

# explorations



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## **The Suburban *Unhomely*: Alienation and Anxiety in Shirley Jackson's *The Road Through the Wall***

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**Abstract.** The paper discusses Shirley Jackson's first novel, *The Road Through the Wall* (1948), as governed by two dominant affects: alienation and anxiety. It proves that the fictional middle-class suburban community in the novel can be seen as a metaphor for America with its unconscious desires and fears. The uncanny transformation of the setting from a pastoral ideal into a grotesque site of horror is a response to the major anxieties of the 1940s in America and a way to talk about contradictions at the heart of American national narrative.

**Key words:** abject, anxiety, middle-classes, suburbia, uncanny

### **1. INTRODUCTION**

Unlike her notorious short story "The Lottery" published the same year, Shirley Jackson's first novel, *The Road Through the Wall* (1948), did not receive too much critical attention. Set in Cabrillo, a fictional suburb of San Francisco, the narrative focuses on the inhabitants of Pepper Street and, in a series of carefully focused vignettes, depicts their middle-class values and vices before culminating in a tragic end. As Judy Oppenheimer (1988, 17) has noted, the book is "remarkable for its smooth style, its unpleasant view of suburbia, and the amazing fact that it features not even one likeable character in a cast of many." Despite attempts at generating publicity, including a biographical description calling Jackson "a practicing amateur witch," the novel sold poorly and was typically overlooked among the author's more popular later narratives, such as *The Haunting of Hill House* (1959) (nominated for the National Book Award) or *We Have Always Lived in the Castle* (1962), which cemented the author's position as a major representative of the American Gothic. However, as the recent decades have witnessed a renewed interest in and reevaluation of Jackson's oeuvre, several critics ventured to explore the book from a more contemporary perspective. Apart from Joan Wylie Hall's excellent discussion of the novel's theme of the loss of innocence in the

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fallen Eden of its California landscape<sup>1</sup>, it was examined by Darryl Hattenhauer (2003, 83), who believes the book is “solidly modernist and does not give strong hints of the complex forms to come.” Bernice Murphy (2009, 27), on the other hand, focuses on Jackson’s interest in exposing the dark side of American suburbia and sees *The Road* as “a founding text of the Suburban Gothic.” While it is true that this debut novel seems the most realistic of all her fiction and most directly referring to Jackson’s personal experience, it is also “an effective metaphor or microcosm for the tensions inherent in the culture in the postwar period” (Parks 2005, 239). Yet, beyond a merciless portrayal of the evil and hypocrisy of the suburban middle-class and the social and political tensions of a particular decade, Jackson’s text offers a more complex and far-reaching analysis of the national consciousness. In this essay I will argue that the novel’s depiction of its suburban community is dominated by the effects of alienation and anxiety, which are emblematic of late modernist subjectivity. At the same time, just as the American suburb may be seen to “signify the essence of the American social structure” (Pascal 2005, 84), so Jackson’s *The Road Through the Wall* comments on the vision of America as a new modernist project, a self-enclosed new world and, like American Gothic literature in general, it exposes the contradictions at the heart of the American national narrative.

## 2. THE SUBURB AS THE MINIATURE OF AMERICA

The novel opens with a prologue, which delineates spatial and temporal boundaries of the text. The world of the novel is limited to Pepper Street and its immediate surroundings in the walled California suburb through the summer of 1936. Jackson’s neighborhood, populated by a number of middle-class families is “charming and fairly expensive and even comfortably isolated” (Jackson 2013, 1), and except for one Jewish family, it is a “secure enclave of WASP homogeneity” (Oppenheimer 1988, 16). In this clean and proper community working husbands commute to the city while the women are embodiments of typical 1950s housewives, who gather together for sewing and gossip and “never serv[e] bacon without eggs” (Jackson 2013, 126). If there is anything in the neighborhood that causes some distress to these otherwise flat and seemingly unemotional characters, it is the house-for-rent, which “was never suitably tenanted” bringing to the safely enclosed Pepper Street “one completely unsatisfactory family after another” (Jackson 2013, 4). Critics and biographers agree that the setting in *The Road* is clearly based on Burlingame, the actual suburban district of San Francisco, where Jackson grew up. The middle-class mentality of the characters, however, seems to reflect the atmosphere of North Bennington, Vermont, where Jackson’s husband, Stanley Edgar Hyman, was offered a teaching post at Bennington College, and where the couple moved in 1945. Like many other New England towns, North Bennington was not particularly friendly to newcomers and the Hymans never managed to integrate themselves fully into the community whose “surface politeness often masked deeply held biases” (Franklin 2016, 201). Yet, suburbia in Jackson’s novel does not strive to depict any specific location: it is the universality of this most ordinary-looking neighborhood that makes

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<sup>1</sup> See Joan Wylie Hall, “Fallen Eden in Shirley Jackson’s *The Road Through the Wall*” in *Shirley Jackson: Essays on the Literary Legacy*, edited by Berenice M. Murphy, 23-33. Jefferson, North Carolina: McFarland & Company.

Jackson's setting a state of mind, an emotional landscape emblematic of the white middle class in twentieth-century America.

As the middle class consolidated and struggled to define itself throughout the nineteenth century in opposition to the lower classes, the suburbs came to be perceived as a relatively secure enclave, which provided their inhabitants with a sense of privacy and respectability. The members of the middle class believed their social status allowed them to seek distance and protection from the masses and celebrated a lifestyle defined by comfort, property and propriety. Thus, the invention of the suburb, like that of America, was deeply rooted in ideas of privilege and uniqueness, as well as the utopian belief in the possibility of a new beginning. In this sense, it echoed the expansive and venturesome tendencies known from American history. As Bernice Murphy (2009, 10) points out,

the rhetoric of the Eisenhower-era suburban expansion often deliberately recalled the phraseology of the colonial era and westward expansion: those willing to leave the cities behind and settle in the brave new world of suburbia were often referred to as 'settlers' and 'pioneers'. Presumably the move was a kind of variation upon 'Manifest Destiny': a home for every family, and a car in every driveway.

More than two centuries after the Pilgrim Fathers, then, the central myth of America as a new Eden found its reflection in "the promised land of suburbia" (Murphy 2009, 6). Like the Renaissance European fantasies about America, modern suburbanization offered an opportunity to withdraw into a comfortable and controllable world and into social and economic stability. The structure of the suburb was from the beginning based on "the idealized image of the American small town, in which class relations are entirely static and the possession of house and land constitutes an ineluctably secure hedge against social and financial disruption" (Pascal 2005, 83). In other words, the creation of the suburbs responded to "the modern middle-class impulse to retreat to communities and domestic sites that simulate a past expunged of uncertainty" (Pascal 2005, 83). In this sense, as Zofia Kolbuszewska (2007, 90) has put it, the suburban time structure "looks forward only to encounter the mythical past of the origin and nostalgically harks back to the time of Victorian towns in order to 'retreat into a tidily controllable new *old* world.'" Seen from this perspective, modern suburbs are more than just "make-believe small towns of a bygone era" – they are miniatures of America (Pascal 2005, 84). The meaning of the miniature has been explored by Susan Stewart (1993, 48) in her *On Longing: Narratives of the Miniature, the Gigantic, the Souvenir, the Collection*:

in miniature we see spatial closure posited over temporal closure. The miniature offers a world clearly limited in space but frozen and thereby both particularized and generalized in time – particularized in that the miniature concentrates upon the single instant and not upon the abstract rule, but generalized in that the instance comes to transcend, to stand for, a spectrum of other instances.

### 3. THE SUBURBAN UNCANNY

The fictional suburb in *The Road Through the Wall* presents this isolated and, at the same time, universal landscape. The opening description of the perfectly ordinary

exteriors of houses on Pepper Street looks certainly familiar and creates the impression of order and stasis. Yet there is something about the opening sentences of the novel that immediately creates a desire to look beyond the neat façade of this suburban neighborhood: “The weather falls more gently on some places than on others, the world looks down more paternally on some people. Some spots are proverbially warm, and keep, through falling snow, their untarnished reputations as summer resorts; some people are automatically above suspicion” (Jackson 2013, 1). While the prologue presents an almost idyllic picture of this “undeniably ‘nice’” (Jackson 2013, 1) area covered in pink blossoms and basking in the afternoon sun, the following pages brutally deconstruct this image with repeated acts of wickedness and violence. In the first episode, Mrs. Merriam, concerned about her teenage daughter’s morality, has ransacked her room and read her diaries as well as the most innocent love letters Harriet had composed in secret. Then, she makes her daughter destroy everything she has written: “she and her mother [stood] religiously by the furnace and put Harriet’s diaries and letters and notebooks into the fire one by one” (Jackson 2013, 29). In another scene, Marilyn Perlman is harassed at school by a group of other girls for being Jewish, and Artie Roberts, who is thin and pale and bookish and “such a disappointment” (Jackson 2013, 18) for his own mother, is humiliated at the dinner table by his family for getting love letters from girls. Thus, this apparently peaceful and homely neighborhood gradually turns into a site of terror and emotional unrest, while Jackson’s narrator coldly exposes the hypocrisy and moral corruption of the characters. In her close study of this suburban microcosm, as in the majority of her fiction, Jackson focuses on the most disturbing aspects of her community – she is “interested in the uncanny and grotesque exorcised from the mainstream culture of American suburban domesticity” (Kolbuszewska 2007, 84). Indeed, just as other representatives of Suburban Gothic, including Joyce Carol Oates, Ira Levin, or Richard Matheson, who explore the disturbing dimensions of suburban conformity, materialism and pretence, Jackson exposes the horror and violence inside the home and within the family. Typically for the Gothic in general, the book presents “a nightmare vision of a modern world made up of detached individuals, which has dissolved into predatory and demonic relations which cannot be reconciled into a healthy social order” (Kilgour 1995, 12).

The fictional Cabrillo is “halfway between a suburban development and a collection of large private estates” and Pepper Street is “on the borderline between these two” and in between a highway and dark, unexplored woods (Jackson 2013, 5-6). As Bernice Murphy (2009, 20) observes, “[t]he liminal status of this type of environment – neither one thing, nor another but something in-between – is part of what helps make American suburbia the perfect breeding ground for fictional expressions of anxiety and unease.” The inhabitants of Pepper Street strive to be perceived as proper and successful representatives of American middle class. The ideal image of a conscientious suburban housewife is brought to a parodic extreme in the figure of Mrs. Desmond who “was excessively concerned about the cleanliness and general superiority of the food she served her family” and, like many other women in the neighborhood, “did her own dusting and bedmaking” (Jackson 2013, 74). At the same time, Mrs. Desmond is the epitome of conformity and self-restraint:

she had never spoken a harsh word to or about anyone in her life. She had lived with Mr. Desmond for nineteen years, and in all that time had never raised her voice to

him, or acted in any manner that was not genteel; she never treated her adopted son with anything less than perfect courtesy, and her attitude toward her neighbors was such as to set her apart in a lovely aristocratic isolation; she had never, to her knowledge, had a friend. (Jackson 2013, 73-4)

Surface politeness, excessive concern about morality and cleanliness, as well as general “invulnerability” (Jackson 2013, 1) of Jackson’s characters enclose each family, but also every individual, in their own private enclave. The insistence on order and hygiene characteristic of the 1950s suburban lifestyle seems to apply equally well to the sphere of emotions: an overt expression of feelings may be considered socially awkward or embarrassing. The characters not only avoid any manifestations of their mental states but also appear not wholly conscious of their own affective needs and unable to articulate their passions in any coherent way. Just as Pepper Street is surrounded by a wall, which protects the neighborhood from the outside world, the protagonists live “their own private unowned lives” (Jackson 2013, 130) in their separate realities, alienated not only from each other but also from their own fears and desires. This is made even more apparent by the disturbing fragmentation of Jackson’s narrative, in which the narrator quickly moves from one scene to another in a series of short, almost cursory glimpses. Hence, the psychological complexity of the characters lies hidden beneath the formalities of their conventional existence, threatening to reveal itself in a moment of crisis. Sigmund Freud (1971, 241), in his essay “The Uncanny,” argues that refusal to face one’s feelings inevitably leads to emotional unrest: “every affect belonging to an emotional impulse, whatever its kind, is transformed, if it is repressed, into anxiety.” Indeed, if the world of the novel appears familiar and predictable, it is also gloomy and deeply disturbing. Thus, the Freudian concept of *das Unheimlich*, understood as “that class of the frightening which leads back to what is known of old and long familiar” (Freud 1971, 220), may be seen to function in Jackson’s novel as a manifestation of anxiety, pointing to “the connection between psychological and aesthetic experience” (Johnson 2010, 35). The wall, which surrounds and protects the area, and remains one of the novel’s most important symbols<sup>2</sup>, clearly works, as “Freud’s metaphor for repression” (Hattenhauer 2003, 94), while uncanny experiences, which take place in domestic spaces and between different characters, are emblematic of their deeply hidden anxieties.

#### 4. UGLY FEELINGS AND WICKED CHILDREN

Whereas the adults delight in their proudly worn dignity and self-possession, and rarely display any negative feelings, it is the Pepper Street children who perform the majority of violent acts in the novel. With the exception of Caroline Desmond, a three-year-old epitome of innocence and perfection, other children often behave in brutal or immoral ways. Helen Williams terrorizes not only the Jewish Marilyn but also her own younger sister, Jamie laughs at the humiliation of his brother Artie, Mary and Virginia ruthlessly exploit the naivety and generosity of the mentally retarded Beverly, and a nine-

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<sup>2</sup> As Ruth Franklin (2016, 217) reveals, before publishing the book the editor suggested changing the title to *The Innocents of Pepper Street* but Jackson opposed to the idea explaining that the wall was the novel’s central symbol.

year-old Hallie Martin flirts with the men who work at the wall. Not only are these children openly cruel to one another, but they also perform a scapegoating ritual in the form of a word game. Playing “Tin-Tin,” a very old game whose “entire introductory ritual had lost its meaning” (Jackson 2013, 99), the children each time choose their own victim, one of whom is Tod Donald. Interestingly, Tod is generally treated as a scapegoat by the Pepper Street kids: older boys he wants to befriend only feign their friendship, his own sister hates him and a newly arrived in the neighborhood Hester rejects his affection. Tod is regarded as “inefficient and a bad sport,” as someone who “does *everything* wrong” (Jackson 2013, 33-4) and, finally, as the most probable murderer of little Caroline. Earlier in the novel, in one of the most disturbing passages, the thirteen-year-old Tod sneaks into the house of the Desmonds and secretly explores the interior of Mrs. Desmond’s and Caroline’s bedroom. In what reads like an allusion to a sexual act, Tod enters the wardrobe, “wormed his way in through Mrs. Desmond’s dresses and negligees until he reached the most hidden part of the closet, and he sat down on the floor, his perfumed hand over his face,” speaking out loud “all the dirtiest words he knew” (Jackson 2013, 67). This uncanny penetration of the feminine interior is also a symbolic confrontation with the repressed maternal – as Tod moves through the house he sees his own reflection in a number of mirror-like surfaces as if he has returned to the Lacanian Imaginary. In Jackson’s novel, then, children are far from innocent as they give vent to the unarticulated anxieties of their community – they enact “the repressed other of the sanitized suburban and domestic ideal” (Kolbuszewska 2007, 86).

##### 5. SUBURBAN ANXIETIES

Historically, the category of the uncanny was related to the rise of big cities and their heterogeneous population, which resulted in the necessity to mark class boundaries with geographical ones. When discussing suburban anxieties of the Victorian era, Lara Baker Whelan (2010) investigates the reasons for numerous suburban repressions. As the critic points out, “the suburb became ‘not only the seat of respectability but . . . a world of fantasy in which dreams of self-importance and fulfillment could become tangible in the management of some doll’s house estate and in the occupation of a unique social niche’” (Whelan 2010, 22). At the same time, one of the main preoccupations for suburbanites has been the instability of their position as middle-class citizens: “[o]ne underlying source of the fear of a working-class invasion was derived from the larger middle-class concern about ‘degradation’ or, later in the century, ‘de-evolution’” (Whelan 2010, 70). As Anthony Vidler (1992, 3-4) explains, “the contrast between a secure and homely interior and a fearful invasion of an alien presence” is the essence of the Freudian *Unheimlich* and is closely related to the precarious position of the middle classes:

At the heart of the anxiety provoked by such alien presences was a fundamental insecurity: that of a newly established class, not quite at home in its own home. The uncanny, in this sense, might be characterized as the quintessential bourgeois kind of fear: one carefully bounded by the limits of real material security and the pleasure principle afforded by a terror that was, artistically at least, kept well under control. The uncanny was, in this first incarnation, a sensation best experienced in the privacy of the interior.

The anxiety about the possibility of interconnections between classes was also related to the idea of “dirt” intruding upon the sanitized closed-off suburban areas. According to Mary Douglas’s theory (2006, 152), two important kinds of social pollution include “danger pressing on external boundaries” and “danger from transgressing the internal lines of the system.” Hence the intrusion of the excluded urban Other – the low, the non-white, the degenerate – was perceived as the source of contamination, degeneration and chaos. As Peter Stallybrass and Allon White (1986, 125) argue, “[i]n the nineteenth century that fear of differences . . . was articulated above all through the ‘body’ of the city: through the separations and interpenetrations of the suburb and the slum, the grand buildings and the sewer, of the respectable classes and the lumpenproletariat.” At the same time, by physically excluding the social “debris” from their suburban space, the middle classes strived to symbolically exclude all that is associated with the low – sexuality, brutality, and death – from their ordered bourgeois lives. Thus the middle-class’s attempts to create a secure “home” eventually lead to the repression of all that was associated with the other, of all that was *un*-homely.

In *The Road Through the Wall*, Jackson’s characters not only remain out of touch with their own most intimate feelings but they also take pride in their privileged position as white middle-class suburbanites comfortably separated from and uncontaminated by the most frightening aspects of human existence. Like many other dwellers of suburbia at that time, they “called themselves upright American citizens, and they looked around Pepper Street with its neatness and the highway beyond and the gates and the wall, and they possessed it with statements like ‘good place to live,’ and ‘when I decide to move’” (Jackson 2013, 130). Consequently, they fear and look down upon the newly-arrived less affluent tenants of the house-for-rent, who “are not of the best breeding” (Jackson 2013, 146). The mentally retarded and socially clumsy twelve-year-old Beverly Terrel, who steals money from her mother and walks around barefoot seems to embody many of the most basic fears experienced by the middle classes: she is poor, uneducated, mentally deficient, with an awkward, disproportionate body; there is also a suggestion that her mother, who is asleep all day and neglects her children, may be earning their living by working as a prostitute. There is a general distaste for the Terrel girl in the neighborhood, expressed most eloquently by Miss Tyler: “‘A great big animal like that ought to be in a cage. And you bring her here!’ She made a pushing gesture with both hands, her mouth turning in disgust. ‘You bring her into this house, that great big dirty animal, right here in with me’” (Jackson 2013, 153-4). Also, one of the neighborhood girls experiences “the faint nausea” at the thought of having anything to do with “this great awkward girl who talked like a six-year-old child” (Jackson 2013, 150). The Terrels, like the Williamses before them, represent the uncultivated and therefore menacing lower classes, which bring with them disorder and the threat of demoralization. Symbolically, then, Beverly Terrel and her family may be seen as the embodiment of the *abject* defined by Julia Kristeva (1982, 4) as that which “disturbs identity, system, order” and “does not respect borders, positions, rules.” As Kristeva makes clear in her *Powers of Horror*, abjection involves the “throwing off” of the liminal or in-between condition of being simultaneously inside and outside the mother at the moment of birth and is a process necessary for the emergence of subjectivity. However, the transition from the pre-linguistic Semiotic realm to the Symbolic sphere of language and culture is never complete and the terrifying traces of the Semiotic continue to press upon the subject from

within. On the social level, a similar process of exclusion seems to take place: “the ‘top’ attempts to reject the ‘bottom’ for reasons of prestige and status, only to discover, not only that it is in some way frequently dependent upon the low-Other . . . but also that the top *includes* that low symbolically” (Stallybrass and White 1986, 5).

Consequently, the demolition of the wall in Jackson's novel disrupts the symbolic boundary separating the “more cultivated” suburbanites from the unfamiliar and therefore menacing “other” and a threat of “barbarian hordes” that were to “be unleashed on Pepper Street” (Jackson 2013, 130) begins to terrify the protagonists. When old Mr. Martin contemplates the possible consequences of tearing down the wall, he envisions “the sacred enclosed space” of the neighborhood being invaded by “small boys with stones, perhaps curious trespassers gathering flowers, perhaps all those people with large feet who trample down tiny growing things” (Jackson 2013, 134). However, the fear of such “intrusions from the outside world” (Jackson 2013, 134), that is the invasion of the “dirty,” low-Other that so much bothers the characters is, in fact, the fear of what they have been familiar with all along and what they had repressed in an attempt to be perceived as the embodiments of middle-class ideals. Earlier in the novel, it was Tod Donald who threw stones at other kids and when leaving the Desmond house he pulled a yellow blossom, crushed it in his fingers, and dumped to the ground. The “large feet,” on the other hand, clearly refer to those adults of Pepper Street who, like Mrs. Merriam, repeatedly look down upon and humiliate their own children.

## 6. THE SUBURBAN CARNIVALESQUE

Indeed, the disruption of the symbolic border between inside and outside results in a sudden release of long repressed emotions and primitive instincts, which turn Pepper Street into a truly uncanny site of terror. Symbolically, the threat of pollution is marked by the dust coming from the old bricks and filling “every living-room on the block,” which makes Mrs. Desmond change Caroline into clean clothes several times a day (Jackson 2013, 133). The gap in the wall provides Mr. Roberts and Mrs. Martin with a hideaway, where they disappear for what looks like a sexual tryst, and Hallie Martin puts on her mother's lipstick to flirt with the working men. Mr. and Mrs. Ransom-Jones organize a neighborhood party to which the Pepper Street outsiders – the Jewish Perlman, the witch-like Mrs. Mack or the lower-class Terrels – are not invited. During the party other notable transgressions take place creating “a suburban version of carnival, with normally staid adults getting drunk, flirting with minors, and becoming aggressive” (Hattenhauer 2003, 95). As Stewart (1993, 68) has stated, “[t]he miniature world remains perfect and uncontaminated by the grotesque so long as its absolute boundaries are maintained.” Ironically, then, the breach in the wall rather than letting evil come from the outside, opens up a way for all that was repressed and kept under control *within* the middle-class community to come out.

The neighborhood party leads eventually to “a great climactic festival” (Jackson 2013, 181), in which the celebrated oppositions between high and low, classical and grotesque, clean and dirty are suddenly erased. When little Caroline Desmond is suddenly found missing, all the inhabitants of Pepper Street come together on what was traditionally their village green and forgetting their highly-valued individuality create, as in the Bakhtinian carnival feast, one common body: “[they] gathered closer together so

that it was impossible to single out any one of them . . . they were so close together that there were no names for any of the faces, and the hands might be clasped tight in the hands of strangers” (Jackson 2013, 184). What is more, despite the disturbing quality of the event, “[t]he prevailing mood was one of keen excitement; no one there really wanted Caroline Desmond safe at home” (Jackson 2013, 182). Finally, it is the dead body of the female child, discovered in the creek, that becomes the epitome of the abject: “[s]he was horribly dirty; no one had ever seen Caroline as dirty as she was then, with mud all over her yellow dress and yellow socks and . . . [blood] all over her head” (Jackson 2013, 185). As the residents of Pepper Street gather around the corpse, this “climactic festival,” based on the principle of reversal and disrespect of boundaries, leads to the confrontation with all that the middle classes have struggled so much to keep outside their ordered existence. In a truly carnivalesque fashion, then, the suburban party turns into its opposite: the morbid feast of the Other.

### 7. MODERNITY AND ITS DISCONTENTS

The transformation of the novel’s secure and homely suburb into an arena of “unhomeliness” and anxiety might be seen as an illustration of Freud’s concept of the uncanny: the tendency of the familiar to become defamiliarized, disturbing, almost dreamlike (cf. Vidler 1992, 7). On the one hand, the suburbia’s propensity to turn on itself lies in the tensions inherent in its very nature. As Robert Fishman (quoted in Silverstone 1997, 6) has argued,

The classic suburb . . . is first a monument to bourgeois civilization at its most prosperous and self-confident, an aesthetic achievement in both landscape and domestic architecture that commands respect; but it is also a testimony to bourgeois anxieties, to deeply buried fears that translate into contempt and hatred for the ‘others’ who inhabit the city.

On the other hand, just as Freud’s essay “The Uncanny”, published in 1919, Jackson’s novel may be seen as a response to the shock and horror of war and the ensuing feelings of insecurity and homelessness. Written after the Second World War but set after World War I and the Great Depression, *The Road Through the Wall* seems to capture “the fundamental condition of anxiety in the world – the way in which the world was experienced as ‘not a home’” (Vidler 1992, 7-8). The development of the suburbs in America in the 1930s, but especially in the 1950s, and their insistence on order, security and stability, may be seen as a response to this sense of “homelessness” and ultimate loss of fundamental values that was the consequence of the dramatic events in the first half of the twentieth century. A real or imagined sense of “unhomeliness,” Vidler (1992, 7) notes, was characteristic to the time when “the entire ‘homeland’ of Europe, cradle and apparently secure house of western civilization, was in the process of barbaric regression; when the territorial security that had fostered the notion of a unified culture was broken, bringing a powerful disillusionment with the universal ‘museum’ of the European ‘fatherland.’” Indeed, in the Preface to *The Magic of Shirley Jackson*, Stanley Edgar Hyman (1966, viii) makes a revealing comment about the writer’s perspective: “Her fierce visions of dissociation and madness, of alienation and withdrawal, of cruelty and

terror, have been taken to be personal, even neurotic, fantasies. Quite the reverse: they are a sensitive and faithful anatomy of our times, fitting symbols for our distressing world of the concentration camp and the Bomb.”

In this sense, Jackson's novel offers an examination of anxiety produced by contradictions inherent in the very logic of modernity. While evoking, especially in the prologue, the image of a preindustrial village that Pepper Street may be modeled upon,<sup>3</sup> the narrative addresses the nostalgia for a premodern world where one still feels at home and secure. However, while modernity brought with itself the freedom of the individual, it “created free society . . . at the expense of the protective tissues which had bound together feudal society” (Schlesinger 1949 qtd. in Vegso 2013, 177). Hence, the modern concept of the individual as separate rather than part of a community resulted in a profound feeling of alienation and homelessness. In Jackson's novel, the lack of social and emotional bonds between characters is parodied in the peculiar friendship between Miss Fielding and Mr. Donald, who spend time together talking to themselves as if they were alone, with Mr. Donald keeping his eyes closed. When they talked, “[t]hey often interrupted one another, or talked both at once, as though all that were necessary was to make a companionable noise” (Jackson 2013, 147). What is more, the road through the wall that gives the novel its title and threatens the pastoral peacefulness of the neighborhood is, clearly, a metaphor for progress, a version of Leo Marx's machine in the garden: a “shriek of the locomotive” in the “Sleepy Hollow” of the American Arcadia (Marx 2000, 16). Indeed, there is a sense in the novel of an exclusive and familial suburban refuge being irrevocably destroyed by a larger, invisible and uncontrollable force: “the idea that placid Pepper Street was being deformed by workmen and dirt and great foul machines was almost as bad as the prospect of being shortly on a direct road with the rest of the world” (Jackson 2013, 133). If Pepper Street was a peaceful retreat from the dangers and uncertainties of the larger world, “[i]t was the destruction of the wall which put the first wedge into the Pepper Street security, and that security was so fragile that, once jarred, it shivered into fragments in a matter of weeks” (Jackson 2013, 131). The insecurity of these middle-class characters results also from the fact that, like modernity itself, they are forever haunted by a long-repressed fear, or fantasy, which returns like a phantom and intrudes upon their ordinary lives. As Terry Castle (1995, 8) has argued, the Freudian uncanny was born at the rise of modernity, when the insistence on reason and intellect brought about a radical devaluation and, consequently, repression of the irrational yet secretly familiar to the sphere of the unconscious and “produced, like a kind of toxic side effect, a new human experience of strangeness, anxiety, bafflement, and intellectual impasse.” Hence, the individual suppression of infantile fantasy that is the essence of the uncanny reenacts the historical process “by which human civilization as a whole – at some paradigmatic juncture in its history – dispensed with ‘primitive’ or ‘animistic’ forms of thought and substituted new, rationalized modes of explanation” (Castle 1995, 10). Significantly, these troublesome ideas are taken up by the Gothic

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<sup>3</sup> See Richard Pascal's reading of the novel in “*The Road Through the Wall* and Shirley Jackson's America,” in which he argues that “[m]odernity's wistful, sentimentalizing memory of the feudal village as a community of citizens who live in fellowship with one another as social equals is the mythic paradigm for leafy suburban areas such as the novel's ‘Pepper Street,’ but its applicability is perpetually undermined by the society's still more intense veneration of another idealized remnant of feudal society, that of the landed estate” (Pascal 2016).

genre, which emerges in the eighteenth century as a form of rebellion against the modern aesthetic ideal and sublimates the irrational, lawless and transgressive into forms of art and literature.

## 8. CONCLUSIONS

In Jackson's novel, then, the rupture in the wall which separates the privileged "innocents" from the rest of the world might be seen as a spatial representation of the failure of a national fantasy, of the impossibility of a utopian ideal going back to "the nation's perennial fascination with the promise of some vague but fervently dreamt of communal fulfillment implicit in its originating image of itself as a New World" (Pascal 2005, 82). The idealized vision of the modern suburb as a private, isolated social unit sheltered against the threatening Other proves equally illusory. Indeed, the opening in the wall is also symbolic of the gap between the American dreams of innocence and reality. The climactic moment in Jackson's novel uncovers the disturbing truth that evil lurks not outside but *within* the enclosed space of this miniature world. The primitive murder of little Caroline, whose immaculate body is found soiled with dirt and blood, is the ultimate loss of innocence leading to the disintegration of the neighborhood as well as to the disillusionment about moral superiority of one social group over another. It is telling that Jackson's characters, rather than suspecting that the villain might be from outside of their own community, are ready to assume it was Tod Donald simply on the grounds he "acted funny" (Jackson 2013, 176) earlier that day. The readiness to accept the possibility of the most horrific scenario in which one child is capable of murdering another draws attention to the community's deeply buried fears about their own propensity for violence. Again, as in "The Lottery," the victim is killed with a stone, the most primitive of weapons, as if to prove what has been one of the dominant themes in Jackson's writing: "the uncontrolled, unobserved wickedness of human nature" (Oppenheimer 1988, 125). In both, the novel and the celebrated short story, there is, too, an almost instinctive and irrepressible need for a scapegoat, upon whom the worst social fears are projected – Tod Donald is not only accused of murdering the little girl but there is suspicion he had abused her sexually. As the boy refuses to speak and commits suicide, the novel finishes without revealing who really killed Caroline Desmond. In this way, Jackson makes the whole community of Pepper Street responsible for the deaths suggesting perhaps, as Tony Tanner (qtd. in Hattenhauer 2003, 95) does, that "[e]vil is in part summoned up by the dreams of innocence." Thus, in its echoing of the central myth of America as a new Eden, *The Road Through the Wall* focuses rather on the haunted national unconscious and shows the fictional suburb as "the physical personification of all that was wrong with American society" (Murphy 2009, 5). Indeed, if Jackson's suburbia can be seen to represent America, it comments on the repressions and fears which terrify her readers because they are only too familiar.

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