

The background of the top half of the cover is a torn, vintage-style photograph. It depicts a woman with dark, curly hair, wearing a dark, short-sleeved dress, standing in a kitchen. She is looking down at a counter. On the wall behind her is a calendar and a window with vertical blinds. The photograph has a white border with a deckle edge. The title 'shirley jackson' is in white serif font, and 'and domesticity' is in a pinkish-red serif font. The word 'and' is smaller and in white. The background of the bottom half of the cover is a dark, atmospheric photograph of a large, multi-story house with many windows, some of which are lit. The house is surrounded by trees and is set against a dark, cloudy sky. The title 'Beyond the Haunted House' is in a white serif font. The editors' names 'JILL E. ANDERSON & MELANIE R. ANDERSON' are in a white serif font. The publisher's name 'BLOOMSBURY' is in a white serif font.

# shirley jackson and domesticity

Beyond the Haunted House

Edited by

JILL E. ANDERSON &  
MELANIE R. ANDERSON

BLOOMSBURY

# Shirley Jackson and Domesticity



# Shirley Jackson and Domesticity

Beyond the Haunted House

*Edited by  
Jill E. Anderson and  
Melanie R. Anderson*

BLOOMSBURY ACADEMIC  
NEW YORK • LONDON • OXFORD • NEW DELHI • SYDNEY



BLOOMSBURY ACADEMIC  
Bloomsbury Publishing Inc  
1385 Broadway, New York, NY 10018, USA  
50 Bedford Square, London, WC1B 3DP, UK

BLOOMSBURY, BLOOMSBURY ACADEMIC and the Diana logo are trademarks of  
Bloomsbury Publishing Plc

First published in the United States of America 2020

Volume Editors' Part of the Work © Jill E. Anderson and Melanie R. Anderson  
Each chapter © Contributors

For legal purposes the Acknowledgments on p. ix constitute an extension  
of this copyright page.

Cover design: Eleanor Rose

Cover images: (top) Vintage photograph of 1950s woman in kitchen against pile of  
photos © catscandotcom / iStock / Getty Images Plus; (bottom) Haunted House  
© Andy McGowan / Getty Images

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced or transmitted  
in any form or by any means, electronic or mechanical, including photocopying,  
recording, or any information storage or retrieval system, without prior permission in  
writing from the publishers.

Bloomsbury Publishing Inc does not have any control over, or responsibility for, any  
third-party websites referred to or in this book. All internet addresses given in this  
book were correct at the time of going to press. The author and publisher regret any  
inconvenience caused if addresses have changed or sites have ceased to exist, but can  
accept no responsibility for any such changes.

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Anderson, Jill E, editor. | Anderson, Melanie, editor.

Title: Shirley Jackson and domesticity : beyond the haunted house /  
edited by Jill E Anderson and Melanie R Anderson.

Description: New York : Bloomsbury Academic, 2020. |

Includes bibliographical references and index. |

Summary: "This collection explores the ways domesticity  
weaves through, interferes with, and influences Shirley  
Jackson's writing"— Provided by publisher.

Identifiers: LCCN 2019051467 | ISBN 9781501356643 (hardback) |

ISBN 9781501356667 (pdf) | ISBN 9781501356650 (epub)

Subjects: LCSH: Jackson, Shirley, 1916–1965—Criticism and interpretation. |

Domestic relations in literature. | Housekeeping in literature. |

Home in literature. | Families in literature.

Classification: LCC PS3519.A392 Z8525 2020 | DDC 818/.5409—dc23

LC record available at <https://lccn.loc.gov/2019051467>

ISBN: HB: 978-1-5013-5664-3

ePDF: 978-1-5013-5666-7

eBook: 978-1-5013-5665-0

Typeset by Newgen KnowledgeWorks Pvt. Ltd., Chennai, India

To find out more about our authors and books visit [www.bloomsbury.com](http://www.bloomsbury.com)  
and sign up for our newsletters.

*To Daddy, always by my side.*

*— Jill*

*For my parents.*

*— Melanie*



# CONTENTS

*Acknowledgments* ix

Introduction 1

*Melanie R. Anderson*

- 1 Hideous Doughnuts and Haunted Housewives: Gothic Undercurrents in Shirley Jackson's Domestic Humor 7

*Bernice M. Murphy*

- 2 Enemies Foreign and Domestic: Shirley Jackson's *New Yorker* Stories 27

*Ashley Lawson*

- 3 "You Didn't Look Like You Belonged in This House": Shirley Jackson's Fragile Domesticities 43

*Michael J. Dalpe Jr.*

- 4 "Sharp Points Closing in on Her Throat": The Domestic Gothic in Shirley Jackson's Short Fiction 59

*L. N. Rosales*

- 5 Endless House, Interminable Dream: Shirley Jackson's Domestic Architecture and the Matrophobic Gothic 77

*Luke Reid*

- 6 Casting a Literary Spell: The Domestic Witchcraft of Shirley Jackson 97

*Alissa Burger*

- 7 Homemaking for the Apocalypse: Queer Failures and Bunker Mentality in *The Sundial* 113  
*Jill E. Anderson*
- 8 Domestic Apocalypse in *The Sundial* 133  
*Christiane E. Farnan*
- 9 “I May Go Mad, but at Least I Look Like a Lady”: The Insanity of True Womanhood in *The Sundial* 149  
*Julie Baker*
- 10 Insisting on the Moon: Shirley Jackson and the Queer Future 169  
*Emily Banks*
- 11 Shirley Jackson’s Merricat Story: Conjugal Narcissism in *We Have Always Lived in the Castle* 189  
*Richard Pascal*
- 12 My House Is My Castle: On the Mutually Enabling Persistence of Familial Devotion and Defunct Economies in Shirley Jackson’s *We Have Always Lived in the Castle* 205  
*Allison Douglass*
- 13 Flipping Hill House: The Netflix Renovation of Shirley Jackson’s Landmark Novel 223  
*Jessica R. McCort*
- Notes on Contributors* 243
- Index* 245

# ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The editors of this volume must thank the contributors who shared our love of Shirley Jackson and graciously provided the following critical analyses of her fiction. Without their ideas, meticulous work, and patience with us and the process, this collection would not exist. We also wish to thank the team at Bloomsbury for shepherding this manuscript through the process of publication and into readers' hands. This appreciation extends to the anonymous readers, whose feedback, in the early stages especially, was valuable in the development of the collection and its scope.

Jill E. Anderson wishes to thank Melanie, her coeditor, for going along this ride with her, communicating effectively, and being consistently understanding, supportive, and witty. Thanks also to Lisa and Katie, her perennial cheerleaders who've supported this work along its way. Most importantly, she is grateful to her daddy, for instilling a love of the written word in her, and to her mama, who is supportive though she pretends to not understand any of it. Also to Hans and Alistair, whose insistent loyalty is sometimes a little too steadfast but always true. And finally, a million thanks to Jonathan who always haunts their home and cooks the meals when domesticity is a burden.

Melanie R. Anderson must thank her coeditor Jill for being a hardworking and understanding partner in this process that involves paying attention to many different details from beginning to end, usually all happening at once. Thanks also are due to her family, particularly her parents, for their support. And finally, much appreciation must go to Bobbie, whose patience is immense and who is one of the best of man's best friends.



# Introduction

*Melanie R. Anderson*

Fans and scholars of Shirley Jackson's fiction have witnessed a resurgence of interest in her work in the past ten years, and, recently, two of Jackson's most well-known novels have been adapted for the screen. In October 2018, Netflix released Mike Flanagan's ten-episode series *The Haunting of Hill House*, and in the same year, the full-length movie *We Have Always Lived in the Castle*, directed by Stacie Passon, had a limited theatrical release and appeared on streaming services. These two iterations of Jackson's work followed the release of previously unpublished stories in the collection *Let Me Tell You* (2015)—edited by two of Jackson's children, Laurence Jackson Hyman and Sarah Hyman DeWitt—and Ruth Franklin's biography *Shirley Jackson: A Rather Haunted Life* (2016). The Netflix series and the movie constitute clear evidence of a continued interest in Jackson. They also, however, show how she has been remembered as a writer of gothic horror tales, often centered on a haunted home.

While the Netflix series *The Haunting of Hill House* was a well-constructed and popular television program with talented actors, it may have overshadowed Jackson's own contribution to the source material. There were new editions of the 1959 haunted house novel tied into the streaming program, but, for the most part, the show used the novel as the bare bones for a larger and much different saga, albeit with similar themes. Flanagan borrowed the names of characters and the eponymous house and brilliantly sprinkled Easter egg references to Jackson's oeuvre throughout the episodes, but Shirley Jackson was referenced only in the first name of one of the Crain siblings. Furthermore, even though there was a book titled *The Haunting of Hill House* in the show, it was written by Steven, Shirley



Crain's brother. This relegation of Jackson's authorship to the background was not lost on critics.<sup>1</sup>

Adaptation is not an exact science and is dependent on interpretation; thus, Netflix's *Hill House* taking on a life of its own in the twenty-first century is not surprising. I do think, though, that the manner in which the Netflix program departed from Jackson's work and the very choice to adapt *The Haunting of Hill House* indicate her popular and critical legacy. This focus on Jackson's predilection for the gothic has eclipsed the actual variety of her writing and led to critics examining her work through a limited number of texts: "The Lottery" (1948), *The Haunting of Hill House* (1959), and *We Have Always Lived in the Castle* (1962). There are two previous edited collections of essays on Shirley Jackson's work, Bernice M. Murphy's *Shirley Jackson: Essays on the Literary Legacy* (2005) and my *Shirley Jackson, Influences and Confluences* (2016), edited with Lisa Kröger. Each of the introductions to these collections has repeated the lament of Jackson scholars that, until the years leading up to the twenty-first century, and particularly by 2010 when the majority of Jackson's work came back into print, academic writing on Jackson's work was sparse. Beyond journal articles, classroom use of her writing was usually limited to "The Lottery." While the number of articles on Jackson's work has increased, much more attention could be paid to her rich and varied fiction beyond the most cited novels and stories. Of her six completed novels, *The Road through the Wall* (1948), *Hangsaman* (1951), *The Bird's Nest* (1954), and *The Sundial* (1958) have yet to be fully explored. We offer in this collection three takes on *The Sundial*, which seems to be emerging as the novel to watch for in current critical literature. Additionally, a staggeringly large number of her short stories published in popular magazines of the time and in her collection *The Lottery and Other Stories* (1948) have, thus far, eluded sustained scholarly attention. Bernice M. Murphy addressed this situation in 2005, writing, "Critics have not quite known what to make of [Jackson], a problem caused by the fact that she operated in two popular and yet frequently marginalized genres: those of horror and the gothic and the so-called domestic humor that appeared in women's magazines during the 1950s."<sup>2</sup> The popular perception of Jackson has focused on her influence on the horror genre without taking into consideration her diverse output, which includes nonsupernatural meditations on life for women in the home and her penchant for linking the position of women in 1950s America to gothic themes of the uncanny and entrapment.

Jackson was so much a part of 1950s American letters that Linda Wagner-Martin described the 1950s as "the decade of Jackson."<sup>3</sup> New writers of the 1950s and 1960s were often compared to her. Because of her writing and her husband's critical and professorial career, she ran in literary circles that included Ralph Ellison, Howard Nemerov, Bernard Malamud, and Kenneth and Libbie Burke, to name a few luminaries. In addition,

Jackson was aware of the social changes surrounding her. Biographer Ruth Franklin describes the atmosphere of growth and paranoia that prevailed at the time Jackson was writing, from rampant conspicuous consumerism to the House Committee on Un-American Activities to the justified, but simultaneously inconceivable, fear of nuclear apocalypse to the beginnings of desegregation and the stirrings of the coming second wave of feminism. Franklin writes, "All these tensions are palpable in Jackson's work, which channels a far-reaching anxiety about the tumultuous world outside the home even as it investigates the dark secrets of domestic American life."<sup>4</sup> Jackson may have written about haunted spaces, but she had her finger on the pulse of contemporary women's experiences in America. In her fiction, she negotiated the tension between women's obligations to home and family and the possible desire to avoid marriage and family altogether or to pursue a career outside the home. As a writer who was a wife and mother, she knew from her own experiences the internal and external conflicts faced by individuals who did not fit into the socially scripted roles of the 1950s. Jackson's stories often focus on a woman facing the social issues of her day, whether she was writing gothic fiction or domestic sketches loosely based on her family's everyday life. Moreover, she did not shy away from humanity's inhumanity to individuals perceived as the Other, as seen in stories like "The Lottery," "A Fine Old Firm," "After You, My Dear Alphonse," and "Flower Garden." The aim of this collection of essays is to continue to move beyond the focus on Jackson's haunted houses and horror motifs to excavate the concerns that are present in her more realistic fiction and that may lie beneath her Gothicism.

This collection begins with essays that explore short stories by Jackson that may not have received much attention up to this point. The first chapter is Bernice M. Murphy's "Hideous Doughnuts and Haunted Housewives: Gothic Undercurrents in Shirley Jackson's Domestic Humor." Murphy connects Jackson's traditional gothic works and her domestic sketches of family life collected in *Life among the Savages* (1953) and *Raising Demons* (1957). She points to the confusion critics felt over what they interpreted as a dissonance between Jackson's novels and her humorous sketches that initially appeared in popular magazines, such as *Good Housekeeping*. In her chapter "Enemies Foreign and Domestic: Shirley Jackson's *New Yorker* Stories," Ashley Lawson takes us back beyond the point often read as the beginning of Jackson's career—the 1948 publication of "The Lottery" and all the confusion it caused among readers of the *New Yorker*. Lawson carefully traces how changing trends and readership at the *New Yorker* affected Jackson's work as she attempted to place stories in that august publication, ultimately leading her to use some of the trademark characteristics of a *New Yorker* story, while still developing her own style and concern for female protagonists. Michael J. Dalpe Jr.'s "'You Didn't Look Like You Belonged in This House': Shirley Jackson's Fragile Domesticities" explores how Jackson used her short fiction

to invert the social expectations and power dynamics of the American home in the 1950s and 1960s. He posits that Jackson interrogates ideas of “belonging” and “normalcy” to show how polite society polices social order, which results in oppressive control for women who cannot quite fit in. In “‘Sharp Points Closing In on Her Throat’: The Domestic Gothic in Shirley Jackson’s Short Fiction,” L. N. Rosales, like Murphy earlier, joins the gothic to Jackson’s domestic concerns. Rosales argues that Jackson makes the domestic space seem fragile and dangerous as familiar aspects of the home, such as children, become strange and threatening. Rather than the home being a safe, nurturing space, it is a site of invasion and fragmentation. Rosales shows how Jackson views the expectations of the traditional role of the housewife as fraught with peril and demanding perfection no one could possibly achieve.

In a shift to an analysis of domestic spaces, Luke Reid focuses on mothers and houses in his article, “Endless House, Interminable Dream: Shirley Jackson’s Domestic Architecture and the Matrophobic Gothic.” He investigates the gothic poetics of space and architecture, linking gothic spaces to horrific domestic situations involving mothers and their families. He expands this idea of the haunted house and the maternal in Jackson’s fiction to encompass *The Haunting of Hill House* and the under examined story “The Bus.” “Casting a Literary Spell: The Domestic Witchcraft of Shirley Jackson” by Alissa Burger likewise links space to gothic themes. Burger takes the theme of magic often associated with Jackson, because of her purported interest in witchcraft, and expands it to show how Jackson’s fictional women use magic outside her supernatural stories to seize power, create protection, and navigate the possibilities of everyday experience. She includes Jackson’s domestic sketches in her analysis alongside *Castle*.

At this point in the collection, there is a turn to Jackson’s apocalyptic novel *The Sundial*. In Jill E. Anderson’s “Homemaking for the Apocalypse: Queer Failures and Bunker Mentality in *The Sundial*,” she argues that this novel plays out against the nuclear concerns of Jackson’s age, including the anxieties surrounding the preparation for a nuclear war and the unknown implications of such an event for human society. She identifies in the Halloran’s preparation for the end of the world aspects of what she terms “homemaking for the apocalypse,” or the actions taken in the 1950s to prepare homes and bunkers for the faint hope that life could continue beyond the nuclear inferno. Christiane E. Farnan, in her “Domestic Apocalypse in *The Sundial*,” focuses on the multiple murders in *The Sundial* as women seek to acquire power, first from men and then from each other. She argues that Jackson illustrates how women may wield power just as absolutely and cruelly as the patriarchal icons they attempt to overthrow, thus disrupting the 1950s ideal of the peaceful refuge of the family home. Julie Baker takes on the continuation of the Cult of True Womanhood into this novel in “‘I May Go Mad, but at Least I Look Like a Lady’: The Insanity of True

Womanhood in *The Sundial*.” She reads Aunt Fanny’s power struggle against Orianna and her developing madness as a picture of the damage wrought by traditional stereotypes of feminine behavior.

The next three chapters explore themes in the *Castle*. In Emily Banks’s “Insisting on the Moon: Shirley Jackson and the Queer Future,” she places *Hill House* next to *Castle* to illustrate how women may resort to destructive and violent actions to dismantle and escape the patriarchy. Banks posits that the heroines in each book go to extreme lengths to avoid entrapment in traditional family structures. In “Shirley Jackson’s Merricat Story: Conjugal Narcissism in *We Have Always Lived in the Castle*,” Richard Pascal argues that in Merricat Blackwood, Jackson created an adult child consumed by solipsism. He connects this isolation and narcissism to the same focus on self often encouraged in post–Second World War American descriptions of home and family life. In “My House Is My Castle: On the Mutually Enabling Persistence of Familial Devotion and Defunct Economies in Shirley Jackson’s *We Have Always Lived in the Castle*,” Allison Douglass also focuses on isolation. She, however, links the stasis and containment of the experience of the Blackwood family survivors to gothic portrayals of families in castles with inherited wealth and bloodlines and then traces this motif through the expansion of consumer capitalism into the domestic spaces of 1950s and 1960s America.

Jessica R. McCort’s essay “Flipping Hill House: The Netflix Renovation of Shirley Jackson’s Landmark Novel” ends the collection where I began this introduction: with Netflix’s Crain family in a twenty-first-century Hill House. McCort compares and contrasts Jackson’s representation of motherhood and home with the Netflix show’s more recent interpretation of such themes. She identifies what she calls the “monstrous feminine” in both incarnations. She teases out how women still, even though we are approaching the third decade of the twenty-first century, struggle between the roles expected of them by family and society and their life choices, ranging from marriage to family to career that echo Jackson’s meditations from 1959.

Jill E. Anderson and I hope that this collection of essays continues the work of opening the scope of Jackson studies to explore beyond the gothic haunted house to find the domestic themes and conflicts that the home contains. In her fiction, Jackson was reacting to and questioning the social issues of 1950s American culture: the fear, the paranoia, the conflicts stemming from discrimination based on race and gender, and enforced conformity and heteronormativity. She looked at the American family, the small town, and the suburbs, and she saw the cracks within them. She saw how the expectations and mandated behaviors that made up these American institutions harmed individuals who wanted to choose or act differently. At the same time, as a wife and mother who wrote, published, and delivered lectures on writing, Jackson not only was aware of the cracks, but she saw

the possibilities as well. Quite possibly, we may have her knowledge of that paradoxical position to thank for the lasting power of her imagination.

## Notes

- 1 See Jason Zinoman, “*The Haunting of Hill House*, on Netflix, Is a Family Drama with Scares,” *New York Times* (October 11, 2018), n.p.
- 2 Bernice M. Murphy, ed., *Shirley Jackson: Essays on the Literary Legacy* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland and Company, 2005), 11.
- 3 Ruth Franklin, *Shirley Jackson: A Rather Haunted Life* (New York: Liveright Publishing, 2016), 5–6.
- 4 *Ibid.*, 6.

## References

- Anderson, Melanie R., and Lisa Kröger, eds. *Shirley Jackson, Influences and Confluences*. London: Routledge, 2016.
- Franklin, Ruth. *Shirley Jackson: A Rather Haunted Life*. New York: Liveright Publishing, 2016.
- Murphy, Bernice M., ed. *Shirley Jackson: Essays on the Literary Legacy*. Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2005.
- Zinoman, Jason, “*The Haunting of Hill House*, on Netflix, Is a Family Drama with Scares.” *New York Times* (October 11, 2018), n.p. (accessed on September 22, 2019) <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/10/11/arts/television/netflix-the-haunting-of-hill-house-review.html>.

# 1

## Hideous Doughnuts and Haunted Housewives: Gothic Undercurrents in Shirley Jackson's Domestic Humor\*

*Bernice M. Murphy*

It may initially seem surprising that Shirley Jackson, the author of unnerving, ruthless tales such as “The Lottery” (1948) and *The Haunting of Hill House* (1959) spent much of her career penning humorous anecdotes about life as an apparently conventional mother and housewife. The contrast certainly baffled contemporary critics, many of whom found themselves unable to understand the gulf between these two superficially divergent facets of Jackson's writing. This puzzlement, as Lynette Carpenter notes, contributed to Jackson's long-standing critical neglect: “... traditional male critics could not, in the end, reconcile genre with gender in Jackson's case; unable to understand how a serious writer of gothic fiction could also be, to all outward appearances, a typical housewife, much less how she could publish housewife humor in *Good Housekeeping*, they dismissed her.”<sup>1</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup>This chapter is a revised and slightly updated version of a book chapter that first appeared *The Ghost Story from the Middle Ages to the Twentieth Century* ed. Helen Conrad O'Briain and Julie Anne Stevens (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 2010), 229–59. It is reprinted here with the kind permission of Four Courts Press as well as the author.

The relationship between Jackson's "housewife" humor and her gothic fiction is more compelling (and revealing) than first impressions suggest. If a casual browser were to simply survey the titles of Jackson's domestic memoirs, *Life among the Savages* (1953) and *Raising Demons* (1957), they would probably assume that the texts are concerned with subjects of a horrific nature. Though indicative of Jackson's sardonic sense of humor, it seems odd that, as more than one previous commentator has noted, the most outwardly "gothic" and suggestive of Jackson's eight book titles should belong not to an intense exploration of madness and multiple personality like *The Bird's Nest* (1954) or family annihilation such as *We Have Always Lived in the Castle* (1962) but the most apparently innocuous texts in her entire oeuvre.

As Darryl Hattenhauer notes, Jackson's money-spinners were among the most lucrative of her time: "Her novels were bestsellers. There were movie deals on two of those novels (*The Bird's Nest* and *The Haunting of Hill House*) ... Jackson got a minimum of one thousand dollars for each short story and article appearing in a mass market magazine: the average fee was probably much more."<sup>2</sup> Much of Jackson's financial success arose from her frequent appearance in women's magazines in the 1950s. "The editors ... knew that Jackson's name on the cover meant higher sales" and were willing to pay premium prices to secure her writing. Jackson's 1949 contract with *Good Housekeeping* ensured her a large fixed fee for eight stories a year. The deal was so lucrative it enabled her family to move from New York to New England. It also confirmed her status as one of the decade's leading writers of so-called housewife humor.<sup>3</sup> As Nancy Walker has observed, Jackson's generation of female humorists "wrote about the domestic life of the woman in terms that were strikingly similar to those of their nineteenth century counterparts."<sup>4</sup> The postwar suburban ideal that led many middle-class women out of the cities, "the labor saving devices that merely elevated the expectations for women as homemakers, and the virtual isolation of women from commuting husbands all helped promote that particular sub-genre of domestic humor that shows women interacting more often with girl scout cookies and matchless socks than with ideas."<sup>5</sup>

The subgenre Walker dubs "the domestic saga" is generally characterized as "an account of a female persona in a domestic setting struggling to cope with the many demands of her role as homemaker."<sup>6</sup> The domestic saga originated in the early nineteenth century, in the work of Caroline Kirkland and Fanny Fern but "reached its fullest flowering in mid-twentieth century works such as *The Egg and I* by Betty McDonald, Jean Kerr's *Please Don't Eat the Daisies* and Shirley Jackson's *Life among the Savages*."<sup>7</sup> In each of these memoirs the heroine and her family are transplanted from the big city to an unfamiliar rural environment. Both Jackson and Kerr begin by detailing moves from New York City to rural New England, while McDonald details her husband's decision to swap a city existence for life as a chicken farmer.

These moves away from the city paralleled the flight toward suburbia that many readers of such volumes would have themselves experienced.

*Life among the Savages* (1953) was bookended by two intense explorations of psychological breakdown, *Hangsaman* (1951) and *The Bird's Nest* (1954). It is a revealing juxtaposition, demonstrating Jackson's range and the close relationship between two of her favorite subjects: mental instability and domesticity. *Savages*, like *Demons*, is a series of extended anecdotes previously published as magazine stories. "Charles," Jackson's most frequently anthologized humorous piece, first appeared in *Mademoiselle* in July 1948 and "My Son and the Bully" debuted in *Good Housekeeping* in October 1949, while several other stories were initially featured in *Harper's*—all popular women's publications of the time.<sup>8</sup> For the book, the stories were arranged chronologically, given added descriptive passages, and worked in alongside previously unpublished pieces.<sup>9</sup>

Jackson was often scathing about the literary quality of her domestic sketches: she was "appreciative of their salability, but considered them potboilers."<sup>10</sup> A strong note of self-deprecation frequently surfaces in her thoughts on this facet of her career. Responding to a letter from her parents that criticized the quality of these pieces, Jackson responded: "I quite agree with you ... they are written for money and the reason they sound so bad is because these magazines won't buy good ones, but deliberately seek out bad stuff because they say their audiences want it."<sup>11</sup> At a rate of at least a thousand dollars a story, Jackson felt that she "could not afford to try to change the state of popular fiction today, and since they will buy quite as much of it as I write, I do one story a month and spend the rest of the time working on my new novel or other stories."<sup>12</sup> Jackson's self-deprecation also may have been due to her suspicion that success in this female-led field would have a negative impact upon critical responses to her "real" writing.

This suspicion was well founded. As Joan Wylie Hall notes, "Jackson's discovery of an appealing formula and a lucrative market distracted critical attention from the balance of her short fiction, which was much more important to her."<sup>13</sup> For many years, it was relatively easy for critics to dismiss or ignore *Savages* and *Demons*. Yet, as Walker has demonstrated, "Women's humor is an index to women's roles and values; and particularly to their relationship with American cultural realities."<sup>14</sup> While Betty Friedan may famously have seen "housewife humor" as collaboration with a system oppressing American women (because, in her analysis, it belittled the desperation of the women who read it), David Van Leer notes, "even highly conventional literary treatments of the housewife functioned unintentionally to increase female awareness."<sup>15</sup> From this perspective, "housewife humor" is not, as Friedan argues in *The Feminine Mystique* (1963), a cynical exploitation of female desperation by women who are themselves anything but "typical"; but rather, as Walker argues, a highly significant chronicle of



the American woman's "self-perceived inability to meet a set of culturally determined standards for her role as homemaker."<sup>16</sup>

The titles of the most popular domestic humor texts of the postwar period reflect the impossibility of meeting rigid societal expectations. Jackson implies that her own children are *Savages* and *Demons*; Jean Kerr's *How to Be Perfect* is "an ironically titled account of just the opposite," and most overt of all is Peg Bracken's *The I Hate to Cook Book*.<sup>17</sup> Such titles encapsulated the contrast that existed between the "official" ideal of a woman's life and the more realistic attitude that many women had toward their own circumstances.<sup>18</sup> In Jackson's family chronicles, as in those of her contemporaries, the daily frustrations of motherhood and housekeeping are raised to the self-conscious absurdity of slapstick comedy, yet, Walker continues, "throughout the book(s) are strong suggestions that the life of the average housewife is repetitive and demeaning."<sup>19</sup> Indeed, as David Van Leer notes:

All suburban novels reinforced clichés about the importance of the family and of the mother's role as nurturer and moral exemplar. Yet their comic tone established a conspiratorial relationship to their audience ... in so defining "Housewife" as a job and as an object of literature, these novels set the stage for Friedan's subsequent critique of society's evaluation of that job. Only after readers recognized that they were housewives could they decide whether or not "housewife" was something that they wanted to be.<sup>20</sup>

Contrary to Freidan's impassioned indictment of "housewife humor" therefore, it is more accurate to characterize such writing as the means toward highlighting the absurd gap between the way women were supposed to be and the way things were. The desperation and dry humor depicted in their pages were arguably indicative of many deeper social and domestic problems, and a reflection, as Walker suggests, not of "the individual failure of an individual woman" but rather a 'symptom of a society wide structure of power and powerlessness.'<sup>21</sup>

For several decades after Jackson's death, analysis of the family chronicles has tended to confine itself largely to a single extract: the story "Charles," which was first published as a stand-alone tale in 1948, but later included in *The Lottery and Other Stories* (1949) and then integrated into *Savages*. This is perhaps because it is the most obvious example of Jackson's gothic sensibilities being given expression in her domestic humor. It also showcases Jackson's interest in the dramatic possibilities provided by "split" personalities, a topic also explored in *Hangsaman* and *The Bird's Nest*.

"Charles" begins unassuming enough, as the narrator (a version of Jackson) is watching her eldest son Laurie leave for his first morning at school, "seeing clearly that an era of my life was ended, my sweet-voiced nursery

tot replaced by a long-trousered, swaggering character who forgot to stop at the corner and wave good bye to me.”<sup>22</sup> It begins as a conventional account of a child's first morning at school, and in the narrator's sadness at the end of this stage of her child's development, there is also a sense of foreboding regarding the inevitable consequence of the postwar era's emphasis upon motherhood and childbearing. Even an apparently innocuous milestone such as that recorded in “Charles” serves as a reminder that a woman's days of fertility, and “usefulness,” would soon end. As Glenna Matthews notes of the era, “There could be no more cruel reminder of the essential uselessness of the older woman in the culture of consumption than the reduction of the last several decades of a woman's life to a ‘desert of wasted time.’”<sup>23</sup>

Laurie soon starts arriving home with tales of a classmate named Charles who is constantly getting into trouble. Charles hits the teacher, throws chalk, and makes a classmate cry. By the third week of kindergarten, stories of his misdeeds have become so familiar that, “Charles was an institution in our family.”<sup>24</sup> Laurie's parents naturally become extremely curious about this disruptive child's parents, so at the PTA. meeting, the narrator sets out to encounter his poor mother: “At the meeting I sat restlessly, scanning each comfortable matronly face, trying to determine which one hid the secret of Charles. None of them looked to me haggard enough.”<sup>25</sup> The denouement comes after the meeting, when, having failed to find Charles's mother, the narrator converses with her son's kindergarten teacher. To her immense surprise, the narrator is told that Laurie has had some problems in adjusting to school. The narrator nervously tries to laugh this off by saying, “I suppose this time it's Charles's influence”—and is shocked when the teacher responds, “We don't have any Charles in the kindergarten.”<sup>26</sup> The twist in the tale—Laurie and Charles are the same person—is played for laughs: but in Jackson's gothic fiction, this kind of discovery is always chilling. *Hangsaman* even features essentially the same twist: Natalie Waite's new friend Tony is a figment of her disturbed imagination.

Houses and the concept of “home” also constitute one of the most important preoccupations in Jackson's gothic fiction. *Savages* begins with the line that immediately highlights Jackson's interest in living space: “Our house is old, and noisy, and full.”<sup>27</sup> Next, there is a move from New York City to the New England countryside that would be replicated on many occasions in Jackson's fiction. *Hill House* begins with Eleanor's fateful drive from the city to the titular rural mansion, while “The Flower Garden,” “The Renegade,” and “The Summer People” (all published in *The Lottery*) also depict city dwellers adjusting to life in the unwelcoming countryside. *Savages* opens with the implication that the narrator and her husband have become enmeshed in a life of apparently cozy, but cheerfully chaotic, domesticity—without ever really intending to. Jackson tellingly invokes a metaphor that suggests entrapment rather than contentment: “This is the way of life my husband and I have fallen into, inadvertently, as though we had fallen into a

well and decided that since there was no way out we might as well stay there and set up a chair and a desk and a light of some kind ...”<sup>28</sup>

Even with the apparently humorous opening, there is a definite hint of the panic that so often infects Eleanor in *Hill House*. This sense of domestic anxiety also afflicts the protagonists of stories such as “The Demon Lover” and “The Tooth.” It is a feeling intensified by the circumstances by which the family has had to move from New York—the landlord simply rented their apartment to someone else. Having decided upon a move to Vermont (biographical sources suggest that Jackson had become prone to severe panic attacks exacerbated by the stress of city life), the newcomers are maneuvered into leasing a large, old house by canny locals.

When Eleanor first views Hill House, she experiences a jolt of visceral dislike, and immediately declares it “vile.” Eleanor’s accurate first impressions are almost the same as those of the narrator in *Savages* when she first enters *her* new home. As she and her husband view a kitchen “where a monumental ironwork stove threatened to fall on us,”<sup>29</sup> the narrator is suddenly stricken with a desperate desire to flee. “‘I’m sorry we stayed,’ I said to my husband earnestly, my hands shaking as I looked at the two hideous doughnuts.” The narrator’s reaction is described in terms suggestive of the dread that characterizes a panic attack, as is Eleanor’s instinctual response to Hill House:

I should have turned back at the gate, Eleanor thought. The house had caught her with an atavistic turn in the pit of the stomach, and she looked along the lines of its roofs, fruitlessly trying to locate the badness, whatever dwelt there; her hands turned nervously cold so that she fumbled, trying to take out a cigarette, and beyond everything else she was afraid, listening to the sick voice inside her which whispered, *Get away from here, get away*.<sup>30</sup>

Yet, just as Eleanor resists her initial instincts, so too does the narrator of *Savages*. It seems that the Fielding house is the last suitable place in town; moreover, the elderly leaseholder presumes, without being asked, that the family will move in and offers them absurdly cheap rental terms. The narrator, still shaken, blames her husband for deciding to stay: “‘You seem to have taken the house,’ I said unjustly to my husband. ‘It’s probably because we went inside,’ he said. ‘No one else has ever gone inside and that probably constitutes a lease.’”<sup>31</sup> Despite the narrator’s misgivings, when the family returns a few weeks later, they find that the house has been transformed: “literally scraped clean; down to the wood in the walls, straightened up, painted and repaired.” Upon seeing the residence on this occasion, the narrator voices a completely different opinion: “It’s beautiful”—a remark that anticipates Eleanor’s similar volte-face in Hill House and her remark, “I don’t think we could leave now even if we wanted

to."<sup>32</sup> This sense of ambivalence is, of course, a major recurrent theme of Jackson's work: but here, as is so often is the case in her fiction, the home space is simultaneously enthralling and terrifying.

What is most interesting about the opening of *Savages* is that Jackson personifies her new home as a kind of living, thinking entity. The residence has rooms that seem to choose where furniture should go and instinctively prefers old things to those brought from the city: "All these things, the ones that had been in the house before, and other things which had been in similarly old houses and knew their ways, fell naturally into good positions in the rooms, as though snatching the best places before the city furniture could crowd in."<sup>33</sup> It's a description that further underlines the extent to which Jackson adhered to long-established gothic conventions, even in her nonfiction. As Fred S. Franks has noted of the importance of Horace Walpole's *The Castle of Otranto* (1764), by making the castle the centerpiece of his gothic tableaux, Walpole ensured that "the principal engine of the gothic plot would be an inlaid system of architectural contraptions, acoustical effects installed throughout the gothic castle ... where inanimate objects behaved in human ways."<sup>34</sup> Like the classic eighteenth-century gothic castle and its successors, Jackson's real-life residence is characterized as a semi-sentient entity furnished with objects that have decidedly human preferences and dislikes.

There is the sense here of an inevitable caving in to the demands of the countryside: the old furniture instinctively crowds out the family's newer city possessions. The narrator and her family soon learn the futility of trying to impose human will upon their new home: "After a few vain attempts at imposing our own angular order on things with a consequent out-of-jointedness and *shrieking disharmony* ... we gave into the old furniture and let things settle where they would."<sup>35</sup> It is a statement that of course recalls the non-Euclidian geometry of Hill House, a place of "clashing disharmony." The Jackson family's eventual acceptance of the old furniture in *Savages* is also reminiscent of Eleanor's surrender to the will of Hill House. There is one key difference, however: the home Jackson and her family move into in *Savages* turns out to be "a good house, after all"—the benign flipside of her most notorious fictional edifice, with an intelligence that is ultimately welcoming rather than malevolent—once the new inhabitants accede to its wishes.

The relationship between the two houses also provides an important clue as to how we should view Jackson's domestic humor in relation to her gothic fiction. As Carpenter has noted, while the preoccupation may often be the same—in this case the personification of a family home—the *tone* constitutes the key difference. If an observation is framed within the explicitly comic context of her domestic writing, then it is clearly in that spirit that the reader is intended to take her remarks. Yet it remains the case that when removed from this reassuring context, or even considered

in more detail, we often see Jackson discussing the same themes broached in her serious fiction with notably similar language. The seemingly cozy façade of her domestic humor is unsettled by this close relationship to her more explicitly gothic tales. If the reader has no knowledge of this side of Jackson's career, she will likely be mollified by the narrator's declaration that "It *was* a good house after all": but that significant use of italics opens up other chilling alternate possibilities. What if it *had* been a "bad" house? It is a question that Jackson obviously found intriguing enough to use as the premise for her most famous novel.

*Demons* opens with another move, this time from the house discussed in *Savages*. Here, the clutter that litters the household is said to be too much to deal with, so again without really making a conscious decision, the family is maneuvered by the local community into purchasing a new home, thus provoking in the narrator "an extraordinary sense of inevitability."<sup>36</sup> We are yet again told that the family's fate is not in their own hands: "I have not now the slightest understanding of the events which got us out of one big white house which we rented and into another, bigger white house which we own."<sup>37</sup> The narrator soon discovers the real reason why the local community was so eager to see them move: a member of the local family who originally owned their rental home has decided to reclaim her ancestral estate. When this erstwhile scion tours the property, she displays a sense of entitlement that shocks the narrator: "I thought someone had told you,' she said, 'I was a Fielding before I was married ... we are coming home again.'" It is clear that a preoccupation of Jackson's fiction noted by Carpenter—her recurrent portrayals of the clash between city newcomers and long-established rural communities—is also present in her domestic humor.

In *Savages* and *Demons*, however, the network of gossip that fuels small town discourse is treated in comedic fashion. Although the local people encourage the move for their own reasons, they help the narrator's family find a new home quickly: "I was to learn later that the grocer not only knew our housing problems, but the ages and names of our children, the meat we had served for dinner the night before, and my husband's income."<sup>38</sup> Though here played for laughs, the very same reservoir of local knowledge can, with just a slight change of emphasis, become deeply disturbing. Consider, for instance, the shopping trip which opens *Castle* (1962). Merricat Blackwood's final foray into the local village is a virtuoso exercise in paranoia and resentment. The scene was anticipated by the relationship between the arrogant Halloran clan and hostile locals in *The Sundial* (1958), and then Eleanor's uncomfortable stop at a local coffee shop in *Hill House*.<sup>39</sup>

However, her most accomplished exploration of the clash between rural New England and urban newcomers takes place in her 1950 story "The Summer People" in which an elderly couple unwisely overstays their welcome in the countryside and come to an uncertain end. Similarly, in *Demons*, the narrator's family briefly takes up residence in a summerhouse in another

part of the state while their new home is being renovated. As the narrator tells us, "Our neighbors were almost all summer folk like ourselves, and agreeable, informal people."<sup>40</sup> Though the family soon moves into their own residence, there is always this sense, as in Jackson's fiction, of never truly belonging. It is a preoccupation that would reach its ultimate expression in her final novel *Castle*.

Unsurprisingly, given that *Savages* and *Demons* take the form of what Friedman has aptly described as "family chronicles," Jackson's children often take center stage. While mothers with small children crop up frequently in Jackson's short stories, not one of Jackson's six novelistic heroines is a mother. The mothers who do appear in Jackson's novels are either ineffectual (*Hangsamen*), dead (*The Bird's Nest*, *Hill House*, *Castle*), or domineering (*Sundial*). Indeed, the closest we get to a benign maternal figure in Jackson's novels is a sister, such as Constance Blackwood, or, at a stretch, *The Bird's Nest's* brusque but well-meaning Aunt Morgen. Jackson's only sustained portrait of loving motherhood therefore comes in the domestic humor. Nevertheless, we are left in little doubt that the maternal role is highly challenging one. The children here, as in many of her fictional works, are simultaneously magical and frightening, a tendency that imbues these ostensibly lighthearted sketches with a revealing undercurrent of maternal ambivalence (even if that ambivalence is usually softened by humor). For instance, one particularly revealing passage in *Savages* finds the narrator reflecting upon the fundamental unknowability of her offspring: "Sometimes, in my capacity as a mother, I find myself sitting open mouthed and terrified before my own children, little individual creatures moving solidly along in their own paths and yet in some mysterious fashion vividly reminiscent of a past which my husband and I know we never communicated to them."<sup>41</sup>

Like the mothers in fictional stories such as "The Witch" and "The Renegade," the narrator is suddenly able to perceive her own children with more than a hint of fear. For instance, the little boy on the train in "The Witch" laughs delightedly as a strange old man talks about beheading his sister. Jackson's children can also be diverted away from their parents by outside ("local") influences. In *Demons*, the narrator worries that "The children were changing in the new house: they belonged to the town now."<sup>42</sup> The same thought strikes the protagonist of "The Renegade" as she listens to her children excitedly discuss gruesome methods of preventing the family dog from stealing chickens: "Mrs. Walpole looked at them, at her two children with their hard hands and their sunburned faces laughing together, their dog with blood still on her legs laughing with them."<sup>43</sup>

Children also provide Jackson with the opportunity to explore another of her favorite thematic preoccupations: identity slippage. Besides "Charles," there are plenty of other such instances; as Friedman and Hall note, Jackson's children in the family chronicles are constantly changing their names and adopting new, fantastical identities. For example, in *Savages* we are told

that the narrator's eldest daughter Jannie has an imaginary friend named "Mrs. Ellenroy." This conceit, like that recounted in "Charles," recalls Natalie's imaginary friend in *Hangsaman*.<sup>44</sup> The narrator's wry comment on this perpetual shifting of identities encapsulates the warning given in so many of her more obviously fictional creations: "Nothing is stable in this world."<sup>45</sup> There are also clear resonances with Jackson's fiction to be found in the narrator's observation that her youngest daughter Sally spends her days "wandering perpetually in a misty odd world where familiar signs merged and changed as she passed."<sup>46</sup> After all, what is the typical Jackson story but the tale of a wrong turn taken on a familiar road, where the line between madness and reality is crossed in an unwary instant? The singsong doggerel uttered by Sally has clear echoes in the unconventional syntax of Merricat Blackwood and Natalie Waite. At one point in *Demons*, Sally suddenly comes out with a statement that the narrator finds as disturbing as it is nonsensical, "'In my river,' Sally remarked once, chillingly, 'we sleep in wet beds and hear our mothers calling us'—giving me a sudden, terrifying picture of my own face, leaning over the water, and my voice far away and echoing."<sup>47</sup> Sally also chants the question asked by nearly every Jackson heroine at some point, if only of herself: "'Do you know who I am?'" Sally was singing on her head in the backseat, 'Do you know who I am?'" In this case the answer is both surreal and baffling: "'I'm a rat and you're a fish,' Sally said, 'and now you know who I am.'"<sup>48</sup>

One of the other most significant preoccupations of Jackson's literary fiction is her dramatization of female anxiety about the limited roles middle-class white women were being forced into during the postwar era. Jackson's obvious frustration toward the life expected of a 1950s housewife does not surface explicitly in *Savages*. By contrast, in *Demons*, the narrator's deep-seated anger frequently comes to the surface. The book, though relatively successful, did not achieve the commercial popularity of its predecessor. Jackson attributed its poorer reception to inadequate publicity;<sup>49</sup> but, as Judy Oppenheimer suggests, there may have been another reason: "Though funny and enjoyable, the book as a whole did not come off as well as *Savages*—the tone was more harried, at times even irritable, with more than a few rough edges. Occasionally a harsher reality broke through: Shirley's jealousy of Stanley, for instance, cropped up in no less than three episodes."<sup>50</sup> In other words, her readers may well have been deterred by these hints of seemingly genuine bile. This tendency emerges as early as chapter Two, when the narrator, who is feeling under the weather during a bitter New England winter, explodes in anger:

I got to feeling that I could not bear the sight of the colored cereal bowls for one more morning, could not empty one more ash tray, could not brush one more head or bake one more potato or let out one more job or pick up one more jacket. I snarled at the bright faces regarding me from



the breakfast table and I was strongly tempted to kick the legs out from under the chair on which my older son was teetering backward.<sup>51</sup>

The narrator's frustration is aimed at the unrelenting tedium of domesticity—the constant round of minor tasks to be completed. Yet there is no obvious way for her to escape. Unlike many of the housewife protagonists in her short stories, who often flee “normality,” she pragmatically accepts her situation: “This state of mind is not practical in a household which continues to move relentlessly on from breakfast to mail to school to bath to bed to breakfast, no matter how *I* feel.”<sup>52</sup> Jackson characteristically softens the extract by ending on a note of comedy, but the daily routine continues uninterrupted, and the machinery of domesticity grinds on. Nancy Walker has stated that Jackson's primary technique in *Savages* and *Demons* is “raising the daily details of motherhood and housekeeping to the absurdity of slapstick comedy.”<sup>53</sup> However, there are also, she continues, “strong suggestions that the life of the average housewife is repetitive and demeaning.”<sup>54</sup>

Intimations of unease continue to appear in *Demons*. Jackson's narrator goes on to sarcastically describe the existence of a particular substratum of housewife: “the faculty wife.”<sup>55</sup> “On Being a Faculty Wife,” which first appeared in the Bennington College alumnae magazine, was slightly extended for publication in *Mademoiselle* and was finally incorporated into *Demons*.<sup>56</sup> In this story, the narrator describes how her husband's job has begun to encroach upon her own identity: “I was slowly becoming aware of a wholly new element in the usual uneasy tenor of our days: I was a faculty wife.”<sup>57</sup> Jackson then wryly explains what this position means: “A faculty wife is a person who is married to a faculty. She has frequently read at least one good book lately, she has one ‘nice’ black dress to wear to student parties, and she is always just the teensiest bit in the way, particularly in a girl's college such as the one where my husband taught.”<sup>58</sup> The faculty wife's assumed pastimes, Jackson continues, are all typically “feminine” tasks such as “knitting, hemming dish towels, and perhaps sketching wildflowers.”<sup>59</sup> They certainly do not include a successful career of her own.

Jackson's sarcastic listing of these qualities was anticipated in *Hangsaman*, which was largely set in an all-girl college based on Bennington. As well as being Jackson's first sustained depiction of mental illness and identity slippage, *Hangsaman* further explores the sentiments expressed in “On being a Faculty Wife.” The faculty wife in *Hangsaman*, Elizabeth Arnold, is protagonist Natalie Waite's only real friend. Elizabeth is 20, just a few years older than Natalie, a former college student who married her professor. She has achieved the supreme goal of every young woman of the time, at least as defined by society: marriage to a professional man. But although Elizabeth has conformed to societal expectations, she is deeply unhappy. Her husband is unfaithful, and she is isolated, bored, and possibly suicidal, with alcoholic