Living on the Moon: Women, Home Making, and the House after World War II in Shirley Jackson’s We Have Always Lived in the Castle

Leslie Dennis
University of South Carolina - Columbia
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Leslie Dennis

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Accepted by:

Brian Glavey, Director of Thesis

Catherine Keyser, Reader

Lacy Ford, Vice Provost and Dean of Graduate Studies
In my thesis, I concentrate on Shirley Jackson, her novel *We Have Always Lived in the Castle*, and women’s place in post-World War II American society. To start, I introduce Jackson and her role in literary history, the housewife writer in the 1950s and 60s, and magazine culture. Then I move to a historical perspective of the 1950s and propaganda during the atomic war era. I focus my attention on how government literature worked to contain women in the home and control sexuality and gender roles. Following my discussion of domesticity, I concentrate on the history of the Gothic novel and how the genre’s components act as to define femininity and women in the home. In the final chapter, I offer an interpretive reading of *We Have Always Lived in the Castle*. I investigate the relationship between gender and the home – both the domestic relationship and the body's relationship to the physical structure. I also examine how the protagonist manipulates the home and separation of spheres in order to express herself and develop a new domestic order without male figures at the helm or even in the realm of the house.
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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION: SHIRLEY JACKSON, THE HOUSEWIFE WRITER, AND MAGAZINE CULTURE

A search for information on Shirley Jackson leads to a few scattered obituaries, a list of her novels, short stories, and essays, and a handful of lackluster articles about her works. Ranging from the occult to housewife literature to issues with mother figures, the topics of these articles offer little insight or analysis into Jackson’s writings. Even more, the literary scope and focus of scholars’ studies extend mostly to “The Lottery” and The Haunting of Hill House, Jackson’s two more famous works – “The Lottery” because it is widely read in secondary schools and The Haunting of Hill House because it has spawned multiple film adaptations. Those and her other works are unnoticed by the canon and are poorly or under-analyzed by critics. However, upon close reading, Jackson draws from literary tropes and movements and the political time period in which she lives. By doing so, she demonstrates a historical and cultural perspective of
literature that influences, surrounds, and enriches her texts and cements them in the canon that disregards her talent and works.

The type of pieces Jackson writes ranges from fiction to nonfiction, from essays to short stories to novels. Just as her literature is a conglomeration of forms, the style and tone of those follows suit: “an eerie admixture of the psychological and the quotidian, written in an even, often companionable tone of voice that rides implacably on top of vast, unspoken fears and tensions” (Shapiro 147). Jackson melds the mundane tasks of everyday life with internal anxieties in order to establish a connection that reveals the strain of domesticity and gender stratification. In her works, while balancing household duties and daily activities, “often, an element of the supernatural seeps through the plot or the characters are touched by otherworldly powers in ways they barely comprehend,” allowing a bit of fantasy and, what most critics have identified as, occult features into seemingly normal middle-class life (Shapiro 147).

Jackson’s blend of tones and dash of unreality into reality play into the humor established by the housewife writer who becomes a feature in women’s journals and magazines during the 1950s and 60s. Although “the trapped
“housewife” is a statistical minority, her character in magazine literature speaks for a group of women represented as “happy homemakers” while she expresses “the intense boredom of housework, the pressure to be a flawless wife and perfect mother, how she resent[s] her husband for his freedom and snap[s] at her children for their demands,” and, most of all, the quicksand of guilt and confusion (Shapiro 232). Jackson’s short fiction and nonfiction enact this ideal and follow this tradition, finding grains of truths in the semi-myth of the trapped housewife. Jackson wrote a trilogy of home novels, one of which will be analyzed in this thesis, that concentrate on women confined to or by houses, familial relationships, and gender mores and uses the whimsical approach to those novels that housewife writers bring to their work.

In The Feminine Mystique, Betty Friedan, a contributor to magazines herself, asserts magazine circulation and articles promoted a post-World War II culture and psychology of the domestic goddess ideal, which women became consumers of and mirrored in their own lives. She also criticizes those labeled as “Housewife Writers” for leading a life of comfort at home and having the luxury to write about the domestic unease of others. However, she “overlooks the fact that many of these writers struggled in
both life and print with the tensions of career and home in ways that would have seemed quite familiar to many of their readers” (Walker, “Humor” 100). Housewife writers used their texts as outlets for themselves and their readers to escape, expel, and give voice to frustrations and limitations. While writing allows women to treat the hostility towards their domestic lives with levity and express feelings in safe confines, on another level, the magazine articles became a piece of a “social continuum, with a broad base of support” (Walker, “Humor” 113). Housewife writers, however, as stated before, did not represent the majority of content in women’s magazines during the post-World War II era.

Since the early nineteenth century, women’s magazines have informed and educated women on domestic issues. During the 1940s and 1950s, the industry experienced a shift, not in focus but in the delivery and strategy of the message, because of “dramatic changes in the American economy, in American political rhetoric, in technology and industry, and in advertising practices and patterns of consumption” (Walker, Shaping 11). These forces coalesced in women’s magazines and shaped the content and the image of American households. Women’s magazines became segmented, to a larger degree, by race, class, and income level. While magazines
such as *Ebony* or *Harper’s Bizarre* presented a different perspective and reality of American living during the time, targeting African-American women or upper-class women, magazines like *Good Housekeeping* and *Ladies Home Journal*, which represented white, middle-class housewives who lived suburban areas, are the focus of this work. In creating the domestic world for their niche readership, magazines addressed political upheaval and international involvement, technological advances within the home, and development in education all while attempting to survive economically in a fast-moving and growing advertising world.

Women’s magazines became the largest carrier of information to housewives about the role prescribed to them by a patriarchal society. Since the nineteenth-century, the magazines’ focus on the domestic intersected with a traditional genre of popular literature and culture – the conduct book. Magazines intended for women, like the conduct book, printed materials on “approved behavior, attire, and décor” (Walker, *Shaping* 31). In the early twentieth-century, the emphasis on these standards “both increased and solidified around middle-class standards [...] as the production of widely distributed household products coincided with maturation of the advertising industry” (Walker, *Shaping* 31).
World War II and the Cold War catapulted the advertising industry into a new sphere of influence and growth. By 1940, “the visual layout of women’s magazines had completed an evolutionary change that mingled editorial and advertising content in a manner that mirrored the interactions between the home and culture at large” (Walker, Shaping 55-56). Instead of just being a guidebook for housewives, women’s magazines began to integrate advertisements visually into their advice. The shift in design implicated magazines in establishing women as consumers and targeting those consumers with messages tailored to the domestic sphere.

In 1942, the Ad Council, conceived only a few months before, incorporated into the War Advertising Council (WAC), an organization mainly comprised of advertising agency executives. The council worked to promote wartime efforts and provisions and mobilized ad men and advertisers to support the war. Through WAC, the ad industry turned “into the largest single purveyor of domestic propaganda for the war effort by fostering the inclusion in advertising space of exhortations to buy war bonds, conserve food, and donate blood” (Walker, Shaping 67). Even after the end of World War II, President Roosevelt requested the council continue its work in conjunction with
the National Safety Council to encourage homeland safety practices in the atomic age.

During the 1940s and 1950s, “American women’s magazines conveyed complicated and sometimes contradictory messages precisely because such was the nature of the culture the publications reflected” (Walker, Shaping 29). Although, during both World War II and the Cold War years to follow, magazines and advertisements maintained a message of national safety as the most important job of women, the avenue through which women were allowed to operate in this job differed in those periods. World War II prompted awareness of international crises and promoted consciousness of involvement with the international community. Because of America’s participation in the war, WAC disseminated information about purchasing war bonds, rationing food during the shortages, and working for the war effort. Women’s magazines, in turn, educated women on trimming the budget, cooking with alternative food sources, and greeting soldiers upon their return home. Articles on food preparation became a mainstay in women’s magazines and often cast women “rhetorically to both a quasi-military and a domestic role” (Walker, Shaping 70). Even cosmetic companies would publish ads to justify purchasing make-up in order to maintain normalcy during a period of pinched
budgets and global unrest. These advertisements shared “a
translation of national defense into domestic terms.
Whether maintaining her ‘historic’ beauty or stocking up
food for the winter, the middle-class American woman [was]
portrayed as working for the national interest, even though
she [was] performing traditionally feminine tasks” (Walker,
*Shaping* 68-69).

However, magazines and WAC were not in complete
control of wartime rhetoric or news. In keeping with WAC,
President Roosevelt created the Office of War Information
in 1942 to circulate reports on the war’s progression and
other items that could be released about the effort safely.
Within the OWI, there was a bureau known as the Magazine
Bureau, which was of particular interest to women’s
magazines and “issued guidelines that affected the content
of fiction and nonfiction features and the copy and
illustrations of advertisements in America’s magazines”
(Walker, *Shaping* 78). While the OWI was established to
provide information, another aspect of its function was to
monitor and censor certain pieces. The Magazine Bureau
released an annual *Magazine War Guide* to women’s magazine
editors advising them to publish articles that would
influence women to purchase specific items, help them cope
effectively with emotional and budgetary implications of
rationing and shortages, and encourage them to do volunteer work. While women’s magazines acted as a conduct book for mid-twentieth-century women, the rules within that book were controlled, monitored, maintained, and supported by the advertising industry, WAC, and the Magazine Bureau of the OWI.

By integrating national safety and government concerns into advertising and women’s magazines, “the war and consumption entered the home together, both promoting a domesticity that was national in scope yet focused on individual and family desires” (Walker, Shaping 67). The end of World War II promised the end of shortages and rationing and ushered in a Cold War era of atomic anxiety and more technologically advanced products for the home. The Cold War domestic ideal, just as the previous era had, bound the home to national security and widened women’s magazines definitions of domesticity to include mental health and a perceived crisis in American education as well as an escalation in middle-class material consumption. However, unlike World War II, the Cold War fostered insularity within politics and the family. Advertisements and magazine content emphasized maintaining and improving the domestic space in order to move on from the mentality of the past two decades. Whether through plans for postwar
homes or instructions on new household appliances, magazines “in general predicted a rosy domestic that would be unlike both the war years and the economic depression” (Walker, Shaping 94).

According to Friedan, women’s magazine fiction stories in 1939 involved a heroine called the “New Women [who created] with a gay determined spirit a new identity of women – a life of their own” and “were almost never housewives” with the stories ending before they had children (38-39). Nearing the end of the 1940s, however, the New Woman image blurs and “the prototype of the innumerable paean to ‘Occupation: Housewife’” begins to appear in the New Woman’s place and throughout magazine content (Friedan 41). The shift in magazines reflects a social, political, and economic message conveyed to American women by media outlets and government agencies during the post–World War II era. As men returned home from the war, women were expected to embrace a feminine mystique that makes “certain concrete, finite domestic aspects of feminine existence – as it was lived by women whose lives were confined by necessity, to cooking, cleaning, washing, bearing children – into a religion, a pattern by which all women must now live or deny their femininity” and a representative shift from the Rosie the Riveter ideal held
previously (Friedan 43). Not only were these women bound to the home now but the home had moved and been transformed. Following World War II, a great exodus from cities took place among families and “between 1950 and 1960, the population in the suburbs surround[ing] America’s major cities increased forty-seven percent” (Walker, “Humor” 107). Housewives were transplanted from life in the city to a new community, isolated from former friends, and confined to a space in flux with technological advances and mass media proliferation. Companies that created bombs and tanks for the war now made vacuums and plastic materials used in the home. Advertisements for household technology and scientific advancement “continually promoted themselves as lightening the homemaker’s burden” when in fact the products were “increasing the domestic demands on the [magazine] readers they sought to serve” (Walker, Shaping 60). Also, magazines implied if women purchased these products, their middle class status would be solidified. Women served their household by their purchases through the product’s use and the social status it invoked.

During the 1940s and 1950s, the assumptions and aspirations of the feminine mystique – women ought to be happy homemakers and women with young children should not work – “were reinforced by the mass media and advertising
industries” to create a “homogenized national culture that literally whitened out America’s diversity” and to advance the ideal of the American dream and superiority (Coontz 64-65). White, middle-class women targeted by magazines such as *Ladies Home Journal* and *Good Housekeeping* learned the “normalcy” of being housewives through the magazines’ advertisements and editorial content - expert advice, conduct instructions, articles on educating children, and how-to directives. The message these magazines provided was not just a business or editorial agenda; the ideals promoted permeated past the pages of the magazine and emanated throughout social and government programs as well.
CHAPTER 2

ATOMIC HOUSEWIFERY, HOME FRONT SECURITY AND CONTAINMENT

In 1950, President Harry Truman created the Federal Civil Defense Administration (FCDA). Part of the administration focused on training women to prepare the home for atomic warfare. These civil defense initiatives combined “sophisticated technology with domesticity” and “encouraged Americans to define ‘home’ in terms of safety, nationalism, consumption and the nuclear family” (Lichtman 39). Pamphlets and brochures became the main print resource for women while Jean Wood Fuller and Katherine Howard functioned as the faces and voices for what historian Laura McEnaney termed “atomic housewifery.” Fuller, who became the most important proponent and the key woman for the FCDA, worked to implement programs that advocated for women to participate in civil defense by keeping them in the home. Fuller’s position seems to be paradoxical in that she, a professional woman, encouraged other women to stay at home, collect food and medical supplies, and care, clean, and cook for the family to save America once nuclear annihilation happened. The nuclear warfare education she
offered women was not about politics or science but the housekeeping of it.

“Grandma’s Pantry,” the most extensively publicized and popular campaign by the FCDA, promoted the home bomb shelter and the ways in which women could contribute to that shelter by stocking food goods. Brochures about Grandma’s Pantry started to circulate in 1955 and contained pictures of an old-fashioned cook stove in a well-supplied kitchen that “included a long list of foods, canned goods, medical supplies, and other helpful items, such as first aid kits, soap, candles, buckets, and pet food” (May 91). Along with contributing to the pantry, women were to cook with makeshift utensils, administer first aid and home nursing, and act as home firefighters. What would be jobs outside the home and what women, during the war, would be compensated for were now unpaid tasks considered duties, patriotic ones at that. To be a good American and a good wife, women were relegated to the kitchen, the home, and the basement as unpaid and unemployed nursemaids.

In her essay on the domestic interior and war culture, Beatriz Colomina describes the space as a battlefield named “the war cabinet.” Through the multiple common use definitions of cabinet – a cupboard for storage and display and a political body “controlling government policies” –
the house and space within becomes “a military weapon, a mechanism within a war where differences between defense and attack have become blurred” (Colomina, “Domesticity” 16-17). Women, in this rhetoric, take over the role of general, being the first line within the domestic to prevent, prepare for, and lead attack through the prescribed roles and duties promulgated by government agencies.

Education beyond the kitchen area included “how to construct simple shelter in their basements from a large board leaning against a wall, essentially employing them as home construction workers as well” (May 92). Liberation to learn skills such as manual labor came within the confines of their home. All these hats wives were taught and expected to wear, though allowing them to pursue new avenues and forms of workmanship, still limited them to the home and shackled them to the family unit. While women had worked and were in the workforce at a greater number than ever before, “they remained housekeepers and childcare providers first. Such expectations were carried into the construction of the home fallout shelter and helped perpetuate gendered stereotypes into the post-nuclear world – literally building them into a concrete form” (Lichtman 40).
Even commercial companies bought into and supported the campaign by showcasing family protection items. Sears and Roebuck created window displays at their stores for civil defense programs and included items wives could purchase for their pantry endeavors in the catalogues. By pushing products in the glass cases of street front views, Sears and Roebuck drew women not only into the store itself but also into the product of the program and the idea of atomic housewifery, perpetuating the mentality of women being subservient and staying in the home.

Grocery stores participated in the programs as well by allowing volunteers to teach women how to build up their stockpiles (McEnaney 111-112). Women got to enact Grandma’s Pantry with others, which propagated the idea the program was useful, important, and necessary by showing that other mothers and wives subscribed to it. During this era, grocery stores were hubs of community and household spending for housewives. By allowing women to interact with each other in a social setting and use the program together, these stores rubber-stamped Grandma’s Pantry with trusted, neighborly presence.

Appliances and conveniences offered the housewife a “new kind of mobility and efficiency” to enable her preparedness in the home (Colomina, “Introduction” 15).
This equipment, “coming from the same factories that made guided missiles,” were not only supposed to make the housewife’s job easier and faster but to promote a “lifestyle of prosperity and excess that was the main weapon in the Cold War” (Colomina, “Introduction 15-16). If the house and the wife within were to defend against foreign and domestic terror, then inventions such as the microwave and vacuum were the tools to wage war. In the 1959 “Kitchen Debates” between Vice President Richard Nixon and USSR premier Nikita Khrushchev, Nixon vocalizes the subtle agenda by equating appliances as the strength of the US rather than missiles. “Politics had moved to the domestic space – or, more specifically, to the kitchen of a suburban house put up by a Long Island builder and furnished by Macy’s for the American National Exhibition in Moscow’s Sokolniki Park” (Colomina, “Introduction” 16). Atomic housewifery became a political and commercial business and allowed the government’s agenda of securing the home front and the economy’s purpose of continued growth to succeed.

Not only did the government and economy win through those avenues, but keeping women at home also opened up the job market for men. Men who came back from war now had jobs to go back to without having to compete with women and
companies did not have to create new jobs for those men. With stability in the home, in the economy, and in the workforce secured, the FCDA could focus on keeping atomic warfare’s outcomes as minimal as possible.

2.1 Return to the Nineteenth Century: Angel of the House, Sexuality and Hysteria, and Emotional Isolation

While atomic housewifery became institutionalized in America in the 1950s, the woman household reformer and the femininity linked to that role extend back to the nineteenth century, as documented in Coventry Patmore’s “Angel of the House.” The historical context of a feminine enterprise with regard to welfare of the household “further encouraged defense officials to draw women into their preparedness blueprints” and essentially feminized the concept of civil defense because of its domestication (McEnaney 98-99).

During World War II, the feminine ideal was Rosie the Riveter, someone who told women they could help the government, their men, and themselves by working outside the home. However, post-World War II, “a slightly altered version of a nineteenth-century ‘true woman,’ [who embraced] marriage and motherhood” and believed women could support the government, their men and themselves by working inside the home, forced Rosie into retirement (McEnaney
Government and commercial propaganda emphasized a nineteenth-century ideal of containment to ensure atomic safety, economic security, and household stability. All of these led to a regulation over sexuality and sexual practices. Just as the cult of true womanhood in the nineteenth century was designed to repress female sexuality and regulate female hysteria, believed to be a symptom of an oversexed woman, the atomic housewifery and the 1950s “true woman” ideology—“early marriage, sexual containment, and traditional gender roles, [which] merged in the context of the cold war”—worked to sustain a sexual normalcy (May 89). Because of social and political disruption, anxiety over sexuality tends to arise after times of national crisis, and after World War II “much of the anxiety focused on women, whose economic and sexual behavior seemed to have changed dramatically” (May 81–82).

While men had been away at war or working on various duties for the military or government, women had been outside the traditional roles working for the war effort as well to support the family, whether as nurses or secretaries, more acceptable feminine jobs, or as factory workers. The necessity to support the family and the home, considered a “man’s role,” did not necessarily reverse the gender ideology but did threaten the positions within the
patriarchal system, creating what May describes as a “unique form” of “anxiety” in the postwar years. “Professionals in numerous fields, government officials, and creators of the popular culture revealed the powerful symbolic force of gender and sexuality in the cold war ideology and culture” and had to address the anxiety forming within society. “It was not just nuclear energy that had to be contained, but the social and sexual fallout of the atomic age itself” (May 81-82).

The comparison between nuclear energy with sexual energy – female sexuality specifically – makes winning the cold war a foreign and domestic priority for the government, hence the necessity for the FCDA and its programs. The potential fallout of sexual energy within the home and society threatens the economic, governmental, and social structures. Essential to winning the Cold War was creating, fostering, and maintaining a society of unified families. To do so, men and women needed to adhere to socially acceptable gender roles and traditional sexual norms that established a stable home environment. Ideally women were expected to return to the home, abandoning their jobs or, at the very least, taking a part-time or volunteer one, to care for their husbands and children. However, the homemaker ideal proved to be less pervasive and strong than
before the war. More married women worked outside the home after the war than before; however, “their job opportunities were limited, and their wages were low. Employed women held jobs that were even more menial and subordinate than those of their male peers,” indicative of the social and home life. While women had the option to work, “surveys of full-time homemakers indicated they appreciated their independence from supervision and control over their work; they had no desire to give up their autonomy in the home for wage labor” (May 16). Also, once a woman got married, she could only keep her job “if her husband didn’t object and she didn’t like her work too much” (Coontz 61). Social acceptance of a married woman did not include having a job “satisfying enough to compete with her identity as wife or impinge on her husband’s sense that he was the primary breadwinner” (Coontz 61). While women did have jobs post-World War II, the home – husband and children – and socially acceptable gender guidelines came before women’s autonomy.

As for sexual obligations, women were to support “the monolithic goals of cold war America through the practice of duplicity: [...] attract and stimulate male sexual drives but not gratify them. Female sexuality was thus always double” (Nadel 117). As wives, women were to satisfy their
husbands’ needs but also maintain an exterior complimenting that of a 1950s housewife. Those women who wanted to work or showed any promiscuity were cause for concern about mental instability. “Psychiatrists attributed female ambition to various debilitating sexual neuroses, while social scientists tried to ascertain whether children were harmed by having mother who worked” (Shapiro 136).

If women satisfied the atomic age’s domestic role, children “would avoid juvenile delinquency (and homosexuality), stay in school, and become future scientists and experts to defeat the Russians in the cold war” (May 95). The maternal directly influenced the next generation and its sexuality, education, and politics. The emergence of a more affluent middle-class and “distinctly teen clothes, magazines, entertainment, and accessories” gave rise to a new teenage population that became a source of anxiety women had to contain and maintain (Ehrenreich 28). Teens became a prime target for developing media and advertising that threatened the stability of the traditional home. “Pornography was becoming more visible in the postwar era” and feverish responses to musical acts – the Beatles and Elvis – by girls created a new set of concerns during a time “cold War politics encourage a heightened preoccupation with family stability” (D’Emilio
Pornography was believed to lead teenage boys to delinquency, threatening the future of national security and prompting the government to investigate reading materials in 1952 and promote “campaigns against sexual explicitness in the public domain” (D’Emilio 282). Teenage girls were also at risk through rock ‘n’ roll mass hysteria, which “announced and ratified teen sexuality” (Ehrenreich 30). Acts like Elvis Presley and the Beatles elicited masses of teens who screamed, cried, and convulsed while listening to albums, watching the acts on television, and attending concerts. The housewife’s role of moral education became essential to containing teenage sexuality and monitoring media consumption.

The women in the atomic-age family were the concern because of their “increasing sexual and economic emancipation” due to World War II and the need to “channel those energies into the family” became a priority in those post-war years (May 95). If women were domestically and sexually subordinate to their husbands and turned their energies to the family, they would be “contented and fulfilled wives devoting themselves to expert childrearing and professionalized homemaking” (May 85).

During this time, “frequently, marriage itself symbolized a refuge against danger” in literature and
government propaganda (May 94). In a highly publicized stunt in Life magazine, a couple entered their bomb shelter for their honeymoon symbolically starting their new life in a safe haven as a nuclear family in the nuclear age. While “bomb shelters were not nearly as widespread as the particular form of family life they symbolically contained,” the message surrounding the bomb shelter pervaded commercial messages and social mores – one in which a unit of security and traditional roles were sacrosanct (May 94).

Because of these ideals, married women enjoyed social acceptance and “single women [were viewed] with suspicion as potential corruptors of the home” during the post war years. (May 35). Single women did not inhabit and were not able to construct bomb shelter security so they had the potential to invade, raid, or destroy the safety the home offered because the outside influences infected their bodies and minds. Single women not only threatened the home but the marriage with their sexuality, as they were unencumbered with a husband or children. Because they had no ties to a specific family or residence, these women could shift between men without a thought and endanger the safety the home offered. Marriage inoculated women from becoming a danger to other women, families, society, and
themselves. As much as fear of women’s sexuality and hysteria threatened the security of the home, the balance of women’s mental state contributed an equal amount to maintaining the atomic housewife order. When women complained about marriage being a source of entrapment or exhibited ennui in their daily life and routine - “the housewife syndrome” - “this was taken as a symptom rather than a potential cause of their disturbance” and was “treated by analysis, medication, and even electroshock therapy” (Coontz 73). Expressions of boredom or discontentment signaled danger to the prescribed social order.

Carol A. B. Warren reviewed a study of middle-class white women hospitalized during the 1950s and 1960s. These women had never been hospitalized before and did not have a history of mental illness; however, mental institutions admitted them in these situations and the study because they suffered from “the housewife syndrome.” Warren found that “isolation characteristic of traditional housewives who were not integrated into stable kin networks precipitated a sense of trouble and crisis in the lives of married women” (52). Women in the fifties suffered because of economic powerlessness and a lack of opportunities for autonomy or interpersonal relationships.
While men’s place was an external arena in the workplace, women were relegated to an internal space of the domestic, mirroring mental confinement and leading to isolation from others and of self. Warren also found that because a woman’s only outlet was the domestic and household, housework and childcare became centrally important to her “in the sense of providing a locus for identity (the self aspect) in a structure that provided no alternative sources of female identity” (51). If women did not perform household tasks properly or failed at educating and caring for children, women’s identities also suffered. Criticism by husbands was felt acutely by housewives and led to their own chastisement and self-loathing.

The mental illness of housewives affected not only housework and those in the house but had larger implications for the atomic age. “The threat of mental illness to woman’s place, therefore, was a threat to the essential order of life: to the private order of the family, and [...] to the external social order” (Warren 13). Hospitalization of women endangers the well-crafted middle-class image; however, if treatment is necessary for “the housewife syndrome,” it was not meant to allow women to “gain a stronger sense of self,” but to “reconcile herself to her role in the family” by showing her how to change her
feelings (Coontz 73). Prescription for a discontented mind was to reinforce the ideals of family, conservation, and duty.
CHAPTER 3

THE GOTHIC TRADITION

With women in the 1950s sent from the workforce and back into the domestic space, the reappearance of the Gothic, an eighteenth- and nineteenth-century literary form seems appropriate, especially for Jackson’s novels. Just as magazine articles and other writers of the time use humor, Jackson employs the Gothic genre to critique women’s confinement to the home.

The Gothic “is preoccupied with the home. But it is the failed home that appears on its pages.” A morally “crumbling castle [is a] site of terror” in which, most of the time, men are locked out and women remain inside the house (Ellis ix). In the eighteenth century, the Gothic novel revealed the internal turmoil within the external beauty of the fortress, the main site of the action. Just as magazine article writing allows women to ridicule their everyday life, the Gothic permits the same latitude. By encoding the language with certain characters, authors “create a landscape in which a heroine [takes] initiative in shaping her own history [and purging] the infected home
to establish a true one” (Ellis xii). This penance of Eve’s betrayal and the creation of a new Eden allows women to invent a space of their own within the domestic sphere to which they are relegated, giving them some type of control. However, the plot itself limits women to a fortress that confines them. So while they do establish the new arena in which they live and can function, they are still restricted to the terrifying home.

Established in the eighteenth century, the Gothic genre situated itself within the Romantic literary movement originally. Novels identified as Gothic incorporate supernatural elements, architecture, mysterious objects of antiquity, and unknown or vague semblances of geography. The novel is set in some “never-never land, existing beyond the reach of spatial or temporal constraints” to “invoke the murky atmosphere” of domestic issues (Wolff 101).

Because characters are isolated from an apparent or present society, “incompletely linguistic markings of ‘character’ maintain a draining but irreducible tension with a fiction of physical, personal presence” (Sedgwick 256). Characters tend to form a social and emotional bond with the physical home structure and lose the ability to articulate properly or coherently since they lack a community of peers outside of the house. Also, surface details such as the “use of
color, landscape, music, and some characteristic turns of plot exhibit the same fixity and repetition in more visibly influential way, [making] recognizable and meaningful some of the newly described Gothic conventions as they recur in later, more accessible, and apparently realistic fictions” (Sedgwick 256). Repetition itself, which will be analyzed later, then becomes a part of the Gothic standard and influences characters and action within the novels. After Horace Walpole’s novel The Castle of Otranto, the first to be categorized with Gothic hallmarks, women writers such as Ann Radcliffe worked to reinvent and reconfigure the Gothic tradition through a female lens. Today, the genre “has come to be dominated by women – written by women; read by women; and choosing as its central figure a young girl, the Gothic heroine” (Wolff 98).

Because of the idealization of the home and the newly created middle class of English society, Gothic novels gained in popularity. Middle-class women had time for reading and education, which allowed them more access to diverse, more complex fictions. However, women in positions of paid labor in lower class society ventured outside the house and risked bodily security. These risks contrasted with the comforts of middle class life and perpetuated the
agoraphobia and xenophobia. Because of the possible dangers encountered once women came in contact with society, the home became a symbol of safe refuge in literature and society, and the way to obtain a home, and thus safety, was through marriage.

Dependence on marriage to save women from lower-class existence and possible physical vulnerabilities fostered ideology that maintained a gendered difference and hierarchy. “The violence, danger, and breakdown of community ties that accompanied the development of eighteenth-century capitalism provided a justification for the separation of spheres” (Ellis x). Separation of spheres came to be not just a gendered philosophy but also a way of relegating economic and domestic tasks. Women were the purse holders and purchasers for the home while men were the ones to earn the money to go into the purse. Among those duties, women had to manage household staff members and maintain a social presence as well. Middle-class claim and superiority rested on a moral leadership by women. A home well-kept and regulated within gendered spheres was an “outward sign of male competence and trustworthiness, a valuable economic asset in a situation where traditional markers of reliability were inappropriate, inadequate, or breaking down” (Ellis x-xi). A misstep in social order or
an untidy, disorderly household promised to shake the foundations of the middle class and reflected poorly on the man who governed it. The stability of a household not only reinforced the middle-class image but also distinguished it “from the potentially dangerous lower orders, who could not afford it and [...] provided a rallying point for middle-class hostility toward an aristocracy that had lost its capacity for moral leadership” (Ellis xi)

The middle-class culture in British society signaled a new avenue through which media – books being the most popular at the time – could navigate. Therefore, the “middle-class idealization of the home” provided an entry point through which the Gothic novel could exist (Ellis xi). However, the genre did not necessarily promote female protection from male control and anger. “Rather, it was her endangered position that was so ideologically useful, allowing her to stand for the class itself, beset on all sides by aristocratic license and lower-class violence” (Ellis xi). The Gothic genre profited from this social, political, and economic order by playing into readers’ anxieties while revealing the complex relationship between the domestic and women.

By the 1950s, the Gothic was thriving once again, revolving around a similar concern as it had in the
nineteenth century – the lifestyle of the domestic. Post-
World War II American society offered a new set of fears –
the rise of suburban and atomic culture – with which Gothic
authors could play. “The same conventions reappeared –
ominous castles, distant and dim locations, faceless
heroines” – as did gender expectations (Wolff 104). Fear of
outsiders and domestic annihilation heightened because of
the Cold War mentality, allowing for the Gothic’s
resurgence.

3.1 Haunted Houses: Writing Female Identity and Confinement

Although women control the domestic space to an extent
in the Gothic novel and during 1950s atomic age, they
cannot truly feel or realize freedom because of constant
captivity within the home and its literal and figurative
walls, despite their renovation and reinterpretation of
that space. The space in which one lives correlates to the
way in which the body reacts to and acts within the space.
Describing the surroundings in the Gothic novel coincides
with characterizing the woman in the space; women can be
seen only within and enacting with the domestic space.
“Woman’s space is not a field in which her bodily
intentionality can be freely realized but an enclosure in
which she feels herself positioned and by which she is
confined” (Bartky 134). Between men and women, “there are
significant gender differences in gesture, posture, movement, and general bodily comportment: women are far more restricted than men in their manner of movement and in their lived spatiality" (Bartky 134). Foucault’s theory of docile bodies becomes realized in the domestic sphere with men making housewives the militarized automatons in Cold War America. Women in the Gothic genre enact the docile bodies as the novel constructs, places, and contains femininity to the fortress.

Women authors are not excluded from participating in strict gender code construction. They can restrict themselves by perpetuating and participating in cultural mores, pleasing the patriarchy with conduct books and themselves, believing in maintaining the social norm. However, I want to focus on those women writers who react to the prescribed femininity by drawing portraits of women trapped within the construction. While these characters rarely succeed in transgression and inevitably remain confined to the home, the minute progression exposes the desire to misbehave and achieve something beyond the domestic. “The Gothic novel expanded the female sphere to the point where women could challenge the basis of their own ‘elevation’” by committing minor acts of disobedience and attempting to interpret inner feelings and self (Ellis
In the Gothic, female internality manifests itself physically in the structure of the mansions or houses to which women were confined. The labyrinthine blueprint mirrors the emotional isolation of women in the Gothic novel and society. Closed doors separate rooms from each other and the outside world; a “dark, secret center” of the structure confuses “the boundaries of life and death;” and décor and rooms sizes seem incongruous when viewed as a whole (Kahane 334).

Not only is the house disjointed, “its confusions – its misleading clues, postponements of discovery, excessive digressions – are inscribed in the narrative structure itself” with a untrustworthy narrator, nonlinear or incoherent plotlines, and unusual circumstances that have befallen characters (Kahane 334). Throughout the novel, the heroine attempts to navigate through the house and her emotions, whether she is deciding on a spouse, grappling with maternal and domestic expectations, or struggling with a past trauma. Ultimately, the heroine’s journey, discovery, and understanding of the Gothic house’s center symbolize “the mystery of female identity, teeming with archaic fantasies of power and vulnerability, which a patriarchal society encourages by its cultural divisions” (Kahane 350). During the Victorian era and the 1950s,
readers related to the heroine’s plight and responded “to the emblematic significance of the building; its ‘reality’ rests in its ability to represent the conflicting passions that may be ‘housed’ within a single woman’s body” (Wolff 101).

While in search of that identity, characters perform Freud’s repetition compulsion to establish a mastery over their trauma. As mentioned previously, devices of the genre tend to repeat throughout the novel – whether it is imagery, settings, or leitmotifs. These repetitions function, as in most traumas, to reactivate the memory in order to recognize the unspeakable that happened. In the Gothic, “the originating trauma that prompts such repetition is the prohibition of female autonomy […] , in the families that people it, and in the society that reads it. History, both individual and societal, is the nightmare from which the protagonist cannot awaken and whose inexorable logic must be followed” (Massé 12). Thus, the narrative structure and social context of the Gothic work within a framework to return the reader and characters to locations of suffering, points of remembrance, and ideas of inescapability from the past. The plot is never an escape but an “exploration of the traumatic denial of identity found there” with the “nightmare stasis of the protagonists
and the all-enveloping power of the antagonists are extensions of social ideology and real-world experience” (Massé 18). The structure of the house, the site of terror, with its internalization and silencing power, marks the interior repression of characters and symbolizes the repressive power itself. “Furthermore, the over-determined repetition of [the heroine’s inability to align with patriarchal figures] within individual narratives and in the Gothic genre marks a persistent and active attempt by authors, their characters, and readers to rework the feminine social contract” (Massé 13).

Patriarchal authority not only causes trauma to women in fiction and reality but forces women to relive the horror through remembering the act, confining them to the site of it (the home), and affecting future reactions to situations. This control and twentieth-century constructions of femininity lead to more than just internalizing the actions. The structure of patriarchy and the home cause agoraphobia, which “presents itself as a virtual, though tragic, parody” of that ideology (Bordo 170). The Gothic genre, complicit in containing women to the home and perpetuating the terror of the space, fits into the agoraphobic mindset perfectly. During the 1950s and early 1960s, agoraphobia began to escalate among women
because it “was a period of reassertion of domesticity and dependency as the feminine,” an “ideology of [...] so well described by Betty Friedan and perfectly captured in the movies and television shows” (Bordo 170). In the Gothic and other popular media, “the housebound agoraphobic lives this construction of femininity literally” and cannot escape it (Bordo 170). Agoraphobia acts as a protest of housewife expectations – participating in social activities, running errands, and attending children’s school events – but also perpetuates women’s dependency on men. Developing shortly after marriage, agoraphobia cements “attachment in the face of unacceptable stirrings of dissatisfaction and restlessness” (Bordo 176). Paradoxically, agoraphobics attempt to protest cultural prohibitions but in doing so reinforce the conditions being disputed.

Women writers of Gothic fictions also present a paradoxical position by producing narratives that confine women to the home and revisit psychological issues. However, these writers attempt to revise this structure by fashioning, at times minutely, opportunities for female expression, renovation, and creation beyond patriarchal control. The novel discussed in the following chapter works within the Gothic framework to reclaim the domestic. Laura Shapiro, in writing about women’s responses to Julia
Child and Betty Friedan, said both Child’s and Friedan’s messages, though not similar in subject matter, told women the same core value: “You can do this yourself, with your brains and your own two hands. You don’t need to get it from a package. You can take charge. You can stand at the center of your own world and create something very good, from scratch” (248). Even within the Gothic genre, the culture of atomic housewifery, and the home itself, women could contribute to changing the domestic landscape and feminine cultural norms and plant the roots for the revolution on the horizon in the 1960s.
CHAPTER 4

WE HAVE ALWAYS LIVED IN THE CASTLE:

BURNING DESIRE TO LIVE ON THE MOON

In *We Have Always Lived in the Castle*, her final novel, Shirley Jackson creates her most comprehensive and developed work, combining Gothic traditions with mystical ideology and fairy tale conventions. The amalgamation of genres produces a disconcerting tone and unsettles the reader. Mary Katherine Blackwood, or Merricat, narrates in a sinisterly innocent voice while her sister Constance and Uncle Julian live in the world she designs.

The title itself plays with the multiple levels through which the novel can be read. At first glance, a castle prompts imagery of fairy tales and royalty; however, castle also recalls the Gothic site of fear and trauma. The castle in which Merricat and Constance inhabit positions them either as princesses or as prisoners or both. They have, as have other family members, always lived there, unable to escape or relocate themselves. It is not just any castle either. It is “the” castle. Instead of choosing “a castle,” which implies one of many, Jackson elects to make
this “the castle,” the definitive one. “The” universalizes the castle to reveal a social history of containment and restrictive behavior. In that sense, the “we” can be taken as a blanket term for women. Women, in general, have always been confined to the home and relegated to a certain code of conduct – privileged like princesses to a degree but bound to a social contract like prisoners.

The novel begins in present tense with Merricat introducing herself by informing the reader she wishes she would have been born a werewolf instead of a human and her likes and dislikes. She ends her opening by bluntly revealing her entire family, minus Constance, is dead. After the first paragraph, however, the narration switches to past tense and remains that way throughout the novel. Although present tense is only used briefly, the disjointed verbiage mirrors the schism in Merricat and her world. Her opening suggests a childlike, dangerous, and fanciful personality in presenting a strange conglomeration of preferences: she enjoys a poisonous mushroom and dislikes dogs and noise. Her desire to be a werewolf also implies her discontent with reality and her inclination toward mythical creations. Once she changes verb tense, she narrates events leading to a change in her family and living situation and slowly unravels the mystery behind her
family’s death. She can only express these incidents by looking back on them in order to embrace her new domestic situation, which she has a direct hand in establishing.

In the first scene, Merricat recounts her journey home from town, the only passage outside the Blackwood property. Merricat’s description of the village portrays it as a vile, ugly place ominous for women. “In this village the men stayed young and did the gossiping and the women aged with grey evil weariness and stood silently waiting for the men to get up and come home” (Jackson 3). Merricat ventures to town only out of necessity. If she had her way, she would stay at home and never leave. For Merricat, home becomes a safe haven from the rotting society surrounding it. Whenever Constance, who only comes out a few feet beyond the house, mentions going outside, Merricat gets “chilled” with fear and anxiety (Jackson 21). Between the social stigma attached to Constance, villagers assume she killed her family members, and the history of agoraphobia among women in the Blackwood family, Merricat fears what may happen if either woman were to leave the house. As the novel progresses, the plot moves closer within the domestic, beginning with Merricat returning home and ending with the women confined to a single room, and encloses the Blackwood sisters and the reader within the home. By doing
so, Jackson enacts the cultural containment of women during the atomic era upon the reader. Constance and Merricat’s agoraphobic behavior represents the acceptance of that containment; however, the sisters rework the domestic to suit their desires, embrace female tradition, and assert their individuality.

According to Merricat, Blackwoods have always lived in their house and kept daily activities and supplies in order. No one besides the Blackwood family has been allowed to inhabit the property or control the domestic routine. “As soon as a new Blackwood wife moved in, a place was found for her belongings, and so our house was built up with layers of Blackwood property weighting it, and keeping it steady against the world” (Jackson 1). Once a new woman is introduced to the family and home, her possessions are properly placed in the house and become subsumed by the Blackwoods. While women manage and contribute to the house, ultimately they are property and incorporated into the male name of Blackwood. This “Blackwood property” becomes its weight and influence and preserves its strength against outside forces. Merricat focuses on the women of the family and how they provide to the domestic health and wealth of the Blackwood name. In Merricat’s narrative, men rarely act or support household endeavors. Her father’s only
significant action is gating the property off from outside intrusion, at the request of her mother, to maintain decorum and prevent people from crossing through. Uncle Julian, the only male left in the house, is unable to complete any task physically and mentally, and Charles, a distant cousin who invades the house, sponges off the Blackwood fortune and Constance’s work. Women not only run the household but also are the only ones who function in any capacity.

Jackson fetishizes food in Castle and signifies its preservation as the most important contribution of the Blackwood women. Constance reveres food as a “precious” commodity and touches “foodstuffs with quiet respect” (Jackson, Castle 20). By placing so much importance on food, Constance embodies the Cold War mindset of stocking the pantry. She asserts that food “can’t be permitted to stay [in the ground] and rot; something has to be done with it” (Jackson 42). As all the Blackwood women had before, Constance takes the food from the ground and preserves it. The cellar pantry represents a history of Blackwood women and appears as a collection of their personalities and experiences. Food offers Constance a way to express and create an identity for herself. “Constance had worked all her life at adding to the food in the cellar, and her rows
and rows of jars were easily the handsomest, and shone among the others” (Jackson 42). She, as previous Blackwood women, takes “pride in adding to the great supply of food” in the cellar (Jackson 42). Through food preservation, not only does Constance nourish the family and gain personal enjoyment, she continues a tradition of female innovation as well. Merricat says, “the deeply colored rows of jellies and pickles and bottled vegetables and fruit, maroon and amber and dark rich green, stood side by side in our cellar and would stand there forever, a poem by the Blackwood women” (Jackson 42). The women’s work acts as a combined piece of art and lives on past the women themselves.

While Constance does not allow Merricat to participate in the tradition of food preparation, Merricat uses food as a vehicle to eliminate patriarchy and assert her own identity. Merricat adds arsenic to sugar in order to kill her family. Knowing her sister’s habit of not adding sugar to her berries, Merricat saves herself and Constance from their father’s tyrannical reign and leaves Uncle Julian as an ineffectual male figure. Uncle Julian refers to fate as “she” and acknowledges she is the one who either saved or killed the family members. The female controls life, Constance sustaining it and Merricat taking it away,
through the administration of food. Food, which allows for individuality and creation for Constance, permits Merricat to form a matriarchal domestic sphere in which she and Constance can live, control, and design.

However, when Charles arrives at the house, he threatens to disrupt that order and space by reasserting patriarchy. Charles gains access to the home by entering “the heart” of the house, the kitchen. By entering through the kitchen, Charles violates the arena for Blackwood women’s expression and a traditionally feminine space. Charles’s spatial intrusion symbolizes men’s physical penetration of women. As he introduces himself to Merricat, she describes him as “taller now that he was inside, bigger and bigger as he came closer to me” and he asks for a kiss from her (Jackson 57). Charles’s body looms over hers and represents a physical risk to her body and home. Constance recognizes Charles instantly because “he looks like Father,” which adds to Merricat’s fear of him (Jackson 57). As Charles settles in the home, he takes on characteristics of the late John Blackwood, for whom Uncle Julian often mistakes him. Charles sits in John’s chair, stays in his room, and wears his clothing. By physically putting on aspects of John, Charles attempts to insert himself into the symbolic role John held as well.
To eradicate Charles from the house, which he now saturates, and from the women’s lives, Merricat suggests that Constance “make a gingerbread man, and [Merricat] could name him Charles and eat him” (Jackson, Castle 75). Again, Merricat employs food to destroy male control. However, this time, the man becomes a product of female creation and enters the female body literally as the woman devours man. Also in this scenario, the woman regulates how and when a man can access her body. For Merricat, the physicality and bodily presence of men presents the most frightening aspect of patriarchy. Women must gain control over the male body and act against it to prevent their own bodies being infringed upon or subsumed.

Initially, in an attempt to maintain matriarchal control, Merricat buries or hangs objects that symbolize male authority, such as money. By hiding items in the ground, Merricat hopes to ward off unwanted visitors and protect the space from harm. To expel Charles from the house, at one point, she nails her father’s gold watch to a tree, which infuriates Charles. Merricat does not find value in her family’s monetary wealth and attempts to rid the home of the objects’ symbolic value through their burial. Ultimately unsuccessful in her actions, Merricat utilizes more determined force against Charles and burns
all material signifiers of patriarchy. Merricat’s only option to preserve the domestic space is to reinvent the structure itself. By gutting her family home, Merricat erases all evidence of male intrusion and demolishes her patriarchal lineage, leaving only she and her sister to survive and the ground level with the kitchen and cellar intact.

After the fire, the sisters close off unused space one by one and confine themselves to the kitchen and front door area. Vines take over the exterior and barricades and boards act as barriers against the outside world. Merricat embraces the new home and feels a sense of ownership because “the boards across the kitchen windows were ours, and part of our house, and we loved them” (Jackson 145). As never before, the two women possess property of their own making. In the final line, Merricat tells Constance “we are so happy,” a revision of the happily ever after endings familiar in fairy tales (Jackson 146). With the reference Merricat inverts the marriage plot and knight on white horse tropes in those tales. The women here save themselves, reject social contracts and notions of love, and need only female relationships to survive and be happy. While Merricat remains an unstable force and Constance is confined to her kitchen and caring for Merricat
indefinitely, the women’s life together offers a stronger, more palatable alternative than the dominance of Charles or the unhappiness and ugliness of the villagers.
WORKS CITED


