and in tracing the little walls of discrimination which they build up among themselves with mortar supplied by their parents, Shirley Jackson does a convincing job of writing. But in making this wall a physical reality, and in introducing a character who reads portentous excerpts from the Bible pertaining to the tearing down of walls and the consequent destruction, the author employs a central symbol which is at once both obvious and overconvenient. Admittedly the wall serves to implicate more closely the parents of the neighborhood, which is important to the author.[6]

The wall is overconvenient and overplayed, but it serves as a helpful point of reference for the author and the reader.

Two characters in the novel, Tod Donald and Caroline Desmond, are emblematic of the isolation and alienation on Pepper Street. At first Tod is presented as a real boy who talks with others and plays, but after the hunt for him begins,

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[6]Kenneth Lash, "Book Reviews," New Mexico Quarterly Review, XVIII (Autumn, 1948), 372.

the method of presentation changes. He no longer talks; he is the mute quarry in a vengeful search. Before this time, the author has commented on his actions; she no longer does. He has become a symbol of the uncomprehending, incomprehensible violence and alienation that the values of his neighborhood create. The switch from the real to the symbolic is so melodramatic that it is difficult to accept. The emblematic portrayal of Tod does not ring true, but that of Caroline does.

Caroline Desmond is used totally as a symbol--the ideal of the adults, never speaking, never disobeying, never anything like a real three-year-old girl. She becomes the victim, a pagan sacrifice to the values of neighborhood, because she has been kept separated from, and uncontaminated by, a dirty world. Again, it is the parents who set their child up for harm. Her mother is unable to cope with the world, and her father lives by such artificial standards that he cannot guide others into a satisfying life. Caroline is a more effective symbol than Tod because her tragic end is of a piece with her previous presentation. Shirley Jackson had a talent for creating characters who, like Caroline, are unique.

The author reveals the characters by their speech, actions, and thoughts, and by what is said about them by

other characters and by the narrator. Another technique which Shirley Jackson uses well is that of revealing the characters through their relationships with others. A quotation from the book demonstrates her use of this technique: "Warmly Harriet smiled at her mother and thought how for a little while the three of them would live together in vast amiability."[7] This sentence very economically describes the past, present, and future Merriam family life. Harriet recognizes from past experience that a false closeness will engulf the family now after a time of dissension--until the next argument. No real love lives in a home where dread of the next argument underlies a time of truce. The word "vast" connotes the hypocrisy of a relationship in which the mother exacts compliance from a teen-ager as the price of peace. Harriet's father is mentioned in passing because he has little control over the family's relationship. The relationship, then, is one of an unhappily dutiful teenager, browbeaten by her domineering mother, while a weak father avoids the conflict. He is the passive, quiet-father type. Mr. Merriam is only one of many characters in The Road Through the Wall not fully developed.

In a novel with so many characters, it is not surprising that many of them are types. For example, Virginia Donald is

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[7]Jackson, Road, p. 44.

the stereotyped grasping, greedy human being with no redeeming traits. Often, though, secondary characters have unique qualities that are surprising enough to create the impression of complexity, or roundness. One such character is the widowed Mrs. Martin, who with her two children, lives with her in-laws. They want her to move and take the children. In a grotesque contest of wills, Mrs. Martin defies her mother-in-law; she will not move. But, of course, the subplot involving the Martins is extraneous to the major conflict of the book. Delineating characters actually unnecessary to the novel takes the focus away from major characters and weakens their presentations. However, many of the major characters are very well drawn.

Some of the characters are surprising in their originality; as a reviewer says,

> The characters themselves are highly original, each one lucidly perceived and conveyed. The widowed Mrs. Mack, reading the Bible to her attentive dog every night; the mock-invalid Miss Tyler, living with her sister and her sister's husband, whom she bitterly loves; the restless Mr. Roberts, prowling at night like a tom-cat; they are depicted with an impersonal sympathy that is reminiscent of Steinbeck at his best.[8]

One of the best-drawn characters is Mrs. Ransom-Jones, for she is surprising in her complexity. She seems the ideal,

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[8]Halsband, "Streetside, U.S.A.," p. 15.

loving sister to the spiteful Lillian Tyler until she goes out for the evening with her husband as the sister feigns illness to keep her home. Mrs. Ransom-Jones befriends the hapless Terrel sisters but keeps her kindnesses from her neighbor, Miss Fielding, who does not consider the girls worthy of notice. Mrs. Ransom-Jones, in an act of neighborliness, holds the garden party that ends when Caroline is missed. But she is not neighborly enough to invite the "unsuitable" residents of Pepper Street. At the party she chooses to ignore her sister's complaints, after ascertaining that her rudeness will not be seen by the guests. She is not strong enough to clash with her sister when a real battle is in view; she calls her husband for support. Mrs. Ransom-Jones is complex and, thus, a satisfyingly round character.

Both dialogue and narrative styles are well handled in The Road Through the Wall. One reviewer states that "most of [the novel's] success derives from the author's style, a supple and resourceful instrument that makes her shopworn material appear much fresher than it is."[9] Her narrative

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[9]"Briefly Noted Fiction," The New Yorker, XXIII (February 21, 1948), 95.

style is clear, understated, and economical, as this quotation illustrates:

> They all lived on Pepper Street because they were able to afford it, and none of them would have lived there if he had been able to afford living elsewhere, although Pepper Street was charming and fairly expensive and even comfortably isolated.[10]

Sentence structure is clear, although often complex, as the example is. Words are commonplace but chosen with deliberation. For instance, the phrase "comfortably isolated" has a much different meaning from the word "isolated" alone. Shirley Jackson economically conveys two clear points when she describes a house with a "regrettable pink" color and an "abortive front porch"; the family in residence is as unattractive as the house it occupies. Humorous comments and situations are part of Shirley Jackson's style. One such comment concerns Mrs. Donald, who learns of an event while washing her hair. She remembers the event "in a state of wet, off-balance agitation, not unmixed with a hint of grey."[11] The confrontation between Mrs. Mack and Mary Byrne is rendered with humor. Mary, believing that Mrs. Mack is a witch, tells her that her name is Sallie. Then if Mrs. Mack wants to cast a spell over her, she cannot, since she has the wrong name to use. Mrs. Mack, unaware of her reputation as a witch,

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[10]Jackson, _Road_, p. 304. [11]_Ibid._, p. 75.

is ignorant of the terror she arouses in the girl. Sometimes the humor is overly cute, as is the comment that someone was "brained by an overzealous golf ball."[12] But such failures seldom occur in the dialogue style of the novel.

Good dialogue is a strong point in Shirley Jackson's writings. If one reads a character's lines very carefully, he finds a consistent attitude, a distinct speech pattern, and a clearly perceived personality. The following exchange between Harriet and her mother illustrates the point:

> Mrs. Merriam kept her eyes down on her sewing: Harriet would know she was offended.
>
> "You _can_ go to Helen's," Mrs. Merriam said. She heard Harriet's gusty sigh of relief, and added daintily, "but you _may_ not."
>
> "Why?"
>
> Mrs. Merriam tightened her mouth over her sewing. "I think you know what you've done, Harriet."
>
> "Mother," Harriet began, only what she finally said was "M-m-m-mother," and she stopped helplessly.
>
> "Please, Harriet," Mrs. Merriam said. "There's nothing to talk about. Go to your room."
>
> "But--" Harriet began. Then she said, "Oh, Lord," and started heavily up the stairs.
>
> "You might spend the time writing letters," her mother said, raising her voice slightly.
>
> The word "letters" carried Harriet hastily up the stairs and into her room.[13]

Such realistic dialogue is one of the best elements in _The Road Through the Wall_; the atmosphere is another.

Repressive and cruel, the atmosphere of suburban Pepper Street supports the credibility of the action. The inability

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[12] _Ibid._, p. 72

[13] _Ibid._, pp. 16-17

of the residents to reach out from their own isolation to help others, their refusal to admit such a responsibility, create the community in which a tragedy such as the deaths of the two children may occur. The physical surroundings and the mental attitudes were parts of the atmosphere.

Although not successful as a whole, the characterizations, style, and atmosphere are well done. The plot is confusing, particularly since it lacks focus. Better novels by Shirley Jackson follow The Road Through the Wall.

CHAPTER III

HANGSAMAN

Shirley Jackson's second novel, Hangsaman, concerns Natalie Waite, a seventeen-year-old girl who is tottering between sanity and madness. At home she runs a solitary course between her egotistical father and her whining mother. At college nothing and no one meets the exacting standards she has absorbed from her father. Uncomfortable in the real world, Natalie withdraws more and more into an incoherent fantasy world. She does form a friendship with another misfit, but it crashes after the girl attempts to establish a Lesbian relationship. Natalie, now completely alone, realizes that she has only herself to depend upon to find her own power and place within the world.

Part I of the novel shows Natalie's home life as an unstable mixture of paternal overbearance, motherly complaint, and uneasy sibling compliance with her young brother. Mr. Waite is a writer of some note. Mr. Waite maintains strident opinions and a sarcastic wit that he polishes and appreciates. After having felt his acerbic wit too often, Mrs. Waite seldom speaks to her husband or to anyone within his presence; but,

to compensate for her defensive silence, she unleashes a continuous monologue in her kitchen. While she helps there, Natalie learns to know the unhappy, grasping woman who is her mother. Bud Waite, the fifteen-year-old son, escapes as best he can from the adults.

Satirical comedy, set by the personality of Mr. Waite, is the mood of most of Part I. The story opens as the family eats Sunday breakfast and discusses that evening's cocktail party. During the week Mr. Waite invites whomever he pleases to his home Sunday evening, without keeping a count of the expected guests. It falls to Mrs. Waite to prepare refreshments, drinks, and a buffet supper. To repay herself, she becomes drunk early in the party and is put to bed by Natalie. Mr. Waite feels no responsibility for his wife and certainly no sympathy.

After breakfast Natalie meets Mr. Waite in his study to discuss a weekly writing assignment. Throughout this and all other events of the day, Natalie entertains a fantasy involving a detective who questions her about a murder. The fantasy invades the kitchen as Natalie and her mother prepare for the evening. Mrs. Waite complains of her plight as the wife of a man who demeans her instead of praising her superb qualities. She cautions Natalie against marrying a man like

her father. However, Mrs. Waite says, if Natalie does marry such a man, she will take her back. Mrs. Waite's mother would not take her back on the grounds that she was not as good after she married as she was before. It is easier for Natalie to converse with the imaginary detective than with her mother.

Bud starts his emancipation from the family by deciding not to attend the party and offers to share the opportunity with Natalie by taking her with him. She declines because she is not ready yet to begin the process of separation. At the party she talks with Verna, who believes that she assumed a new personage when she changed her name from Edith. Verna is denying her roots to achieve selfhood. After Natalie puts her mother to bed, the mood of the writing changes. Natalie is led to the surrounding woods by a handsome older stranger, who presumably seduces or rapes her. A horrified remembrance hovers over her the next morning, but she tells no one and declares that whe will not think about it. The reader never knows for sure whether her experience was pure fantasy. In a dismal atmosphere, the family prepares to send Natalie to her first year at college.

Especially chosen by Mr. Waite for its liberal attitudes, the girls' college is part of his plan for the type of

education he desires for Natalie. Progressive attitudes were foremost in the minds of the college's founders. Experience was to be the mode of learning, with the students free to structure or not to structure their learning as they desired. With tongue-in-cheek, the omniscient author notes that this did not work out and that modifications of the original ideas were necessary. But it is still a liberal school by the time Natalie enters.

The original mood of sprightliness begins Part II of Hangsaman. Whimsical descriptions of the founders, the architecture, the learning, the faculty, and the students are employed. Natalie is delighted with her room and the school until her first encounter with other dormitory occupants. Her mood and that of the writing changes. All of the girls are to identify themselves, and Natalie finds it very difficult to stand before them and claim her identity.

Other such initiations are forthcoming. Aroused from bed early in the morning, several freshman girls are herded into a room and asked foolish questions. Natalie defies the custom by refusing to conform to this kind of good sportsmanship. Rosalind, an unsavory girl, invites her friendship, but Natalie refuses to gossip. Someone is stealing from the dormitory; Natalie, fearing that she will be blamed, falsely

claims that someone has stolen from her and is appalled at her lie. A chance meeting with Elizabeth Langdon, the wife of Natalie's English teacher, begins a tenuous friendhsip. Two older students use Natalie in their plans to harrass Elizabeth by playing up to her husband, Arthur. Elizabeth reveals to Natalie all her childish expectations about marriage and her hopeless defeat in it. Natalie sees the entire situation as disgusting. An emancipated life it may be, but it lacks substance and purpose.

Classes offer no more satisfaction, for the teachers are pedants or performers demanding praise from their students. Natalie writes letters home that skirt around her situation, and her parents carry on their usual monologues by mail without really noticing their child. She is deeply wounded when she sits at a dormitory cafeteria table already occupied by three girls; without saying a word, they all leave. Natalie sinks more and more into fantasy, staying away from other students and her classes. She writes to herself in her diary, mentioning once the dreadful incident at home she had promised never to note. During an hallucination she meets Tony, another girl who has rejected the school--or been rejected by it. Tony's disdainful attitude towards the school is the balm Natalie needs.

Part III of the novel covers Natalie's final good-byes to childish things. She goes home for Thanksgiving, where she is treated as a guest; she no longer really belongs there. Back at school she goes to Rosalind's room, only to be crudely turned away. Walking across the campus, she meets Arthur Langdon, who tells her that he and Elizabeth soon will be parents. Natalie goes to Tony's room, where she is welcomed and soothed. Tony dismisses the snooping girls outside her door and calls them names. Natalie learns that she has been called up before a student board for not going to classes for two weeks.

The climax is approaching as events and thoughts pound against Natalie. The next morning, the two girls take the fifteen dollars Natalie has brought from home and take a fanciful and frantic whirl around town. They frolic there until Tony suggests that they take a bus ride to a place she knows. Crowded on the bus, Natalie feels surrounded and crushed by enemies. They ride to a closed amusement park at the end of the line where Tony deserts Natalie momentarily. In an open area Tony kisses Natalie on the lips. Revolted, she leaves what was her only friend, the last of her escape avenues. Fantasy has disappointed her. That crisis has passed, but Natalie must choose death or reality, and she

chooses reality. After a ride with an everyday, commonsense couple, Natalie thinks of suicide. The reassuring bulk of the college buildings calls her back to reality and to life, minus her false supports.

Conflict in Hangsaman centers on Natalie's struggle between reality and fantasy. From the entrance of the detective into Natalie's conscious mind in the first scene, Natalie wavers between escape from life and her unhappy realization of the imperfections in the world. She cannot accept the world with its warts and moles, but her final conclusion is that a real, but disordered world is better than the abyss of fantasy. The resolution is unbelievable if it is interpreted to mean that Natalie is suddenly a sturdy, whole human being. Some reviewers took this view, but it does not fit with the ideas or situations presented in the book. A more realistic interpretation is simply that Natalie will rely upon herself as she treads her way gingerly through the world.

Foreshadowing is effectively used. Verna's comments about creating a new identity foreshadow Natalie's search for identity. Mr. Waite's comments about there always being a motive for friendship foreshadow the debacle of the two older students stealing Arthur Langdon away as their "friend" Natalie takes home his drunken wife. Naturally everyone knows

their game but Natalie. Protective jealousy exhibited by Tony as the one-armed man seeks Natalie's help points out her unhealthy attitude.

Three parts comprise the structure of Hangsaman. Part I pictures Natalie's home life; Part II brings into view the roads of reality open to her; Part III contains a series of rejections of certain aspects of her life, the farewell to fantasy and death as outlets, and a grudging acceptance of the world. Part I is written in a gaily satirical mood, except for the section dealing with the foray into the woods. Part II opens on the gay mood but it soon becomes ominous. Part III holds varied degrees of quiet desperation until the climax, when Natalie tentatively comes to terms with herself and reality. Then the tone assumes everyday rationality. All aspects of the novel work well except the tone, because the levity of some parts jangles against the sobriety of others. As W. T. Scott says,

> Now in the novel Hangsaman, and on its much larger scale [than "The Lottery"] Miss Jackson again proceeds from realism to symbolic drama. Here the method fails. The tones do not flow into one another. In its final passages the novel certainly achieves an eerie quality; at any given point Miss Jackson's writing as such bears the distinction she has been so justly praised for. But the structure of the novel falls apart; it cannot contain both the satirical reporting of its first half and the nightmare fantasy of its second.[1]

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[1] W. T. Scott, "Dreaming Girl," Saturday Review, XXIV (May, 5, 1951), 11.

Parallel structure, though, enhances the unity of the novel. A complex parallel that has great import to Natalie involves the characters of her mother and father and their relationship and the characters of Elizabeth and Arthur Langdon and theirs. Each of the men is childish, egocentric, and very interested in his work. Each has chosen a woman who admires his accomplishments but is so miserable as his wife that she becomes half-alcoholic. Mrs. Waite wanted her husband to substitute her desires for his and use his superior power to achieve what she wanted; but she tells Natalie that, after her marriage,

> instead of being different and powerful and giving the orders, you've been tricked just like everyone else and then you begin to know what happens to everyone and how they all get tricked. Everyone only knows one "I," and that's the "I" they call themselves, and there's no one else can be "I" to anyone except that one person, and they're all stuck with themselves. . . .[2]

Some advantages Elizabeth Langdon expected when she married were "staying out all night if I felt like it, and laughing in everyone's face the next morning. And faculty parties . . . and pouring at teas. And getting the best of everything."[3] At home and at school Natalie sees the same type

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[2]Shirley Jackson, Hangsaman (New York, 1951), pp. 44-45.

[3]*Ibid.*, p. 145.

of marriage. Natalie's refusal to take responsibility for her life is also a direct parallel with these two women characters.

Parallel events also include the chance meeting with Elizabeth Langdon that launched the couple's friendship with Natalie, the chance meeting with Arthur Langdon which marked its termination, the visit of Rosalind to Natalie's room in search of friendship, and Natalie's return visit for the same purpose. John O. Lyons pointed out that the novel did not hold together structurally, but he also noted the "effective thematic repetition,"[4] as the two times Natalie was led off into the woods.

Edgar Hyman considered the book to be within the "Huckleberry Finn framework of the rites of passage, the series of ceremonial initiations leading to maturity. . . ."[5] The thematic repetition brings the plot around full circle so that the structure is not episodic. The linear movement is interrupted only by a few remembrances of past events. Focus of this novel is never in doubt, for it is almost strictly a chronological account of a short time in the life of one

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[4]John O. Lyons, The College Novel in America (Carbondale, Illinois, 1962), p. 68.

[5]Stanley Edgar Hyman, The Promised End (Cleveland, 1963), p. 349.

character, Natalie. Other characters may have stories to unfold, but Shirley Jackson exercised the discipline she had learned well as a writer of short stories by telling only the parts of the other stories that contribute directly to Natalie's. One event, Natalie's visit to Rosalind's room, seems manipulated, because the action is out of character for her. That and the great swings in tone seem the only defects that affect plotting in an otherwise compactly conceived and executed novel.

Hangsaman is a novel of initiation, but the candidate's dilemma is not simple. Natalie's drama revolves around a two-part conflict: her struggle to find herself and her struggle to bring whoever she is into the adult world. Until she discovers, or admits to herself, who she is, she cannot undergo the final steps. Illusion and reality both threaten Natalie, as the comment of the omniscient author makes clear:

> Perhaps--and this was her most persistent thought, the thought that stayed with her and came suddenly to trouble her at odd moments, and to comfort her--suppose, actually, she were not Natalie Waite, college girl, daughter to Arnold Waite, a creature of deep, lovely destiny; suppose she were someone else?[6]

Another escape from life for Natalie is death, the true love mentioned in the verse on the title page of Hangsaman:

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[6]Jackson, Hangsaman, p. 193.

Slack your rope, Hangsaman,
O slack it for a while,
I think I see my true love coming,
Coming many a mile.

In the old English ballad "The Maid Freed from the Gallows," of which this is a variation, the father, mother, sister, and brother of the girl on the gallows refuse to rescue her but her true love will. Tony may be considered a symbolic character, a ghost with whom Natalie talks--and a valid case can be built for this interpretation, although a literal interpretation is pursued in this study. As a symbolic character, Tony may represent death, and the kiss in the woods may be the kiss of death; therefore, Natalie rejects death as an escape from life. Escape into fantasies, hallucinations, and addresses to her diary are tools Natalie uses to avoid the conflict; when she can no longer hide, she is initiated. This novel of initiation is exceptional because of its psychological bent, though Lyons simply states, "This initiation is convincing."[7]

Some of the major characters of Hangsaman are complex in scope, and none more so than Natalie. The character is solidly in view at times and shadowy at others. This is a deliberate portrayal in keeping with her elusive personality.

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[7]Lyons, The College Novel, p. 64.

Revelations in her diary clearly show her schizoid personality; unexplained sections of hallucinatory writing also evoke the essence of the mental illness. The most surprising part of the character of Natalie is the naivete which makes her so vulnerable to danger so often; she should really know better.

The characterization of Natalie was attacked by Scott:

> Natalie was raped or seduced offstage at her father's cocktail party. Presumably the emotional effects were profound, but we don't know any more about them than we know, for instance, about the effects of a flock of martinis Natalie absorbed one afternoon and for the first time. Miss Jackson's method of not-quite-telling begins to show its disadvantages. We know from her diary that Natalie is schizoid, but when she drowses into a period of paralytic madness we can never be sure whether her girl-friend Tony, kleptomaniac and Tarot card reader, is real or imagined. We are too fragmentarily informed to be fairly prepared for what happens.[8]

The traumatic incident at the cocktail party is mentioned later, but the effect of the cocktails is unimportant for the novel. Shirley Jackson does tell, but much in the manner of a mystery novelist, about Tony. The whirl of events obscures her characterization, but simply tracing her portrayal makes evident her reality in the virtual world of _Hangsaman_. She is not as fully drawn as Natalie, but her quirks create the impression of roundness.

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[8]Scott, "Dreaming Girl," p. 12.

Effectiveness of the presentation of secondary characters varies. The parallel women, Elizabeth Langdon and Mrs. Waite, are surprising. Their dogged clinging to their husbands while hating them is inexplicable, but human. Mrs. Waite's personality is rounded out by the recollections of her relationship with Natalie during Natalie's younger days as Elizabeth's is rounded out by her desire for real affection. Mr. Waite never emerges from the stereotype of the pompous fool, while Arthur Langdon does, partially by his petulance over his wife's drinking and his too-obvious interest in meeting Natalie's father. Again, the very minor characters are given unique characteristics that bring vitality to them. Old Nick, the fragrant, eccentric dormitory matron, is among this number. Shirley Jackson's clear vision of the characters, plus the excellent dialogue and delineation of relationships, contributes to the quality of the characterizations.

Understated narrative style is the viable means of construction for Hangsaman. Commonplace words are used throughout, sometimes in particular configurations for precise effects. All four traditional sentence styles are used, although the periodic is used more often and the baroque less often than the others. No excesses of slapstick mar the text, but humorous touches are frequent in the novel.

As one reviewer says, "Miss Jackson writes with grace and precision of this tenuous borderland country of the emotionally disturbed."[9]

Settings influence the main character so much that they are symbolic of the state of Natalie's mind: the woods where she is harmed are tantamount to the jungle her mind is threading through; her room, kept closed and locked, is much the same as her mind when she contemplates humanity; the dormitory, teeming with people, is alien to her, as are the people. Settings are minutely described; even the dimensions of the dormitory rooms and their furniture are detailed. Shirley Jackson makes clear where the story is taking place, why it is there, and how it is influenced by the setting. Often the setting is so skillfully merged with the story that it becomes a participant in it. The technique of blending setting with story continues to develop in the novels of Shirley Jackson until the settings become overwhelmingly important to the final three novels.

Continuing her study of alienation, Shirley Jackson creates Natalie, a character almost separated from herself and the world. She cannot separate reality from illusion.

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[9]F. H. Bullock, "Miss Jackson on Some Odd, Dark Corners of the Mind," New York Herald Tribune, April 22, 1951, p. 7.

The reality she hides from pictures shortcomings of the entire world narrowed into her small territory, but the indictment of them is not small. This contemporary commentary upon the world is pertinent now, more than ever, for many soon-to-be-adults reject the world as they see it. Hangsaman is tightly plotted, but wide variations in mood cause a fissure in the structure. Characterizations are, on the whole, good, but not outstanding. Settings contribute greatly to the novel, as does the dialogue. Hangsaman is a commendable second novel.

CHAPTER IV

THE BIRD'S NEST

Four personalities in one body, each distinct and working for control; an egocentric doctor; and a gruff aunt watching the struggle are the main elements of Shirley Jackson's surrealistic novel, *The Bird's Nest*. One of Elizabeth Richmond's four personalities, Betsy, states the problem when she repeats part of the rhyme that gives the novel its name, "Elizabeth, Beth, Betsy, and Bess, they all went together to find a bird's nest." The bird's nest of psychological confusion which has splintered the personality of the girl known to the world as Elizabeth Richmond must be unraveled, and then the pieces of personality must be merged if she is to live in sanity. The story of *The Bird's Nest* evolves unevenly through events told by the omniscient narrator and by Dr. Wright, the analyst trying to help Elizabeth. Long before the doctor and the aunt know much about the girl's problems, the reader has been given a good indication of her condition by allusions to past events, statements the personalities make, and actions they take.

The plot of The Bird's Nest is well organized and, at the end, no pieces of the story are missing. The first section lays the background for the following action, as it should. Elizabeth Richmond goes to work one morning to find a threatening note on her desk. She finds more of these as time passes. Elizabeth is bothered by them, by headaches, and by voids in time during which she has no idea what might have happened. She is accused by her aunt of sneaking out during the night; one night she is shocked to find an empty brandy bottle beside her bed; visiting some friends with her Aunt Morgen, Elizabeth is insulting, but she does not remember the occurrence. Her aunt decides that Elizabeth should see the family doctor, who recommends that the girl consult Doctor Victor Wright, a general practitioner interested in psychoanalysis.

Dr. Wright, using hypnotism, brings forth Beth, another personality of Elizabeth's. After Betsy, a third personality, emerges, Dr. Wright diagnoses Elizabeth as having a multiple or disintegrated personality. Much later a fourth personality, Bess, appears. Elizabeth knows only of herself; Beth knows of herself and Elizabeth; Betsy knows of the two others; only Bess knows of the four persons of Elizabeth's personality. The conflict of the book revolves around the four personalities

who control the personage and Dr. Wright's attempts to achieve an integration of personality.

Betsy takes control of Elizabeth Richmond long enough to get her to New York, where Betsy hopes to find her mother, who died four years earlier. While in New York, Betsy is overpowered by Bess, who wants to find Robin, an old lover of her mother's. When Betsy regains control, she is shocked to find her hotel room vandalized and her clothing torn. In a vivid scene, the two parts of personality war, with Betsy biting the hand controlled by Bess as she reaches for the door key and Bess choking Betsy to cause her to give up the key. The girl passes out and is taken to a hospital. A note Beth has written is found in their common purse, so that Dr. Wright can be notified and the girl taken home.

After further analysis, Dr. Wright calls the girl's Aunt Morgen for help. Morgen, unable to accept the complex problem, thinks that Elizabeth should be sent to an asylum. Wright disagrees; he feels that it is necessary for Morgen to be present to help if the girl's personality is to be merged. And Morgen cannot accompany her to an asylum. The climax of the novel occurs in another vivid scene of the body struggling with itself. Elizabeth says good-bye and states that she will not appear again; Beth does not surface;

Bess has control of most of the body, and Dr. Wright holds her in check; Betsy is struggling through the right arm with which she has previously written messages at times when Bess dominated the body. Aunt Morgen holds on to Betsy by grasping the arm. After the struggle, in which none of the personalities can achieve domination, a new Elizabeth appears, cognizant of each of the others and all of the things she has done while controlled by one personality or another. In the denouement, Dr. Wright and Aunt Morgen assume parental responsibility for the development of the new person.

The denouement of The Bird's Nest is the logical continuation of the story. Elizabeth, guided by Aunt Morgen and Dr. Wright, haltingly remembers her past: "She was clouded with memory, bemused with the need for discovering reason and coherence in a patternless time; she was lost in an endless reflecting world, where only Aunt Morgen and Dr. Wright followed her, as she pursued them."[1] She has her hair cut and realizes that she has no name. Morgen is uncomfortable with the unique creature who is her niece and very concerned that the girl, whom she has loved dearly all of her life, may not return the affection. Dr Wright wants, with

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[1]Shirley Jackson, The Bird's Nest, The Magic of Shirley Jackson, edited by Stanley Edgar Hyman (New York, 1966), p. 360.

Morgen's aid, to rebuild the new personality so that Elizabeth can be a whole, substantial being. Fittingly, Shirley Jackson rounds out the structure of the novel by having the three of them visit the Arrows, the couple Morgen and Elizabeth have visited early in the novel. Afterward, Elizabeth chooses her new name, Victoria Morgen, and says that she is happy, for she knows who she is.

The points of view of the novel are handled adroitly. About two-thirds of the novel is from the omniscient narrator's view. This includes chapter one, which serves as a prologue, and chapter six, which serves as an epilogue to the main conflict. Chapter three tells of Betsy's surrealistic trip to New York and the emergence of Bess. Chapter five deals with Aunt Morgen and her influence over Elizabeth, as well as Morgen's interaction with Dr. Wright. Chapters two and four, narrated by Dr. Wright, center almost exclusively on interviews in his office with the component parts of Elizabeth. Narrative style is distinctively different for each. The omniscient narrator says,

> Elizabeth Richmond was twenty-three years old. 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. Since the death of her mother four years before, Elizabeth had spoken intimately with

> no person, and the aunt with whom she lived required little of her beyond a portion of her weekly pay and her prompt presence at the dinner table.[2]

Dr. Wright has a good deal to say about himself in the sections he narrates. He discusses his own reactions, in particular, to the personalities of Elizabeth and her aunt, and he dwells at length upon his interest in Thackeray's novels. He can get quickly to a point, but he prefers a more leisurely, discursive style, as this quotation shows:

> I found myself, lying awake that night in bed--one finds, I think, that even with a clear conscience there comes an age when sleep forsakes the weary mind; I am not elderly, but I frequently, now, court sleep in vain--I found that I was telling over and over, as though they were figures in a charade, my four girls, Elizabeth, the numb, the stupid, the inarticulate, but somehow enduring, since she had remained behind to carry on when the rest of them went under; Beth, the sweet and susceptible; Betsy, the wanton and wild, and Bess, the arrogant and cheap.[3]

In both narrative styles much dialogue is used, although the omniscient narrator uses more than Dr. Wright, who likes to talk too much himself to give voice to others.

Unless a reader simply does not like the novel, there is little to criticize in it. As Don Wickendon says,

> Having delighted untold thousands with her recent account of life among the savages in Bennington, Vermont, Shirley Jackson, the housewife and mother,

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[2]*Ibid.*, pp. 151-152. [3]*Ibid.*, pp. 275-276.

> has once more yielded to Shirley Jackson, the literary necromancer, who writes novels not much more like any others since the form was invented. . . . Sinister, sardonic, and satirical by turn, The Bird's Nest is what one might expect from the author of those frightening stories in The Lottery. And yet, as the book races from one astonishment to the next, we come to feel that the other Miss Jackson must have had a hand in it, too. The drama repeatedly turns into farcical comedy, and under the comedy lies pathos. . . . And the climax of the story and its conclusions are curiously moving.[4]

Another reviewer says, "Miss Jackson's reputation as a master of shock, surprise, and suspense is well-deserved."[5] He also notes the variety of methods and devices, ranging from stream of consciousness to the use of the excerpts from Dr. Wright's journal that Shirley Jackson uses to tell the tale of Elizabeth Richmond. But Time magazine's review says that when three personalities are revealed,

> The Bird's Nest promises some interesting psychological explosions. But, except for a brief surrealistic lark when Betsy runs off to New York with her captive sisters, the novel dredges a long, dry, stream-bed of consciousness. Halfway through, in need of a fresh character, Author Jackson invents still another Miss R., a money-loving witch named Bess. By that time Miss R. is whirling through personality changes like a shifty quarterback on a hidden-ball play, and the reader is in need of a score card.[6]

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[4]Don Wickendon, "Shirley Jackson Once More Weaves Her Dramatic and Satiric Spell," New York Herald Tribune Book Review, June 20, 1954, p. 1.

[5]William Peden, "Bedeviled Lady," Saturday Review, XXXVII (July 17, 1954), 11.

[6]"Strange Case of Miss R.," Time, LXIII (June 21, 1954), 108.

The book deserves a more sympathetic reading than this. Elizabeth Richmond is not complete as a personality without the crude Bess, and, without Bess, there is not enough motivation for the disintegration. Also, the other three personalities are not strong enough to generate sufficient pressure to achieve either domination of the personage or an explosion that would lead to some conclusion of the problem. Each of the fast changes, and they are fast at the conclusion, is recorded clearly. Shirley Jackson erred by having too many characters in her first novel, but, having learned from that mistake, she keeps the cast here so small that no confusion results.

The Bird's Nest is a study of the sins of the father being visited upon the children and the theme's universal application. The universal application is stated by Dr. Wright as he looks into the corrupt eyes of Bess and sees there his own vanity and arrogance: "We are all measured, good and evil, by the wrong we do to others."[7] He turns to Morgen for help in dealing with the monster he feels he has helped to create. Morgen has taken pride in never doing any wrong; therefore, she is incapable of helping until she

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[7]Jackson, The Bird's Nest, p. 317.

admits the harm she has done by coveting her sister's husband and her sister's child.

Because Elizabeth's mother was such a failure as a human being, she has harmed the girl more than any other person. Each element of the girl's four personalities is a reaction against her mother. Elizabeth is the protective shell the child could erect when her mother disappointed her; Beth is the softly loving child who would give affection to her mother when the mother would let her; Betsy is the imp who delighted her mother and gained most of her attention; Bess is the copy of her mother's grosser nature, but the element of personality foreign to the self image of the others. They had to repress knowledge of her. Each of the four had to cope with the strong personality of Aunt Morgen. The child could not love her completely because of Morgen's disparagement of Elizabeth's mother; to love either mother figure completely would have involved rejection of the other because the hatred between the two women was so bitter. Elizabeth's personality fragmented in an effort to encompass all of the pressures she felt. Only when Morgen achieves a compassionate acceptance of her niece can she offer her love without bitterness. When Dr. Wright is willing to admit his incompetence in handling the girl alone, he calls Morgen to help. Then they can begin to undo the evil which has been done.

In each of her first three novels, Shirley Jackson has explored the harm done by adults to children through their own unloving selfishness. By her concern over the individual, the author seems to be saying that creation of a "self" that can give itself honestly and compassionately to others, without rejection of itself or the other persons, is the most basic problem that each individual must solve. Thereafter he is capable of being a worthy citizen of his world. William Peden says of The Bird's Nest that Shirley Jackson has

> created a kind of twentieth-century morality play in which the familiar medieval conflict between good and evil has been replaced by the struggle for domination among Elizabeth, Beth, Betsy, and Bess. . . . Her novel suggests that without the love and understanding that eventually restore Elizabeth existence can become a disorderly bird's nest of fears, doubts, and wrong moves. . . .[8]

The theme of the novel is clearly stated, but it never overrides the story being told; the reader is always more interested in the development of Elizabeth than in the moral involved.

A novel dealing largely with personality necessarily relies for its substance upon excellent characterizations. Dr. Wright, Aunt Morgen, and Elizabeth are all well portrayed. Elizabeth is distinctive in each of her personalities, and

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[8]Peden, "Bedeviled Lady," p. 12.

predictable, as befits only the partial portrayal of a personality. Elizabeth is described by Dr. Wright as a gentlewoman. Beth is compliant and whining; she is sure that Dr. Wright and Aunt Morgen do not love her as much as she loves them. Betsy is cheerful when she is getting her wishes, but she is prankish and spiteful when he is not. Bess is by turns greedy, threatening, and wheedling. Several different personalities in one personage may seem an unacceptable thesis until the reader realizes, as does Aunt Morgen, that sometimes she feels that she too has two or three personalities.

Motivation and background for the splintered personality are evolved slowly as Elizabeth's relationships with her mother and her aunt are revealed. But the reader is always informed. A review in _Newsweek_ declares that

> Miss Jackson never loses control as she drives her four personalities in harness. The different Elizabeths take on distinctive physical characteristics and mental attitudes. Their pranks on each other are bizarre and sometimes appalling. The relatively strong personalities take advantage of their weaker sisters, and cause them deep distress. It is an agonizingly real and heartbreaking portrait of mental illness, and the final resolution of the four conflicting personalities, "melting together like snowmen," is a source of satisfaction and joy.[9]

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[9]"Brooding," _Newsweek_, XLIII (June 21, 1954), 102.

The mother of Elizabeth helped to create the unhappy woman who first visits Dr. Wright. She is described by Morgen, her sister, as a "brutal, unprincipled, drunken, vice-ridden beast."[10] Morgen liked one thing about her: sometimes she would play with Elizabeth and sing nursery rhymes and songs to the girl. Betsy, the facet of the girl that her mother liked best, continued singing these. Exposed too much to her mother and the mother's current lover, Bess tried to seduce him when she was fifteen. Betsy and Morgen then ran him out of town. When Elizabeth is in New York, Bess is looking for the man. Betsy has not accepted the fact of her mother's death, which occurred when she was nineteen; therefore, she is looking for her mother. The experience with the mother's boyfriend, her mother's death soon after Bess has shaken her severely, and the lifelong trauma of living as she has cause the disintegration of Elizabeth's personality.

Morgen contributes to the breakdown by her tactless tongue and her defensiveness. She is unwilling to admit that she has been anything but a loving, helpful aunt to Elizabeth. Morgen feels honest disgust with the creature

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[10] Jackson, The Bird's Nest, p. 307.

named Elizabeth, Beth, Betsy, and Bess, but she wants to see the girl well. She especially wants the girl's love. Morgen is a complex character who excites sympathy for her plight and exasperation for her crudeness and insensitivity to others. For her to express tenderness is difficult, but after she admits her failings with Elizabeth, she can give the girl the affection she needs. Without the earthiness and humor she gives to the novel, *The Bird's Nest* would come dangerously close to being a clinical study. Peden refers in particular to the "crackling high comedy"[11] of the brandy drinking scene between Morgen and Dr. Wright.

Minor characters, as usual in Shirley Jackson's novels, have unique characteristics that set them apart from most flat or stereotyped characters. Each of them is suitable to his purpose, and none is distracting, as minor characters were in *The Road Through the Wall*. This is because no sub-plot is given them; only their direct relationship to the main plot is recorded.

Without the novel's excellent dialogue, *The Bird's Nest* would have been a failure, for the reader has to feel that each of the four segments of Elizabeth is different from the others. Shirley Jackson describes them differently and

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[11]Peden, "Bedeviled Lady," p. 12

says that they are different; then the dialogue proves her novelistic thesis. One example will illustrate the difference. When Elizabeth takes four baths in succession, using Aunt Morgen's bath salts, each of the "sisters" reacts to the salts differently. Elizabeth says, "Wonderful. . . . Just what I needed."[12] Bess says, "Mind if I use your bath salts?"[13] Beth says, "These for me? Morgen, how lovely."[14] Betsy shouts, "Say, Morg--mind if I use the rest of your bath salts? There's only a little left!"[15]

Settings for the novel are as appropriate as the conversation. The house Elizabeth and Morgen occupy accurately reflects the determined eccentricity of its decorator, Morgen. Dr. Wright's stodgy office reflects his desired quiet den, and he reacts quickly when it is threatened, as it is by the angry Bess. The bus trip and kaleidoscopic descriptions of New York reflect the confused mind of Betsy, who is alone in the unknown world for the first time. The overall atmosphere of the novel mirrors the troubled drama of the action, also. Newsweek says, "A brooding atmosphere, permeating the book with a sense of sickness, doubt, and tension accentuates the

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[12]Jackson, The Bird's Nest, p. 332. [13]Ibid., p. 334.

[14]Ibid., p. 335. [15]Ibid., p. 337.

tragedy of Elizabeth's predicament and anchors it in truth."[16] Henry James says in "The Art of Fiction," "A novel is a living thing, all one and continuous, like any other organism, and in proportion as it lives will it be found, I think, that in each of the parts there is something of each of the other parts."[17] In each of Shirley Jackson's novels, just as in The Bird's Nest, the setting is an important part of the entire work, contributing to and becoming a part of each element of the novel.

The Bird's Nest contains a well-structured plot, fine characterizations, complementary settings, concise narration and dialogue, and a theme of concern to every person. This theme, the individual's struggle for domination of himself, can be transferred to man-to-man and, eventually, nation-to-nation relationships.

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[16]"Brooding," Newsweek, p. 102.

[17]Henry James, "The Art of Fiction," The Great Critics, edited by James Henry Smith and Edd Winfield Parks (New York, 1951), p. 661.

CHAPTER V

THE SUNDIAL

The Sundial is a fantasy about the efforts of twelve people to prepare themselves for the end of the world and their responsibilities as the founders of a new human race. Although none of the twelve has made good use of his time before the impending holocaust, each accepts the idea that in a new world the group will be capable of creating an idyllic society. The twelve disciples, most of whom are refugees from the normal world, are following instructions of a spirit, Michael Halloran, trying to save them from destruction. That the spirit never did anything for anyone in his lifetime does not damage his credibility to the twelve persons who congregate in the house he built. Such ironies are found frequently in *The Sundial*.

Although *The Sundial* is ironic and gaily satirical--the characters dance to their doom--the undercurrent of isolation that the self-deluded characters fear flows beneath the tone of the novel. The unhappy and discontented characters persuade themselves that they will be serene and gloriously happy in the next world, because the world will

have changed, not the characters. Read for its wit and biting commentary, The Sundial is entertaining, but it has a much greater range of meaning. Possibly one of the major ironies of the book is that it can be so completely misunderstood as a shallow comedy instead of a well-executed novel about some of the major concerns of mankind. In a review, William Peden says,

> . . . Miss Jackson has built an engrossing novel. In addition to being a first-class storyteller, she has always been concerned with the conflict between good and evil in a world deplorably deficient in common sense, kindness, and magnanimity. . . . The Sundial is no exception.
>
> 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. As H-Hour or an apocalyptic D-Day approaches, the spooks who inhabit the Halloran mansion become even more selfish, bigoted, and stupid than before. Concerned only with their own egos, oblivious of the meaning of a larger tragedy looming before them, they present a shocking picture of a society paralyzed by conceit and rendered impotent by the folly of accepting the role of a Chosen Few.
>
> Perhaps I misunderstand Miss Jackson, or am taking The Sundial too seriously. On the other hand, the author's preoccupation with symbols thrusts this kind of reading upon even the most unsophisticated reader.[1]

Mr. Peden does not misunderstand the novel; it is all he thinks, and more.

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[1]William Peden, "The Chosen Few," Saturday Review, XLI (March 8, 1958), 18.

The story told in the novel is ridiculous. In the large Halloran house are gathered seven people: the autocratic Mrs. Richard Halloran; her senile husband; their daughter-in-law, Maryjane; her daughter, Fancy; Fancy's teacher, Miss Ogilvie; Frances Halloran, sister of Richard Halloran; and Mrs. Halloran's jester-companion, Essex. After Mrs. Halloran says that all but Fancy will be sent away, Frances, or Aunt Fanny, has a vision of the end of the world, announced to her by the spirit of her dead father. All those in his house will be spared to begin a new world. During the waiting period, five others join the party: Gloria Desmond, a distant relative of Mrs. Halloran; Captain Scarabombardon, a stranger Aunt Fanny picks up at the town's bus stop; and Mrs. Willow and her two daughters, Julia and Arabella. Mrs. Willow is an old friend of Mrs. Halloran. Mrs. Halloran agrees to let all of them stay.

Preparations are made for continuing the group's existence in the brave new world, including the stockpiling of many items which they might not be able to replace in a destroyed world. A farewell party for the villagers is held; Mrs. Halloran reigns over it in a gold crown and a gold dress, purchased for that occasion and for her time as queen of the new world. On the day the holocaust is expected, all of the

servants are sent away, the house is barricaded and the windows and glass doors are covered, and all radios are silenced. But before the end of the world and the coming of the new Eden, Mrs. Halloran is pushed down the stairs to her death. Her body is placed outside by the sundial, since those within the house do not want to spoil their first day in paradise by burying her. With the scene set for some low comedy (or some stark terror), Miss Jackson ends her story.

The novel begins after the death and funeral of Lionel Halloran, son of the Richard Hallorans. He has died from injuries sustained in a fall down the same stairs Mrs. Halloran is to fall down at the end of the novel. His wife insists that his mother pushed him. The elder Mrs. Halloran may not have murdered her son, but she did run his life, as she runs the life of everyone in the Halloran house. The central conflict of The Sundial, on one level, is whether anyone can wrest control of affairs from Mrs. Halloran. The central conflict for each of the characters, and the book as a whole, is whether anyone can cast off illusion and go back into the dull world that existed before the prophetic visions were announced.

The illusory world is exciting. Aunt Fanny, who receives the first message, returns from the garden to tell what

no one but her believes. Her father has appeared and said,

> "When the sky is fair again the children will be safe; the father comes to his children who will be saved. Tell them in the house that they will be saved. Do not let them leave the house; say to them: Do not fear, the father will guard the children. Go into your father's house and say these things. Tell them there is danger."[2]

After the message is delivered, a brightly-colored snake appears, then disappears, in the room where all inhabitants are gathered. After the second message, a huge window shatters noiselessly, for no apparent reason. These events, taken as signs that the supernatural is at work in the house, support Aunt Fanny's messages. As the story progresses, the real reason for the inhabitants' belief in the messages becomes clear. They have no other faith. Mrs. Halloran voices this when she says, "I 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."[3] After Mrs. Halloran accepts the prophecy, there is no turning back for any resident in the house. She enforces her will on all of them.

Two couples, Julia Willow and the Captain and Gloria Desmond and Essex, contemplate leaving the safe harbor for

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[2]Shirley Jackson, The Sundial (New York, 1954), p. 32.

[3]*Ibid*., p. 47.

the world. Julia tells Mrs. Halloran, who gives her blessing. When the Captain comes to see Mrs. Halloran, she gives him a check for a large amount of money, telling him that she does not believe that the world will last long enough for him to spend it. Her sign of faith convinces him that he should stay. Julia, not knowing this decision, leaves in a taxi hired by Mrs. Halloran. After a terrifying trip, she is found unconscious in front of the gates. She does not try to leave again. Essex, courtier to Mrs. Halloran, loves the innocent Gloria, who has come to stay while her father is in Africa. Gloria is disillusioned by the world, but she feels that she and Essex would be better off there than at the Halloran place. Essex is afraid to leave, for he could not do without the luxuries. Gloria then convinces herself that the world outside is not worth wanting.

Except for two flashbacks, the plot of the The Sundial moves steadily toward the expected Armageddon and the climax of the novel. Conflict among the characters has risen steadily. Aunt Fanny has fought unsuccessfully to take control of affairs by using the name of her father, while Mrs. Halloran ignores her until she has laid her own plans. Julia and Arabella Willow have sought the Captain and Essex (as has Aunt Fanny) unsuccessfully, although Arabella, at

last glance, has the Captain's interest. Mrs. Willow has engineered her girls' campaigns and refereed their arguments. Fancy has understood the situation with the clarity of a ten-year-old who has not yet found reason to be afraid of the world. She has told her views to Gloria, who rejects them. Because of her age, Fancy could not leave the menagerie if she wanted, but she does not want to. She wants her grandmother's crown too much. Ominously, Mrs. Halloran has said that Fancy may have her crown after her death.

Mrs. Halloran's assumption of dictatorial powers, symbolized by her wearing of her crown, brings her death. She does not envision the pagan abandon that her sycophants do. She issues several rules, one of which states the kind of world she wants:

> On the First Day, and thereafter, wanton running, racing, swimming, play of various kinds, and such manifestations of irresponsibility will of course not be permitted. It is 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 offence be given to supernatural overseers who may perhaps be endeavoring to determine the fitness of their choice of survivors.[4]

Such rules brings an action which Mrs. Halloran would not have believed possible: one of the inmates of the house pushes her down the stairs.

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[4]*Ibid.*, p. 192.

The climax of the novel's action is the death of Mrs. Halloran; immediately thereafter the climactic moment for each of the other characters occurs. Each must choose whether he will continue the charade or cast off the world of illusion and go into the real world. The denouement shows them living on in their chosen roles. Essex does regret that Mrs. Halloran could not change her mind about coming to the new world as the ruler. He and the Captain carry her body to the site of the one human imperfection on the front lawn, the sundial, and leave it there, minus the crown, which Fancy has. Placing the body by the sundial is another ironic touch; much earlier Mrs. Halloran had thought about the sundial, "without it the lawn would be empty. It is a point of human wickedness; it is a statement that the human eye is unable to look unblinded upon mathematical perfection."[5] The survivors are left awaiting the new world.

The story is told from the point of view of an omniscient narrator, in chronological order except for two flashbacks. This point of view is right because it allows more commentary and freer choice of incidents. The first flashback tells how Michael Halloran became a rich man; invaded the territory now owned by his family; erected his huge, mathematically perfect

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[5] *Ibid.*, pp. 14-15.

home; and controlled the surrounding countryside like a Machiavellian ruler. His story sets the stage for the isolation of his people and his lands, an isolation both mental and physical because of the wall he had erected around his property and the adjacent property he took. Connection between the other flashback and the main plot is unclear. It tells of Harriet Stuart, who was accused of bludgeoning her family to death with a hammer. She was acquitted and returned to her home to live in seclusion until her death. The village maintains the property and encourages tourists to see it. Such a tale becomes the major backdrop for Shirley Jackson's sixth novel, _We Have Always Lived in the Castle_. The story is not organically necessary to _The Sundial_, but it does illustrate some of the horrible truth about the real world.

Foreshadowing is used effectively in the novel. For instance, Gloria, who sees visions of the future in a mirror, reveals to Fancy that she has not seen Mrs. Halloran in any of the revelations. Mrs. Halloran's declaration that Fancy may have her crown after she is dead foreshadows the death. The vision in the mirror of the villagers outside the house during the holocaust or shortly thereafter means one thing to the inhabitants, but it allows for another quite different interpretation. Other events are foreshadowed, and all contribute to the suspense.

The suspense is that of any mystery: will the truth be found? In this mystery, the truth in question is whether the characters will find the truth about themselves. They do not find it because they do not want to. The suspense is kept alive by Fancy's discussions of the Halloran world, as opposed to the outside world that she does not know.

The Sundial may be read as a frothy tale of comically misspent lives or a satire upon the human race, a species that ignores all but the fairy tales it wants to believe. Besides the Harriet Stuart episode, the plot has only one minor flaw: Gloria is forced into the story. She simply gains entrance onto the Halloran grounds with a letter from her father, presumably a distant relative of Mrs. Halloran. The Willows have come because the mother is unable to support the girls any longer. She feels that Mrs. Halloran owes her something and that she will help her. Aunt Fanny is shown to be quixotic enough to pick up someone like the Captain. He has stayed because of greed: he wants his share of the luxuries the Halloran mansion offers. Mrs. Halloran has let him stay because she characteristically allowed Fanny to do whatever does not interfere with Mrs. Halloran's plans.

Two main themes are implicit in the novel. The first is that mankind's single-minded devotion to self-gratification

leads to isolation and destruction. Life at the Halloran house is such a circus that the theme does not appear absolutely serious, but this is part of the author's method: serious truths underlie seemingly frivolous stories. Early in the novel Essex states the theme when he finishes the quotation, the first sentence of which is carved on the sundial, "'What is this world?" . . . What asketh man to have? Now with his love, now in his colde grave, allone, withouten any company."[6] The question "What is this world?" receives a blistering reply in The Sundial. Granville Hicks says that "what Miss Jackson reveals about these people . . . is a dreadful commentary on humanity in an age of imminent disaster."[7]

As in Shirley Jackson's second novel, Hangsaman, illusion versus reality is under thematic discussion. The omniscient author comments, "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."[8] The abstract belief in the coming destruction

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[6]Jackson, The Sundial, p. 14.

[7]Granville Hicks, "Nightmare in Reality," Saturday Review, XLIX (September 17, 1966), p. 82.

[8]Jackson, The Sundial, p. 39.

in The Sundial solidifies when the snake appears and later when the window shatters. The mindlessness of the believers is shown by their answers to Fancy's question about what is real. Mrs. Willow says it is comfort; Miss Ogilvie says it is food; Maryjane asks if it is something not in the movies; Arabella says reality is her dream world; and Essex says that he is real but that he is not sure that the others are. Supernatural signs could make such characters believe anything. The reality of the old as opposed to the expected new world is debated by Gloria and Fancy. Fancy is sure that the new world will be no more real than the current one, and Gloria assures her that it makes no difference which world a person is in. Reality, then, is what the believer chooses to think it is. The reality chosen by the characters in The Sundial is shown to be more harmful, though, than the reality of a world that is rationally perceived.

A third minor theme is a person's search for a father, in this instance Frances Halloran's search for both a father and a mother in a world that cares not at all for her. Deluded and emotionally immature, Frances seeks, and does not find, a loving parental figure.

The Sundial is rich in symbolism, beginning with the sundial itself. It symbolizes the imperfection of mankind,

the return to primitive times that the inhabitants of Halloran Mansion desire, and the passage of time that they wish to forget. Three houses become symbols; first in Fancy's exact replica of a house peopled with doll figures for each of the persons in the Halloran house. Second is Aunt Fanny's, the wing of the house she has arranged to duplicate her first home; and third is Mrs. Halloran's, the mansion itself. Each of the proprietors can manipulate her people as she wills. Fancy comments that when she inherits the large house she will smash her doll house because she will not need it any more. The Halloran house may also be considered symbolic of the world as a whole, wherein each inhabitant is concerned only with his own needs and can ignore those of others. Also, its mathematical perfection, loved by many of the inhabitants, may be considered symbolic of the scientific and technological perfection worshipped in the world now in lieu of a more spiritual faith. Among the many secondary symbols are the maze, prefiguring the confusion of Aunt Fanny and the other inhabitants of the house; and the taxi driver, who smells of filth and decay. He may be interpreted as death, the universal fate of all and the death awaiting the personages in the Halloran house if they dare to leave it. Since Mrs. Halloran arranges for the taxi driver, she may have power of life and death over her people.

The house and the grounds influence the people and the action of The Sundial so much that the setting becomes a major element in the novel. Life within the house is ordered by the quotation painted over the stairway in the main hall: "When Shall We Live If Not Now?" The house's mathematical perfection and the artificial security of life there impale its inhabitants until they feel that they can live in no other atmosphere. Applied more generally, this philosophy is one that overtakes many people who then become immobilized and unable to accept change. The maze, and the gardeners--who should never be working early--are supernatural elements, as are the snake, the window shattering soundlessly, and the voice that Aunt Fanny hears. The setting of The Sundial, created by Shirley Jackson and furnished with exceptional people and ideas, influences the action of the novel.

Characters in The Sundial are, on the whole, well developed. Each of the minor characters, although not round, is accorded an individuality by the author's deft descriptions. For example, a few words make two old maid shopkeepers more than stereotyped spinsters:

> Miss Deborah did the dusting herself, naturally, and her sister kept the books. Miss Inverness wore purple crepe with her mother's garnet brooch, and tended to be brusque, although she knew--none better--that her heart was really of gold;

> Miss Deborah wore a little locket around her faded neck and had once been in love with a music teacher.[9]

After the two are shown at Mrs. Halloran's party in huge flowery hats, admiring all of the arrangements, then later on, drunken and giddy, relishing some dirty stories, they become unforgettable. Each of the characters is well drawn for his purpose. Major characters like Essex and Mrs. Halloran are humanized at the same time they are given larger-than-life qualities.

The child Fancy is deserving of special note. She does not seem a normal ten-year-old, but she is not expected to. She has lived in a loveless atmosphere of bickering and sarcasm, without the companionship of other children. She has absorbed the pride of the Halloran family, but she also feels the disdain for her grandmother which her mother, Maryjane, and her Aunt Fanny exude. Fancy displays the cruelty inherent in her family--she sticks pins in her grandmother doll--and by application of the broader interpretation of The Sundial, inherent in much of mankind. Although Fancy reflects the general dislike of her grandmother, she has unconsciously followed her example and become much like her. The lack of

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[9] Ibid., p. 86.

sympathy Fancy shows is disturbing in a child character, but the condition is easily accounted for in terms of her surroundings. She is surprising in the clarity of her vision and very human in her desire to make her own mistakes when she is out in the world. Fancy cannot be considered the usual little girl, but then the world she inhabits contains the distillation of many of the least admirable traits of mankind. She is the offspring of such a world.

Perhaps best of the major characters is Mrs. Halloran. She longs for quiet and for power at the same time; she chooses power--and her death. Her struggle is continuous throughout the book. She decides to send away all of the residents of her home but herself and her granddaughter. But, sharing the universal fear of death, Mrs. Halloran chooses to believe that the house and its occupants will escape the destruction of the world that her sister-in-law Fanny prophesies. She has a nightmare of Essex and Gloria eating up her dream house of candy and pastry, thus foreshadowing her death. Alone one evening, she wonders when, or if, she could have given up the house and all of her possessions. She is alternately bored by her senile husband and tender in her care of him, but she has kept a succession of young men in their home as courtiers. Mrs. Halloran's

manner toward her powerful father-in-law was the same as that exhibited toward the expected "supernatural overseers," a decorous compliance to what she feels will be their wishes. She feels strong family loyalty, except to Maryjane, for whom she will provide but from whom she would take Fancy. Mrs. Halloran is complex and surprising. Edgar Hyman has commented in The Promised End:

> 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 Orestia of Aeschylus incurs the wrath of the gods and his own death by treading on the carpet of royal purple.[10]

It is easier to accept Mrs. Halloran as a woman than as a mythic matriarch because of the humanizing insights provided by the omniscient narrator. But, if the novel is interpreted as a myth of the end of the world, she does fulfill that role admirably.

Essex, the courtier, fulfills two roles. As flatterer to the queen, Essex represents the hangers-on who buzz around power. He spies on the Captain and Julia or other persons for Mrs. Halloran; he believes what she does because she does. Essex represents those who serve the powerful. But he has, as well, a more individualistic meaning. He realizes that he is

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[10]Hyman, The Promised End, p. 365.

a liar, a sneak, and a spineless fawner; and he tells Gloria that she must support them if they marry. But he longs for another world in which he will not be spoiled by the "things" that civilization offers. Realizing what he is, he feels cleansed by the fresh affections of Gloria; she can be his passport to the better life. The dual role of Essex is to stand as an individual and as a representative of power seekers. The parts are not incongruous, and he fulfills them well.

The characters are presented by dialogue, through the eyes of other characters, and by direct description. Each character has his own mode of speech. Narrative style is as clear, simple, and pithy as the dialogue.

A major stylistic device which Shirley Jackson uses is that of accumulating commonplace detail to bring an aura of realism to the fantastic stories she presents. An example is the elaborate description of the Halloran mansion:

> From any of the windows of that side of the house, which was the garden front looking out over the ornamental lake, the people in the house could see the sundial in the middle distance, set to one side of the long sweep of the lawn. Mr. Halloran had been a methodical man. There were twenty windows to the right; because the great door in the center was double, on the second floor there were forty-two windows across and forty-two on the third floor, lodged directly under the elaborate carvings on the roof edge. . . .[11]

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[11]Jackson, <u>The Sundial</u>, p. 12.

Minute descriptions of the house make it seem more real, almost ploddingly real. The backdrop anchors the action. William Peden considers the accumulation of detail harmful in The Sundial, saying that it "tends at times to blunt the edge of Miss Jackson's story."[12] When it is overdone, the detail is detrimental to the novel; but overall, it serves to anchor the action to a realistic world. The lucid sentence structure keeps the novel easy to read, regardless of the accumulated detail.

The tone of the conversations, and, often, the comments of the omnisicient narrator are responsible for much of the success of The Sundial. Witty and ironic touches abound throughout the novel, swiftly moving the action along and avoiding the pitfall of dark bitterness that could overtake a novel about twelve stupid people preparing to be the last survivors of a horrible world and the founders of a new race of mankind. These quotations illustrate the witty commentaries:

> "But now you may give up having asthma, Maryjane," Aunt Fanny said.
> "Why?" Maryjane sat up. "Is she dead?"
> "You know perfectly well," Aunt Fanny said irritably, "that she is well on her way to being reborn into a new life and joy."
> "Reborn?" Maryjane fell back. "That's all I need," she said.

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[12]Peden, "The Chosen Few," p. 18.

> "Shall I push her down the stairs?" Fancy asked, as one repeating an incantation rather than as one asking a question; perhaps she had to recite it regularly to her mother.
> "Is Fancy subnormal, do you think?" Aunt Fanny asked.[13]

At the village party Essex spreads the dirty stories that the villagers love to hear; then he reports to Mrs. Halloran, "I am doing all I can to make your party a success." She replies, "All it lacks, actually . . . is the head of the Cheshire Cat looking down on us from the sky."[14] That it does.

A technique in furthering the narrative which Shirley Jackson uses often is that of having a book similar to the story read by some of the characters. For instance, Robinson Crusoe is read to Richard Halloran throughout most of The Sundial. As Crusoe makes a move, parallel actions of the characters in The Sundial do the same. A quotation lamenting the supply of unnecessary money and the lack of needed seed for food from Defoe's book begins a section of The Sundial during which the Captain and Julia discuss needing money for their sojourn in the world. As the inhabitants of Halloran Mansion collect their supplies, comparison is made

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[13]Jackson, The Sundial, p. 45.

[14]Ibid., p. 207.

of the preparations Crusoe makes for his new world. Shirley Jackson uses the technique in other novels. Mrs. Mack reads from the Bible about walls falling throughout _The Road Through the Wall_, a novel in which both physical and mental walls fall. A variation on the technique is the brief mention of Tony's reading _Alice in Wonderland_ to Natalie Waite in _Hangsaman_ right before Natalie begins a trip through a fantastic world of her own. Another variation is that used with Betsy in _The Bird's Nest_: she sings nursery rhymes and parts of songs that reflect her current situation. The inclusion of these scenes enriches the whole presentation of each novel.

The plot has few faults; the themes pervade the novel but not to the point where they make it a "message" novel; the style, particularly the dialogue style, is exceptional; and the tone underscores the foolishness of mankind that the novel is concerned with. _The Sundial_ is a novel remarkable for its conception and its development.

CHAPTER VI

THE HAUNTING OF HILL HOUSE

Shirley Jackson tells in a lecture reprinted in the book *Come Along with Me* how *The Haunting of Hill House* came to be written. She was working on a book about a haunted house when she read about a group of nineteenth-century psychic researchers who rented a haunted house and recorded what they saw and felt in a paper for the Society for Psychic Research. Shirley Jackson says,

> 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.[1]

She found their experiences so exciting that she wanted to people her own haunted house and see what she could make happen. Her haunted house is Hill House, and she makes many astonishing things happen. Since the novel is written by Shirley Jackson, however, it becomes a psychological horror story of alienation, isolation, and mental cruelty.

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[1]Shirley Jackson, "Experience and Fiction," *Come Along with Me* (New York, 1968), pp. 200-201.

Hill House is invaded by four persons who come to investigate the possibility that it could be haunted. The investigation, as planned by John Montague, a Ph.D. in anthropology, is to be conducted scientifically. Each researcher agrees to write notes about any supernatural manifestation he sees. Two assistants, Eleanor Vance and Theodora, have had some experience with supernatural manifestations. Luke Sanderson, the fourth invader, is heir to the house and is there to protect it as well as to participate in the research.

The plot is well organized and well unified. Except for the opening chapter, which provides background information, all action occurs within a week at Hill House. The background information includes a description of Hill House, tells how Dr. Montague recruits his researchers and who each is, and focuses attention on the protagonist, Eleanor Vance, by describing her trip to Hill House and her first reaction to it.

When she first sees the house, Eleanor thinks, "Hill House is vile, it is diseased; get away from here at once."[2] But she has nowhere else to go. Eleanor's search for a home or a feeling of belonging is the central conflict of the novel. Eleanor has never belonged anywhere or been loved by anyone

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[2]Shirley Jackson, The Haunting of Hill House (New York, 1959), p. 33.

except her father, who had died twenty years before. Her mother, an invalid whose death occurred three months earlier, made Eleanor into a nurse and maidservant. Since the mother's death, Eleanor has lived with her grasping sister and the sister's family. When Theodora arrives later at Hill House, she and Eleanor begin a tentative friendship. The easy comradeship includes the doctor and Luke the first day or so; then the friendship between the women becomes strained because they vie for attention--specifically for the attention of Luke. He finds the livelier Theodora more attractive than the timid Eleanor. Eleanor comes to feel more and more alone. The more alienated she feels, the more she turns to Hill House for a feeling of belonging, overcoming her early repugnance for the house.

The forces of conflict are tangled. Eleanor wants Luke or Theodora to take her in, but they will not. Theodora is unused to caring for others and wants to feed her vanity. Her attachment to Luke is for this purpose, for she has no other great feeling for him. Though Luke himself would like a strong attachment, he will not make an effort for one, settling for lighter relationships. Eleanor is disappointed in him, yet she is unable to forsake her own problems and fill the emotional void in Luke's life. The doctor hopes to

keep his charges safe and to gain scientific proof of the existence of supernatural beings at Hill House. The supernatural occurrences seem increasingly concerned with Eleanor; the house wants her even if nothing else does.

The second section of the novel describes the house's conveyance of its message. In describing the house, Dr. Montague has foreshadowed the struggle for Eleanor by saying, "the evil is the house itself, I think. It has enchained and destroyed its people and their lives, it is a place of contained ill will."[3] Grisly, maddening manifestations make clear the house's longing for Eleanor. As long as she fights its absorption of her, she finds the house evil. When first exploring the house, she cannot enter the library because of an overwhelming smell of mold and earth that only she notices. Luke, Theodora, and Dr. Montague enter and see the stairs from which an earlier inhabitant hanged herself. One night something entices the men outside, while a force inside the house terrorizes the women. The next day Luke finds a message in chalk on a hall wall asking for Eleanor to come home. Then a message, in Theodora's room, written in what seems to be blood, urges her to send Eleanor home. Theodora's clothes are ruined by the liquid, also.

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[3] *Ibid.*, p. 82.

The final third of the novel develops Eleanor's serious consideration of the ghostly invitation to stay at Hill House, her decision, and her death. Theodora refuses to let Eleanor come live with her after they leave Hill House, and Theo's friendship with Luke grows stronger. Antagonism between Theodora and Eleanor is bitter; Eleanor feels more isolated. When Dr. Montague's wife and a friend of the family, Arthur Parker, arrive, Eleanor is further cut off from the group. The two newcomers receive a message asking Eleanor to come home as they play planchette, a game for receiving written messages from the spirit world. Eleanor goes for a walk to think about what she will do and is overtaken by the unseen spirit that walks the area. Heretofore it has been cold, agonizingly cold to her; now it is warm and reassuring. Eleanor's reversal of opinion of the spirit is the climax of her struggle, for she is at home at Hill House. She will waver, but she will not change her mind. To illustrate her isolation, Eleanor is shown as being separated from humanity, listening outside doors when the others are together.

Shirley Jackson then has the problem of ending her story; something must be done about Eleanor. E. M. Forster says, "If it were not for death and marriage I do not know how the

average novelist would conclude."[4] The denouement prepares the reader for the death of Eleanor. The house is waiting quietly; it feels no need now to send messages--even through planchette. Eleanor withdraws more and more into fantasy, hearing a rhyme that concludes, "Go forth and face your lover." The night before her death Eleanor hears a voice telling her to come along. Having finally surrendered to the house, she happily enters the library and runs up the stairs. The others rescue her. In a subtle psychological touch, Shirley Jackson makes Eleanor unable to leave the dangerous stairway until Theodora indicates that she wants Eleanor to be safe. Theodora has been asked particularly by the house or spirit to help Eleanor to come home, which she does by refusing her another refuge. This is one of the ironic embellishments that Shirley Jackson creates so well. Briefly a part of the group again, Eleanor descends the staircase. The next morning she is shunted away by Dr. Montague and the others. She crashes her car into a tree in the driveway, killing herself so that she can stay at Hill House. A brief epilogue tells where the others go and that the house is the same as before. The first paragraph of the novel about the house is restated to round out the structure of the novel.

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[4] E. M. Forster, _Aspects of the Novel_ (New York, 1927), p. 95.

The plotting of the novel is terse and complete, except for the deliberate omission of an explanation of the supernatural force in the house. No unnecessary events or persons are introduced into the story. Some of the appearances of the supernatural beings may seem overdrawn, or they may be considered a fitting adjunct to the Gothic horror story. Up to the point of Eleanor's surrender to the house, they are acceptable; thereafter, they seem strained. One review states that the book has excellent characterizations and horrendous effects galore, but that "it will be most palatable to those who swallow it whole."[5] Some of the melodrama mars the novel.

Foreshadowing and suspense are used extensively in _The Haunting of Hill House_. From Eleanor's impulse to leave the house when she first sees it, through the doctor's warning that the house enchains its inhabitants, to the messages asking for Eleanor, the reader knows that something will happen to her. Luke and Theodora offer the only possibilities of a home or acceptance for Eleanor. This chance for a normal life maintains suspense about the fate of Eleanor. Shirley Jackson does not try to answer logically and scientifically another element of suspense in the novel: what the

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[5]Warren Beck, "Book Reviews," _Chicago Sunday Tribune_, October 18, 1959, p. 3.

supernatural force may be. This is her artistic right. The nearest thing to an explanation occurs in a review, which states, "What gradually becomes clear is that it is Eleanor's presence, the lifetime of suppression and hate in her soul, that has somehow incited it all. Hill House may be haunted, but its ghosts require human beings, embodied fear, to arouse their fury."[6] What the forces are is not important; the story of the haunted house is the vehicle for relaying the tale of a person isolated from humanity.

Man's isolation as he searches for a place for himself is the theme of _The Haunting of Hill House_. The theme applies to Eleanor, for she has searched for a loving father or mother. Having failed at this, she then searches for any person or thing that offers the same type of security. Eleanor is actually looking for her mother, for whose death she feels guilty. If she had brought her mother's medicine in time, the old lady might not have died when she did. Whenever Eleanor is in distress, she unwittingly calls for her mother. Hill House answers the call and Eleanor finds a home. Contrasted with Eleanor's urgent search for a home are the

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[6]Roger Becket, "Shirley Jackson's Story of Psychic Horror," _New York Herald Tribune Book Review_, October 25, 1959, p. 14.

solutions found by Theodora and Luke. Theodora has a companion at home, but her main allegiance is to herself; she seeks no other and is capable of accepting no other. Luke would like to belong to someone but not enough to make the effort to form a strong alliance. Opposed to this exploration of man's search for a place within the world is the thematic study of its opposite, man's yearning for death. This ambivalent attitude is explored through Eleanor in the novel. By choosing to stay with Hill House, she chooses death.

Symbolism gives depth and richness of meaning to the novel. Death as the symbolic lover is mentioned throughout, as Eleanor says repeatedly, "Journeys end in lovers meeting." This one line Eleanor repeats, along with most of the others of the Clown's Song in lines thirty-five through forty and forty-three through forty-eight of Shakespeare's Twelfth Night, Act II, Scene iii:

> O mistress mine, where are you roaming?
> O, stay and hear! your true-love's coming,
>   That can sing both high and low.
> Trip no further, pretty sweeting;
> Journeys end in lovers' meeting.
>   Every wise man's son doth know.
> . . . .
> What is love? 'Tis not hereafter;
> Present mirth hath present laughter;
>   What's to come is still unsure:
> In delay there lies no plenty;
> Then come and kiss me, sweet and twenty!
>   Youth's a stuff will not endure

Death is also the lover mentioned in the song she hears during her last fantasies. Early in the story Eleanor daydreams of a man to love; when she meets Luke, she half hopes that he might be the man, but this is not to be. Since she can have no earthly haven, the house and its spirit overcome her.

Hill House is the setting and the major symbol of the novel. Its physical characteristics and its personality are described in detail:

> It was a house without kindness, never meant to be lived in, not a fit place for people or for love or for hope. Exorcism cannot alter the countenance of a house; Hill House would stay as it was until it was destroyed.[7]

Each occupant reacts to the house with fear; its caretakers will not stay the night on the premises, yet the two girls reared in it and the village girl who lived there wanted to stay. Eleanor describes its effect after a night during which whatever walked at Hill House terrified the four researchers: "The sense was that it wanted to consume us, to take us unto itself, make us a part of the house."[8] The author conceives the symbol so well that early in the novel she makes much to-do over the doors always closing by themselves, but the night that Eleanor wants to go into the

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[8]Jackson, Hill House, p. 35.

[9]Ibid., p. 139.

library and kill herself, the front door is inexplicably open so that the other occupants, who are chasing Eleanor, rush outdoors and give Eleanor the opportunity to get into the library.

Hill House becomes so pervasive, so insistent, that it becomes a main participant in the action. It--or something in it--acts, closing doors, demanding quietness, disturbing the sense of balance of its occupants, and it enshrines the sinister cancer that demands the souls and bodies of certain persons and that terrifies others. The house is personified by such statements as, "Around them the house steadied and located them . . . and the center of consciousness was somehow the small space where they stood, four separated people."[9] Supernatural forces that inhabit Hill House also roam all of the land fenced in by its first owner. It is on the grounds that Theodora and Eleanor are first frightened by the invisible something that seems to chill the sunlight and make a depression in the grass. Later the two see the hallucination of the happy family picnic, and Theodora glances behind them, terrified of what she sees. Hill House and the grounds are another world, created expressly for the related story, just as Pepper Street, the college in _Hangsaman_, the Halloran

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[9] _Ibid._, p. 58.

mansion, and the Blackwood house in We Have Always Lived in the Castle were created for the accompanying fiction. All of these but the college are set off by walls, also. Shirley Jackson carries the use of such specialized settings to its ultimate end in The Haunting of Hill House: the house participates in the action.

Most characters in the novel are well drawn, but two are utter failures. Mrs. Montague and Arthur Parker are too bombastic, too insensitive, too much caricatures of the nagging wife and the stupid schoolmaster to do anything but disrupt the action initiated by the four original researchers. Two other minor characters, Dudley and his wife, are the correctly macabre caretakers of the house which they both hate and love. Of the four researchers, Dr. Montague and Eleanor are presented as complex human beings, perhaps Eleanor most completely. She is not admirable, but she is pitiable. She has spent years as nursemaid to her mother, hating the demanding termagant. Eleanor wants a place of her own, a quiet harbor where she belongs, but she also wants an attachment to another person. Eleanor does not want to be completely alone. At first the woman seems only a lonely spinster seeking affection, but the bitterness of her jealous antagonism toward Theodora is surprising; then her complete

incapacity to offer any sympathy to Luke reveals her misanthropic attitude. Eleanor's attempt to aid the child she hears abused in a dream shows that all of her sympathies are not dead. Her gaiety and her helplessness when she cannot escape the others in the library illustrate the mental illness overpowering her. The author does not violate the personality she has created by disposing of Eleanor in a way uncharacteristic of her. Eleanor has at times performed stubborn actions which were counter to what others expected of her, as when she took the car without her sister's approval. Driving the car into a tree is characteristic of the desperate action the woman could take. Eleanor is a surprising, complex, and well-portrayed character.

Another character touched by humanity is Dr. Montague, who is a pleasant interpretation of the older, educated, strong-minded man that Miss Jackson has created before. Mr. Waite in Hangsaman and Dr. Wright in The Bird's Nest are such men, but these two are pompous egocentrics, each of whom is the most interesting creation he knows. Dr. Montague is absorbed in a work he finds intriguing, as Wright and Waite are; but he has more kindness of spirit than Waite, and he is less afraid of failure, and thus less defensive, than Wright. Possibly two things preserve him from these attitudes.

Living with his wife requires a kindness of attitude; also he had deliberately chosen his work, realizing fully that it is not universally respected. He believes in it so thoroughly that the disbelief of others does not dismay him. When he does fail, as he must, he withdraws without lashing back at the persons who deride him. Small details contribute to his credibility, as when he forgets his own rule that the researchers are not to be alone and sends Luke after coffee. On this trip Luke is terrorized when he finds the message high on the hall wall asking Eleanor to come home. The doctor's kindness causes him to send Eleanor away from the malign influence of Hill House--and to her death. Dr. Montague's fallibility makes him appear more human.

Miss Jackson's style of writing has not changed much from that of the first novel. She still uses much dialogue to allow her characters to reveal themselves. Each character has distinct speech patterns which are appropriate for him. But there are two false sections of dialogue in _The Haunting of Hill House_. The entire group of interchanges involving Luke, Theodora, and Eleanor the first night of their stay at Hill House seems entirely too flippant. These passages may have been meant to show the deliberate false cheerfulness practiced under conditions of fear, but it is too cute to

be acceptable. The failure of Mrs. Montague and Parker to sense the drama of Eleanor's try at suicide, as shown in their conversation, is false also. Narrative style remains the controlled, excellent prose for which Shirley Jackson has been praised. Sentence structure varies from moderately long to very short sentences. The rhythm of the prose makes for easy reading and fast-moving action. Diction is marked by a choice of everyday words, with no brand names and no special terms used. One quirk in Shirley Jackson's writing, though, is italicizing many words. For example, page 62 of the novel has three italicized words, two in one paragraph, and page 63 has four such words.

A noncommittal, business-like tone of writing underscores the melodramatic story of the novel. The passages involving the malignancy of Hill House are good; as Edmund Fuller says,

> At certain moments, quietly, in quick, subtle transitions of tone, Miss Jackson can summon up stark terror, make your blood chill, and your scalp prickle. . . . Shirley Jackson proves again that she is the finest master currently practicing in the genre of the cryptic, haunted tale. To all the classic paraphernalia of the spook story, she adds a touch of Freud to make the whole world kin.[10]

Maxwell Geismar also noted the passages: "when the monster at Hill House strikes at last (and how!), then Miss Jackson's

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[10]Edmund Fuller, "Terror Lived There, Too," New York Times Book Review, October 18, 1959, p. 14.

pen becomes charmed, or rather demonic, and the supernatural activity is really chilling."[11]

The Haunting of Hill House is an excellent Gothic tale of eerie horror, made more intriguing by the characterization of Eleanor, who chooses death rather than face the world alone; but it is not a first-rate novel. The psychological touches, criticized in some reviews, provide motivation for the characters, especially Eleanor, but something is still wrong. The two extra visitors, Mrs. Montague and Arthur Parker, mar the tone of the proceedings, as do some of the conversations. This variation from the psychological horror story to the witty, wry commentary on human nature is the major flaw in the novel. Concentration on one or the other aspect would have made a better novel.

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[11]Maxwell Geismar, "Annals of Magic," _Saturday Review_, XLII (October 31, 1959), 19.

CHAPTER VII

WE HAVE ALWAYS LIVED IN THE CASTLE

We Have Always Lived in the Castle is a simple tale of passionate hatred, mass murder, vicious collective cruelty, avarice, and isolation. In what is probably the most sophisticated use of time in her novels, Shirley Jackson unfolds her story. Time's review says,

> Creating a cross-ruff of curiosity--backward in time to whatever dreadful event has brought the Blackwoods to their present predicament, forward to some nameless but newly foreshadowed disaster in the future--the book manages the ironic miracle of convincing the reader that a house inhabited by a lunatic, a poisoner, and a pyromaniac is a world more rich in sympathy, love, and subtlety than the real world outside.[1]

Mary Katherine Blackwood, or Merricat, wants to live quietly in a loving, happy atmosphere at home with her sister Constance and their Uncle Julian, an invalid. Merricat concentrates her narrative on the events of about one week, during which the family history is recounted in conversations--not flashbacks--and Merricat's fears of danger are verified. A demon-ghost in the disguise of a young man named Charles

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[1]"Nightshade Must Fall," Time, LXXX (September 21, 1962), 93.

Blackwood, her cousin, invades the Blackwood home and brings a crisis. One reviewer says, "The havoc [Cousin Charles] wreaks, and the unsuspected denouement of the end, bring into soft focus the human ambivalences of guilt and atonement, love and hate, health and psychosis. . . ."[2] The darker and the brighter natures of mankind, both of which are in each individual, are studied in this unique novel.

Merricat's story begins with her usual Friday shopping trip to town. She says of the townspeople, "The people of the village have always hated us."[3] She returns the hatred in full measure, wishing cruel, painful deaths for the town youngsters who taunt her with a rhyme:

> "Merricat, said Connie, would you like a cup of tea?
> Oh no, said Merricat, you'll poison me.
> Merricat, said Connie, would you like to go to sleep?
> Down in the boneyard ten feet deep?"[4]

The afternoon of the shopping trip Merricat and Constance receive the only guest they regularly entertain, Helen Clarke, who unexpectedly brings another woman, Lucille Wright. Lucille, avidly curious, causes Unle Julian to tell about the

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[2]Ihab Hassan, "Three Hermits on a Hill," New York Times Book Review, September 23, 1962, p. 5.

[3]Shirley Jackson, We Have Always Lived in the Castle (New York, 1962), p. 6.

[4]Ibid., pp. 22-23.

night when most of the members of the family were poisoned. He was the only survivor of those who took the poison. As the history is reviewed, Merricat dreads some approaching evil and she is made uneasy by Helen's urging Constance to get back into the world. The next day, after the doctor has come for his weekly examination of Julian, Julian reviews the details of the family's last day. He has notes piled haphazardly over his desk and is ready to write chapter forty-five of his history of the event. Merricat has thus related past history; the current conflict begins when her cousin Charles arrives.

Constance allows Charles to enter their home and stay. Merricat, knowing that some threat to her way of life is coming, thinks up three powerful words to ward off evil, but they fail. Charles, with his grinning round face, is there fouling her territory. Charles wants Constance to resume a normal life, put Julian in a hospital, and do something with Mary Katherine. The "something" is never spelled out, but it is a clear threat to Mary Katherine. Charles makes Constance feel that she has harmed the two by letting them stay there with her. Constance hides because she was accused, then acquitted, of poisoning her father, mother, brother, Uncle Julian, and his wife. Toward the end of the novel the reader

learns what he has suspected all along: that Merricat poisoned the family and that Constance knew it but never revealed her knowledge to the police or to Merricat. Merricat asks Charles to go away, but he says that she, not he, may be the one to leave. She smashes the mirror on the dresser he is using to make him feel less welcome. He yells about the waste of money when he finds a gold watch chain which Merricat has nailed to a tree as a charm against his evil presence. Another of her magical tricks is in the same vein as smashing Charles's mirror: she puts sticks and dirt in his room, after destroying many of the room's furnishings, hoping that he will not feel at home there and will leave. When he demands that she be punished, she runs to the summerhouse and entertains a fantasy in which she sees her dead family praising and serving her. Merricat, feeling a compulsion to be at the dinner table with Constance, Uncle Julian, and Charles, rushes home. Charles bullies her and Constance lets her know that she is not angry about Merricat's dirtying Charles's room. Merricat goes upstairs to wash for dinner and enters Charles's room, where she drops his lighted pipe into a wastebasket full of newspapers.

Charles, discovering the fire, runs to the village for the firefighters. Uncle Julian goes to the back of the house

to protect his papers, and Merricat leads Constance outside to the porch. The upper floor of the house is destroyed by the fire. Immediately afterwards, the interior of the front rooms downstairs is destroyed by the villagers, who vent years of hostility by smashing the furnishings. Constance and Merricat attempt to escape to the woods, but the crowd stops them. Then--in an incident paralleling the village boys' taunting of Merricat--the villagers, laughing and enjoying the mass cruelty, sing the rhyme about the poisoning to the girls, who eventually make their way to the nearby woods. Jim Clarke, Helen's husband, arrives and tries to disperse the crowd, but they will not move. Dr. Levy comes and finds Julian in the back of the house dead of a heart attack. This news finally makes the villagers go home. Merricat and Constance escape to Merricat's hiding place farther from the house. The action has reached a climax, Merricat is almost safe, and the denouement begins.

An ambulance removes Julian's body in the night; the attendants call the girls, who do not respond. In the morning they see the badly damaged home, of which only the kitchen, Uncle Julian's room adjacent to it, and the basement are habitable. They begin cleaning it up and later Merricat barricades the house as well as she can. When the Clarkes and

Dr. Levy try to see them, they do not answer. The girls arrange to use Uncle Julian's two suits and some tablecloths as clothing, for neither wants to go into the world again. Conveniently for them, the basement is stocked with several years' supply of food, and Constance has always grown a prolific garden. Contrite villagers begin to bring baskets of food in reparation for items they destroyed in the home. Charles Blackwood comes once, and unaware that his cousins are sitting right inside the house, discusses with a magazine reporter the money he feels is going to waste there. He tries to wheedle Constance into letting him in, but she now fears him--as she does all outsiders. After he leaves, Constance tells Merricat how happy she is, and Merricat answers that she knew that Constance would like living on the moon, a fantasy Merricat has used often to indicate her desired escape from the world. Merricat is safe from the outside world now.

Merricat's fear that her way of life will end foreshadows the approaching disaster caused by Charles's coming to visit them. In her narrative, Merricat tells of the charms and magic words she uses to ward off change, but nothing can keep Charles from influencing Constance, who is the only one who can change their lives. Constance is

ready to move slowly back into the world. In the end it is not Merricat, but the villagers, who preserve her way of life by showing how horrible people on the outside can be.

The plot is well laid; all the pieces are there, except that no answer is given to why Constance was acquitted of the poisonings. Uncle Julian gives the only clue to this when he says that Constance's lawyer pointed out that she had not the subtlety of mind to devise a plan such as putting arsenic in the sugar for the Blackwoods' blackberries. Other facts are almost too conspicuous by their presence, such as Merricat's having a place for the girls to hide. Another unbelievable touch is that of having rows and rows of canned goods in the basement. There seem to be electricity and water, even after the house is burned. The parallel structure is almost too neat, also. The village boys taunt Merricat, and the villagers taunt both girls on their lawn, paralleling the derision suffered by Constance during her trial.

The denouement seems interminable. Long after it is clear that the two girls will stay where they are, the author is tying up loose threads. The final events of the denouement are not needed to persuade the reader that the girls are better fitted for their isolated existence than they are for the world.

In a surprising switch from her usual use of the omniscient narrator, Shirley Jackson has the refractory Merricat as the spokesman in We Have Always Lived in the Castle. Merricat speaks well; as Time's review says, Miss Jackson makes "transparent in the innocent narration of Merricat the variety of fantasy, reality, horror, and comedy that she means to convey."[5] The first-person point of view, however, brings another result. For once, Shirley Jackson views her characters in a detached way. The persons in Merricat's story, except for Constance, have no goodness visible to Merricat, who transmits her view of them so well that the reader often shares her opinion of them. The reader can agree with her that Charles is fittingly disposed of and the poisoned Blackwoods received what they deserved. Granville Hicks says that the author "suggests, perhaps a little more ruefully than was customary with Miss Jackson, some desperate truths about mankind."[6] Shirley Jackson characteristically views her personae with benevolence as she endows them with failings and feelings that provide depth of character. Without these humanizing comments, they become stereotypes of humanity,

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[5]Eugene Goodheart, "O To Be a Werewolf," Saturday Review, LXV (November 3, 1962), 47.

[6]Hicks, "Nightmare in Reality," p. 32.

moving in answer to their one-dimensional lives. Presented thus, the thematic study becomes one of man's inhumanity to man, with the rational values so topsy-turvy that separation from mankind is a welcome escape. The conclusion does not reflect Shirley Jackson's usual attitude.

The characters in this novel are sadly underdeveloped in view of what the author has done before. This may be because her narrator, with her limited knowledge, cannot see the full person, but the seemingly unselective dialogue Merricat records is meant to overcome this deficiency. The characters are simply not as well portrayed as they have been in other novels by Shirley Jackson. One interesting device she uses, however, is connected with the representation of time in the novel: Uncle Julian represents the past; Merricat, the future; and Constance, the present. Just as these characters have limited interest in time, their traits are limited. Merricat remains the ruthless, possessive, peculiar person she has been from the age of twelve. Constance is always the sweet servant, trying to preserve an appearance of equanimity, without the courage to leave her sanctuary. She surprises the reader only by her complete surrender to captivity and "life on the moon" with Merricat. The New Yorker's review noted the "superbly slanted" chacterization of the girls but was more impressed by the story of their separate longings:

> Constance longs to forget the outside world, so that she can stop longing for the courage to escape into it, and Mary Katherine longs only to keep Constance for herself, safe from the rest of the world forever. In the end, both sisters are satisfied.[7]

Minor characters do not emerge from their stereotyped natures as they often do for Shirley Jackson. The greedy village merchants, the Elperts, never surprise; nor do the doctor, the Clarkes, or any of the others who are named. The secondary character who does surprise is Charles Blackwood, not because of what he does or is, but because Shirley Jackson conceived and portrayed him. He has no redeeming trait; he is a boorish, greedy bully. His dead uncle is better only in that he seems to have cared for some of his family. Charles represents the voice of reason in the world, and what he says is reasonable. Julian should be in a hospital, Mary Katherine should be more civilized and much less destructive, and Constance should not serve Merricat and Uncle Julian as she does or stay isolated from the rest of the world. But the other side of what he says is not good: he wants to control the Blackwood household, especially the lands and the money, replacing the girls' dead father in that role. Miss Jackson has created a reverse situation in which

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[7]"Briefly Noted Fiction," The New Yorker, XXXVIII (October 13,11962), 232.

the happy world of the three hermits seems better than Charles's sensible world. Ihab Hassan points this out when he says that Shirley Jackson has specified "a real world which is at once more sane and more mad than the world we see."[8] Since Charles represents the voice of reason, his very nature devalues what he hopes to do. The creation of such a being is a telling comment by the author about humanity.

Julian makes more sense than Charles--and Julian is a lunatic. Uncle Julian has more life than the other characters, although his life, for all practical purposes, ended six years before. He reacts with spirit to the visit of Lucille Wright and Helen Clarke; he almost immediately despises Charles, who wants to deprive Julian of the past, where he lives most of his life. Julian's childishness--asking Constance how he performed for the two visitors--and his character evaluations of his brother and his nephew enliven the book. Julian is the source for almost all of the family history, as well as the source for some humor, as can be seen in this exchange with the inquisitive Mrs. Wright:

> "It was Constance who saw them dying around her like flies--I do beg your pardon--and she never called a doctor until it was too late. She washed the sugar bowl."

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[8]Hassan, "Three Hermits on a Hill," p. 5.

> "There was a spider in it," Constance said.
> "She told the police those people deserved to die." [Said Mrs Wright]
> "She was excited, madam. Perhaps the remark was misconstrued. My niece is not hard-hearted; besides, she thought at the time that I was among them and although I deserve to die--we all do, do we not?--I hardly think that my niece is the one to point it out."
> "She told the police that it was all her fault."
> "Now there," Uncle Julian said, "I think she made a mistake. It was certainly true that she thought at first that her cooking had caused all this, but in taking full blame I think that she was over-eager. I would have advised her against such an attitude had I been consulted; it smacks of self-pity."[9]

The review in The New Yorker states, "The uncle . . . is an engaging character, full of fire and wit and crisp elegance," but, it continues, Miss Jackson's "characters (even the old-school uncle) have no depth, nor even any life except as parts of a contrivance."[10]

Merricat details the setting of We Have Always Lived in the Castle superbly. Her home and the grounds are well described. This is her domain and she is familiar with every part of it. She checks the fences weekly, and she daily walks through the garden, the fields, the woods, to the creek, like a wild thing that loves her lands. She is aroused to great

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[9]Jackson, Castle, pp. 52-53.

[10]"Briefly Noted Fiction," p. 231.

anger when her territory is scrutinized too closely by anyone; like an animal, she answers a visceral call to ward off invasion. The house is described by carefully-wrought details: the combs on the mother's dresser, the brush set the father used, the wedding cake trim, and the brocade chairs in the parlor. As usual with Shirley Jackson, the descriptions accompany some action. The land is described as Merricat enters it or roves over it, and the house is described as the girls "neaten" it. This setting is unusual because it is not important to the characters for what it is, but for the isolation it affords. For six years no one but the three remaining Blackwoods have traversed any of their property. After the house is almost destroyed, the two survivors seem not to miss it; they only want privacy on what is left to them.

Another impression imparted is that there is nothing foreboding about the territory; any sinister influence is caused by Merricat's magical spells and charms. Merricat is a practicing witch, as much as she can be in her circumstances. Her familiar, unknown to her or him, is Jonas, her cat. In her book for children about witchcraft, Miss Jackson defines a familiar as a servant and a spy.[11] Jonas is a poor

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[11]Shirley Jackson, The Witchcraft of Salem Village (New York, 1956), p. 8.

substitute for the devil's agent, but then Merricat is not an effective witch, although the dark side of her nature, which rules her, corresponds to the evil in mankind which responds to the practice of witchcraft. Merricat's disturbed mind concocts all of the sinister elements on her land, but this fact does not mean that other sinister elements do not enter the novel. The world outside brings its own varieties of terrifying thoughts and events. The occupants of the house choose their own kind of life.

The plot of this novel is almost too well thought out--a contrivance. The characterizations do not rise to the usual level achieved by Shirley Jackson. But the setting is superb. However, the reader must agree at least partially with the reviewer of The New Yorker, who says,

> Shirley Jackson has been promising for a long time, but she is a fibber. Her new novel is one more bit of evidence that she means to stick close to her haunted house forever, disappointing those who admire her technical talents and wish that she would exercise them on less specialized projects.[12]

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[12]"Briefly Noted Fiction," The New Yorker, XXXVIII (October 13, 1962), 231.

CHAPTER VIII

CONCLUSION

A partial collection of the writings of Shirley Jackson is very appropriately entitled _The Magic of Shirley Jackson_. In her short stories, family chronicles, and novels she sets her scene, introduces her personae, and weaves a magical spell that often captures the mind of the reader. In analyzing the ways Shirley Jackson creates that spell, one too often finds that the spell is not as effective as first thought.

Shirley Jackson is skilled at plotting--up to a point--although her first novel, _The Road Through the Wall_, shows little of her skill. The novel contains several short stories intermingled and set in one locale. The focus shifts so much that the reader is never sure which is the main plot. When Shirley Jackson uses a large cast again, in her fourth novel, _The Sundial_, the problems of subplot and focus are solved. Only the actions of secondary characters that are relevant to the main plot are told, and the main character, Mrs. Halloran, dominates the story. The other four novels have few major characters; consequently, the main plot is never in doubt. Like many authors, Shirley Jackson has the problem

of ending her tale in a satisfactory and believable way. The first novel, as it ties up too many loose threads, ends with an epilogue that muddies the previous conclusion about the murderer of the little girl. Hangsaman and The Bird's Nest have brief sections of falling action during which the main characters embark upon their new paths in life. They are very believably done, without authorial intervention. The ending of The Sundial is controversial because some readers feel that the novel should have shown the first day of the new world or that it should have shown the villagers' discovery of Mrs. Halloran's body and the resultant comic scenes. Other readers find the contemplation of those scenes more interesting when left to the imagination. The denouements of We Have Always Lived in the Castle and The Haunting of Hill House are too long.

W. T. Scott, in his review of Hangsaman that was quoted earlier, makes a valid evaluation of Shirley Jackson's work when he says her method is "not-quite-telling." In The Road Through the Wall she does not give any psychological insights into Tod the night of the murder, even though she gives the impression that he murders the girl. Before this, the reader is told faithfully how the boy felt. In Hangsaman whether Tony is real or an imaginary companion of Natalie is never

really clear to some readers, although a reader can choose to believe one or the other. The Sundial does not answer the question of whether the inhabitants of the Halloran mansion are deluded; The Haunting of Hill House does not tell whether the supernatural force is an actual presence or a psychological attraction of Eleanor for the house, shared at times by the other investigators; and We Have Always Lived in the Castle does not explain why Constance chose to isolate herself, her sister, and her uncle on the Blackwood land or how she came to be acquitted of the murder of her family. However, the first person narrator, Merricat, in We Have Always Lived in the Castle would not know why Constance was acquitted or why she stays on the land, nor would she care as long as she stays.

In The Bird's Nest, a first-rate psychological novel, no question is left dangling; all of the influences that cause the disintegration of Elizabeth Richmond's mind are stated. Each of the other three novels has an element of the supernatural in it; this is what is not explained. Miss Jackson is not exploring the supernatural, but the protagonists' interactions with it or some related force that overwhelms them. Each of the supernatural forces--if they are that--leads to a choice for the protagonist, from Natalie's refusal to take responsibility for her life--as

shown in the fortune-telling Tarot cards--to her decision to try to live in the real world, to Eleanor's choice to stay with Hill House alive or dead. The choice the inhabitants of the Halloran mansion make is to believe that the world is coming to an end for everyone but them. The problem of choice for the character is made clear in the novels, although the supernatural is not explained.

Shirley Jackson's use of point of view merits special attention. She uses the point of view of the omniscient narrator in each novel except We Have Always Lived in the Castle, in which Merricat tells the events. The "I-as-major-character" narration does not give as well rounded a story as the omniscient author technique; however, Shirley Jackson tries to overcome the flaw by having Merricat record unselectively the events and conversations she sees. The focus in Hangsaman shifts from Natalie to her parents briefly and returns to stay on her. Eleanor, in The Haunting of Hill House, loses the focus at times to Luke and Theodora, but she soon regains it. The focus shifts from character to character in The Road Through the Wall until who the main characters are comes into question; it shifts all around in The Sundial, but each shift adds to the story. The best use of the omniscient narrator with shifting focus is that in

The Bird's Nest. The chapters in that novel are named after the person who has the main attention, with three being centered around Elizabeth, two around Dr. Wright, and one around Aunt Morgen. Since Dr. Wright and Aunt Morgen are concerned mainly with Elizabeth, the shift in focus enhances the portrayals of the two, but it does not endanger the focus of the novel.

Various other narrative techniques mark Shirley Jackson's writings. Her six novels contain very few flashbacks in which the narrative is completely stopped and an earlier event is told. Most flashbacks occur in dialogue, with the listeners reacting and commenting.

Except in The Bird's Nest, the setting of each novel is of particular importance. Probably the most effective of the settings is the house in The Haunting of Hill House, since something in the house influences the four investigators greatly. Two novels contain statements that changes in the environment of the major characters also change them: Tod in The Road Through the Wall by removal of the wall and Elizabeth in The Bird's Nest by the gaping hole in her office wall.

The themes Miss Jackson explores are the basic problems each individual has in finding his own place in the world. She is concerned variously with alienation, isolation, a

search for a father or an identity, and the distortion of illusion versus reality. As has been stated earlier, Shirley Jackson assumes the presence of evil everywhere, even in children. The evil she sees is the lack of loving acceptance of other persons, a lack exhibited in varying degrees by most characters in each of the novels. Results of this situation vary: in The Road Through the Wall Tod commits suicide and Harriet can never face the world; Natalie Waite in Hangsaman, Elizabeth in The Bird's Nest, Eleanor Vance in The Haunting of Hill House, and Mary Katherine Blackwood in We Have Always Lived in the Castle become mentally ill. Only two of the girls are rescued from their illness--Natalie through her own desire and Elizabeth through a change in attitude of her aunt and her doctor.

Shirley Jackson became an authority on witchcraft and wrote a book for teen-agers about it, and elements of the supernatural are present in each of her books. She sometimes uses the supernatural merely for effect, but more often as an analogy to help illuminate the dark, unloving side of human nature. Nowhere does she show the terrible depraved ugliness of some kinds of witchcraft nor their counterparts in human nature. Included in Shirley Jackson's concept of evil, though, are the lack of love and the desire for death.

Not many relatively normal characters inhabit the pages of Shirley Jackson's books. The heroines of four of the six novels border on mental illness or are mentally ill; in the other two, Mrs. Halloran and Harriet Merriam are certainly not happy, normal characters either. Assorted other characters fall somewhere between these categories; probably less than half a dozen characters in the books could be classed as happy. Shirley Jackson portrays children without any gloss of idealization: Fancy Halloran and Merricat Blackwood become caricatures of the type of persons loveless homes can create. The men, as a group, are not as satisfactorily drawn as the women.

Each of the novels contains some characters touched by the complexity of humanity, including Mrs. Ransom-Jones of *The Road Through the Wall* and each of the heroines of the novels, except Merricat. The complex characters have good and bad natures revealed, but those in *We Have Always Lived in the Castle* are flat. Constance is very, very good, while Merricat and the others are very bad. It is as though in her final complete novel Shirley Jackson's compassion for mankind is gone. Not enough of the unfinished last novel, *Come Along with Me*, exists to indicate its theme or plot, but its characterization of the major character, again

narrator of her own story like Merricat, shows a mentally ill person much like Merricat. While the reader is under the spell of Shirley Jackson's novels, each of the characters seems lucid and distinct. Major characters are revealed slowly by what they do and say, enabling the reader to get to know them. Some portrayals are open to criticism, but, on the whole, the characterizations are above average.

Shirley Jackson is a consummate stylist. Her narrative style changes little from that perfected in her short stories, which she continued writing throughout her lifetime. The style is straightforward narration interspersed with dialogue. Understated but fast-paced prose is the foundation for the bizarre story lines and unusual settings. Dialogue is excellent, except for a few instances when it clashes with the tone of the action. Each character speaks in his own way, distinct from the speech of other characters. Much of the action is first-hand and is related in conversations and confrontations of characters, instead of by the narrator. This immediacy of presentation makes the action seem more vital than secondhand reports would be.

Although she misses greatness as an author, Shirley Jackson writes poignant and powerful novels. The Road Through Wall is a failure as a novel, but its presentation of the

trials of childhood is outstanding. The Sundial fails to satisfy many readers because it does not answer the central problem it poses. The clashing tones of Hangsaman and the unsuccessful characterizations of We Have Always Lived in the Castle mar these novels, but they are still much better than many novels which get published. The most satisfying technically are The Bird's Nest and The Haunting of Hill House. Both are psychological novels, but the latter is embellished with supernatural elements which Shirley Jackson does not explain. Because of her themes, characterizations, and style, Shirley Jackson stands far above many writers; she deserves a permanent, unique position in American fiction.

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