GOTHIC ELEMENTS IN THE NOVELS OF SHIRLEY JACKSON

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The problem with which this paper is concerned is that of tracing Gothic elements in the six complete novels of Shirley Jackson (1919-1965). Jackson's novels, magazine reviews of these novels, articles on Gothicism, and histories of English literature form the sources of data for this research project.

The first chapter relates a brief history of Gothicism, dividing it into two types: terror-Gothic and horror-Gothic. Terror-Gothic emphasizes the elements of suspense and the supernatural, whereas horror-Gothic emphasizes a complex villain-hero and a state of moral ambiguity. Traits the two share are an interest in psychological abnormality, an isolated setting, and a brooding atmosphere.

In the following chapters, each of the novels is subjected to examination for its Gothic qualities. The novels are considered in chronological order: *The Road Through the Wall*, a narrative about an isolated community; *Hangsaman*, an initiation story of a seventeen-year-old girl on the brink of insanity; *The Bird's Nest*, another psychological study of a young woman suffering from schizophrenia; *The Sundial*, an account of a smaller isolated group in an old mansion; *The
Haunting of Hill House, a combination of psychological imbalance and the trappings of frightening isolation; and We Have Always Lived in the Castle, a similar combination of emotional disturbance and social ostracism intensified by an ironically sunny cheerfulness.

The final chapter concludes that Shirley Jackson employed Gothic elements extensively in each of her novels. She has proved herself a lover and master of the Gothic tale.
GOTHIC ELEMENTS IN THE NOVELS
OF SHIRLEY JACKSON

THESIS

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

This paper will trace the Gothic elements in the novels of Shirley Jackson (1919-1965). A gifted stylist, Jackson blends the plausible with the supernatural, combines commonplace and paranormal settings, and exploits the reactions of ordinary, unpresuming people to extraordinary experiences.

Perhaps Ray Bradbury best expresses the fascination which Gothicism holds for him, Shirley Jackson, and other writers of the twentieth century. Discussing his personal talents, he describes the appeal of the Gothic as a "strange, wild, and exhilarating world" in which he finds he can "laugh out loud with the sheer discovery that I am alive" in it.\(^1\) The Gothic also compels him "to jump and raise up a crop of goosepimples, when I smell strange mushrooms growing in my cellar at midnight or hear a spider fiddling away at his tapestry web in my closet just before sunrise."\(^2\)

Surely Shirley Jackson would have agreed with Bradbury's statement, "We [twentieth century authors who are interested in Gothic fiction] meet on the common ground of an uncommon

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\(^2\) Ibid.
To demonstrate the indebtedness of Shirley Jackson's novels to Gothic prototypes, it is necessary to identify the characteristics of Gothic novels. Handbooks and histories of literature, however, have little to say about the Gothic novel, and that little is sprinkled with such vague words as variety, richness, mystery, and terror, followed by a brief history of books containing these characteristics.

The New Century Handbook of English Literature, for example, defines the Gothic novel only as a "type of story, usually in a pseudomedieval setting full of mysterious, occult and violent incident, in a pervading atmosphere of gloom and terror." It is further defined as being of two types: historic, with some attempt at reconstruction of a period; or horror, whether wrought by Matthew Lewis's fantastic method of terrifying by gory scenes, or Mrs. Anne Radcliffe's method of terrifying by mere suggestion.

In much the same vein, Ernest A. Baker identifies "distinctive" features of the Gothic novel as "exciting adventures," "violent emotions," "gloomy scenes," "forests

3Ibid.
5Ibid.
and antres, castles, dungeons, and graveyards"—all stemming from a cult of emotion.⁶ Baker lumps together such elements as interest in the supernatural, a "growing interest in the past," a "tenderness for the hoary and decayed," a "rage for the medieval," and an "awakening of the historical spirit," suggesting that they all helped pave the way for the Gothic novel and its subject matter.⁷ David Daiches, with equal vagueness, says that the Gothic novel utilizes the "ages of superstition and romance" for providing emotional excitement.⁸

Horace Walpole is credited as the author of the first Gothic novel, The Castle of Otranto (1764), in which imagination and impossibility are blended to produce such supernatural trappings as a portrait which steps out of its frame and a statue that sheds blood. A History of English Literature, by Robert M. Lovett and William V. Moody, states that Walpole gave to the Gothic romance elements such as "a hero sullied by unmentionable crimes, several persecuted heroines, a castle with secret passages and hidden rooms, and a plentiful sprinkling of supernatural terrors."⁹ Walpole

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⁷Ibid., p. 176.
had written a pattern for a new form. The first to copy it was William Beckford in *Vathek, an Arabian Tale* (1786), which substitutes a luxurious Oriental setting for the medieval, with appropriate oriental mysteries and Eastern "voluptuousness."\(^{10}\) Mrs. Anne Radcliffe's five romances (1789-1797), especially *The Mysteries of Udolpho* (1797), contributed to the growing popularity of the form with added emphasis upon plot, to keep the reader guessing; greater attention to setting, which was elaborately described; and the employment of character types, which unfortunately led to flat stereotypes.\(^{11}\) She used such standard Gothic properties as vaults, secret passages, a "wildly persecuted heroine flying through forests, caves, and castles," and the bonus of a happy ending.\(^ {12}\) Sir Walter Scott declared that the key to her work is suspense.\(^ {13}\)

Matthew Lewis changed the Gothic novel with the introduction of "fiendish wickedness, supernatural ghastliness, and sadistic sensuality" in his sensational work *The Monk* (1796).\(^ {14}\) His brutal use of "demons and putrefying corpses

\(^{10}\) *Ibid.*


\(^{13}\) *Ibid.*

\(^{14}\) *The New Century Handbook of English Literature*, p. 506.
and his human bodies frenzied with lust or tortured with agony"\(^5\) offended and shocked many but earned him a lasting reputation, however good or bad. Charles R. Maturin's *Melmoth the Wanderer* (1820) is the last and greatest of the Gothic novels of this period; Maturin's handling of the emotion of fear, though crude, may remind one of Edgar Allan Poe.\(^6\) Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* (1818), in the style that Monk Lewis set, developed the theme of moral ambiguity that Lewis introduced and is one of the better known Gothic novels today.

In scorn of just such mechanical characteristics as those employed by Walpole, Mrs. Radcliffe, and Matthew Lewis, literary critics have chosen largely to ignore the Gothic novel. They assume that all Gothic novels contain such "claptrap" and may therefore be read for amusement only. The association of Gothicism with "the subliterary depths of romanticism"\(^7\) also contributed to its notoriety.\(^8\) These derogatory opinions would seem justified if Gothicism depends on mechanical devices alone. But some critics feel that the

\(^{15}\) Baker, p. 209.

\(^{16}\) Daiches, p. 742.


\(^{18}\) Hume, p. 282.
Gothic novel is more than just secret panels and wildly fleeing heroines and that it has contributed to the artistic development of the novel.

In a recent revaluation of the Gothic novel, Robert D. Hume attempts to identify its distinctive characteristics. In order to do so, he divides the Gothic novel chronologically into two types: terror-Gothic and horror-Gothic. The earlier type, terror-Gothic, depends on the reader's responding to suspense; whereas the later type, horror-Gothic, tries to persuade the reader to identify with a villain-hero. Terror-Gothicists, such as Mrs. Radcliffe, raise vague but dreadful possibilities which never materialize but hold the reader's attention; horror-Gothicists attack the reader with a succession of shocking horrors such as rape and murder. The horror-Gothic increasingly emphasizes psychological concern rather than suspense. Whereas terror-Gothicists rely heavily on setting and supernatural agency, horror-Gothicists, turning from such devices, involve themselves with a villain-hero in a world in which there is no clearcut standard of good and evil, a world of moral ambiguity. As will be shown, Shirley Jackson utilizes characteristics of both terror-Gothic and horror-Gothic novels. For example, her vague, never-quite-explaining style holds the reader in suspense, imagining many situations in which the supernatural often plays a part; this style

19 Ibid., p. 285.
would mark her a terror-Gothicist. On the other hand, she has developed psychological insight into her characters—insight which is much more important than the action of the novels—and sometimes involves her readers with the moral ambiguity exemplified in her villain-hero protagonists.

Both types of Gothic novels, according to Hume, share some characteristics in common, the first being a unique psychological interest, which is illustrated by "reactions of their characters to trying or appalling situations." The chief problem of early terror-Gothic novelists was the problem of creating realistic reactions of natural human beings to supernatural phenomena thrust upon them. In explaining his purpose as a novelist, terror-Gothicist Horace Walpole mentions his use of psychological probing into characters in The Castle of Otranto; he believes that the writer should "conduct the mortal agents in his drama according to the rules of probability; in short to make them think, speak and act, as it might be supposed men and women would do in extraordinary positions."

Horror-Gothic novelists delved much further than their predecessors into the psyche of man. For supernatural trappings, they substituted "the experience of the enlightened

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person feeling the haunting of some demonic self," which Frances Russell Hart suggests is the very heart of Gothic fiction. For example, the whole degradation of Lewis's Ambrosio in *The Monk*, with all of its ambiguity, is portrayed fully through illustration of the psychological process of moral deterioration.

As horror-Gothicists explore the psychological realm, they create a complex villain-hero, from whom much of the action of the Gothic novel is derived. In fact, much of the popularity of the Gothic novel comes from interest in the misfit, the outcast, or the "guilt-haunted wanderer." Curiously, this interest leads to a discovery of greater depth in human nature; and as taboos are lifted in the minds of the readers, great writers are able to demonstrate that "sadism, indefinite guiltiness, mingled pleasure and pain (Maturin's 'delicious agony') and love-hate were also rooted in the minds of the supposedly normal." The Gothic hero, much like the romantic hero, is a lonely, reticent "scapegoat or guilty wanderer" haunted by evidence of a "discrepancy between good and evil." He has some great virtue which turns into a great vice and is in touch with evil forces, in

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22 Hart, p. 94.
24 Hume, p. 287.
the mind mainly. Naturally the early Gothicists did not achieve all of this psychological insight, but they led the way.

This use of the villain-hero may be seen in the horror-Gothic novels Frankenstein and Melmoth the Wanderer. Mary Shelley writes of a scientist who, negligent of friends, family, and all other interests, discovers the essence of "life" and infuses it into a body composed of human bits and pieces. Upon seeing his creation, the result of years of effort, Dr. Frankenstein rejects it and runs away. Tragedy follows, and Frankenstein, the villain-hero, would like to confess his misdeed. Because no one will believe him, he cannot. Therefore, he seeks refuge in nature at Mont Blanc; he does not find peace, however, for the monster confronts him there. At this point in the story the reader is involved with Dr. Frankenstein, a man who has within him much potential for good, which is never fulfilled. The reader may also feel involved with the monster because the author has given it human emotions and eloquence in speaking. The monster points out the sin that Victor Frankenstein has committed: "God, in pity, made man beautiful and alluring, after his own image; but my form is a filthy type of yours, more horrid even from the very resemblance. Satan had his companions, fellow-devils, to admire and encourage him; but

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28 Ibid.
I am solitary and abhorred."\textsuperscript{29} Both imperfect creation and imperfect creator find death the solution to their dilemma. Frances Hart writes that the involvement of the reader with villain-hero Melmoth in \textit{Melmoth the Wanderer} comes about because Melmoth insists that his demonism is one with the human emotions of the real world and that "we believe him because his own human torments are fully analyzed before our eyes."\textsuperscript{30}

The key device for involving the reader, however, is a total atmosphere of evil and brooding terror used for psychological ends.\textsuperscript{31} Incidental to Gothic atmosphere is setting, such conventional places as gloomy forests and haunted castles. Hume states that during the 1800's a setting which would remove the story from the reader's world in order to escape much moral censure was carefully chosen.\textsuperscript{32} Much like earlier Gothic novels, \textit{Wuthering Heights} (1847), \textit{Moby Dick} (1851), and Faulkner's \textit{Sanctuary} (1931)—all Gothic novels of stature—create "distinct worlds of their own . . . isolated in space,"\textsuperscript{33} and, like the early novels, they also present a moral norm against which the villain-hero may be measured.\textsuperscript{34} The element of the supernatural aids terror-Gothicists

\textsuperscript{29}Mary Shelley, \textit{Frankenstein} (New York, 1963), p. 113.
\textsuperscript{30}Hart, p. 102.
\textsuperscript{31}Hume, p. 286.
\textsuperscript{32}Ibid.
\textsuperscript{33}Ibid., p. 287.
\textsuperscript{34}Ibid.
in conveying atmosphere. Whereas early Gothic heroes and settings depend on an artificially contrived supernatural, later Gothic novels develop in the direction of "the irrational, the impulse to evil, the uncontrollable unconscious." Indeed this development influences future interest in irrational evil and the relationship of love and hatred; there is a recognition of the "discrepancy between appearance and reality." For example, the central question of *Melmoth the Wanderer* is whether Melmoth is a demon or human being. As Melmoth struggles with the thought that he is possessed by a demon, he "poses the terrible possibility that all men are—or can be—agents of the devil, demonic at their most noble, demonic for those they love most." Goethe, a contemporary of the early Gothic novelists, has asserted that the "daemonic character appears in its most dreadful form when it stands out dominantly in some man." Coleridge, an employer of the supernatural himself, gives an accurate description of Gothic mimesis: "And real in this sense they [supernatural situations] have been to every human being who, from whatever source or delusion, has at any time believed himself under supernatural agency." 

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35 Nelson, p. 249.  
36 Ibid., p. 250.  
37 Hart, p. 96.  
38 Ibid., p. 99.  
Expanding and developing this interest in the psychological reaction of man to evil, horror-Gothicists find themselves depicting a state of "moral ambiguity for which no meaningful answers can be found." \(^{40}\) Faulkner's point in *Sanctuary* that "all men are victims of the evil in human nature; there can be no good distinct from evil, and so there can be no definitive distinction between them" \(^{41}\) is a good summary of the point of many early Gothic novelists. The good-bad nature is explicitly illustrated in Lewis's Ambrosio, the chief character of *The Monk*. Ambrosio is a saintly monk who falls short of his lofty ambitions of perfection when he meets love-stricken Matilda. After his seduction he feels damned, but still has good qualities which appear now and then. However, he soon tires of Matilda and approaches innocent Antonia. Using sorcery, he drugs and rapes her, and later murders her. Finally he is caught, only to discover that Antonia and her mother were demons. In the end the despairing monk is destroyed by the devil, with whom he has bargained. Nelson suggests that we learn from Ambrosio that "by implication, whoever is capable of great good is also capable of great evil." \(^{42}\)

Victor Frankenstein is another who is capable of great good, but in ambitiously striving to create life, he merely

\(^{40}\) Hume, p. 288. \(^{41}\) Ibid. \(^{42}\) Nelson, p. 242.
creates an outward form of his "inward deformity." Frankenstein not only creates a monster; in a way he is a monster. As Nelson further explains, "Evil is within; in one's own works and creations." Frankenstein is destroyed by his rejection of his own work. The theme of the mixed moral nature of man is further extended in the characters of Heathcliff and Ahab. The absence of God or at least a divine justice in novels such as Moby Dick causes good and evil to lose their simplicity and their separate identities and to generate complexities. Moby Dick asks for definitions of good and evil.

In summary, the Gothic novel has been divided into two types: terror and horror, which are distinguished by basic Gothic characteristics. The suspense of outward trappings and setting of terror-Gothic novels is "de-emphasized in favor of increasing psychological concern with moral ambiguity" in the transition to horror-Gothic novels. More importantly, the two types share four basic qualities: (1) a setting "sufficiently removed" from the reader's own time so that contemporary moral standards could not interfere with the story; (2) "a moral norm" against which the villain-hero may be measured; (3) "a complex villain-hero;" and (4) "a

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43 Hume, p. 286.  
44 Nelson, p. 247.  
46 Hume, p. 285.
non-Christian or anticlerical feeling" produced by the lack of a clearcut definition of good and evil.\(^7\) Shirley Jackson combines the suspense and the supernatural elements of terror-Gothic with the villain-hero and moral ambiguity of horror-Gothic to create what some critics have called a "magic" type of her own. She continues the tradition of the terror-Gothicists in blending imagination and impossibility to produce supernatural trappings; yet, at the same time, she delves much further than the early Gothicists into the minds of her characters. She creates complex personalities and then refuses to allow them to be judged by everyday moral standards. Her novels, like the later Gothic novels, develop in the direction of the irrational and evil within man. All her novels display her interest in abnormal psychology. She seeks to involve her reader emotionally, and she is truly at her best in creating an atmosphere of evil and brooding terror for psychological ends. All of these Gothic elements may be traced in her work.

\(^7\)Ibid., p. 286-7.
CHAPTER II

THE ROAD THROUGH THE WALL

Shirley Jackson displays the Gothic element of psychological interest from the beginning of her first novel, The Road Through the Wall. She introduces the suburban California neighborhood which is to be the focus of her story with the following observation: "The weather falls more gently on some places than on others, the world looks down more paternally on some people. Some spots are proverbially warm and keep, through falling snow, their untarnished reputations as summer resorts; some people are automatically above suspicion."¹ Throughout the book the author exposes the prejudices and immorality of the families who live on Pepper Street. With perceptive psychological analysis, she explores the attitudes of the neighborhood children and gradually works back to those of the parents until the reader has seen the weaknesses of each family. All of her characters are either petty or vacant-minded; all, ugly. The children portrayed are truly the products of their respective hearths.

Harriet Merriam, for instance, is a fat, unattractive teen-ager, who is introduced early in the story. Her mother

¹Shirley Jackson, The Road Through the Wall (New York, 1948), p. 3.
is trying to rear her to be genteel and to have good manners by making Harriet feel guilty for expressing any honest emotion. Harriet and some neighbor girls write "love" letters to boys; Mrs. Merriam is shocked when she finds one written by Harriet. Although Mrs. Merriam berates Harriet for her filthy words and filthy thoughts, forbidding her to express such "improper" feelings, Mrs. Merriam does not suppress her own avid taste for gossip. Greedily she grasps at every shred, each tidbit, and enlarges it into a feast of filth. She is eager to give Harriet a proper upbringing, but she is actually teaching her own bad behavior to her daughter. Unfortunately, since Mr. Merriam is a nonentity, he cannot counter his wife's effect on Harriet. Mrs. Merriam further insists that Harriet dissolve her friendship with the one good influence Harriet has met, Marilyn Perlman, a Jewish girl. Harriet says, "My mother says to tell you that people of my class are always nice to everybody in spite of their religion or their background but that we have to set standards. ... I can't talk to you any more or play with you." The value of the standards Mrs. Merriam holds is questionable.

Another family in the neighborhood, the Roberts, has two sons: Artie, a quiet, sensitive boy, and Jamie, a natural athlete. Artie is ignored by the family, which favors Jamie for his athletic prowess. Mr. Roberts has his

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2Ibid., p. 220.
problems, too. A gossip much like Mrs. Merriam, Mrs. Roberts nags and watches her woman-chasing husband, who not only drinks and flirts with her succession of maids but has a sexual experience with Mrs. Martin, a young widow, behind the wall at the end of the road. A constant source of embarrassment to his wife, Mike Roberts indulges in such activities because he questions the value of his existence.

Marital conflict also exists in the home of the young Ransom-Joneses, in which two sisters subtly and courteously vie for the affection of small, meek Brad Ransom-Jones. Lillian Tyler, invalid sister of Mrs. Ransom-Jones, lives with the couple and feels that she should have Brad's love.

The richest and most cultured family on the block, the Desmonds, consists of the parents, adopted fifteen-year-old Johnny, and the apple-of-her-mother's eye, three-year-old Carolyn. This home is almost completely devoid of psychological conflict, simply because Mrs. Desmond chooses not to think. She can scarcely bear entertaining occasional guests. All she wants is a nice isolated niche away from the world. Mr. Desmond, whose only fault is bad taste in music, has more depth than most of the male characters in the book. Johnny is an intelligent, obedient son and believable character, but Caroline is such a perfect child that she is not believable.

The Donald family is more deftly characterized than any of the others, and with good reason, since thin thirteen-year
old Tod is the victim of the coldness of Pepper Street and, in turn, as murderer of Caroline, is responsible for the collapse of the neighborhood structure. So, senselessly, he is the destroyed and the destroyer. A clue to his eventual destruction is contained in the statement, "Nobody ever noticed Tod Donald very much."\(^3\) A poor copy of his older athletic brother, James, Tod is never chosen to play games or to be a friend to anyone. His sister Virginia ignores him completely and leads the other children to do the same: "'He never does anything really,' she \(\bigtriangledown\) Virginia \(\bigtriangledown\) said.\(^4\)

Everyone acts as though Tod does not really exist. Finally, after his murder of Caroline and the subsequent questioning by the police, he ends his own doubtful existence with a piece of kitchen rope. He does not stand out as the main character of the novel, however, because of a much too populous cast and perhaps because, as Irving Malin says, "Characters cannot be 'well-rounded' while they are obsessed with themselves."\(^5\) The brother and mother contribute to Tod's disintegration by their rejection and degradation of the young boy. Virginia's wickedness is shown by her being viciously untruthful and promiscuous. Mr. Donald is completely withdrawn, having been too disappointed with his own failures in life to help combat those of this children.

\(^3\text{Ibid.}, p. 47.\) \(^4\text{Ibid.}, p. 50.\) \(^5\text{Irving Malin, New American Gothic (Carbondale, 1962), p. 6.}\)
In elaborating on the Gothic element of interest in psychology, Malin provides a reason why the family has become crucial in what might be called new American Gothic when he states that "disfiguring love is often learned at home" and that "children become narcissistic because of their need to find and love themselves in a cold environment." Like Jackson, other recent Gothic novelists have dealt with the limitations and flaws of the individual personality and wars within the family. Malin explains that characters in these novels are so isolated, so full of a sense of not belonging, that they anxiously turn inward more and more, seeking death. Coldness in family circles and the resulting isolation of characters in the story reinforce evidence of broken order, moral decay, blurred identity, twisted sex, and the eruption of hidden thoughts of characters—all of which are found in contemporary Gothic novels.

Physical, as well as psychological, isolation is a major circumstance in this and all novels of Shirley Jackson. The isolated neighborhood with a wall sealing it from the world, a wall which in the end comes down, provides a Gothic setting. Just as early Gothic novelists set their tales in a remote past or a distant place such as the Orient in order to remove the stories from the reader's world, recent Gothic

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6 Ibid., p. 8. 7 Ibid., p. 15. 8 Ibid., p. 9.
novelists place distance between readers and stories by creating and exploring the microcosm of a closed social structure in which Malin says "there is enough room for erratic (and universal) forces to explode."^9 Throughout The Road Through the Wall, Jackson emphasizes the structure and physical appearance of a self-contained neighborhood, its activities, its people, the ever-present wall, and all of the social and economic implications of Pepper Street. The wall helps structure the neighborhood. Reflecting the social disintegration of the community, the wall comes down. It is removed because the city wants a road there.

The isolation of the setting is a familiar Gothic characteristic; after informing the reader that the story takes place in Cabrillo, California, in 1936, the author effectively cuts Pepper Street off as one small piece of the world, "The sun shone cleverly on Pepper Street, but it shone more bravely still beyond the gates; when it rained on Pepper Street the people beyond the gates never got their feet wet."^10 She also writes, "Life on Pepper Street was peaceful and easy because its responsibilities lay elsewhere."^11 The implication is that no one on Pepper Street has any power to control his fate and actually that no one really owns anything there. The mood portrayed, characteristic of many Gothic novels, is one of helplessness.

^9 Ibid., p. 5.  
^10 Jackson, p. 11.  
^11 Ibid., p. 178.
The usual Gothic atmosphere of evil and brooding terror is not present in The Road Through the Wall because the narration of the story is very casual and the reader does not become deeply involved with the emotions of any character. However, a depressing atmosphere does characterize the novel. It is most obvious in the air of brooding on the part of unloved, rejected young Tod, who after years of inner suffering violently attacks and kills the much loved, certainly never rejected little Caroline. Tod, as already indicated, has largely been ignored by the neighborhood children. He is aware of his isolation and is lonely and dejected. He is attracted to Hester, the teen-aged hired girl of the Roberts, but she rejects him just as the others do. Still, Tod broods over his much hated home more than he does over the outside world. "Tod Donald, seated at his family dinner table, knew already that he hated every part of it [family life] more than anything else in the world. He had time every night at dinner to hate things individually."\(^{12}\) The author further states that "he hated his family and the way they talked."\(^{13}\)

He broods over these feelings, and entering the Desmonds' house secretly, looks at and touches everything owned by Mrs. Desmond. He is reminded of all the love and affection Mrs. Desmond lavishes on young Caroline and wishes to share in some part of it. However, he knows by experience that she,

\(^{12}\) Ibid., p. 173.

\(^{13}\) Ibid.
too, would reject him; perhaps he could strike at her. His state of mind drives him to a desperate solution.

Another character of the novel who broods is Lillian Tyler. She secretly wishes that she were married to her brother-in-law and actually feels that he loves her. Her anxieties about her sister’s husband cause both moodiness and such sensitivity to any mild criticism from her sister Dinah that she occasionally loses emotional control. On one such occasion when she can bottle up her feelings no more, she bursts out: "Don’t tell me what Brad minds. . . . I know all about Brad, and you and I know what he minds, and he was sick to think of you bringing that thing [retarded child] in here with me, and I just wish you could see how he looked at you."\(^\text{14}\) Lillian Tyler’s unhappiness contributes greatly to the depressing atmosphere of the novel.

A brooding, unhealthy atmosphere exists on Pepper Street because of the morbid meditation of such individuals. Other characters are also unwholesomely obsessed with personal problems, although their emotions are not emphasized. Harriet broods over her obesity, Marilyn over racial discrimination, Hester over snobbery, and Mrs. Roberts over Mr. Roberts. Even Mike Roberts broods, “Just living on the same, day after day, a man gets tired of it all. What’s it worth?”\(^\text{15}\)

\(^{14}\) Ibid., p. 214.
\(^{15}\) Ibid., p. 194.
This book may not be characterized as a true terror-Gothic or horror-Gothic novel. The senseless murder of young Caroline and the suicide of Tod, two innocents, seem indicative of events of horror-Gothic, but they are related so quietly that the reader is not horrified. Neither can the reader identify with the confused protagonist, Tod Donald, for the author does not provide enough detail about Tod to inspire empathy. The only horror which the reader might feel upon reflection would stem from his realization that types of people such as those who live on Pepper Street dominate this world.

Hypocrisy reigns on Pepper Street. The adults seemingly hold one set of upright moral standards but often reveal in their own lives quite different practices. Mrs. Merriam has already been cited as such a case. The Desmonds, who think of themselves as most democratic, are actually prejudiced and, on pretense of avoiding hurt feelings, exclude the Jewish girl from a children's theater they are planning. Mrs. Donald and the mothers of the other girls are concerned over some love letters their daughters write. Yet in their own lives they feast upon malicious gossip and worry about straying husbands. Virginia Donald is one of the cruelest and most immoral girls of the lot; yet she believes herself superior to Hester, who does not pretend to be an angel. The best reflection of the parents' hypocrisy is shown in their children. Virginia, Harriet, Hallie Martin, and Mary Byrne
show the effects of their parents' lack of belief in and practice of any moral code. Thus Tod's crime seems only logical, not heinous. It is the result of his environment. The loss of the little three-year-old does not strike one as tragic since she appears to be merely a perfect copy of her empty, doll-like mother.

Through Tod the reader feels moral ambiguity, an important Gothic element, because he cannot condemn the young boy for the murder that he has committed. Although Tod is by no means a fully developed villain-hero, the reader gleans from brief sketches of him in the novel the fact that he loses his sense of right and wrong because of his inability to cope with personal rejection. Tod does not seem to be acting of his own will; he actually seems driven by circumstance to murder and suicide. The fact that Caroline is not developed as a human being also contributes to the reader's sympathetic response to Tod.

Thus, in her first novel, Jackson uses only three Gothic elements: concern with psychological abnormalities, isolated setting, and moral ambiguity. She has completed her first experiment, and although she has committed faults in technique (too many characters and a too obvious symbol—the wall), she has begun her life's work.
CHAPTER III

HANGSAMAN

Hangsaman, Shirley Jackson's second novel, is much more Gothic than The Road Through the Wall, for it not only contains the Gothic elements of psychological abnormality and isolated setting, but also brooding atmosphere, suspense, and moral ambiguity. The style of writing is more subtle, and the author employs symbolism that is not immediately apparent to the reader.

An initiation story, Hangsaman centers around an unusual seventeen-year-old girl named Natalie Waite—a girl who is typical of adolescents in that she is searching for her true identity and atypical in the sense that she sways on the edge of mental illness. William Peden has called Hangsaman a "picture of a girl's descent into insanity."¹ Natalie's escape into a fantasy world begins at home, where she is unmercifully observed, analyzed, and directed by her egomaniac father, Arnold Waite, a literary critic, and is whined at by her alcoholic mother, Mrs. Charity Waite, a disappointed failure. Her father, who will never find anyone quite so amusing or brilliant as himself, is famous for remarks such

as "I am God." His constant disparagement of his not-so-brilliant wife, who, among other things, has no interest in anything literary, has driven Charity Waite to drink. She, in turn, uses her daughter as a confidante, a practice which helps push the daughter into a dream world. Bud, the son, manages to assert himself and escape into healthy activities.

At a cocktail party at which Mr. Waite urges Natalie to drink, Natalie, half in a dream world of a discussion with an imaginary detective, allows herself to be led into a dark wood near the house by a strange man. Although details are hazy, one can assume that she is seduced. With that event, the first phase of her initiation into life is complete. Since she finds the experience sordid and disgusting, she becomes guilt-ridden and tries to push the memory of it out of her mind.

The second phase of Natalie's initiation into life involves her going off to college. She fearfully but happily separates herself from her family to build for herself a new environment, which unfortunately turns out to be sadder and emptier than that at home. In a midnight initiation at the dormitory, Natalie's individuality leads her to defy the conductors of the ceremony. She leaves the room, ignorant of the fact that her refusal to play the game will mark her college career; the others will ostracize her

and she will be a social isolate. She discovers from a horrid, gossipy girl named Rosalind that other freshmen consider her "spooky" and "crazy." The overtures of friendliness Rosalind makes arise from Rosalind's being shut out by the popular girls; she wishes to ally herself with Natalie on the pretext that they are not "like the other girls." Natalie cannot accept this uniqueness. Later Natalie forms an admiring friendship with English professor Arthur Langdon and his pretty alcoholic wife, whose disillusionment with life parallels that of Mrs. Waite. Natalie finds neither Mrs. Langdon nor two young, attractive student devotees of Langdon sympathetic, though the devotees, Vickie and Anne, pretend to be Natalie's friends. Meanwhile, most of the classwork of the liberal college is worthless, according to Natalie, the professors being pompous and concerned only with themselves.

Finally Natalie takes step three: a friendship with a bizarre female character named Tony, who seems almost a figment of her imagination. Careful of no one's opinion, Tony holds a strange attraction for Natalie. The two girls become friends, both deprecatory of the other girls and appreciative of themselves. With Tarot cards, the two tell themselves they are the finest, luckiest people of all. They sleep, shower, and think together. Unwittingly, naive Natalie is drawn into a lesbian relationship, which is only

Ibid., p. 61.  
Ibid., p. 63.
delicately hinted at. At the end of a journey to a deserted amusement park with Tony, Natalie faces the truth that Tony wants her. She has gone into the dark wood again literally and symbolically, but this time she turns and flees. At the same time she is fleeing death, for she has seriously considered suicide. A car stops on the road, and Natalie climbs in with a middle-aged couple, saying, "I'm lost, I think." She gets back to the college safely, determined to face reality.

The outstanding feature and strongest point of structure of the novel is the characterization of Natalie. Since all that occurs in the novel appears through her eyes, she is the center of the work. The Gothic, in general, deals with the dark side of the personality and the reaction of the personality to trying or appalling situations. Shirley Jackson has shown psychological interest in, and psychological conflict inside, her protagonist in almost every line of the novel. This quality alone would mark the novel Gothic.

Coming to maturity is usually a trying situation; under the Waites' unhappy, shallow home circumstances, coupled with unfortunate sexual experiences, Natalie's growth from girlhood to adolescence to womanhood involves several psychologically disturbing situations. Moreover, the author points out that Natalie's mental and emotional stability has been impaired before the action of the novel takes place.

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^Ibid., p. 188.
Natalie Waite, who was seventeen years old but who felt that she had been truly conscious only since she was about fifteen, lived in an odd corner of a world of sound and sight past the daily voices of her father and mother and their incomprehensible actions. For the past two years . . . she had lived completely by herself, allowing not even her father access to the farther places of her mind.6

The shallow attitude of her family and her deliberate snubbing by the girls at school drive Natalie, who has never been able to relate to anyone very well, farther into herself. She does relate to nature, however: "The garden belonged exclusively to Natalie; the rest of the family used it, of course, but only Natalie regarded it as a functioning part of her personality, and she felt that she was refreshed by ten minutes in the garden."7 Later, when Natalie feels lonely, she thinks, "Somewhere in the world trees were growing."8 In many ways Natalie wishes to be popular and liked and to become a strong, fine, powerful person who is greatly admired, a not uncommon teen-ager's ambition. She makes up fantasies about this ambition; she clutches at her friendship with the Langdons, and at last she turns to companionship with Tony. At times Natalie tries to be a part of normal life at parties and in class, but every time she does so her own nature and emotional instability rebuff her. She is condemned by herself to the fate proclaimed by a

6Ibid., p. 6.
7Ibid., p. 21.
8Ibid., p. 85.
phrase of an old counting song which runs through her head: "One is one and all alone and evermore will be so."\(^9\)

Natalie's very isolation and inability to communicate, symptomatic of her mental disturbance, are Gothic characteristics. Natalie enters the dark forest of sexual experience once but flees perversion in the woods the second time she enters; the dark forest is another Gothic feature, often used symbolically. As the year at college progresses, Natalie's mind becomes so troubled that she cuts classes, writes her name on everything to prove that she exists, and has little sense of reality; sensing how close she is to the brink, she dreams of confinement behind bars. This near madness passes. Yet toward the end of the work, Natalie contemplates suicide to the point that she climbs to a high bridge parapet. She looks into the water and chooses life, life alone and free from fear.

Other characters in the novel, as previously mentioned, have their own psychological problems. Most of these problems contribute to the pervading atmosphere of depression in \textit{Hangsaman}. Despite flashes of whimsicality and sardonic humor, the overall mood of the book creates a sense of brooding, another distinctive Gothic element. The mood is mainly due to the emptiness—-the utter superficiality—of the lives of the adults in the novel and, even more, to the feeling of hopelessness in the air. Four factors support and

\(^9\)\textit{Ibid.}, p. 37.
contribute to the depressing atmosphere: (1) the lack of beliefs in the philosophy of Mr. Waite, (2) the disillusionment resulting in alcoholism of Mrs. Waite and Mrs. Langdon, (3) the evil and shallowness of the stranger's seduction of Natalie, and (4) the evil in the world as shown in Rosalind, Vickie, Anne, and Tony.

First, Mr. Waite, who quite arrogantly feels he has prepared his daughter for emancipation from home and for participation in life, actually has given her no foundation for living—no morality, no concern for other people (in fact, he does not relate to people very well himself), and no religious beliefs. He is his own god; Arnold Waite feels completely self-sufficient, loving his family as much as he can love anyone or anything outside himself. He teaches his daughter to question every concept ruthlessly, but he gives her nothing to have faith in.

Charity Waite pitifully offers her own empty experience in marriage as a warning for her daughter. Marriage has failed far short of Mrs. Waite's expectations; she had expected to be successful in her career and to be happy in her marriage; she is neither. In an alcoholic stupor, her frequent method of escape, Mrs. Waite explains to Natalie that it is not any single thing which has ruined her life, and she wails, "This is the only life I've got—you understand? I mean, this is all... I spend most of my time just thinking about how nice things used to be and wondering
Elizabeth Langdon's disillusionment with marriage, along with her subsequent alcoholism, parallels the situation of Mrs. Waite. She, too, seeks Natalie's sympathy and understanding.

Natalie's seduction by the stranger seems almost unreal except for the shame over it that wells up in her from time to time. The young girl finds this disaster only a prelude to the evil she meets at the college. Gossip Rosalind has been previously mentioned, as has lesbian friend-traitor Tony, as examples of evil with whom Natalie comes in contact. Vickie and Anne, the two girls she meets at the Langdons', befriend Natalie for their own reasons and reveal their unlovely natures. All these factors combine to create a surly, uncheerful atmosphere—very Gothic in nature.

The Gothic sense of terror, shown in suspense and a feeling of dread, characterizes two incidents in the book. The one already mentioned is a mysterious ride to a deserted amusement park with Tony, who momentarily leaves Natalie alone and then reveals her purpose. Another is an incident of Natalie's being awakened in the night by a quiet giggle and led to a collection of stolen items in a room from which Natalie flees. The author implies that this may be a dream but never clarifies the situation. At any rate, it is a totally terrifying experience for Natalie. Throughout the novel terrifying experiences lie immediately beneath the

10 Ibid., pp. 31-32.
surface of Natalie's mind. At some point Natalie must stop running and face them. Finally she says, "Oh hell. . . . Maybe I'd better give up inventing worlds and do without any for a while."\textsuperscript{11}

Although some critics have claimed that Tony is either a spirit or a figment of Natalie's mind, thus bringing in the supernatural—another characteristic of terror-Gothic, she is neither. Tony is a bizarre creature—kleptomaniac and Tarot card reader, and Jackson intentionally makes her vague. The fact that other people in the novel see Tony and react to her encourages the reader to accept a literal interpretation of Tony, although symbols are prevalent in this work. As W. T. Scott claims, "Miss Jackson again proceeds from realism to symbolic drama. Here the method fails. The tones do not flow into one another."\textsuperscript{12} The story falls apart because it is inconsistent in tone and vague.

True Gothic setting is another feature of \textit{Hangsaman}. It may be seen in Natalie's physical isolation in her dormitory room and again in her and Tony's private world. The dark woods in which Natalie is seduced and the deserted amusement park with its dark wood to which Tony leads Natalie are Gothic in nature; Natalie's walks at night and other eerie events that occur at night also add to a Gothic atmosphere.

\textsuperscript{11}Ibid., p. 178.

Another Gothic element, characteristic of horror-Gothic, contained in the work is the very important element of moral ambiguity. Gothic novelists of the past sought to separate their subjects from the everyday world and exercise the freedom to set up their own rules of conduct. While Natalie's insanity isolates her from the world, the author strives to bring the character back into the world. Until Natalie gains some beliefs, she cannot participate in life. Living in a state of moral questioning, she struggles for a sense of values. Shirley Jackson effectively foreshadows the character's success when she has Natalie say at the very first, "I may be in danger every moment of my life . . . but I am strong within myself."\(^{13}\) She proves this strength by rising above her family and surroundings. Her own self-questioning perhaps may be best shown in the following passage:

Here was this hideous girl attempting an alliance on the grounds that Natalie was—what? was there a word? (Innocent? Who was innocent--this girl with her nasty eyes? Chaste? Chaste meant no impure thoughts; virginal meant clear and clean and could not include this Rosalind with her low coarse face; untouched? Spotless? Pure?)\(^{14}\)

Natalie, who is no longer a virgin, seems pure and innocent in contrast to the other girls portrayed. Perhaps, the author implies, morality is a state of mind, a personal thing. Jackson does not give any concrete answers, nor

\(^{13}\)Jackson, *Hangsaman*, p. 9.
\(^{14}\)Ibid., p. 63.
does the story call for any. Natalie finds at last that she can answer her own plea:

Sometimes, with a vast aching heartbreak, the great, badly contained intentions of creation, the poignant searching longings of adolescence overwhelmed her, and shocked by her own capacity for creation, she held herself tight and unyielding, crying out silently something that might be phrased as, 'Let me take, let me create.'

In summary, Hangsaman contains the following Gothic elements: psychological abnormality, brooding atmosphere, suspense, Gothic setting, and a state of moral ambiguity. Some critics claim it also contains elements of the supernatural. The writing, especially the characterization, is exceptionally good. Despite the novel's awkward variation in tone, it is a Gothic novel which holds new meaning upon each rereading.

\[15\text{Ibid.}, \ p. \ 22.\]
CHAPTER IV

THE BIRD'S NEST

Shirley Jackson's third novel, *The Bird's Nest*, is a psychological case study. As in her first two novels, Jackson portrays a character facing distressing psychological problems. Unlike Tod of *The Road Through the Wall* and Natalie of *Hangsaman*, however, the protagonist is recognized as mentally ill from the outset of the novel. Her struggle to become a whole person is facilitated by the help of a doctor and her aunt. Psychological abnormality is the outstanding characteristic of the novel, but *The Bird's Nest* does contain other Gothic features.

A quiet, dull, unobtrusive girl, Elizabeth Richmond disintegrates before the reader's eyes into three different personalities. A stodgy psychoanalyst by hobby, Dr. Wright, gives the original person and her three personalities names from a nursery rhyme: Elizabeth, Beth, Betsy, and Bess—with Bess asserting herself only later, toward the middle of the novel. Elizabeth has severe headaches when the personalities struggle to obtain dominance of her body and mind. These headaches, in addition to obscene letters she receives from Betsy and excursions she makes at night, which alarm her Aunt Morgen, cause the girl to seek professional help. Then through hypnosis Dr. Wright meets his "girls": sweet,
whining, too gentle Beth; whimsical, mischievous, childlike and sometimes cruel Betsy; and cold, inhuman money-seeking Bess, who at fifteen had sought out her mother's lover. Even the brusque, sensible, masculine Aunt Morgen, addicted to creature comforts, can finally accept her niece's peculiar problem when she realizes that she sometimes acts like two or three different people herself. Her acceptance of the problem supposedly eases the reader into accepting the credibility of Elizabeth's situation. Morgen, who reared Elizabeth after the death of Elizabeth's mother, had constantly criticized the drunken, immoral mother and had coveted her brother-in-law (Elizabeth's father), a repetition of a situation from The Road Through the Wall. Only when Morgen accepts her share of responsibility for creating the multiple personalities of her niece and when Dr. Wright admits that his own wounded vanity (the personalities would often refuse to respond to his treatment) has prevented his contributing to the cure of the patient, can they help Elizabeth evolve into a new and whole individual.

The only contribution the setting makes to Gothicism is that it is so drab and unnoticeable that the main character is quite effectively cut off from the world and shown in the microcosm of the limited world of her aunt's house in a small town. Betsy's jaunt to New York takes her only to one street, and most of the action there takes place in her hotel room.
The museum at which mild Elizabeth works at the beginning of
the story does not break in any way Elizabeth's isolation,
as the omniscient narrator makes clear:

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 [from life] 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.

Chester Eisinger has remarked of Shirley Jackson that "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, so does the human personality."2

Thus, for this particular story Jackson's ordinary, barren setting is appropriate and most effective.

Another critic has stated that in The Bird's Nest Shirley Jackson "shuts out the sunlight in a tale of horror and psychological conflict."3 This novel contains the Gothic element of psychological abnormality in the broadest meaning of the term. Each of Elizabeth Richmond's personalities becomes real to the reader, for each carries out its

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individual actions and each is characterized by a very different speech pattern. Horror exists because there is danger of cheap, crude Bess's gaining lasting control of Elizabeth and also danger of Elizabeth's becoming mentally incompetent as a result of her inner turmoil. Her four warring personalities are hard for the author to control, but Jackson does so, though barely skirting the ridiculous at times. The scene in which each of the "girls" takes a bath and talks to Aunt Morgen is humorous, for instance, and almost too much so for the serious reader. Before the girl can have any peace, her four personalities must be reconciled and blended into one new creature. Each must have a part in the new being.

The fragmented Elizabeth is a villain-hero, a character found in horror-Gothic. Although a standard of good and evil is upheld in the story, Elizabeth's emotional imbalance prevents the reader's judging her actions as he usually would. The revelation of the black part of the personality of Elizabeth and the threat of mental illness create an unpleasant, evil picture of the girl. This evil portrait is balanced, however, by the good represented in Elizabeth's attempts to regain self-control and find peace, by the gentleness of Beth, and by the final complete being who emerges from schizophrenia. The physical conflict between Betsy and Elizabeth in New York is an example of the evil working inside the major character. Miss Richmond's warring
personalities almost succeed in killing their shared body. After a stay at the hospital, Miss Richmond returns to Owenstown and Aunt Morgen. At the confrontation between Aunt Morgen and Elizabeth at the end of the book, the reader discovers the source of Elizabeth's turmoil, for she angers her aunt, tricking Morgen into helping her recall events surrounding her mother's death. She discovers that she had truly loved her drunken mother but had hated her mother in times of disappointment. Finally, after having waited and waited to surprise her mother on her mother's birthday, Elizabeth became so angry with her that she shook her violently. Elizabeth's mother died soon afterwards. Elizabeth, already suffering from an ambivalent attitude toward her mother, could not sustain the added burden of guilt, which rapidly caused Elizabeth's mental imbalance. Her struggle after this realization of the source of her trouble causes concern to observers, for it is terrifying to think that heartless Bess or cruel Betsy will be the victor. The good within her does win, creating a happy ending.

Usually a hero, such as Elizabeth, in horror-Gothic literature is morally ambivalent. However, in The Bird's Nest there is no such ambiguity in the individual personalities. Wrong and right are clearly personified by the four "girls" in one body. Perhaps William Peden in Saturday Review best expresses this view when he claims The Bird's Nest is "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." Although Peden calls the novel a modern morality play, it is not one in the sense that the theme overshadows the reader's interest in the character Elizabeth. The good that lies within the character is ultimately victorious, and the last words the reader is to hear from brand new, short-haired, newly named Victoria Morgen are "I'm happy . . . I know who I am."5

A fourth Gothic element, a brooding atmosphere, hangs oppressively over the book. A writer in Newsweek claims that "a brooding atmosphere, permeating the book with a sense of sickness, doubt and tension accentuates the tragedy of Elizabeth's predicament and anchors it in truth."6 The chronic illness of Elizabeth, the wildness and cruel tricks of Betsy, the whining of Beth, and the greediness of Bess all contribute to a depressing air. The constant tension conveys suspense, characteristic of terror-Gothic, to the novel, also. When

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5 Jackson, The Bird's Nest, p. 276.
6 Newsweek, p. 102.
Miss Richmond's personalities melt together, one realizes that dull Elizabeth has been trying to arrange a final confrontation between her aunt and the personalities in order to explore her subconscious and rout the sickness from her mind. Suspense characterizes the entire novel and is relieved only when Elizabeth finds a solution to her mental state.

The Bird's Nest thus possesses the Gothic elements of psychological abnormality, isolated setting, villain-hero, brooding atmosphere, and suspense. It certainly qualifies as a Gothic work.
CHAPTER V

THE SUNDIAL

William Peden has called The Sundial a book alive with the magic which could be wrought only by Shirley Jackson; he says she "shocks her readers into instant attention by juxtaposition of startling incidents and unusual characters." ¹

A major defect in this novel, as in The Road Through the Wall, is the author's not crediting the reader with enough intelligence to understand the theme of the book. Helpful little moral hints such as the sign over the stairway, "When Shall We Live If Not Now?"² and the sundial's inscription, "What Is This World?"³ are painted all around. However, Peden calls Shirley Jackson a first class storyteller who inquires into the "idiocy of mankind."⁴ He points out that the real spooks (the people involved) become more selfish, bigoted, and stupid as the novel progresses.⁵

The Halloran mansion provides an excellent Gothic microcosm, as it is set apart from the nearby New England

³Ibid., p. 12.
⁴Peden, p. 18.
⁵Ibid.
village and is peopled with eccentrics. Appropriately, the novel opens at the time of the funeral of the only Halloran son (and only threat to his mother's rule), Lionel, who has died under mysterious circumstances.

A stone wall, reminiscent of the wall in Jackson's first book, separates the Halloran land from the rest of the world. The first Mr. Halloran, in the face of sudden wealth, had decided to set up his own world, a world whose inhabitants would find their every whim gratified in it. So, he produced a house "endlessly decorated and adorned, the grounds constructed and tended with exquisite care." An ornamental lake, a pagoda, a rose garden, softly colored walls sporting nymphs and satyrs, silver, gold—all these are included, even a library, despite Mr. Halloran's protests that he did not care for books. The mansion commands a wide, beautiful terrace with two hundred and twelve pillars holding up marble balustrades. Shallow steps lead to a blue pool and an open, templelike summerhouse. Intrusively off center sits a sundial reading "What Is This World?" All in all, the luxurious place is imposing, although the gates remain locked and villagers are not allowed inside. This setting gains additional significance when the reader is informed by Aunt Fanny that only inhabitants of this house will survive safely in a holocaust that is to engulf the world. The mansion's Gothicism lies in its grotesque, as well as its separated,

6Jackson, The Sundial, p. 11.
nature. It is too luxurious and too much adorned. Yet the present Mrs. Halloran loves the house and revels in its possession.

Another Gothic element, psychological abnormality, is shown in Jackson's analysis of the eagerness of the housemates to accept the unbelievable, the supernatural. Each member of the household has found life disappointing. Mr. Halloran is a helpless invalid; his anything-but-helpless wife can never attain enough power to satisfy her. His sister, Fanny, is an old maid who did not choose her lot and still longs for sexual fulfillment. Maryjane, the sniveling Halloran daughter-in-law, can think only of her illness and pity herself. Her ten-year-old daughter, Fancy, is the only character in the book untouched by cynicism and disillusionment. Essex, a young man hired ostensibly to catalog the library but in reality to provide affectionate diversion for middle-aged Mrs. Halloran, is a parasite who later regrets his inability to be anything else. Miss Ogilvie, Fancy's governess, futilely loves Mr. Halloran. Gloria, a lately arrived niece, feels that nothing in the world is real or good. A blunt old friend of the mistress of the house joins the family, forcing herself and two spinster daughters on Mrs. Halloran.

The destroyed dreams of the family and of the guests in the house lead them to grasp for any new chance at life. The reader infers that people believe what they want to believe in life. They will swallow anything that promises or appears
to promise them the fulfillment of their desires. Mrs. Halloran, not satisfied with domination of her entire household, desires to be a queen in a new world; and, in spite of the fact that she seems to be the most sensible and practical character in the novel, she is totally deluded into accepting Aunt Fanny's vision of a destroyed old world and bright new world, in which only the inhabitants of the Halloran mansion would exist. When Essex asks Mrs. Halloran whether she believes Aunt Fanny's "claptrap," his employer replies, "I will not be left behind when creatures like Aunt Fanny and her brother are introduced into a new world." Further, she states, "I insist upon being saved along with Aunt Fanny. I have never had any doubt of my own immortality, but put it that never before have I had any open, clearcut invitation to the Garden of Eden; Aunt Fanny has shown me a gate." Since Essex has always followed the course of least resistance, he agrees with Mrs. Halloran and says that he, too, will book a ticket. Even later, when he begins to love Gloria and look at rosy dreams of early marital life with her, he cannot help returning both sexually and emotionally to Mrs. Halloran. He is a weak person. Aunt Fanny is mentally unbalanced but shrewd enough perhaps to have a vision and thus be allowed to stay in the family home. She has no position in the present world except the dubious one of old-maid sister-in-law. Her vision gives her prominence in the household and a paradise

7Ibid., p. 47.  
8Ibid.
to look forward to in the midst of her forty-eight-year-old, fruitless, unfulfilled life. Maryjane looks forward to a lovely place in which she will never again suffer from asthma and continues implanting in ten-year-old Fancy seeds of hatred against Mrs. Halloran. Miss Ogilvie and Gloria easily adapt to the "Noah's ark" situation and wish to be among the survivors in a new world. Hoping to profit by the experience, the Willows decide to stay. One last person, a military captain, is invited to join the group because another man will be needed to help repopulate the world.

Of the "family" in the secure old mansion, only innocent Fancy, who covets her grandmother's possessions, sees the truth of the group's situation. She is very unhappy about never having been allowed to play with children her age or to experience any of the common pleasures of this world. She despises the idea of being safe, saying she would rather live in a world full of other people, even dangerous ones.

Gloria, a hater at the age of seventeen, tells Fancy, "There's nothing there. . . . It's a make-believe world with nothing in it but cardboard and trouble."9 She and the other adults feel they can cope with a new world much more successfully than they have with the old one. Fancy has summarized the author's viewpoint in an earlier conversation:

Aunt Fanny keeps saying that there is going to be a lovely world, all green and still and perfect and we are all going to live there and be peaceful and happy. That would be perfectly fine for me, except

9Ibid., p. 186.
right here I live in a lovely world, all green and still and perfect, even though no one around here seems to be very peaceful or happy, but when I think about it this new world is going to have Aunt Fanny and my grandmother and you and Essex and the rest of these crazy people and my mother, and what makes anyone think you're going to be more happy or peaceful just because you're the only ones left?¹⁰

Shirley Jackson emphasizes through young Fancy her main idea: "You all want the whole world to be changed so you will be different. But I don't suppose people get changed any by just a new world. And anyway that world isn't any more real than this one."¹¹ Retorting to Gloria's insistence that she has seen the new world through a mirror, Fancy says,

Maybe you'll get onto the other side of that mirror in the new clean world. Maybe you'll look through from the other side and see this world again and go around crying that you wish some big thing would happen and wipe out that one and send you back here. Like I keep trying to tell you, it doesn't matter which world you're in.¹²

The Gothic element of moral ambiguity is present in The Sundial because the reader cannot really condemn the characters for their rejection of the lives they possess. Although they have not transgressed against their fellow man as have the protagonists of such Gothic classics as Frankenstein and The Monk, they have, in one sense, transgressed against life itself by refusing to live in the world they know. There is much more here than just eccentric characters and ghosts, but then there always is in the truly good Gothic novels.

¹⁰Ibid., p. 165. ¹¹Ibid. ¹²Ibid., pp. 165-166.
The terror-Gothic elements of suspense and the supernatural also characterize The Sundial. Aside from the suspense surrounding the waiting of doomsday, suspense is present in the two incidents when Aunt Fanny and Julia get lost. On one of her predawn wanderings, Aunt Fanny asks Fancy to come along with her on a walk through a maze she knows well. Fancy, as in a dream, runs away from her. A frightened Aunt Fanny calls for the child through the mists. Fanny stumbles around, touching warm marble figures. A fantasy of Essex and herself embracing calms her momentarily before she screams for Fancy. It is at this point that Fanny receives her mystic message about the end of the world. The other instance of suspense is Julia's escaping from a menacing taxi driver by running into a thick fog. She had planned to elope with the captain who lives at the Halloran mansion. Mrs. Halloran, who objects to such actions, persuades the captain to stay. Not knowing about the captain's change of heart, Julia meets the taxi and then wishes to escape from it. She has reason to be afraid because the driver is terrifying and because the fog hides a river which she could fall into and also hides her from any helpful travelers. All alone, even the self-reliant Julia has her moment of apprehension. After an exhausting walk, she ends up bruised and broken back at the Halloran gates.

The supernatural plays an important role in this novel. Aunt Fanny's communication with her dead father incites the
action of the book. After being lost in the maze, Fanny runs wildly toward the sundial. She hears a voice calling her name and sees a "something" in the darkness by the sundial. Totally afraid, she listens, asking herself whether it is real; "Then she thought with what seemed shocking clarity: it is worse if it is not there; somehow it must be real because if it is not real it is in my own head; unable to move, Aunt Fanny thought: It is real." From this point, Frances Halloran believes the message which tells her that everyone in the house is safe and that the father will guard the children. Fanny runs to the house and surprises them all by fainting. When she relays her ghostly father's message to the skeptical group, they are sarcastic, and Fanny denies having walked with her. However, Aunt Fanny is so insistent on the point that they finally believe.

The discovery of a brightly-banded snake slithering behind the bookcase seems to them a sign sent because they have mocked the ghost. The insistence of Aunt Fanny about the vision, her energy, and the psychological unlikelihood of her making up such a tale help convince the skeptics. As Essex says, "People can be persuaded to accept almost anything." Mrs. Halloran generously reinstates all the people in the house after the vision; she had just ordered most of them to leave. In their own way, the inhabitants of the house begin to prepare for the coming disaster.

\[13\text{Ibid.}, \text{p. 31.} \quad 14\text{Ibid.}, \text{p. 39.}\]
The other supernatural incident occurs when Gloria glimpses a new world by peering into a mirror coated with oil. The first time she looks, she sees horrible things, but on the second occasion, she sees a pleasant green land with Essex ambling around as a nude huntsman. Mrs. Willow wisely comments,

It seems to me . . . that Gloria sees in the mirror what we want her to . . . . What I mean is that before, when she saw all horrible things, it was because we were all frightened and confused. Now that we know pretty well what to expect, it seems to me that they are showing her more of what we want to see.15

At the end of the novel the inhabitants of the Halloran mansion burn the books (representing truth perhaps) in the library and barricade the house. Mrs. Halloran dies mysteriously in a dress of gold and a simple crown. At the close of the book, Richard Halloran, Aunt Fanny, Maryjane, Fancy, Gloria, Miss Ogilvie, Essex, the captain, and Mrs. Willow and her two daughters are left waiting for disaster, not realizing that a disaster has happened to them as human beings long before. Through Maryjane's running narrative about a movie, the author makes a final comment: "It wasn't the plot so much, you know . . . it was the acting. I mean, it was so real you really got to thinking they were real people. Just wonderful acting."16 Thus, in addition to the Gothic elements already presented, The Sundial demonstrates another important characteristic of modern Gothic. Irving Malin explains, "The

15Ibid., p. 127. 16Ibid., p. 245.
true Gothic . . . is essentially and continuously subjective, presenting reality as a distorting mirror."¹⁷ These characters have truly mistaken fantasy for reality simply because they reject the real lives they lead.

In final analysis, The Sundial contains these Gothic elements: isolated setting, psychological abnormality, the horror-Gothic element of moral ambiguity, and the terror-Gothic characteristics of suspense and the supernatural. With each succeeding novel Shirley Jackson depends more and more on Gothic elements to cast her magic spell in fiction.

¹⁷Malin, p. viii.
CHAPTER VI

THE HAUNTING OF HILL HOUSE

The Haunting of Hill House, which the New York Herald characterizes as "genuine . . . climactic . . . a goose-pimple horror story,"¹ is, in every aspect, a Gothic novel. In this work, Jackson struck her forte, that is, psychological terror. The supernatural—implied, hinted at every turn but never seen—is conjured through the other Gothic elements previously discussed in this study: isolated setting, brooding atmosphere, psychological conflict, suspense, and moral ambiguity.

The novel depends heavily on the reader's acceptance of the supernatural. As E. M. Forster says, "What does fantasy ask of us? It asks us to pay something extra."² He further gives a list of devices for fantasy:

... the introduction of a god, ghost, angel, monkey, monster, midget, witch into ordinary life, or the introduction of ordinary men into no man's land, the future, the past, the interior of the earth, the fourth dimension; or divings into and dividings of personality; or finally the device of parody or adaptation.³


³Ibid., p. 165.
Shirley Jackson utilizes most of these devices in one or another of her novels. In this particular novel one merely observes the manifestations of a monster—never actually seeing "It."

Briefly, the plot involves a haunted house to which Dr. John Montague, a doctor of philosophy and authority on poltergeists, invites other people who have had experience with the supernatural. The only ones who accept are Eleanor Vance, a timid, unloved soul, and Theodora, a beautiful, excitement-seeking girl. Luke, heir to Hill House, joins them in order to protect family interests. Surely enough, a "something" supernatural appears; "It" seems to want Eleanor. The good doctor urges her to leave at once. Since "It" is the only thing that has ever wanted her and Eleanor cannot accept leaving, she deliberately rams her car into a tree on her departure. She is killed instantly, but she wonders a split second before the crash, "Why am I doing this?" The reader wonders, too. The book subsequently ends very neatly with a portion of the paragraph with which it began: "Within, its walls continued upright, bricks met neatly, floors were firm, and doors were sensibly shut; silence lay steadily against the wood and stone of Hill House, and whatever walked there, walked alone."


5Ibid.
The reader is given a sense of foreboding at the beginning of the novel when he first glimpses its setting, Hill House, from the outside:

No live organism can continue for long to exist sanely under conditions of absolute reality; even larks and katydids are supposed, by some, to dream. Hill House, not sane, stood by itself against its hills, holding darkness within; it had stood so for eighty years and might stand for eighty more. 6

Eleanor Vance's first reaction to the house set among the lonely hills was one of rejection. She tells herself, "Hill House is vile, it is diseased; get away from here at once." 7 The full description of the house throws a smothering blanket of depression on the reader just as the house does on Eleanor when she sees it for the first time:

No human eye can isolate the unhappy coincidence of line and place which suggests evil in the face of a house, and yet somehow a maniac juxtaposition, a badly turned angle, some chance meeting of roof and sky, turned Hill House into a place of despair, more frightening because the face of Hill House seemed awake, . . . a house arrogant and hating, never off-guard, can only be evil. . . . It was a house without kindness, never meant to be lived in, not a fit place for people or for love or for hope. 8

It is indeed an evil place for Eleanor to have come to, for she has great need for both love and hope. The interior of the house is divided into many odd little rooms arranged in concentric circles; darkness presides over the rooms, many of which have no windows. The fact that all the walls in the

6 ibid., p. 5. 7 ibid., p. 25. 8 ibid., p. 26.
house are irregular leads to confusion in finding one's way around and helps to create the sense of unreality necessary to understanding and enjoyment of the novel.

The isolated setting and a brooding atmosphere, two other Gothic elements, are woven together. On the first night of the investigators' stay, the doctor paints the tragic history of Hill House by the dim glow of firelight. The wife of the original builder of the house, Mrs. Hugh Crain, had died minutes before seeing it completed. Crain's next two wives had also died, and the older of his two daughters, much to the displeasure of the younger, had inherited the house upon her father's death. She had subsequently bequeathed the house to a companion of hers from the village. This young woman, who hinted of strange things occurring in the house and haggled constantly with the younger Crain sister, finally hanged herself. The house then passed to the Sandersons. Every subsequent renter of the house had left it quickly and entreated others not to go there. Dr. Montague concludes his history by stating that "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." A few minutes later, he suggests that no one wander around the house alone because the house "watches every move you make." The grim appearances and dire comments of the gatekeeper and his wife, the cook, also add to an eerie atmosphere.

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9 Ibid., p. 59.  
10 Ibid., p. 61.
Frightened without knowing why, Eleanor refuses to enter the musty library in the tower, where the companion was supposed to have hanged herself. Much later she will enter the library and almost meet her suicidal death there. Passing into the nursery, the adventurers experience a real sensation of cold, as at the doorway of a tomb; "it was like passing through a wall of ice." Manifestations of the supernatural, to be discussed later, further add to the gloomy, foreboding atmosphere.

Psychological conflict is an important element in The Haunting of Hill House, for the reader sees, or rather feels, the events at Hill House mainly through Eleanor. The house gains a deep hold on Eleanor's mind, which is none too stable in the first place. Eleanor is a young woman who has lived a dull, desperate life with her sister and brother-in-law after the death of her invalid mother. No one loves her; no one wants her. She goes to Hill House to escape her existence. Eleanor is very weak in the "normal" world of human relationships when she comes to Hill House, as Maxwell Geismar points out. She wants to belong anywhere, and even though she is the most frightened person in Hill House, she will not leave. After struggling briefly, Eleanor, through her mental and emotional instability, becomes completely dominated by the


house. She then loves it; her friends, however, insist that she leave.

Theodora, the other young woman staying at Hill House, is important only as a lovely foil for Eleanor. A rather selfish person, she unwittingly helps push the unstable girl to death because she will not agree to allow Eleanor to live with her once they leave Hill House. This is unfortunate since Eleanor has found her first meaningful relationship in life with Theodora.

The chief element of psychological interest is the varied reaction of human beings to the unusual and supernatural events in Hill House. Dr. John Montague welcomes the psychic disturbances and hopes to find their causes. Luke Sanderson, a liar and thief as well as heir to Hill House, is amused at the prospect of hunting ghosts and never loses his sense of humor about the events that come. Adventuresome Theodora is deeply frightened by the supernatural occurrences but seeks rational explanations whenever she can. Eleanor is terrified at first but gradually lets the disturbances dominate her mind to the extent that she experiences disturbances that the others do not. It is possible that, in her mental state, Eleanor is responsible for some of the occurrences. The "rational" minds of the investigating foursome struggle with the evil present in the house; only Eleanor surrenders. Two visitors to the house, Mrs. Montague and her friend Arthur Parker, believe all spirits are friendly
and deplore fear. As a result, they do not feel the unusual sensations the foursome does.

Two traits of terror—Gothic, the supernatural and suspense, are evident in this novel. The supernatural, aided greatly by suspense, is the outstanding Gothic element in *The Haunting of Hill House*. Aside from setting, the first hint of the supernatural consists of Eleanor's and Theodora's sensing something unseen pass over the hillside, chilling the air. The fact that the temperature is very cold at the nursery door is the second. Malin explains in *New American Gothic*, "As in nightmares there are haunted houses in Gothicism—'other rooms'—where 'furies' lie and function." The third sign of a spirit moving comes in the form of a banging on the doors of the guests' rooms and waves of "sickening, degrading cold." The "thing," whatever it is, tries to get into the girls' rooms, shaking the doors and laughing madly. The sounds are not audible to either of the men. The next manifestation is mysterious writing on the wall: "Help Eleanor Come Home." Naturally Eleanor is frightened. A few days later the message is repeated on Theodora's bedroom wall, being written very shakily in something red which resembles blood. Theodora is raging mad because her entire wardrobe has been torn and spattered with the same red substance.

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13 Malin, p. 11.
Because the smell is disgusting, Theodora moves into Eleanor's room.

The next supernatural phenomenon occurs that same night. Eleanor wakes to hear the low babbling of a voice in the next room; she grasps what she thinks is Theodora's hand, wondering why it is so dark when they had left the light on in the room. She hears a child's voice crying somewhere, "Go away! ... Go away, go away, don't hurt me.... Please let me go home."\(^\text{15}\) Eleanor reassures herself and decides she will not tolerate anyone's hurting a child; with great effort she shouts. Immediately she sees that the lights are on again, and Theo is staring at her, startled. "'God God,' Eleanor said, flinging herself out of bed and across the room to stand shuddering in a corner, 'God God—whose hand was I holding?'"\(^\text{16}\) Theodora, in the bed next to Eleanor's, does not even know what has happened. Theodora had experienced horror and shock at seeing her lovely clothes ruined, but the feelings of disgust and repulsion that engulf Eleanor as these events occur are much stronger and more horrifying to her and to the reader. As the book continues, this feeling of horror deepens.

The seventh fantastic episode occurs during a walk that the two girls take in the dusk. At first they are angry with each other. By this stage of the novel, a shadow

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\(^{15}\) Ibid., p. 115.

\(^{16}\) Ibid., p. 116.
of doubt has been cast on Eleanor's emotional state. Only the fact that others, too, experience some of the gruesome activities of the house helps convince the reader that the activities do not exist in just Eleanor's mind. Each new, unusual occurrence brings chilling terror to Eleanor's heart, for she knows that "it" is after her. Eleanor feels real fear as the two girls follow a wide, black, very quiet path. Then, in the midst of the gloom, they stumble upon a happy family picnic in broad daylight—which, of course, is not really there. Suddenly Theodora screams, warning Eleanor to run and not to look back. They reach the house safely, but Theodora cannot reveal what she saw when she warned Eleanor not to look back; she only puts her head against Eleanor, who is deathly afraid.

The eighth sampling of the supernatural is introduced by the arrival of Dr. Montague's wife for the weekend. She and a companion play a game named Planchette, which contains a board much like a Ouija Board. Through this device they receive another message for Eleanor. Mrs. Montague says that the board spelled out a message that Eleanor is waiting to go home because of her mother, that Hill House is her home, and that none of them can help her because she is "Lost. Lost. Lost."\(^\text{17}\) Eleanor wants more than ever some inner peace to guard her against evil.

\(^\text{17}\)\textit{Ibid.}, p. 136.
The "thing" comes pounding on doors again in the night with the piercing cold traveling in its wake. This time the doctor has gathered the foursome together in his room in premonition of something's happening because he says his wife has stirred up the house's spirit. She and her friend have covered the house, pleading with the spirits to speak to them. "It" tries to get into the doctor's room, shaking the door and caressing the doorknob. Eleanor once again hears the little babbling murmur and wonders whether she is going insane. From that point, the house begins dancing and swaying dangerously. Eleanor thinks, before losing consciousness, "It is too much... I will relinquish my possession of this self of mine, abdicate, give over willingly what I have never wanted and whatever it wants of me it can have."\(^\text{18}\) She has surrendered. Meanwhile, Mrs. Montague and her friend have spent a quiet, uneventful night, not experiencing the rocking of the house.

The following day Eleanor, Luke, and Theodora take a walk to the brook to dispel the horror of the night; Theodora and Luke slip away from Eleanor. In a few moments alone, the newly happy girl sees footsteps impressed into the grass and catches a movement of air; no body is visible. She hears her name and wants whatever it is to stay. It passes on. She turns to run and tell the couple but decides not to.

\(^{\text{18}}\)Ibid., p. 144.
From this moment Eleanor no longer communicates her private thoughts to the group. This reticence is a characteristic of new Gothic. Malin points out that "silence is also burdensome. Communication as the bridge between people breaks down." 19 Eleanor has given herself over to the evil "thing," and no one can help her because she no longer communicates. Eleanor alone then hears someone walking and singing softly in the parlor where they have all gathered. This time she is filled with joy and does not share her secret.

Eleanor goes out of her head that very night. She slips from her room and, dancing down the hall, pounds on each person's door. Theodora calls out wildly that "she" is gone. Eleanor wants to enter the library to seek her mother, but a sick, revolting odor of decay stops her. The occupants search for her. After dancing all around the house, she runs into the library and moves up the iron stairway. She thinks, "I have broken the spell of Hill House and somehow come inside. I am home." 20 There in the library she considers suicide but is coaxed into remaining on the top step until Luke can climb up after her.

After this escapade the group urges her to depart, but she refuses to leave. Eleanor thinks, "I could go wandering

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19 Malin, p. 12.

and homeless, errant, and I would always come back here."\textsuperscript{21}

The doctor realizes that not all is well with Eleanor; he wishes her to forget Hill House. He is made even more anxious by her declaring, "The house wants me to stay."\textsuperscript{22}

In the final moments, as she pulls her car away, Eleanor muses, "But I won't go, . . . and laughed aloud to herself; Hill House is not as easy as they are; just by telling me to go away they can't make me leave, not if Hill House means me to stay."\textsuperscript{23} The reader realizes with horror that Eleanor is trapped and that she enjoys being trapped. The only ending left is death.

Another Gothic element, moral ambiguity, is present in this novel. While the reader can hardly admire or even approve of Eleanor's shocking behavior, whether conscious or not, he cannot condemn her for suicide. One of the themes of \textit{The Haunting of Hill House} is the universal need of every human being for love and acceptance. When Eleanor finds neither of these hungers met by fellow human beings, she embraces the supernatural, which has been beckoning her. Answering its summons, she deliberately crashes her car into a tree and ends her brief life. Again Shirley Jackson has chosen mental illness to show the turmoil of a character.

\textsuperscript{21} Ibid., p. 169.
\textsuperscript{22} Ibid., p. 170.
\textsuperscript{23} Ibid., p. 173.
By possessing the elements discussed, *The Haunting of Hill House* more than qualifies as a Gothic novel. It contains more examples of Gothicism than any of Jackson's earlier novels.
CHAPTER VII

WE HAVE ALWAYS LIVED IN THE CASTLE

Shirley Jackson's last complete novel, *We Have Always Lived in the Castle*, is notably different from her preceding ones, especially in characterization. Whereas most of Jackson's works contain skillful characterization, the major characters here are very flat; of the two sisters in the novel, one is insane and the other is completely good. The atmosphere is unusual, also; rather than a brooding Gothic tone, a charming, tongue-in-cheek tone prevails. However, like Jackson's other novels, *We Have Always Lived in the Castle* does possess Gothic elements. For example, the "castle" is a lovely old family home removed from a small village and quite effectively isolated from the world by a barbed-wire fence, padlocked gates, bushes and brambles, and a "No Trespassing" sign. This microcosm shelters the three surviving Blackwoods: eighteen-year-old Mary Katharine, her older sister Constance, and their old, invalid Uncle Julian. These three people have almost literally, as well as figuratively, made a Gothic journey into the forest, since they live apart from the world with just an occasional visitor, usually Helen Clarke. The author contrives to make the reader feel that the world inside the house or "castle"
is preferable to the real, cruel world. She makes her point by having the characters experience the evil, intolerance, hatred, and greed of the outside world, symbolized by the villagers. The real world is out-of-focus, and, not belonging to it, the Blackwoods turn more and more inward.

Critic Wilfred Sheed in the *Commonweal* says that it takes "guts" to do a straight Gothic horror story because of an unbelieving, scoffing modern audience; he further states that *We Have Always Lived in the Castle* lacks guts.\(^1\) Sheed says that the mood of Jackson's novel is suggested by his (Sheed's) statement, "We know we can't frighten you, and we're not even going to try."\(^2\) This insipid mood is a major flaw in the novel. Eugene Goodheart in the *Saturday Review* agrees that the charm and the comedy of the book are stronger than the horror.\(^3\)

The seclusion of the Blackwood home leads one to question why the Blackwoods choose to live in such a manner. The first intimation of mystery in the isolation of the family comes in the form of a nursery rhyme (a device used often by Shirley Jackson) sung by village children to taunt Mary Katherine—or Merricat:

\[^{1}\text{Wilfred Sheed, "The Stage," Commonweal, LXXXV (November 11, 1966), 167.}\]
\[^{2}\text{Ibid.}\]
\[^{3}\text{Eugene Goodheart, "To Be a Werewolf," Saturday Review, XLV (November 3, 1962), 47.}\]
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?

As the story unfolds, the reader discovers that all the rest of the Blackwood family died by poisoning six years before the time this narrative starts. Constance had been the only one at dinner not to use the fatal sugar on her berries; also, she had washed the sugar bowl before the police arrived. Therefore, she had been charged with, but not convicted of, murder. Uncle Julian was the only victim to recover, although he has been left an invalid. Merricat had been sent to her room that night and was not present when the mass poisoning took place. Because of this shocking crime, the villagers despise the remaining members of the family, Constance especially, feeling she should have been punished. Only Helen Clarke, an old family friend who feels obligated to show some kindness to them, comes for tea regularly. Later in the work, the reader discovers that the real murderer is Merricat, who is mentally ill. Murder and madness are certainly Gothic subjects.

Psychological insight is present, not only as shown in the interaction of the characters and the villagers, but also in the insanity of Merricat and its effects. Her actions seem a sunny parody of the bizarre, sensational Gothic created by Monk Lewis. Even at the first of the story, one notices

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that something is amiss because of Merricat's obvious immaturity. Her thoughts are childish; she plays mental games, she completely and violently hates the villagers, and she believes in magic. She often hides things (calling them magical charms) around the boundary of the family property to ward off evil spirits. Very superstitious, a frightened Merricat thinks of three magic words to protect the isolation of herself and her sister. Instinctively, she feels, "A change was coming, and nobody knew it but me." Merricat thinks she must fight to preserve the privacy of the family because in a normal world she would not have exclusive claims on Constance's love and attention. She might even be sent away to a private institution. Merricat is as selfish as a child; she fights Constance's returning to the world and wins because of the hatred shown by the villagers. She never wants to venture forth. The reader may wonder why Merricat poisoned her parents; no answer is given, but he might infer that her parents were considering sending her away.

Constance's feelings create tension in the novel. Connie struggles with her desires, pulled between wishing to live in society again, yet shrinking from the world's ridicule. Portrayed as completely good, Connie "neatens" the house and gardens and cooks delicious food. After having taken the blame for murder for six long years, she longs for a fuller

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5 Ibid., p. 57.
life. When a cousin, Charles, comes and tempts her to come out of her seclusion, Merricat tries to drive him away with childish tricks, filling his room with mud and sticks and tearing his clothes. She accidentally starts a fire in his room which destroys most of the house. Charles runs for help while the girls stay behind, trying to save their possessions, and eventually escape from the crowd of taunting villagers attracted by the fire to the woods. Uncle Julian perishes in his room. Since Uncle Julian's role—to describe through his ramblings the minutest details of the poisoning—is ended, the author thoughtfully disposes of him. Hateful villagers in a mob mood smash all the lovely furniture in the living room. Frightened by the taunting and destruction, Merricat leads Constance to a hiding place she has fashioned in the woods because Constance no longer wishes to enter such a cruel world. Cousin Charles, who wants only the girls' inheritance money, later tries in vain to persuade Connie to return to the outside world.

The atmosphere is the opposite of a brooding Gothic one. For the most part, a cat frolics through a sunny yard in which a lovely woman gardens. Merricat plays the part of a child; gamboling with the cat. The cheerful atmosphere may be paralleled with that of Jackson's most famous story, "The Lottery." Sudden violence erupts and the evil of human nature intrudes on a peaceful scene in each work.
The supernatural, a characteristic of terror-Gothic, is only hinted at in this book and believed in only by the mentally disturbed Merricat. At the first of the novel Merricat comments, "With any luck at all I could have been born a werewolf." Later she says that Blackwood land is enriched with treasures she has buried, "held together under the ground in a powerful taut web which never loosened, but held fast to guard us." Merricat also believes in magic words. She converses with Jonas, the cat, who might be called her familiar. Merricat sees omens in everything. Because she is convinced that Cousin Charles is a ghost, she tries hopelessly to devise an incantation to drive him away. She has good reason to wish to drive this demon away, for he taunts her, "Where would poor Cousin Mary go if her sister turned her out? . . . What would poor Cousin Mary do if Constance and Charles didn't love her?"

Another element of terror-Gothic, suspense, is also employed in the novel. A timid but curious visitor, Mrs. Wright, is invited to tea at the Blackwoods by Helen Clarke. Fearing poison, she is afraid to sample the tea and nibble the cakes. Also, along with Merricat, the reader is held in suspense, wondering whether Connie will return to the outer world. However, the strongest suspense aroused in the reader

6 Ibid., p. 1.  
7 Ibid., p. 59.  
8 Ibid., p. 113.
occurs in the mob destruction after the fire; the reader
waits in dread to see what the villagers will do to the
girls.

The townspeople's destruction of the home and their
crazed, derisive conduct toward Merricat and Connie show an
ugly, sordid side of man, reminiscent of the shocking events
of Monk Lewis's horror-Gothic tales. The sunny atmosphere
of the home is dispelled by the fire and the evil of men.
When Constance and Mary Katharine try to escape to the woods,
the mob closes around them, pushing and laughing. The
singing, shouting crowd forms a circle and will not allow
them to go. The crowd taunts them:

'Put them back in the house and start the fire all
over again.'
'We fixed things up nice for you girls, just like
you always wanted it.'

The girls are horrified, as is the reader. Only Jim Clarke's
announcement of Uncle Julian's death quiets and disperses
the villagers. From that time the girls remain in hiding,
later returning to live in the ruins of the "castle."

The last prominent Gothic element in this novel, a
characteristic of horror-Gothic, is that of moral ambiguity.
The author makes the world of seclusion within the Blackwood
home seem brighter, happier, more secure, indeed preferable
in every way to the world of normal human relationships.
She agrees with Merricat, who says, "What place would be
better for us than this? Who wants us, outside? The world

9 Ibid., p. 129.
is full of terrible people."\textsuperscript{10} The cruelty of the villagers cannot be entirely atoned for by their later food offerings to the sisters. The evil in the hearts of human beings and enacted in their lives can never be fully expiated to the victims of their malice. To live in the real world and expose oneself to other people is to risk and even lose peace in one's life. Characters here do not choose to return to the real world, having been ostracized by that world before. The reader is finally convinced that they have chosen the best solution, that their exile is not morbid self-indulgence.

\textit{We Have Always Lived in the Castle} contains the secluded setting, eccentric characters, bizarre circumstances, interest in abnormal psychology, moral ambiguity, and touches of the supernatural and suspense commonly associated with the Gothic tale, all set in rural sunshine. These elements combine to create an unusual Gothic story.

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\textsuperscript{10}\textit{Ibid.}, p. 78.
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CHAPTER VIII

CONCLUSION

Shirley Jackson began a seventh novel, Come Along with Me, which was left unfinished at the time of her death. The portion published by her husband, Stanley Hyman, indicates that, like her other works, it would have been Gothic. Many critics have bewailed Shirley Jackson's refusal to use her ability at characterization in a less-specialized mode than Gothic. Yet she chose to continue exploring both the psychological needs and the depravity of human beings, often under the influence of the supernatural. A fine Gothic novelist, she sought to involve her reader emotionally in each work—expecting him to feel suspense, shock, revulsion, or sympathy. She often employed such old Gothic devices as spirits, voices speaking from a world beyond this one, dark woods, dreams, and wildly fleeing heroines.

Shirley Jackson was talented at creating a microcosm of life and suspending a brooding atmosphere over it. The isolated setting, essentially Gothic, plays an important role in five of her novels. The whole structure of the neighborhood in The Road Through the Wall collapses when a wall which separates the neighborhood from the world is removed. In The Bird's Nest, the protagonist's lack of
communication with the world effectively removes her from everyday life; and the setting is drab enough to enhance the story. The Halloran mansion guarded by a wall in The Sundial is a model microcosm of human beings separated from the everyday world by choice. Not only does the wall protect the house from the world, but the fact that the people dwelling there are to be the only beings surviving in a new world helps cut it off from civilization. The classic setting of the Gothic novel occurs in The Haunting of Hill House—a haunted house, which is the main force of the story. Finally, the castle of We Have Always Lived in the Castle is a microcosm of life because the inhabitants of the Blackwood home have secluded themselves totally from the outside world.

Closely related to isolation is the Gothic characteristic of brooding atmosphere. The related themes of rejection and disillusionment occur repeatedly in Jackson's novels. Rejected by fortune and their peers, the characters Tod, Lillian Tyler, and Mrs. Roberts are so unhappy that they create a depressing atmosphere in The Road Through the Wall. Hangsaman portrays alcoholism, disillusionment, and evil in almost every character. Elizabeth Richmond's mental and physical sickness, the tension of warring personalities, and the whining of Beth evoke a sense of depression in The Bird's Nest. A brooding atmosphere is created in The Haunting of Hill House by the combination of the house's tragic history, Eleanor's unfulfilled existence, and a sense that the house
is watching her like a living man-eater. Only *The Sundial*, among Jackson's novels, contains little brooding, except for that of Maryjane and old Aunt Fanny.

A third major Gothic concern, analysis of morbid psychological conditions, is provided in all six novels. It is the outstanding feature of the overpopulated *The Road Through the Wall*. Broken order, moral decay, twisted sex relationships, and the evil callousness of people on Pepper Street are clearly portrayed. Three heroines of Jackson novels are admittedly insane. The four warring personalities of Elizabeth Richmond make *The Bird's Nest* a psychological tour de force; Miss Richmond does recover her health. Natalie Waite of *Hangsaman* has had no real communication with the outer world for two years before the time of that story; in growing up, Natalie finally comes to a point at which she must leave dreams behind or die. She is cured. Other characters in this novel are emotionally impaired, also. Demented Merricat of *We Have Always Lived in the Castle*, who poisoned her family, never recovers. Her sister, Connie, faces psychological conflict when she is tempted to return to the real world to live, but she chooses not to do so because of savage mob actions. Eleanor Vance, a rejected character in *The Haunting of Hill House*, turns to suicide as a solution to her unhappy existence. *The Sundial* is almost entirely a psychological study of the emotionally crippled inhabitants of Halloran mansion, who will grasp for anything better than the disappointments of reality.
A fourth vital Gothic element portrayed in each book is that of moral ambiguity or, in some cases, paradoxical moral themes. In Jackson's first novel, *The Road Through the Wall*, Tod's murder of a three-year-old and his subsequent suicide do not seem heinous to the reader. The two crimes seem a logical result of the actions of a cruel environment on a young boy. He is more sinned-against than sinning, and the reader will not hold him responsible for the crime he obviously committed. The amoral atmosphere of Hangsaman drives Natalie to search for some standards of right and wrong. She considers the relativity of purity and innocence and never comes to any answers, but she does decide that it is worthwhile to keep living and trying to discover meaning. The familiar moral theme of *The Bird's Nest*—that only by confronting the dark fears of the mind with love and understanding can people enjoy satisfying lives—has been discussed at length. The reader cannot morally judge the actions of Elizabeth Richmond since she is emotionally ill. The conflict of *The Sundial*, in the tradition of *Frankenstein*, concerns selfish people pursuing a dream; the moral theme is that a new world cannot change the nature of people. The need for love and acceptance is sounded once again in *The Haunting of Hill House*. People such as Eleanor Vance who are denied these essentials will embrace any substitute. Again, the reader cannot blame Eleanor for her actions because of the circumstances of her physical and emotional
life. Jackson seems to have lost faith in mankind completely in *We Have Always Lived in the Castle*. Ironically, she contrives to make the world of seclusion in the woods preferable to the real world. Did she finally find the world so evil that she thought people should escape whenever possible to whatever alternative is available? The reader wonders. In this opinion Shirley Jackson has followed the footsteps of earlier Gothicists, who feel that no meaningful answers can be found to the purpose of existence because they have no faith in man's ability to transform his evil nature.

The most easily recognized terror-Gothic trait, the supernatural, is used sparingly in three of the novels discussed and extensively in a fourth one. The flesh-and-blood existence of quixotic Tony of *Hangsaman* is open to question. She has been interpreted as a mere spirit by some scholars. In *We Have Always Lived in the Castle*, Merricat believes in magic and omens; but since she is insane, these may be discounted. *The Sundial* contains three examples of supernatural phenomena: communication with a spirit, which incites the action of the book; the sign of a banded snake; and a look into the future in a mirror coated with oil. The supernatural element, however, reigns over and overshadows every other feature in *The Haunting of Hill House*. Supernatural devices employed in this novel include a restless spirit rattling and banging on the doors at night, calling to Eleanor at the witching hour, causing a chilling draft
outside a bedroom door, and writing in blood on the wall. As has been explained in the introductory chapter of this paper, later Gothicists developed the irrational and emphasized the discrepancy between appearance and reality. Shirley Jackson has certainly developed both of these qualities in her novels.

Jackson uses the other terror-Gothic element of suspense sparingly. Her first novel contains none at all. The journeys into the forest and the flights from the mysterious girl in the night and from Tony in Hangsaman are suspenseful. The Bird's Nest may produce mild anxiety over which personality will win Elizabeth; the emphasis on the impulses of evil that lie within every person is enlightening, if not terrifying. Two women at separate times and places become lost and frightened in the fog in The Sundial, providing suspense. But the most powerful sense of fear and suspense appears in The Haunting of Hill House. The beckoning by the spirit for Eleanor to come home creates suspense for the reader, and the actions of the unknown "thing" combine fear and suspense in the reader as "It" bangs on doors, cries in the night, and chills the body. One may identify with Eleanor, too. The tone of We Have Always Lived in the Castle, on the contrary, prevents its producing much anxiety. The main characters are too flat for the reader to relate to, but the mob sentiment and action of the villagers at the fire are all too real and terrifying. Not only are Merricat
and Constance upset by the taunting crowd and tensely waiting for its movement, but so is the discerning reader as he glimpses man's warped nature.

The six novels of Shirley Jackson are notably Gothic. In writing them, Jackson originated a unique style of her own. As she weaves her magic spell, she conveys serious messages to the reader, also. Superb at creating an atmosphere dripping with evil—be the day dark or sunny, expert at stripping off people's outward hypocrisies and exposing their most sinister thoughts, adept at molding by mere implication a monster spirit so real that the reader accepts him, Shirley Jackson has proven herself a lover and master of the Gothic tale.
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