



# “What is this world?”: Confronting Conspicuously Literary Realms in Shirley Jackson’s Later Novels

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“What is this world?”: Confronting Conspicuously Literary Realms  
in Shirley Jackson’s Later Novels

Melissa M. Reynolds

A Thesis in the Field of English  
for the Degree of Master of Liberal Arts in Extension Studies

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## Abstract

This thesis addresses the presence of noticeable literariness within the later novels of Shirley Jackson, including the carefully crafted and repetitive inclusion of intertextual and metafiction techniques. Within what I refer to as Jackson's "literary realms," which are comprised of particular literary and historical allusions, moments of attention given to the acts of writing and reading, and pivotal scenes that incorporate libraries, I contend that Jackson demonstrates an ongoing struggle with the potential for such literary realms to serve as desirable, accepting, or safe spaces for the writer and her reader. Reading *The Haunting of Hill House* (published in 1959) as a kind of literary fulcrum for Jackson's work, this project explores the particular construction of literary matters within *The Sundial* (1958), which immediately precedes *Hill House*, and *We Have Always Lived in the Castle* (1962), which follows it. While *The Sundial* delights in shrewdly provoking engagement with a readerly reader, *Hill House* indicates a shift in Jackson's presentation of literary realms as both appealing and threatening. The turn away from the use of more obviously literary language in *We Have Always Lived in the Castle* suggests an increasing distrust in the potential for literary realms to serve as safe spaces. Close consideration of the intricate treatment of literary matters within Jackson's work reshapes her legacy, and repositions Jackson as a substantial American literary figure beyond traditionally assigned genre conventions.

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## Chapter I.

### Introduction: The Literary Tensions of Shirley Jackson

In the foreword to *Shirley Jackson: A Companion*, published in 2021, biographer Ruth Franklin declares that an “explosion in Jackson studies” is underway (Woofter xvii). Similarly, in a recent issue of *Women’s Studies* devoted to Jackson’s work, Daniel Kasper notes that there is a palpable “energy” surrounding this renewed interest in Jackson (Kasper 803). However, for decades, as Bernice M. Murphy recounts, this has not been the case: “[Jackson’s] gender, versatility, professionalism, and commercial popularity meant that [she] was frequently deemed less worthy of serious scholarly and critical inquiry than many of her contemporaries” (*The Letters of Shirley Jackson* xxi). Eric Savoy attributes this history of critical disinclination to “readers and critics [not knowing] quite what to make of Shirley Jackson, perhaps because [Jackson’s] works are individually unsettling and cumulatively disturbing in ways that resist the pointed critical finger” (828). Her work in the novel form, especially, relishes in being refractory, and Hilarie Ashton aptly describes this predilection as part of the general “slipperiness” of Jackson’s style (279). And yet, as Benjamin Dreyer states, “[Jackson’s] one of the great prose stylists of the twentieth century,” but she is largely and “woefully underappreciated” (Kasper 803). If we are indeed in what Kasper calls a “moment of Jackson Revival” (808), an intriguing and challenging dimension of Jackson’s work that begs deeper reflection is the presence of noticeable literariness, particularly within her later novels. That is, the carefully crafted and repetitive inclusion of intertextual and

metafiction techniques; specifically, the use of particular literary and historical allusions, attention given to the acts of writing and reading, as well as pivotal scenes that incorporate libraries. In a seminal reconsideration of Jackson that was published in 2003, Darryl Hattenhauer argues that Jackson should hold a distinguished, essential status within literary study because she represents a significant shift into the postmodern, yet she receives little credit or recognition for it. Hattenhauer notes that “the intertextuality of her style” (4) is one of Jackson’s key postmodern traits, but since the release of his volume, there has been light analysis of the potential purpose of the intertextual or otherwise strikingly literary elements that are present in her works. Interestingly, Harold Bloom, in his scrupulous study of the notion of intertextuality, overlooks its function in Jackson explicitly, stating outright, “her art of narration stayed on the surface” (10). While how or whether the meaning of certain instances of intertextuality or literary-tinted language may be interpreted in a text varies widely across different theoretical perspectives, in examining Jackson’s work, I argue that conspicuous literary cues and the presentation of experiences within literary domains provide an important opportunity to find new meaning in Jackson’s writing. The intention of this thesis is not to chase down every instance of literary reference in Jackson’s later novels, but rather to consider the markedly literary-infused aspects of her work as an essential component in the complexity of her craft. By questioning how and why Jackson intertwines her last three novels (out of six total published in her lifetime) with other touchpoints from literature and history, while also creating experiences of tension in proximity to literary realms, Jackson provokes contemplation of whether literature functions as a safe space, a site of reckoning, or a tradition we should align ourselves with at all.



While this thesis focuses primarily on two of Jackson's less studied later works, *The Sundial* (published in 1958) and *We Have Always Lived in the Castle* (1962), many readers will be familiar with *The Haunting of Hill House* (1959), which was written and released between the previously mentioned texts. The bulk of scholarly assessments of Jackson's work concentrate on this novel, and understandably, most analyze Jackson's writing in general through tenets of the Gothic genre. Roberta Rubenstein, for example, explores how Jackson often uses the Gothic to explore the entrapment of the self inside a house (311), while Dara Downey notes that Jackson's work is "fraught with tensions surrounding the concept of refuge" (290). Certainly, "haunting and frightening" (Hogle 3) elements indicative of Gothic conventions show up in nearly all of Jackson's fiction, but *Hill House* also includes numerous, sophisticated intertextual and literary-tinged features, which are presented in a manner that is different from her prior works. In a recently published piece, Graley Herren explores the plausible influence of William Shakespeare within *Hill House*, referring to the investigation as an "intertextual ghost-hunting expedition in search of shades of Shakespeare in the queering of Hill House" (153). Herren reads the presence of references to Shakespearean plays (including *A Midsummer Night's Dream*) in the text as a pathway for Eleanor, the novel's protagonist, to navigate through experiences of "restrictive gender expectations, patriarchal persecution, and queer desire" (152). Others, including Lynne Evans, have examined the direct quotations within the novel that derive from Shakespeare's *Twelfth Night*. Similar to Herren, Evans sees a connection between the depiction of heteronormative sexuality within Jackson's text and Shakespeare's play (Evans 113).

Pulling back farther from Shakespeare specifically, but maintaining this emphasis on the significance of a literary optic, we notice that one of Eleanor's earliest experiences of paralyzing apprehension occurs as the characters encounter Hill House's library: "'I can't go in there,' Eleanor said, surprising herself, but she could not. [...] 'My mother—' she said, not knowing what she wanted to tell them, and pressed herself against the wall" (Jackson, *The Haunting of Hill House* 97). While some may consider Eleanor's fear in connection with her disturbing relationship with her late mother or as symptomatic of Eleanor's ongoing struggle with personal identity, this striking moment of hesitation also suggests an underlying tension with the idea of the library itself. Earlier in the text, we are told that Eleanor is a reader who is "bored already with the books she had brought" (39), and in describing her carefully curated (though completely made-up) apartment to Theodora, Eleanor speaks of having "a white cat and my books and records and pictures" (83). In both reality and her fantasies, Eleanor surrounds herself with books, and we know that she repeatedly recites the same line from Shakespeare throughout the entirety of the text: "Journeys end in lovers meeting" (34). Yet, the Hill House library is a space she is unable to access, both physically, as she is "overwhelmed with the cold air of mold and earth" (97), and mentally—even her olfactory sense is struck: "I don't think I'll do much reading while I'm here [...] Not if the books smell like the library" (98). Though Dr. Montague is mildly intrigued by Eleanor's reaction to the room, he turns first to Luke for confirmation of any disturbance presented by the space (and receives none), before patronizingly instructing Eleanor to "Make a note of it, my dear, and try to describe it exactly" (99). There is no indication that Eleanor makes any such notes to please Dr. Montague, but what is clear is that the home's library provides entry to the location

where Hill House's former resident killed herself. The library, as regarded by Dr. Montague, is "a most suitable spot, certainly; more suitable for suicides, I would think, than for books" (98). If the library is an intensely threatening realm for Eleanor and (as per Dr. Montague) the most appropriate place for a woman to die, Jackson gestures toward a literary-specific stress point.

In one regard, Jackson might incorporate this literary slant into Eleanor's frightening encounter simply to point at differences in gender experience when it comes to accessing or traversing literary spaces. This would be relatively unsurprising given Jackson's era. Her husband's career as an esteemed literary critic and academic (in contrast with Jackson's tendency to be labeled as mere "housewife") might also be a contributing factor (*Letters* xx). But near the novel's end, Eleanor gleefully breaks "the spell of Hill House" by entering the library and proclaiming: "I am home, I am home" (*Hill House* 221). Her final experience within the library is a complete sensorial reversal to her earlier reaction, and far from being nauseated, Eleanor is "deliciously, fondly warm" and feeling "wonder" in the space (221). While some may read this turn as supporting Eleanor's declining mental state or as an unnerving depiction of a kind of ghostly possession, we must acknowledge that the library has become a haven so powerful, welcoming, and lovely that even "Time is ended now, she thought" (222). And yet, Eleanor is not permitted to stay in this location, as she so deeply desires:

"Look." Eleanor was quiet for a minute, wanting to tell them all exactly how it was. "I wasn't afraid," she said at last. "I really wasn't afraid. I'm fine now. I was—happy." She looked earnestly at the doctor. "*Happy*," she said. "I don't know what to say," she said, afraid again that she was going to cry. "I don't want to go away from here." (230, emphasis in original)

Readers are likely to pass judgment on Eleanor, just as the other residents in the house do. If Eleanor has lost her grip on reality, it is time for her to move along. But perhaps Jackson wants us to consider the alternative: why can't Eleanor remain in the library? It is a joyous place—replete with Eleanor's own stories that are set “far, far away” and include “magic oleanders,” “stone lions,” and “candlelight” (222). The final line of dialogue that Eleanor delivers to Dr. Montague suggests that despite all her protests, she knows she is not going to experience her own happy ending in her blissful literary realm. As she departs, Eleanor says to him, flatly, “I hope your book is very successful” (233). This vacillation between literary spaces sometimes being presented as hostile and other times as welcoming and sublime plays out in different ways elsewhere in Jackson's work. However, it is evident that Jackson wants us to pay close attention to the inclusion and potential implications of such literary frictions.

*The Sundial* and Jackson's final novel, *We Have Always Lived in the Castle*, share some of the same features as *The Haunting of Hill House*, including isolated gothic homes and what Savoy calls the “proximity of horror” (843). However, if we carefully consider the tense, literary-infused undercurrents that pulsate throughout Jackson's novels, I propose that *The Haunting of Hill House* also serves as a kind of literary fulcrum for reading Jackson. In *The Sundial*, I argue that Jackson revels in literary language in order to call attention to the novel, and literary tradition in general, as being under attack. Yet, in *Hill House*, we are presented with the idea of a literary space that is initially terrifying, but ultimately alluring in a deeply personal way for Eleanor. Where *The Sundial* savors dipping in and out of complex literary references in order to provoke engagement with a readerly reader, both the threat and the appeal of literary realms in

*Hill House* focus on the experience of one female, who is never quite able to achieve her peaceful entry into this space. In *We Have Always Lived in the Castle*, however, there is a discernible movement away from the use of more obviously literary language. The novel casts a much darker shade on the concepts of personal storytelling, accessing truth, and preserving words. I contend that in *Castle*, the potential for literary realms to serve as desirable, accepting, or safe spaces, which is subtly present in Jackson's previous novels, is gone.

The embers for Jackson's interest in literary-related turmoil may be traced back to her earlier novel work. In a letter to her agent, dated February 1958, Jackson writes, "I always prepare for a new book by reading all my old books over again" (*Letters* 363). This is not a radical disclosure, but it supports the possibility that her incorporation of intentionally literary language within her novels builds over time. In her second novel, *Hangsaman* (published in 1951), it is implied that Jackson's 17-year-old protagonist, Natalie, is sexually assaulted by one of her father's acquaintances, during a party held at Natalie's home. The party has been organized by Natalie's mother for Natalie's father's circle of literary-professional friends. This largely unspoken act at the novel's outset establishes a disturbing link between an intimate attack that is paired with a literary connotation. Despite his talents as a renowned writer and critic (who even dresses "very literary indeed"), Natalie's father is never able to see or effectively read Natalie's deteriorating mental state as the novel progresses, nor is the violation she suffered ever directly acknowledged (Jackson, *Hangsaman* 209). In *The Bird's Nest* (published in 1954), which focuses on the psychological unraveling of one woman into four split personalities (Elizabeth, Beth, Betsy, and Bess), Jackson integrates multiple references to

nursery rhymes. By the novel's conclusion, she evokes immense unease as the nefarious Aunt Morgen and Doctor Wright are able to exert so much power over Elizabeth that they resolve to "fill" her empty, docile head as if it were a "vacant landscape" (Jackson, *The Bird's Nest* 623). The pair essentially determines to rewrite Elizabeth's mind and personal story, and the novel ends with the group walking away, "arm in arm, and laughing" (*The Bird's Nest* 630). While each of these earlier novels invite their own divergent and complex readings, prevailing interpretations tend to focus on the mental volatility of the protagonists. However, in a recently published piece, Ibi Kaslik explores the role of writing, female identity, and patriarchal resistance in *Hangsaman*, positioning Jackson's novel as an "antecedent" intertext for Sylvia Plath's *The Bell Jar* (174). This interesting new analysis further indicates that the vein of consideration of literary-related matters in Jackson's work warrants greater critical attention.

I begin my analysis with *The Sundial*, wherein Jackson creates a fictional world that is saturated in literary language, but is on the brink of obliteration. The novel is perceived by many as being a sarcastic portrayal of a group of dim and unlikeable people, as well as a representation of the Cold War-related angsts of Jackson's age, including concerns over the potential for nuclear fallout. My reading, however, maintains focus on the expressly literary elements that Jackson offers, and leans into an analysis of Geoffrey Chaucer's "The Knight's Tale" as a key intertext. *The Sundial* dangles in a fluctuating intertextual space in order to create a language that manifests chaos and destruction, while explicating the notion of a literary battle. We are strategically drawn into this tumultuous realm by being asked to ponder potential answers to the significant question posed on the face of the titular sundial: "WHAT IS THIS WORLD?" (Jackson, *The*

*Sundial* 9). Throughout the text, Jackson repeatedly positions literature as being under threat, from maniacal people as well as from other types of media. Ultimately, she prompts us to take up a side as the world of the novel nears its end. The text provides a fascinating glimpse into some of the creative dilemmas of Jackson's time, including wrestling with what value literature provides as it encounters external hostilities, as well as how to navigate the simultaneous presence of other forms of entertainment, such as television and film. It is also a novel in which we most clearly see Jackson delight in inciting the attention of a readerly reader.

The shift in how literary language is presented two novels later, in *We Have Always Lived in the Castle*, is jarring. Jackson's tragically early death at age forty-eight certainly glosses the novel with its own kind of emotional nuance, but within the text we see Jackson demonstrate an interest in exploring the idea of stories of the past. My reading considers the presence of particular historical references, which are brought in at moments when the characters attempt to confront their own challenging pasts. Additionally, I address the treatment of stories and the how the novel accomplishes the preservation of words in a questionable "place of safety" (Jackson, *We Have Always Lived in the Castle* 101). Ultimately, I contend that Jackson accompanies these experiences with various figurative and literal blocks, which suggests a dark and continuous inaccessibility when it comes to meeting the past. Concurrently, Jackson returns to the idea of a library domain within *Castle*, but she emphasizes its unreachability. This combined notion of story- and truth-avoidance, paired with a distant and unavailable library space, points to a larger and ultimately unresolved experience of literary tension.

In looking closely at specific, common literary elements in both *The Sundial* and *Castle* together, Jackson's strategy of pulling in other male-authored and traditionally considered canonical intertexts may also be a commentary on gender experience. Chapter four provides an exploration of how these analogous literary components are presented in both novels. The crafting of strong female protagonists in *The Sundial* and *Castle*, who are also involved in various kinds of interaction with recognizable intertexts, suggests a desire to present and explore a different perspective. The careful and conspicuous inclusion of precise intertexts supports that Jackson is, as Graham Allen phrases it, well aware that she is "writing within patriarchal culture and society" (156). This certainly may be a reflection of Jackson's historical place and time, but the incorporation of Daniel Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe* and Rudyard Kipling's poem, "If," into *The Sundial* also suggest that Jackson is speaking back to a patriarchal literary tradition. *Castle* further draws on *Crusoe* as an important intertext, and its use casts a potentially harrowing new shade on Merricat's relationship with Uncle Julian. Other scholars have addressed feminist themes within Jackson's work, including issues such as "rigidly defined gender roles" (Bonikowski 66) and confronting "proper womanliness" (Shotwell 119). My approach posits that Jackson has a propensity to bring to our attention a distinctly literary challenge of representation and experience. This includes how intertextual reference may elicit a language for trauma.

In the final chapter of this project, I return to Jackson's letters and her personal correspondence with a fan turned friend, in order to make the connection between this particular relationship and the content of *Castle*. I will conclude that literary realms are both an intrinsic and irrefutable part of Jackson's style, deserving of careful attention



outside of or apart from traditional or conventional understandings of Jackson's work.

This position recasts Jackson as a serious writer, who wished to be taken seriously, and thus disrupts the inclination to define her in any singular way.

## Chapter II.

### “WHAT IS THIS WORLD?”: Literary Clashes In (and On) *The Sundial*

While working on an early draft of *The Sundial*, Jackson stated in a personal letter that this new novel “is certainly going to be an odd book” (*Letters* 331), but years after its publication commented that it “has always been my favorite, you know” (417). General conceptions of *The Sundial* focus on its cutting depictions of a group of inane people who are preparing for an apocalypse. Yet, Jackson felt strongly about any effort to recapitulate the text for terse descriptive purposes, and said so in a note to her publisher:

I mind the attempt at plot summary very much. Essentially, the only statement necessary is that the book is about the end of the world. [...] I object most violently to the one-adjective description of each character: ‘Senile Richard Halloran,’ ‘beautiful Gloria Desmond,’ ‘experienced Mrs. Willow,’ and so on. (*Letters* 351)

After *The Sundial*’s debut, a critic in the *Los Angeles Times* remarked, “A novel such as this is a kind of literary Rorschach test,” and another reviewer stated that the book had “all the big brains puzzled” (Franklin 401). While the text has recently received a small increase in critical attention, including interesting new readings from queer theory perspectives, true to Jackson’s oeuvre, the novel resists tidy explanation and is in many ways “inscrutable” (Joshi 26). Jackson herself described *The Sundial* as “so precariously balanced on the edge of the ridiculous that any slip might send it in the wrong direction” (*Letters* 352). The novel’s ambiguous and apprehensive undercurrent is primarily considered by Angela Hague and a few others through the historical angle of the post-war atomic age, including 1950s American domestic and cultural ideology, and what the text suggests about repressive nuclear family relationships (Hague 74). It is also nearly

impossible not to detect numerous literary intimations throughout the novel, and as Hattenhauer affirms, it is "one of [Jackson's] most intertextual" works (142). However, looking beyond the sheer presence of abundant allusions in *The Sundial*, one sees that several noticeably literary features prompt essential questions to think about while reading the novel.

Shortly after *The Sundial* was published, Jackson delivered a lecture to students at Bennington College and spoke of her tendency to create "a heaven-wall-gate arrangement" in her books; essentially a "forbidden, lovely secret" that lies behind "a gate that cannot be passed" (Jackson, *Let Me Tell You* 370). *The Sundial*, she declares, is a complete departure. Instead of creating in her usual manner, she determined that "the thing to do was to write a new book, and *start* inside—write a kind of inside-out book" (*Let Me Tell You* 371, emphasis in original). Considering this novel, then, as a complex, intertextual, and "kind of inside-out book," we see Jackson use the sundial as a central point from which to push back out into a wider literary world. She uses her text to generate unease and provoke contemplation of what literature means, and ultimately asks us to decide whether or not we care about the novel form and its future.

Jackson's narrator reveals early on that while building his estate, the late Mr. Halloran (who was by no means an emotional sort), ardently "set his heart upon a sundial" (*Sundial* 8). Far from being a simple exemplification of "the Gothic motif of an unclear title" (Hattenhauer 140), Jackson almost immediately uses the sundial to focalize a deliberate and repetitive weaving of literary language into her text. The interior and exterior of the Halloran house is described as having been built with thorough consideration of beauty, precision, and architectural symmetry: "equally" and with "a

vastly long lovely movement to a summer house built like a temple to some minor mathematical god” (*Sundial* 9). However, at the novel’s start, in a single sentence set apart in its own paragraph, the narrator states, “Intruding purposefully upon the entire scene, an inevitable focus, was the sundial, set badly off center and reading WHAT IS THIS WORLD?” (10). Depicted as an intentional incursion, both in the mansion’s lawn and in the distinct structure of the prose on the page, the question receives inescapable emphasis and attention. The link between this line and Chaucer’s *Canterbury Tales* becomes clear a few paragraphs later:

“Tell me again,” Mrs. Halloran said, looking down at the sundial in the warm evening darkness. “‘What is this world?’” Essex said quietly, “‘What asketh man to have? Now with his love, now colde in his grave, Al-lone, with-outen any companye.’” (11)

Hattenhauer reads this allusion (and others in the novel) to “the canonical [as] always perverted by the leading characters,” connecting this particular quote to the Halloran family’s obsession with shallow materialism (142). S.T. Joshi interprets Chaucer’s words as part of Jackson’s overall tendency toward misanthropy (33). Yet, Jackson’s personal letters confirm the central importance of the sundial itself: “I think when I find a suitable inscription I will know what the book is about” (*Letters* 305). Characters in *The Sundial* eagerly seek signs of what is to come. While Jonathan Culler (and other scholars) note that it is impossible to unequivocally decode the intertextuality that may be present in a work and proclaim how each instance should be interpreted (Culler 112), the inclusion of a loudly intertextual inquiry on the ostensible sundial—bolstered by Jackson’s careful attention to the inscription—suggests a type of readerly sign.

To begin to clarify this possibility, and as an entry point for how literary elements work within this novel, we might first consider how the sundial functions as a temporal

tool. Although the sundial is “properly engineered and timed,” the characters do not use it to tell time, and we are told that there are several other clocks in the house (*Sundial* 9). In reality, a sundial indicates daylight hours based on the shadow cast by the pointer onto the object’s surface. Jackson’s narrator validates at the start of the final chapter that this is how the Hallorans’ sundial operates as well: “The sundial showed no hours at night” (205). Yet, if the characters were to look to the sundial to tell time, the text also suggests that it would be inaccurate or show “imperfection” (11). Orianna (one of the central protagonists, who is also referred to in the text as Mrs. Halloran), comments as she “touched the sundial gently, ‘We will not count many more hours *here*,’” with an emphasis (italics present in the original) that gestures toward some sense of futility in connection with the sundial, compounded by the impending end of time (116). Additionally, despite the senescent connotation of time through the use of Chaucer’s words on such a sizeable time-telling object, the narrator hints that the sundial’s inscription and overall purpose is not actually related to time at all: “After a while Mr. Halloran quite fancied it, having persuaded himself that it was a remark about time” (9). Beyond the sundial’s potential uselessness as a timekeeping instrument, some of the characters actively loathe it: “‘I hate that thing,’ Arabella said. ‘The sundial’” (104). Though there is something about the sundial that evokes dislike, Orianna repeatedly feels compelled to touch it and at the start of the novel she resolves to ponder the sundial “conscientiously” (11). Jackson challenges us to do the same. If the sundial is not used to mark time, its presence is often treated with contempt, and its inscription is not concerned with time, why is it there? Reflective of what the characters are experiencing in their uncertain wait for the end of the world, the sundial might instead represent an experience

of temporal, literary limbo. The sundial moves us as readers out of or away from a sense of traditional or chronological time, and instead focuses and suspends our reading within the words of the bookish aporia: “WHAT IS THIS WORLD?” (9).

This pattern of intertextual denotations paired with a suspension of time repeats throughout the novel, indicating that we must heed such literary-imbued moments. For example, in the text’s opening lines, we do not yet know who Essex is, but his debut dialogue interjected into the conversation about alleged matricide evokes Shakespeare’s *Hamlet*, “The king, thy murdered father’s ghost” (2). Jackson subtly draws attention to this Shakespearean reference by creating a brief sensation of rest, as the narrator describes how Essex speaks and then “yawned, and moved on the velvet bench, and stretched” (2). Essex’s early utterance, reinforced by the pause, begins to establish that *The Sundial* is carefully designed for a readerly reader. These experiences of literary-mingled suspension, which ripple throughout the text and are confirmed and strengthened by the sundial, open up new pathways for thinking about the novel. Such temporal experiences lead to one answer for the blatant question posed by the sundial’s inscription, and it is important to Jackson that we know it: this world is literary.

In the afterword to *Let Me Tell You*, a collection of some of Jackson’s previously unpublished essays and short stories, two of Jackson’s children, Laurence Jackson Hyman and Sarah Hyman DeWitt, write that “[Shirley] expected the reader to complete the experience of making fiction; she assumed a certain literacy from her reader, or at least the ability to pay attention, because she considered the writer and reader to be partners” (406). Keeping this statement and the sundial’s inscription in mind, there are a number of unexplored parallels between “The Knight’s Tale” and Jackson’s novel. In

accordance with Aunt Fanny's recurring compulsion to refer back to the words of her father, perhaps we are meant to consider the words of Chaucer as some kind of revelatory literary father figure. Following that thread, we find deeper insight into the question posed on the sundial by looking closely at Chaucer's text. Emily Banks contends that the presence of "The Knight's Tale" in Jackson's work helps position Orianna and Aunt Fanny as domestically imprisoned rivals, similar to Chaucer's Arcite and Palamon, and that "while 'The Knight's Tale' is the story of two men fighting over a woman, *The Sundial* is a tale of two women struggling for power over a house" (881). Consequently, Banks sees the sundial's inscription as foreshadowing the conflict between Orianna and Aunt Fanny, from which only one person will survive (881). However, if we examine Chaucer's tale from *inside* Jackson's (heeding her remark that this is a "kind of inside-out book") by looking closely at what is occurring in her novel and within the intertext, another layer of possible solutions to the sundial's question emerges (*Let Me Tell You* 371). "The Knight's Tale" certainly explores the concepts of competition, chivalry, and romance, but it also includes a fearful undercurrent that points to intense disorder. As Palamon reflects:

But well I know that great pain is in this world.  
 Alas, I see a serpent or a thief,  
 That has done mischief to many a true man,  
 Go at his liberty, and can go where he pleases.  
 But I must be in prison because of Saturn. (lines 1324-1328)

Just after Aunt Fanny delivers details from the encounter with her father's voice ("He said fire would come, and he said it would be black fire. He said there was danger"), a snake appears in the Hallorans' fireplace, "seemingly frozen with attention," then it disappears "behind a bookcase" (*Sundial* 32). Through this redolent language and another

intertextual moment of pause, as the snake is briefly “frozen” (33), Jackson may be suggesting that *this* world in *The Sundial* and *this* world in Chaucer’s text are comprised of threats and some kind of “great pain” (Chaucer line 1324). The literary connection is reinforced in the final lines of the snake scene, as Orianna says, “I am bewildered. Come into the library and explain all this to me” (*Sundial* 33). Aunt Fanny, conversely, delights in the snake’s freedom of movement and (to use Chaucer’s word) “mischief”: ““You won’t find that snake,’ Aunt Fanny said dreamily, ‘It was shining, full of light. You won’t ever find it’” (33).

Later in the novel, as Aunt Fanny delivers her “second revelation” (98), we see hints of Chaucer again, as Aunt Fanny describes when the world will end: “After the snake. After the day the night. After the thief the flight” (100). To which the response is: ““Poetry,’ said Mrs. Willow, disgustedly. ‘When they start saying poetry they’re no good anymore’” (100). In this strange and repetitive intermixing of Chaucer within her own fiction, Jackson establishes Aunt Fanny not just as harbinger of the apocalypse, but as a “no good” figure who arouses the bestial, alarming subtext that also runs through “The Knight’s Tale.” However noble the pageantry and social graces within “The Knight’s Tale” are meant to appear, Palamon also muses on how “a beast may fulfill all his desire” (line 1318), and he and Arcite ultimately battle like animals “that froth at the mouth white as foam for mad anger” (line 1659). A similar disturbing and muddled undertone stretches through *The Sundial*. Furthermore, a rearrangement of the letters in Aunt Fanny’s full name, “FRANCES HALLORAN” (*Sundial* 25), which appears numerous times in close succession by the voice of her father, reveals the word *anarch*. While Julie Baker reads Aunt Fanny’s “madness” as a result of the pressures of patriarchy and the



concept of “True Womanhood” (163), the intertextual clues that Jackson provides in incorporating “The Knight’s Tale” suggest that Aunt Fanny is not a hapless victim, but an instigator who inherently possesses some kind of wild, unnatural association. We are obliged to ask ourselves again: What is this world? This world of *The Sundial* is ensconced in the literary and it is embroiled with disorder.

A later section of “The Knight’s Tale” sheds more light on another potential answer to what the world in *The Sundial* (also) is: “This world is nothing but a thoroughfare full of woe, / And we are pilgrims, passing to and fro” (lines 2847-2848). The presence of the village’s True Believers group, who come to the Halloran mansion to discuss their views on the earth’s approaching end, again evokes Chaucer: “‘We wish you a pleasant journey,’ Mrs. Halloran said. ‘We hope that you will be very happy on Saturn’” (*Sundial* 93). As humorous as the scene is, the final utterance of dialogue from the leader of the True Believers as they make their exit is simply: “Woe, woe” (93). This subtle use of intertextual language may also be confirming that this world—both within *The Sundial* and outside of the text in a larger literary space—is somehow suffering or in distress. However, one could zoom out a bit further and think more broadly about the larger framework for Chaucer’s *Canterbury Tales*, which is, at its essence, about a group of traveling pilgrims. Jackson’s integration of Chaucer’s text then also opens up the possibility that this world of *The Sundial* is its own type of troubled literary pilgrimage. Similar to Chaucer’s travelers, Jackson’s cast of characters congregate from different places and positions in society. As the group moves forward in their journey into the unknown, the novel wavers in a state of literary-infused tension, with stories sprinkled in to pass the time. Essex, for example, likes to tell “very entertaining stories” (6), albeit

“scandalous” ones (7). The narrator’s curious insertion of the saga of young Harriet Stuart (the village murderer) suggests a compulsion that even the narrator cannot resist in contributing to continuous tale-telling as the novel progresses.

Knitting together the strands of conceivability that this nuanced connection with Chaucer offers, the next question becomes: what does Jackson do with a world that is simultaneously literary, disordered, and involves a group of people moving toward something? In one regard, she prepares to end it all. If we consider “this world” in a general literary sense, we see the brutal and relentless destruction of this type of world underway within Jackson’s text. The founding Mr. Halloran “did not care for books,” but he “bowed” to outsiders’ recommendations to build “a library, which was properly stocked with marble busts and ten thousand volumes” (8). Despite the onsite trove, Aunt Fanny sees no value in the available texts. On a shopping trip to the village, she asks the Inverness sisters (who run a small lending library out of a gift shop) for “a fairly elementary book on engineering, and chemicals” (80), while also seeking “Candles [...] candles” (82). In explaining to her great-niece, young Fancy, what will happen in the upcoming catastrophe, Aunt Fanny says, “they are going to burn it” and “that is just what they are going to do with this diseased, filthy old world. Right in the incinerator” (37). No direct response is provided for Fancy’s inquiry: “Who is ‘they’?” (38). What is certain, however, is that the only burning of worlds that actually occurs in Jackson’s text is carried out by the mansion’s residents, with “ashes of books” being hauled by the truckloads “to the village dump” (139).

While all are complicit in the destruction, Aunt Fanny is at the effort’s forefront. She is encouraged by Orianna, who says while touching the sundial, “I can hardly refuse

[Aunt Fanny] these small pleasures” (116). When the novel was first published, another early reviewer may have been referring to the book-burning when he stated, “For all its wry humor, the novel seems to me to be primarily a bleak inquiry into what can only be called the idiocy of mankind” (Parks 86). However, as generally unpleasant and foolish as the characters often are, it seems too simple an explanation for why they might act in this manner toward books, specifically. Fairy tales permeate Orianna’s dreams, Essex loves nothing more than spouting off literary quotes, and the group even thinks of Aunt Fanny’s message about the world’s end as a kind of “story” (*Sundial* 193). The endeavor to eradicate through fire nearly every book in existence, while still residing in this current world and preparing to enter the next, invokes a tone that is less ridiculous and more diabolical. Even Jackson’s narrator notices the ruinous rampage and takes a position, briefly personifying the library as cartons of supplies containing “canned spaghetti” are shelved in place of the books being dumped onto the floor: “the room of books, well dusted but not catalogued, looked down with an air of unbelieving surprise” (106). This remark is easily missed, but it suggests that the library hovers as some kind of ethereal presence that watches the happenings in the novel. In another chapter, Jackson’s narrator expresses what sounds like personal frustration with the architectural student who helped build the mansion, because he “malign[ed] Horry Walpole mercilessly” (168). Together, both narrative constructions certainly strengthen the understanding that *this* world within the text is intricately embedded in literariness. However, these elements also contribute to a further dissolving of the space between Jackson’s text and her readers. The narrator sounds less omniscient and more self-consciously interested in literary issues. Jackson may be pushing us to shift into self-reflection as well. If *this* world in *The Sundial* is

moving through experiences of literary chaos and devastation toward some ultimate end at the hands of other people, are we meant to ask ourselves if *this* world we are reading in is somehow experiencing the same?

Colin McAllister asserts that “apocalyptic literature is not just about what will happen in the future; it is also about the past, and—most importantly—about the here and now” (6), and other scholars have noticed how *The Sundial* evokes the general, nuclear world-ending worries of Jackson’s time. Yet, the persistent intermingling of the notion of total destruction with tension around the status and fate of literary expression suggests a more distinctly artistic concern. While revisiting the sundial in the yard, Orianna reflects on the potential for ruin:

“Essex,” Mrs. Halloran said. She stopped by the sundial and put her hand down gently; under her fingers the letters said WHAT IS THIS WORLD?  
“Essex, I am not a fool. I have gone for many years disbelieving most of what people told me. But I have never before been requested to take an immediate opinion on the question of the annihilation of civilization.”  
(*Sundial* 41)

Aunt Fanny’s determination to emerge from the house “into a world clean and silent, their inheritance” (35) is reminiscent of the Nazi book burnings of 1933, which Jackson and many of her original readers would have been keenly aware of (United States Holocaust Memorial Museum). By the summer of 1953, while Jackson was writing prolifically, American culture was in its own throes of upheaval related to literary censorship and havoc. In response to Senator Joseph McCarthy’s assault on the overseas library program, President Eisenhower implored the general public not to “join the book burners” (Fried 14). The suppressive dogma of the age had a substantial, intimate impact on Jackson as well, and in the spring of 1954, Jackson wrote to her agent, “I have been working on a combination of McCarthy hearings by day, and witchcraft trials by night, a

truly well-rounded life” (*Letters* 264). Franklin’s biography of Jackson recounts the FBI investigation that remained open for two years on Jackson’s husband, allegedly as a result of a moving company employee reporting a box filled with books and pamphlets written by Communist sympathizers as being among the family’s possessions (Franklin 322). While Franklin notes that Jackson herself was not pursued in the probe and that her husband, Stanley Edgar Hyman, was eventually cleared, during that time period, several others in she and Hyman’s circle of literary friends were also targeted and some were blacklisted (Franklin 325). If we think about *The Sundial*, then, as a novel written during a particular historical moment in time, as well as its rendering of suspended fictional time—in which the world is deeply rooted in a literary past, yet it teeters on the brink of utter destruction—the text supports the larger idea that literature and all of literary tradition is in trouble.

Returning to the sundial’s emphasis on “The Knight’s Tale,” and Orianna’s pondering of the impending potential for “annihilation,” the work begins to shift into sharper focus as a presentation of a type of literary battle. Orianna’s assertion of resolve provides a clue as to the fight and the stakes:

“I have no choice,” Mrs. Halloran said. She moved her fingers caressingly along WORLD. [...] “I will not be left behind when creatures like Aunt Fanny and her brother are introduced into a new world. I must plan to be there. Oh, what madness.” (*Sundial* 41)

Moving beyond the obvious and well-established personal discord between Orianna and Aunt Fanny (and conversely, Arcite and Palamon), Jackson may be making a delineation between the literary and other types of creations or “creatures.” This is not necessarily to say that Aunt Fanny is a clear metaphorical representation of other types of media being pitted against Jackson’s novel, but Aunt Fanny is often depicted as being a despicable,

aggressive person or “creature” throughout the novel, particularly in her actions carried out against literary works. In thinking about the term “creature” as “a product of creative action” or a “created thing” (*OED* “creature, n.”), and noticing that the word is sandwiched between yet another link back to Chaucer and what sounds like a nod to Shakespeare’s *King Lear* (“O, that way madness lies”), there may be a suggestion that a greater confrontation is at hand (*King Lear* Act III, Scene IV). In several other places on the same page, Essex and Orianna speak of “Aunt Fanny’s claptrap,” which has a theatrical or performative connotation, and Essex mentions wanting to get “a ticket” to the future world (41). The rise of 1950s popular culture is also an issue that Jackson appears to profoundly consider. In an essay titled, “Notes on an Unfashionable Novelist,” in which Jackson makes the case for reading Samuel Richardson, she reflects on some of the challenges the novel faces:

It is difficult today to suggest seriously that any thinking, responsible person sit down and read a book; the glorified comic magazine we call the modern “novel” has taken too firm a hold on our racing, bewildered minds. It is too easy to read a thin volume where everything is said only once, and seven or eight words suffice for a sentence [...] (*Let Me Tell You* 223)

The possibility that within *The Sundial*, Jackson is thinking deeply about the problems of the novel and beseeching us to deliberate on this literary world versus other media forms is bolstered by the inclusion of numerous references to television and film throughout the entirety of the text. However, we may not even notice such references if we overlook what the sundial itself and Chaucer as an intertext incites.

For example, in one scene, the mansion residents discuss the idea of expression and existence:

“Maryjane,” said Essex. “What is reality?” “What?” Maryjane stared with her mouth open. “You mean something real, like something not in the

movies?" "A dream world," Arabella supplied. Julia laughed. "Essex," she said, "What is real?" Essex bowed to her gravely. "I am real," he said. "I am not at all sure about the rest of you." (*Sundial* 58, emphasis in original)

Essex's assertion of his own reality in contrast with the unreality of "movies" presents a brief, but important metafictional discourse, as Jackson distinguishes between the literary and another form. Later in the text, as the world's end draws near, the narrator ominously describes how "the weather turned strange" (179). A reference is then made to "a television set in Florida [that] refused to let itself be turned off; until its owners took an axe to it, it continued, on or off" (179). The steady persistence of this machine and the violence directed toward it is quite funny to anyone who has ever been annoyed by their television set, but the idea that the TV might play on freely while Essex and Aunt Fanny are off "burning another ten shelves of books" (146) seems intended to upset a devoted reader and is rather "strange" behavior (179). Television seeps into the text again as Aunt Fanny attempts to reassure the household: "Wrong is wrong and right is right and Father knows best" (100). Radio program turned sitcom, *Father Knows Best* made its television debut in 1954 (Desjardins 2), and we know that squarely in the time of Jackson's writing, television had become "the dominant medium" (Jones et al. 4). Just a few sentences later, Orianna asks that Aunt Fanny be taken away to bed. We are told that Orianna "had hardly finished speaking when the glass of the great picture window, which filled one short wall of the drawing room, and looked out over the sundial, shattered soundlessly from top to bottom" (*Sundial* 100). The meeting of this pop culture TV reference with the framed image of the sundial results in a dramatic, poetic fracture. Jackson again wants us to regard the sundial and its essential question. She reinforces its confrontation with another media form through the intense imagery of glass smashing "soundlessly," which evokes a

curious mental picture—perhaps akin to seeing static move noiselessly on a television screen.

In the novel's final pages, Orianna's last words of dialogue involve another intense pause ("Remember" and "a minute" of hesitation), before she says: "Remember this—this is the end we have waited for so long" (214). We are reminded that this is a story and there will be an end, evocative of Chaucer's "This is your end and your conclusion" (line 1869) and "Here is ended the Knights Tale" (final line). When Orianna's life ends abruptly afterward, as she is discovered "crumpled" at the bottom of the "great staircase" (*Sundial* 215), her body is brought to its final resting place at the "Sundial—where else?" (219). Aunt Fanny responds to this definitive placement with: "Splendid [...] it was the only thing around here that really *looked* like her, if you know what I mean" (220, emphasis in original). Though it is difficult to know for sure what Aunt Fanny means, she might simply be pleased that Orianna and the sundial both appear doomed and "Allone" (219). However, Orianna is now presented as being physically and eternally at one with the sundial. Her parting words have given us clear instructions to recall this ending. As they prepare to leave Orianna's body behind, Essex and the captain stop to pause "for a minute [...] admiring the way Mrs. Halloran sat by the sundial with her hands folded [...] the captain turned, [and] Essex stayed to look once more," before they both head back to barricade themselves in the house (219). If there is something admirable about Orianna and her final resting place that warrants really looking at her, perhaps Jackson uses this scene to present us with one last conflict that displays a dichotomy between the literary (now, Orianna on the sundial) and the not. The home's remaining residents do not mention Orianna again, and they ready themselves for drinks



and card-playing as the wind kicks up outside. The novel draws to a close with the group's earnest chatter about a movie: "It wasn't the plot so much, you know [...] it was the *acting*. I mean it was so real [...] Just *wonderful*" (221, emphasis in original). In bringing together a significant, literary-aligned death with lowbrow gossip about a film, *The Sundial* culminates with yet another extension of the idea of hostile, creative confrontations. Do we notice? Are we concerned?

If we are that fervent reader who Jackson has been seeking connection with all along, we might return to the sundial's question one last time: What is this world? It is one in which a literary battle is underway, but Orianna has told us to "remember" the ending. The final sentence of Jackson's novel reads: "'The first thing I will do,' Essex said to Gloria, 'is make *you* a crown of flowers'" (222, emphasis in original). Earlier in the text, Gloria reflects on what the distant future looks like, long after the apocalyptic event: "I think they will come, those far-off people, moving fearfully into this house [...] I think they will come on a kind of pilgrimage [...] I think they will not understand much of what they find in this house, but they will tell stories about it, and about us" (110). If the novel involves affliction, threats from outsiders, and an entanglement with other forms of media, yet it remains connected to a storytelling tradition that is supported by the sundial, Jackson appears to offer a glimmer of hope in this idea of a literary struggle. According to Gloria's premonition, the future world's inhabitants will still feel the pull to "tell stories." Even if the largely dreadful people in the Halloran mansion stand to inherit the new world, and even if they forsake the sundial, others will come and stories will somehow survive. Turning our attention back to the circular sundial, then, Essex's final statement is suggestive of Emily in Chaucer's tale. If Gloria, like Chaucer's Emily, is to

receive a “garland for her head” (line 1054) and a life of “bliss” (line 3102) after the knights’ battle is done, Jackson’s work closes on a softer and more expressive note. Despite its onslaught of oppositions, the literary world of *The Sundial* just might be triumphant.

### Chapter III.

#### Meeting Stories of the Past in *We Have Always Lived in the Castle*

Following the financial and popular success of *The Haunting of Hill House*, which was a finalist for the National Book Award and sold quickly for film rights (Franklin 464), Jackson's letters expose a struggle to complete her next book:

damned book is nagging me so i wince. [...] if i can get it off the ground at all it will go lofting until about page seventy and then come down with a crash. then this will happen over again and carol will entreat me not to let her down [...] the hell with it, actually. it's no more degrading than watching television. (*Letters* 437, formatting in original)

While Jackson wryly admits that this creative "Problem of the Artist in Modern Society" (*Letters* 438) is not unique, her words support an ongoing tension with the other popular medium of the age ("television"), as explored in the previous chapter. However, despite Jackson's continued reservations, "i do not think this book will go far. it's short, for one thing, and stanley and the publisher and the agent all agree that it is the best writing i have ever done, which is of course the kiss of death on any book" (*Letters* 510, formatting in original), *We Have Always Lived in the Castle* was her only novel to reach the *New York Times* best-seller list (Franklin 492). Largely well-received, Franklin notes in her biography of Jackson that several original reviewers "found the book beyond criticism," and one writer for the *Boston Herald* commented that "the aura [the book] generates cannot be confined or itemized" (491). To place the novel in further context, Franklin states:

In *Hill House*, Jackson left the novel's most frightening elements unspoken, beneath the surface. She uses the same technique in *Castle*, but takes it to an extreme: *everything* is left mysterious. In contrast to the

maximalist prose that characterizes the work of Kerouac or Bellow—Kerouac’s *Big Sur* appeared in 1962, the same year as *Castle*; Bellow’s *Herzog* came two years later—Jackson reduces episodes that could have been entire scenes to a single sentence. (486, emphasis in original)

The crisp, brisk, and highly controlled style of *Castle* reminds us of Jackson’s skill as an accomplished short story and essay writer. Yet, her apparent stripping away or deviation from the more obviously literary language that is exhibited in her previous novels darkens *Castle* in a different way. If we recall the dense manifestation of literary elements and the intertextuality at play within *The Sundial*, along with Eleanor’s experience of ecstasy in Hill House’s library, the shift away from the presentation of literary realms as being enticing or even accessible in *Castle* is striking. Jackson’s final novel offers us an insistent and unapologetic heroine, but the treatment of literary experiences throughout the text also suggests an intense conflict with the idea of ever finding a sensation of safety or resolution in a literary space.

In a note to her parents, shortly after submitting the novel’s final manuscript, Jackson describes her first-person narrator, Mary Katherine (Merricat) Blackwood, as “really batty” (*Letters* 510, underline in original). The reader maintains a prolonged suspicion that something about Merricat is not quite right, but we do not learn for certain until the end of chapter eight (out of only ten total, making this Jackson’s shortest novel) that Merricat killed most of her family members—including her parents—six years prior to the start of the novel by sprinkling arsenic in their sugar bowl. Merricat’s older sister, Constance, was purposely spared the rest of the family’s fate. As Constance explains to a nosy visitor at the Blackwood home, “I never touch berries [...] I rarely take sugar on anything” (*Castle* 32). Constance, however, fully accepted the original blame for the murders and “was arrested at once,” telling the police “those people deserved to die”

(37). Somehow, Constance has been absolved of the crime, but she remains guilty in the eyes of the hostile local villagers. The sisters live mostly as recluses in their large family home, along with their sickly Uncle Julian, who survived the poisoning. The powerful emotional connection between Merricat and Constance evokes one kind of literary-related commonality with *The Sundial*, as a depiction of the concept of courtly love. This may further support Jackson's continued contemplation of literary tradition at this point in her writing life. In the manner of Chaucer's Arcite and Palamon and their fierce devotion to Emily, Merricat frequently expresses similarly strong feelings of affection for her older sister: "I went to her and put my arms around her. 'I love you, Constance'" (79). Merricat positions herself as a staunch, opposing force to the later, intrusive presence of cousin Charles, who wishes to marry Constance and take over the family fortune, rendering him clearly as Merricat's (to use Chaucer's words from "The Knight's Tale") "mortal foe" (line 1590).

Relatedly, some feminist readings of *Castle* focus on the potency of the Blackwood sisters' relationship and their displays of self-reliance. Lynette Carpenter argues that the novel is "Jackson's portrayal of the institution of patriarchy" (32) and that the text suggests a challenge to "masculine power" (34). Elizabeth Mahn Nollen states that Constance and Merricat "do not fall victim to the typical marriage plot of the female Gothic novel" and the sisters "succeed in making the once-patriarchal home fully their own" by the text's conclusion (101). Karen J. Hall offers a slightly less cathartic reading and asserts that Merricat and Constance's form of patriarchal resistance only comes in their acceptance of "containment," as by the novel's end, they retreat into their now nearly destroyed house, dependent exclusively on each other (118). Some recent

scholarship has begun to more closely examine the particular assembly of literary matters within *Castle*, but it is not the primary lens that is usually applied to the text.

Hattenhauer's critical volume does acknowledge the presence of textuality in *Castle's* setting, including Merricat's regular visits to the library in the village and the large library in the Blackwood home (Hattenhauer 180). Although, as Mahn Nollen aptly points out, "Merricat makes sure to differentiate the female library from the male," because "there are books in their father's study that the two sisters never read" (103), which is reminiscent of Eleanor's initial experience in Hill House. Hattenhauer's critique further maintains that *Castle* is an example of Jackson "writing about writing" (180), and that the novel "not only privileges writing but also satirizes it" (181). For Hattenhauer, the satire is presented through the figure of Uncle Julian, whom Hattenhauer sees as Jackson making fun of in his perpetual quest to finish writing a book about the family murders. Intriguingly, Shelley Ingram explores the novel in relation to Jackson's personal knowledge of myth and folklore. Ingram argues that although Merricat states that she enjoys "fairy tales" (*Castle* 2), Jackson's text is not a fairy tale and may be read instead as a feminist reimagining of folklore conventions (Ingram 72). I propose that another important path for reading this text, which recognizes its interest in exploring the act of writing, as well as its fascination with different types of storytelling, is to consider something else Merricat tells us plainly that she likes: "books of history" (*Castle* 2).

*Castle* begins: "My name is Mary Katherine Blackwood. I am eighteen years old, and I live with my sister Constance. [...] I like my sister Constance, and Richard Plantagenet, and *Amanita phalloides*, the death-cup mushroom. Everyone else in my family is dead" (1, italics in original). A couple of years prior to the novel's publication,

Jackson's letters disclose: "my new great interest right now has turned out to be english kings (richard III did not kill the princes in the tower) [...] stanley has gotten me stacks of books on the tudors and the wars of the roses and i go around muttering dates to myself" (*Letters* 409, formatting in original). In another correspondence, Jackson writes, "i dwell these days happily in tudor england (all imposters if you really fancy richard III) [...] i think my new book (which goes poorly, thank you) will be about a nice girl who murders simply everybody" (*Letters* 435, formatting in original). Jackson's personal curiosity with Richard III, one-time king of England, who is otherwise referred to as Richard Plantagenet, duke of Gloucester, carries over into *Castle*, as evidenced by the novel's introductory lines (*Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, "Richard III"). The reference appears elsewhere in the text, including within Merricat's designated words of protection. However, in an article on *Castle*, Kay Chronister asserts that "one would be hard-pressed to find any significance in the random words to which Merricat attributes magical power (*Gloucester, melody, Pegasus*); rather, it seems to be Symbolic speech itself that frightens her" (139). Merricat's list, shared on the novel's opening page, of the (very) few things she likes refutes Chronister's argument that these are nothing more than "random words." Rather, they indicate another kind of complex back-and-forth that occurs between external stories—this time, histories—and Jackson's text.

Instead of being fearful of the "powerful words" (*Castle* 44) themselves, as Chronister suggests, what produces anxiety for Merricat is confronting the real story—that is, the uncomfortable, historical past behind the words. This complex experience is first hinted at in the novel through Merricat's captivation with Richard III. If we readers pause for a moment to consider the truth (or at least what is widely regarded as historical

truth) about some of Merricat's special words, Richard Plantagenet, duke of Gloucester, is remembered for his plausible role in imprisoning his nephews (the child heirs to the British throne) within the Tower of London, wherein their small skeletons were much later discovered (*Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, "Richard III"). Merricat's enthusiasm for Plantagenet might just serve to underscore her general peculiarity, but Jackson tells us that as long as Merricat has a "strong" word like "Gloucester," and ensures that it is "never spoken aloud," she and Constance will be fine and "no change would come" (*Castle* 44). Jackson seems to be making this extratextual move into actual history in order to support Merricat's belief that as long as we do not acknowledge the potentially disturbing truth of the past, all will be well. Despite Constance's reassurance that, "It's going to be fine, Merricat" (25), we know that very little ends up being that way for the sisters.

Jackson further conflates the idea of historical truth as being somehow inaccessible or an experience to avoid through the recurring mention of the late Mrs. Blackwood's "Dresden figurines on the mantel" (23). Merricat's act of matricide obviously confirms the complicated relationship she had with her mother, but the sisters often regard their mother's portrait, Merricat wears her "mother's brown shoes" to town (15), and the sisters regularly clean their mother's drawing room so that the space is "perfectly" kept (23). Merricat is most proud when the room gleams, "shining and silky" (24). Yet, cousin Charles' disruptive presence in the house is paired with another remark about the figurines atop the fireplace:

"Pretty," he said, taking down one of the Dresden figurines. Constance stopped playing and he turned to look at her. "Valuable?" "Not particularly," Constance said, "My mother liked them." (85)



If Charles' action is met with a repetitive reference, followed by a moment of suspension and silence, Jackson seems to be placing emphasis on something in connection with these figurines, specifically. It may be that the sisters simply do not like Charles touching their mother's belongings, but Jackson might easily have just used the term "figurines" or even "porcelain figurines" to describe the items. Merricat, the devotee of history, however, explicitly and repeatedly says "Dresden." While Constance downplays any potential economic value of the figurines, in reality outside of the novel, artisans in the Dresden area of Germany began producing exquisitely hand-painted porcelain figurines in the early 1700s (*Victoria and Albert Museum*, "Harlequin, Figurine, 20<sup>th</sup> Century"). That is, until "the industry was essentially bombed into oblivion" during World War II (*Collectors Weekly*, "Dresden Figurines").

Though, like most of Jackson's work, the precise time and place of *Castle* is indeterminate, the incorporation of this potential historical allusion to the firebombing of Dresden fits with the post-war era of Jackson's writing. It also adds another shade of reference to Merricat's eventual burning of the Blackwood home. We see Merricat's original confidence in her decision shift into bewilderment as the destruction rapidly escalates out of control: "Fire burns upward, I thought" (*Castle* 102). As the villagers encroach on the blazing house and Merricat notices their "most horrible" laughter, she also sees "one of the Dresden figurines thrown and break against the porch rail, and the other fell unbroken and rolled along the grass" (106). The chaos of this scene, and specifically the shattering of one of the figurines—which are literally small representations of people—is what finally pushes Merricat to confront and speak "aloud" the truth of her past:

One of our mother's Dresden figurines is broken, I thought, and I said aloud to Constance, "I am going to put death in all their food and watch them die." Constance stirred and leaves rustled. "The way you did before?" she asked. It had never been spoken of between us, not once in six years. "Yes," I said after a minute, "the way I did before." (110)

Jackson's positioning of these particular items in her novel thus layers in a powerfully dark and virtually unexplored subtext. In one regard, the figurines support a long-awaited acknowledgment of Merricat's reality. Yet, the moments of pause surrounding the revelation gesture toward the tremendous difficulty that is involved in facing or owning up to deeply tragic veracities. After acknowledging this essential, terrible truth about her own past, Merricat turns to the figurines again in an attempt to please Constance and set something right:

I waited in the doorway to be sure that no one was watching, and then I ran down the steps across the grass and found our mother's Dresden figurine unbroken where it had hidden against the roots of a bush; I thought to take it to Constance. She was still sitting quietly at the kitchen table, and when I put the Dresden figurine down before her she looked for a minute and then took it in her hands and held it against her cheek. "It was all my fault," she said. "Somehow it was all my fault." (118)

In the intimate and poignant manner with which Constance considers the item before her, Jackson may be figuratively demonstrating the impossibility of trying to reconcile a horrendous story from the past. The close succession here again of mentions of "Dresden" might also be Jackson infusing a kind of postmodern discourse into her work, and a suggestion that there is no answer for inexplicably catastrophic events. For Constance, any potential for reckoning that is offered through the figurine is too painful and she turns the blame inward. After sitting with the item—and by extension, the story it presents—for a bit longer, the sisters decide that the only thing to do next is "clean" (118). When Merricat asks Constance what she is going to do with the statuette,

Constance says plainly, “Put it back where it belongs” (118). Yet, “where it belongs” is in the utterly “destroyed” drawing room (118):

Constance went to the mantel and set the Dresden figurine in its place below the portrait of our mother and for one quick minute the great shadowy room came back together again, as it should be, and then fell apart forever. (119)

The sisters work together to close up the entire room so that “no one would ever see it again” (119). Jackson offers no positive attainment or moment of resolution here. There is only a falling “apart forever,” followed by a shutting away.

Elsewhere in the novel, Jackson further explores this notion of closing off access to a past truth by mixing in the concept of preservation. Uncle Julian describes his continual concern with capturing the details of his wife’s and the other Blackwoods’ murders as “My life work” (30). Yet, his poor health and frequent bouts of confusion make it obvious that despite claiming he has “exhaustive notes on all that happened” (32), everyone knows his “work” is futile. He does not know who committed the mass murder and he does not even acknowledge that Merricat is alive:

“My niece Mary Katherine has been a long time dead, young man. She did not survive the loss of her family; I supposed you knew that.” “What?” Charles turned furiously to Constance. “My niece Mary Katherine died in an orphanage, of neglect, during her sister’s trial for murder. But she is of very little consequence to my book, and so we will have done with her.” “She is sitting right here.” Charles waved his hands, and his face was red. (93)

Jackson, however, places subtle emphasis on the idea that his “papers” belong in a safe place, even as the house starts to burn:

“Fire,” Charles said, crashing down the stairs. “Run, run; the whole damn house is on fire,” he screamed into Constance’s face, “and you haven’t got a *phone*.” “My papers,” Uncle Julian said. “I shall collect my papers and remove them to a place of safety.” He pushed against the edge of the table to move his chair away. “Constance?” “Run,” Charles said, at the front

door now, wrenching at the lock, “*run*, you fool.” (101, emphasis in original)

The sisters do not hurry to help Uncle Julian out of the house; rather, Constance wheels him back to his room so that he may handle his papers. It is not clear whether the sisters actively hope that Uncle Julian will perish, although Merricat’s later comment gives pause: “Uncle Julian had believed that I was dead, and now he was dead himself; bow your heads to our beloved Mary Katherine, I thought, or you will be dead” (111). However, what is certain is that after his death, the sisters do not dispute the importance of Uncle Julian’s work. When Merricat asks Constance what she will do with the papers, Constance replies:

“I suppose I’ll keep them all in the box,” she said at last. “I suppose I’ll put the box down in the cellar.” “And preserve it?” “And preserve it. He would like to think that his papers were treated respectfully. And I would not want Uncle Julian to suspect that his papers were not preserved.” (134)

This exchange suggests several convoluted possibilities, including a curious fear of Uncle Julian and what his dead self thinks. And yet, the idea that the cellar is a safe spot to preserve the papers is also troubled. The core act of preservation involves determining what will be kept and saved for the future, and Merricat tells us earlier in the text that the “entire cellar” of the Blackwood house “was filled with food” (42). She describes the “deeply colored rows of jellies and pickles and bottled vegetables and fruit, maroon and amber and dark rich green” that “stood side by side in our cellar and would stand there forever” as “a poem by the Blackwood women” (42). However, besides whatever food Constance has been able to preserve herself over the years, Merricat says that “we never touched what belonged to the others; Constance said it would kill us if we ate it” (42). The succinct inclusion of literary language links the jarred food stores with poetry, yet we are also told that the contents of those jars are deadly. Even more words, stacked up in

Uncle Julian's box, are about to join those already lined up on the shelves. Are his words similarly threatening somehow to Merricat and Constance that they also belong in the cellar next to other items that will never be touched? If so, why keep any of them at all? In this complex basement domain, Jackson presents the idea of beautiful, poetic words that cannot ever be consumed and a life's work that will be buried forever.

Much different than Eleanor's reflection on the enchanting nature of the library and all the "comforts of Hill House" (*Hill House* 233), in *Castle*, words and stories of the past are literally submerged or entombed in inaccessibility. Jackson further suggests that the cellar is a safe spot to bury the words of others who came before, but that it is not a particularly safe place for the home's present residents. Near the end of the novel, as Merricat and Constance hear the voices of a few former acquaintances coming to check on them, Merricat thinks, "if it seemed that they might be able to look in we could run together for the cellar" (*Castle* 128). However, the very next line provided is: "Damn place is all boarded up" (128). This construction underscores the idea of conflict and tension in any attempt to access narratives of the past, and joins it with the suggestion of a blockade. In parallel with Merricat and Constance, the textuality in the cellar will remain perpetually unreachable.

Autobiographical readings of *Castle* tend to consider Jackson's own history of agoraphobia around the time of creating this novel. The subtext of sadness might very well have a personal connection, as the final page of the novel shows Merricat and Constance permanently fixed inside their home, where "no one ever saw our eyes looking out through the vines" (146). In March 1963, Jackson writes of a challenging personal experience: "last thanksgiving was the last time i had been out of the house [...] it was

literally impossible for me to go through the door; if i tried, i would start to shake and my legs would give way” (*Letters* 552). An awareness of Jackson’s personal background also colors the burial and desertion of Uncle Julian’s papers and all of his writing efforts with its own twinge of sadness. However, in problematizing the idea of confronting historical truth and emphasizing the tension that is involved with meeting stories from the past, Jackson offers us much more to think about in a larger literary sense. In order to bring together Merricat’s expressed partiality for “books of history” (*Castle* 2) with her concurrent desire to evade, shut out, and secrete stories of the past, Jackson may also be provoking a search for evidence of what Merricat *does* read, or choose to access and acknowledge.

It is important to Jackson that we immediately notice the “library books on the kitchen shelf” (1), and regard them again, “still on their shelf, untouched” (117), at the novel’s closing. Yet, while Uncle Julian comments that Constance is “a pretty sight, a lady with a book” (2), and we know that Merricat chooses “the library books with care” (2) during her regular trips to the village, we do not ever actually see Merricat in the act of reading a book. Instead, she nails books to trees in the “pine woods” (41) and makes “little house[s]” (75) out of them. This may serve to reinforce the overarching idea of some kind of pained avoidance when it comes to stories, but it also turns our attention to rest on one of the only instances when Merricat does make reference to reading something. Near the end of the novel, Merricat briefly reflects on the recent fire and the events of the past:

Perhaps the fire had destroyed everything and we would go back tomorrow and find that the past six years had been burned and they were waiting for us, sitting around the dining-room table waiting for Constance

to bring them their dinner [...] Perhaps the village was really a great game board, with the squares neatly marked out, and I had been moved past the square which read “Fire; return to Start” [...] (111)

If we pause to notice Merricat’s “read” of the “square,” and return to the beginning of the novel ourselves, Merricat tells us: “The library was my start” (5). Jackson loops us back around into a literary domain, which is positioned as a launch point and a place of orientation or grounding. And yet, we know that there is no such return for Merricat and Constance. Instead, they burrow in to the house, never touch the library books again, and resolve to create “a new pattern for our days” (145). That “new pattern” is directly followed with mention of the home’s staircase, which is presented using additional language with a literary connotation: “the crooked, broken-off fragment [...] was all that was left” (145).

This meta-insertion of the idea of play and “a great game board” paired with the tense idea that the library space is both a foundational and permanently unreachable—or even hopelessly broken—part of the past shades *Castle* with a darkness that stretches beyond conventional understandings of the text. The novel articulates a preoccupation with stories that are not safe to address and truths that are buried and abandoned. Putting these concepts together with the notion of an unavailable or unapproachable literary realm suggests that this is an ongoing and highly strained experience. While we see Jackson return to literary spaces and literary language throughout her body of work, the possibility presented in *Castle* that this tension has “Always” been a challenge is deeply resonant.

## Chapter IV.

### Intertextual Encounters and Gender Experience

When it comes to Jackson's work, it must also be addressed that there is a critical tendency to attribute nearly any of her engagement with literariness or textual matters to her husband's expertise. During the course of their relationship, which began in 1938 and lasted until Jackson's death in 1965, Hyman became a professor of literature and a well-regarded writer of literary criticism. Jackson's letters reveal the extent of his close involvement with and commentary on her writing. A note to her parents indicates a friction between the pair:

i told you that i sold a story to the saturday evening post, but didn't tell you—because we didn't know yet—that stanley has also sold them an article, one of the egghead series they have been running, on literature. It means that one of these days you will open your post and run into one of those full-page pictures of stanley. i have stories waiting at the journal and mccalls, and two small articles from the book i did on babies will be in redbook. (*Letters* 393, formatting in original)

Jackson's biographer reports that by the end of Jackson's life, she and Hyman's personal home library "totaled somewhere between twenty-five and thirty thousand volumes, possibly more" (Franklin 252). The couple's clearly shared affinity for literature may indeed serve as one reason why Jackson's novels express such an interest in literary matters, but as Ingram judiciously argues, much of Jackson's work is "not simply subverting or undercutting Hyman's views," rather, she is "dynamically interacting with them" (54). I concur that it is reductive to disregard or overlook Jackson's thoughtful treatment of literary elements and assign them to Hyman. The core purpose of this project



is to look closely at Jackson and her strategies, which includes the effects of intertextual deployment and the technique's potential commentary on gender experience.

In addition to the work of Chaucer and Shakespeare, another text that is generally considered significant in English literary history appears throughout Jackson's body of fiction, yet its function within her novels remains virtually unexplored. In chapter one of Jackson's debut novel, *The Road Through the Wall* (published in 1948), we are told that the Perlman's live in a house that "was probably the wealthiest-looking on the block," and it includes a bookcase replete with volumes (Jackson, *The Road Through the Wall* 18). By contrast, "the first secular book" (and presumably the only one) in the nearby Byrne home is a teenage boy's "copy of *Robinson Crusoe*" (*Road* 18). Just before mention of the Byrne's boy's book, we learn that young Harriet Merriam does not have the same access to literary items as other children on her block do, and instead she spends her "Saturday morning[s] dusting the photograph album" in her family's living room (*Road* 18). *The Road Through the Wall* is told in a series of vignettes, and provides glimpses into numerous different families' lives within the same neighborhood, but the theme of women (young and old) being unable to freely read, write, or otherwise express themselves runs throughout the text. We know that later in her own life, Jackson reflected on *Robinson Crusoe*, specifically. In February 1960, when discussing literature in a note to a friend, Jackson remarked: "funny, you don't notice the lack of females in robinson crusoe; i wonder if it isn't because dafoe [sic] never felt called upon to explain that he simply couldn't care less" (*Letters* 425, formatting in original). The implications of gender offered by this personal comment provides an interesting opportunity to consider how Defoe's text might function within Jackson's. True to Jackson's style, Defoe's

book's role in *The Road Through the Wall* is not entirely clear (and may warrant its own dedicated investigation), but she returns to the same intertext in both *The Sundial* and *We Have Always Lived in the Castle*. Jackson's incorporation of *Robinson Crusoe* within these novels supports the notion of gendered literary realms. If we think about Jackson's intertextual methods from this angle, she offers us a kind of treatise on how paternalistic literary tradition both complicates and provides new opportunity for female expression.

We learn that *Robinson Crusoe* is one of the only books to avoid the flames of the pit in the yard of *The Sundial*, and though we know that Aunt Fanny does not exhibit much consideration for anyone or anything else, Jackson's narrator describes her as being "mindful of Robinson Crusoe" (*Sundial* 140). At the beginning of chapter three, we are told that Orianna's frail husband, Richard, "asked that his nurse stop reading him weekly magazines and begin on *Robinson Crusoe*" (43). In this instance, yet another subtle demarcation is made between types and perhaps quality of reading material, which intersects with the idea of media forms being at odds, as explored in my earlier chapter. The idea of "weekly magazines" as something apart from or different than Richard's request for Defoe may also be connected with Jackson personally, as captured in a letter written to her parents in 1949:

I quite agree with you about the recent stories. they are written simply for money, and the reason they sound so bad is that those magazines won't buy good ones, but deliberately seek out bad stuff because they say their audiences want it. i simply figure that at a thousand bucks a story, i can't afford to try to change the state of popular fiction today, and since they will buy as much of it as i write, i do one story a month, and spend the rest of the time working on my new novel or on other stories [...] and this sort of thing is a compromise between their notions and mine [...] (*Letters* 139)

Yet, looking only within the confines of *The Sundial*, and at the most basic level of understanding, this is a world in which *Robinson Crusoe* survives. If we believe and

agree that the Halloran set is categorically not who we would like to see ushering in a new age of humanity, Jackson may be presenting this particular text selection as an issue to address. While Baker and some others have explored how *The Sundial* provides “social commentary [on] women’s position within [1950s] society” (150), the attention given to Defoe may suggest that a patriarchal literary tradition is its own type of threat. And yet, as Jackson points out in her personal letters, within the world of *Robinson Crusoe*, there are no female characters. *The Sundial*, by contrast, is filled with and dominated by female presence. This enigmatic inclusion of Defoe’s text within *The Sundial*, then, may serve as a clever critique of traditional understandings of power and representation within a literary space.

The members of the Halloran household like to think that they are preparing themselves to build a new life in the vein of Defoe’s character by purchasing “a keg of nails, since the bag of nails which Robinson Crusoe brought from the ship had proved so comforting” (*Sundial* 140). However, chapter eight of *The Sundial* includes a direct quotation from Defoe that expresses Crusoe’s strong desire for food and “a bottle of ink” (111). In contrast with Crusoe, the residents of the Halloran household place value only on certain material objects, and they express a steadfast determination to take “no writing materials of any kind” into their future state (141). This elicits yet another dimension to the unpleasant readerly realizations that Jackson embeds within her work. Not only will all the books be gone, but there will be no opportunity to create new ones. Jackson closes that same chapter by quoting directly from one of *Robinson Crusoe*’s pivotal scenes:

““It happened one day about noon,”” the nurse read flatly, ““going towards my boat, I was exceedingly surprised with the print of a man’s naked foot on the shore, which was very plain to be seen in the sand. I stood like one thunderstruck, or as if I had seen an apparition. I listened, I looked round

me; I could hear nothing nor see anything; I went up to a rising ground to look farther. I went up the shore, and down the shore, but it was all one, I could see no other impression but that one.” (119, quotations appear as in original text)

The emphasis that hangs on this final sentence supports the general trepidation that surrounds the literary destruction that is carried out by characters inside of *The Sundial*. Yet, the presence of this particular passage also causes the guiding question on the sundial to change shape again. If this literary world is in the throes of tumult and total devastation, but it is also one in which Defoe’s novel endures, what are the implications of having “no other impression but” his book? Leveraging Elaine Martin’s assertion that intertextuality “has a critical function” in that it is “not neutral” (149), the idea of elevating Defoe’s text while ensuring the suppression of all future expression within the world of *The Sundial* evokes a feminist perspective on whose (male) words will be exalted and preserved for all time. Toward *The Sundial*’s conclusion, the words of the Hallorans’ chosen text heightens the continued and nuanced discomfort:

The nurse read levelly, “I cannot express the confusion I was in, though the joy of seeing a ship, and one which I had reason to believe was manned by my own countrymen, and consequently friends, was such as I cannot describe; but yet I had some secret doubts hanging about me, I cannot tell from whence they came, bidding me to be on my guard.” (149)

The passage is delivered in a level or equal manner by Richard’s female nurse, but Jackson’s choice of passage underscores an overall sense of “confusion,” and places weight on a sensation of warning. Beyond the obvious parallel between Crusoe and the Halloran clan as settlers in a new place, why must we return so often to lengthy quotations from this intertext? Is it something we readers should be wary of or on guard against?

As an extension of the apprehension generated by Defoe's text (and reflective of Jackson's overall convolution), the concept of literary-related anxiety and a sense of foreboding is also supported by another question that receives emphasis in the world of Jackson's novel. A nod to the ancient Roman philosopher Seneca, whose bust is frequently moved around the Halloran house, reads:

*WHEN SHALL WE LIVE IF NOT NOW?* was painted in black gothic letters touched with gold over the arched window at the landing on the great stairway; young Mrs. Halloran paused before the window and turned, Fancy toiling upward still, entangled in her skirt. (*Sundial* 2)

This literary-pigmented question (presented "in black gothic letters" like text on a page) emphasizes the importance of the present moment ("NOW"). Yet, the question later reappears in conjunction with "a framed copy of Kipling's 'If'" (167). In one sense, the visual statement is a cliché that Jackson's narrator pokes fun at for being simply another example of "Mr. Halloran's passion for the reassuring presence of a line of good advice" (167). However, the pairing of this specific question with the conditional expression of future time in Rudyard Kipling's poem, "If," supports a more explicitly gendered literary temporal experience. We are again deftly pushed out of the world of Jackson's novel in order to revisit Kipling's poem, which we are told is displayed in its entirety, unlike the other short "maxims" found throughout the house (168). Like Defoe's book, Kipling's poem will also remain intact after *The Sundial's* world ends, since it is safely located within the house's walls. Kipling's original piece closes with: "If you can fill the unforgiving minute / With sixty seconds' worth of distance run, / Yours is the Earth and everything that's in it, / And—which is more—you'll be a Man, my son!" (lines 29-32). The poem suggests that ownership of the Earth is the reward for mastering time, and this highest aspirational virtue is afforded to men—or perhaps even just one man. Moving

back into the world of Jackson's novel, we know that the primary inheritors of the post-apocalyptic earth will be female. Jackson, then, alters Kipling by pulling him into her text, wherein her narrator tells a story that opposes the central tenet of Kipling's poem. Considering Mary Jacobus' argument that "such gestures may release possibilities repressed by a dominant ideology or its discourse" (34), this choice further supports that Jackson is reworking the concept of traditional power dynamics both within the world of her novel and within a vast, external literary expanse.

This strained interplay between what may be considered canonical, patriarchal textual sources and Jackson's work presents itself in *Castle* in slightly different ways. Robinson Crusoe frequently refers to the dwelling he inhabits as his "castle" (Defoe 139), and Merricat clearly echoes and foregrounds the idea of the sisters' home as their castle and fortress. Additionally, and again drawing on the same scene that is referenced in *The Sundial*, after witnessing that first shocking footprint in the sand, Crusoe comments, "I stood like one thunderstruck [...] when I came to my castle (for so I think I called it ever after this), I fled into it like one pursued" (Defoe 130). Merricat reacts similarly to Crusoe when Charles makes his initial appearance on their doorstep, stating: "chilled, I could not breathe" (*Castle* 55) and "I couldn't breathe, and I had to run" (57). Just prior to this sighting of Charles, Merricat is "well hidden" in one of her outdoor shelters, reflecting on the protective strength of her father's "book nailed to a tree" (53). The inability of the book to safeguard she and Constance from Charles' invasion, paired with the hint of Crusoe's tale, subtly merges the concept of a threatening male presence with the idea that some kind of power can reside within a book. It is a type of power and safety, however, that Merricat is ultimately unable to retrieve. Despite her desire to "choose the exact

*device* [emphasis mine] to drive Charles away” (70), which again reinforces the underlying tension by using a term with a literary connotation, the only outlets of expression that are available to Merricat are her own thoughts of “magic” and her physical resolve to “smash the mirror in the hall” (71). Here again, Jackson appears to gesture toward an all-encompassing idea of advantaged male expression in a literary sense, drawing on literary elements as part of an intricate conceit.

In the final pages of *Castle*, as the sisters contemplate how to clothe themselves in their new and entirely isolated life, Constance reacts with sadness to Merricat looking “like a rag doll” (136). Merricat, however, responds proudly, saying, “Robinson Crusoe dressed in the skins of animals [...] He had no gay cloths with a gold belt” (137). The remark may support Merricat’s belief that she is the central hero of the sisters’ tale, and it also reflects Merricat’s generally inflated sense of self, in that she now occupies a better position or higher status than this other, imaginary character. Hattenhauer (and some additional scholars mentioned in his work) posits that this inclusion of Crusoe in *Castle* and the accompanying exclamation by Merricat suggests that she views their situation as a “version of Eden” (Hattenhauer 185). Yet, the reference is troubled by Merricat’s follow-up response to Constance: “You will be wearing the skins of Uncle Julian; I prefer my tablecloth” (*Castle* 137). Despite the prior playful reference to Defoe’s character, Merricat reveals that she understands the pathetic reality of what they are facing (and that she is only wearing a “tablecloth”), and she triggers further unease in referring to the disembodied “skins” of their late uncle. This comment may serve to strengthen Merricat’s evident strangeness, but it also underscores the sisters’ shared desperate and disturbed state. Merricat will not cross the threshold of Uncle Julian’s room and she

refuses to touch any of his clothing—a noticeably un-Crusoe-like response, as he would have used any items available for his own comfort and survival. The harsh separation Jackson makes here between Merricat and Uncle Julian’s space (which is also slightly redolent of the treatment of the library in *Hill House*), presented in connection with a reference to *Robinson Crusoe*, may also support some notion of divergence between Jackson and Defoe’s text, and thus presents another delicate layer of gendered insinuations. Jackson does not necessarily emphasize a binary opposition in that Crusoe’s experience of survival was different simply because he was male, but we do know that eventually, Crusoe leaves his isolated life and rejoins society. This does not happen for the Blackwood sisters. They retreat further, becoming deeply entrenched within their “great, ruined structure overgrown with vines” (146), tightly shuttered by a “lock on the front door,” “boards over the windows,” and multiple “barricades” (145). Despite Merricat’s repetitive assertion that “we are so happy” (146), by placing Defoe’s intertext in proximity to her novel’s conclusion, Jackson may want us to consciously consider Crusoe’s experience as antithetical to Merricat and Constance’s, thereby casting even greater doubt on their ensuing happiness.

The inclusion of Crusoe’s “skins of animals” paired with “the skins of Uncle Julian” might also serve to reveal an alarming new truth about Uncle Julian (137). If Crusoe’s apparel skins were stretched and dried from the animals he hunted, but Uncle Julian also possesses “skins” (when Merricat might easily have just said “clothing”), there is a subtle suggestion of something predatory about Uncle Julian. Early in the text, Merricat tells us that she has “made a rule for myself: Never think anything more than once” (14). Yet, she compulsively thinks about how she should “listen more carefully”



(13) to Uncle Julian and “be kinder” to him (52). This may just be another aspect of Merricat’s unusual personality, or, much more disturbingly, indicates a conditioned response. Merricat sometimes appears fond of Uncle Julian, but she is often uncomfortable with the sensation. She will not enter his room, even after his death, and despite Constance granting permission: “‘But you are allowed. I tell you that you are allowed.’ ‘No’” (135). And yet, Merricat is “troubled” to think about “the smell of Uncle Julian” being “gone from his room,” signaling that perhaps at some point, she has been in the space (137). Merricat does not seem to take issue with handling Uncle Julian’s empty wheelchair or his “initialled [sic] gold pencil” (137), but anything with a more intimate, bodily connotation—his “trousers” or his “bathrobe and pajamas”—repulses her (135). When the possibility of coming into physical contact with those items arises, Merricat detaches and deflects into fantasy-like speech: “I am not allowed to touch Uncle Julian’s things. I shall have a lining of moss, for cold winter days, and a hat made of bird feathers” (135). Constance’s frequent tendency to refer to her sister (who, we might remind ourselves, is a grown woman of eighteen) as “very dirty Merricat” adds another gradation of disconcerting, sexually-charged possibility to the novel (137). Karen J. Hall puts forward that descriptions of John Blackwood’s exertion of power over the whole household before Merricat killed him “paints” the family as “incestuous” (112), but in most other scholarly assessments, Uncle Julian is generally considered harmless. More distressing, though, when considered alongside my reading, is Hattenhauer’s mention of Paul Carroll’s article, which states, “Mary Katherine loves her Eden, where all is ritual, food, incest, and peace” (Hattenhauer 185). It is not absolutely certain whether some sort of trauma or abuse has occurred between Merricat and Uncle Julian, but one of the

primary ways we are able to even consider this likelihood is through Jackson's brief and unsettling insertion of *Robinson Crusoe*.

Close analysis of the use of intertextuality from a gendered perspective within both of these later Jackson novels opens up numerous new angles to consider. Jackson's recasting of gender roles through the expression of Kipling's poem in *The Sundial* aligns with Patricia Yaeger's argument that language is "a somewhat flexible institution that not only reflects but may also address existing power structures" (562). Relatedly, Jackson's infusion of Defoe's work supports *The Sundial's* ominous subtext, but it draws attention to the paradoxical frightfulness of ushering in a new matriarchal society wherein only one text will be available and no further writing will occur. In *Castle*, Jackson returns to *Crusoe* to cast doubt on the sisters' happy ending, as well as on the entire concept of safe spaces. The possibility that a fragment from *Crusoe* gestures toward a complex experience of trauma glosses the novel in an entirely different and dismal register. While there is no single, precise way to read Jackson's novels, her multifaceted intertextual strategies acknowledge and embrace this. Jackson's techniques serve to disrupt and rouse an abundance of freshly unnerving possibilities for the reader who provides full attention.

## Chapter V.

### Conclusion

Jackson may, as some critics have recommended, be read in the context of her era. Her explorations of domestic issues and family relationship dynamics provide remarkable insights into mid-twentieth century America. Jackson's legacy is also intrinsically linked with the Gothic genre tradition, and her influence within the horror subset has been recognized by Stephen King, Joyce Carol Oates, and others. After nearly twenty years, all of Jackson's books are back in print (Woofter 10), and recent streaming productions (both released in 2018) of *We Have Always Lived in the Castle* and *The Haunting of Hill House* support an ongoing, popular fascination with, as Hyman phrased it in a collection published shortly after her death, "the magic of Shirley Jackson." And yet, many readings of Jackson cast a shadow over how profoundly Jackson wishes to engage with and within literary realms. Jackson continuously seeks an attentive and conscientious reader who will observe, reflect upon, and appreciate the intertextual and otherwise literary complexities she worked so meticulously to craft.

After receiving a publicity copy of *The Haunting of Hill House*, Jackson responded to her agent:

Pat has very kindly sent me the first copy of HILL HOUSE, for their catalogue, and since I am most anxious to be agreeable and ladylike I am only asking them to change one word, although I am concerned to find that their general tone seems to emphasize the "readers who like ghost stories" angle rather than the idea—mine—that this is a serious novel. I tried to say this politely to Pat, but of course realize that their publicity is none of my business anyway and I don't know what will or will not sell books. What I did balk at was the statement that there is many a chuckle in this book. (*Letters* 401)

Jackson was acutely aware of the conventional solemnity around many literary works, particularly those that are traditionally considered canonical, writing once to a friend (in her characteristically cutting humor): “don’t you find english teachers get a little stuffy about MOBY DICK after a while?” (*Letters* 420). Her lifelong consideration of this issue and her comment on *Hill House*, specifically, reflects a powerful desire to be taken seriously within this larger literary space. Literary tradition is a domain that she knows a great deal about, and in which she demonstrates time and again she will engage deeply, but somehow, this textual space—perhaps, this literary world—does not fully accept or acknowledge her efforts. As this project has demonstrated, this prolonged tension with other intertexts and with literary matters in general permeates and informs Jackson’s body of work. To ignore or discard such tensions is to be complicit in precisely the issue Jackson attempts to draw our attention to.

The search for a supportive and alert reader is both extended in and confirmed by Jackson’s letters. Franklin recounts the intense correspondence that Jackson began in December 1959 with a Baltimore homemaker named Jeanne Beatty, noting that Jackson “did not always answer her fan mail, but she found [Beatty’s] letter irresistible” (Franklin 468). In her response to Beatty’s initial outreach, Jackson says, “Many, many thanks [...] Yours was the only kind letter I received. I am less than pleased with the unkind letters” (*Letters* 412). According to Franklin, in Beatty, Jackson found “a kindred spirit” and another person who was “searching, somewhat desperately, for someone to talk to about the books she loved” (Franklin 468). Though the pair never met, their intimate, pen-pal relationship continued for years, during the same timeframe that Jackson was writing *Castle*. The letters involve stories about their children, recipe exchanges, and lively

conversations about literature, including Jackson's tongue-in-cheek musings: "oh golly, i don't know. you mean like Books That Have Changed Our Lives?" (*Letters* 419, formatting in original). However, Jackson also expresses to Beatty her creative difficulties surrounding the creation of her novel:

good housekeeping turned down my last article (and rightly; it missed by a mile, but that doesn't help my self-esteem) [...] it's the only one they've refused in the two years i've been writing for them [...] i had one of those searching self-inquiries all alone here with applegate the cat to listen and of course that always makes you feel worse and i decided at last to give up on castle and i put it all in a filing folder [...] (*Letters* 465, formatting in original)

In the introduction to the volume of Jackson's letters, Bernice M. Murphy comments that Jackson's correspondence with Beatty served as a "significant emotional and intellectual outlet for Jackson" (*Letters* xviii). And yet, the impact of this visceral writer and reader relationship is largely unacknowledged in terms of its influence on *Castle*.

Within the novel, Merricat spends much of her time in solitude with Jonas the cat, "together where no one could ever see us" (*Castle* 94), and Merricat is deeply affronted by the "terrible terrible letters" (56) that show up in the wake of Constance's exoneration. Merricat's repeated fondness for Constance's "gingerbread" (75) might also appear in connection with Beatty, as Jackson thanks Beatty profusely for sending her "wonderful little round [gingerbread] fellows" by post (*Letters* 502). Additionally, Merricat's obsession with a life for she and Constance "on the moon" (*Castle* 15) may be a playful nod to Beatty. In an early exchange, Jackson discusses she and Beatty's shared admiration for L. Frank Baum's Oz books, and Jackson pokes fun at outsiders who worry about "how we are ever going to beat the Russians to the moon if our kids read all this fantasy stuff" (*Letters* 412). Dozens of times throughout the text, Merricat mentions how she wonders about things, and the word "wonder" appears in the novel's final lines

(*Castle* 146). When reflecting on the unfriendly villagers, Merricat makes a notably metafictional utterance: “I hated them anyway, and wondered why it had been worth while creating them in the first place” (9). Jackson’s comment to Beatty evokes a similar sensation of writerly wonderment:

do you find it crazy, kind of, sending a letter out into the blue and then just wondering where it got to finally and how it was received and whether someone said goodlordlook at the length of this and then used it to light cigars with? but i feel that about stories too [...] (*Letters* 422, formatting in original)

Reading Jackson’s letters to Beatty, then, as a kind of dialogic intertext that operates within *Castle* validates the notion that the literary space is deeply and inextricably personal for Jackson. Jackson likely never thought that her private correspondence with Beatty would be made public someday, but the presence of the letters’ content within the pages of *Castle* conjures a different type of literary realm. Functioning almost as a hidden refuge that is embedded into *Castle*, the Beatty letters as intertext suggest a literary potentiality that is much more intimate, and perhaps more promising, than Jackson’s engagement with other intertexts. Noticing these moments of close connection between Jackson and one specific, female reader offers a bit of light peeking through the overall darkness of *Castle*. Similar to Merricat’s expression that, “Everything’s safe on the moon” (*Castle* 44), Jackson’s exchanges with Beatty appear to be a kind of writerly safe space woven into her novel. And yet, by nature of its realness, the presentation of the personal as intertext is significantly more precarious than Jackson’s encounters with other canonical intertexts.

The spirited trade of letters with Beatty stops abruptly and without explanation in late 1962 (Franklin 503). This severed rapport remained an agonizing mystery to

Jackson: “Pride would of course prevent my ever writing again, but I confess that I am far too curious to know what has happened, and why [...] Break off all communication if you like but find some way, if you can, to end my absolute bewilderment” (*Letters* 550). Jackson mailed Beatty a copy of *Castle* upon its release, and never heard from her again (Franklin 503). We will never know for certain how the impact of this ruptured relationship may have shown up in Jackson’s ensuing works. The novel in progress at the time of her death, titled *Come Along with Me*, was published (unfinished) posthumously, in 1968. Yet, a late entry in Jackson’s diary gestures toward another literary shift, in her wish to write “perhaps a funny book. a happy book [...] [in] a new style” (Franklin 536, formatting in original).

If we think about Jackson’s later work and trace her novels through this literary lens—which is an essential part of her style—it is nearly impossible to imagine her abandoning it. And yet, we should consider how this aspect of her artistry changes over time. From the deft and almost gleeful confrontational literary experiences within *The Sundial*; to Eleanor’s determination, no matter the cost, to stay in proximity to her happy, literary place in *Hill House*; to *Castle*’s intermixture of difficult stories from the past and perhaps, the personal present, we must resolve to meet Jackson in these tense, literary spaces. In a letter to herself, written in 1963, Jackson says: “the beauty of words coming is mine. [...] please just let me write what I want to, and not be stopped. [...] i can not be afraid. i will do what I am set to do and nothing else” (*Letters* 556, formatting in original). We can be that mindful reader Jackson seeks, and somehow, assure her that there is nothing to be afraid of.

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