Bound for Home: Containment and Community in Cold War America Through Shirley Jackson's "Flower Garden"

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Bound for Home: Containment and Community in Cold War America

Through Shirley Jackson’s “Flower Garden”

Jennifer Lynne Furner

A Thesis Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of
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Abstract

This thesis is an examination of Shirley Jackson’s short story “Flower Garden” and the white middle-class housewives of Cold War America. Through the policy of domestic containment, a practice to shield one’s home and community from outside threats, traditional gender roles are strictly adhered to in order to achieve the greatest security. However, because of the housewife’s confinement to the home, she often feels trapped, unable to express herself. This thesis argues that these women have no concept of home in Cold War America. Where home should be a nurturing, supportive environment, it is cold and harsh and oppressive, leaving these women and Cold War Americans in general with a feeling of homelessness. By exploring the woman’s capacity for home—her community, her own family unit, and her own self-worth—through the works of Shirley Jackson, namely her story “Flower Garden,” this thesis argues that women can never feel completely at home; often, in order to feel one aspect of home, another must be forfeited, leaving these characters always searching for something out of reach. Jackson raises an interesting discussion of women’s priorities, expectations, and desires that still remains just as relevant today as it did in the time she was writing. In this third wave of feminism, women are still asking the same questions that Jackson had the courage to confront.
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I. Introduction

Home is difficult to define. Kirsten Jacobson offers one explanation: “one’s home provides a privileged familiar situation where the patterns for how to live are largely settled and, thus, where one can typically be at rest. Home is, ultimately, that place where we gain a first sense of ourselves and how we stand with respect to the ‘rest of the world’” (4). The childhood home is a place we know since birth and also where we learn the basics about being a human. There’s a comfort that comes with being in our childhood home that often relates to the safe, loving environment it was when we were growing and maturing. It is an accepting place that forgives our stumbles and mistakes as we learn what we inevitably need to learn to survive in the “real world.” Thus, the home protects us from the vast frightening world that lies through the front door until we are ready to step outside and face it.

Who we become in these formative years stays with us for all existence; our experience with home as a child shapes who we become as adults. Ultimately, then, the home is a reflection of who we are and we are a reflection of our home. Jacobson elaborates on the connection between home and one’s personal self:

A person’s childhood home is an especially significant model for her future way of being…Her lived body is significantly shaped by her home’s interpersonally informed character—as a home, for example, that has allowed certain activities and not others, that has comforted and acknowledged her concerns or dismissed them, that has encouraged adventures or cloaked her in fears or admonitions, and so forth. These features of her home live on in her ways of perceiving and engaging herself, others, and the world around her (6).
Jacobson implies that our character is shaped by the character of the house in which we are raised. The “character” of our childhood home is the result of the atmosphere set by other family members sharing the house and from the actual architecture of the house itself. Whether or not the family members living the house create a safe comforting environment is just as important as whether or not the physical house creates a safe and comforting environment.

Perhaps a reason our childhood home has such an impact on our character is because we often see our house as an extension of ourselves. Often when we are in the process of purchasing a house, it’s important that the house reflect who we are and make a connection with us. Janet Carsten and Stephen Hugh-Jones explain this desire for reflection and connection when they write, “The house and the body are intimately linked. The house is an extension of the person; like an extra skin, carapace or second layer of clothes, it serves as much to reveal and display as it does to hide and protect” (2). Carsten and Hugh-Jones have ultimately defined the exact role of the house: reveal, display, hide, and protect. The house conveys what we wish to reveal and display about ourselves, but it also hides what we wish to remain private and it protects against intruders and danger. Along with Jacobson then, it seems the cumulative definition of home is a safe, comforting, familiar place where one is protected from harm to learn and grow with acceptance and love; thus, that environment becomes a reflection of one’s self.

Because home represents acceptance and love, it is often a place where we feel welcome. However, if home is the place where we gain the first sense of ourselves, as Jacobson suggests, than the first sense that Shirley Jackson gained about herself was that she was unwelcome. From infancy, Jackson had to settle for half-homes: people and places that sheltered her, clothed her, and fed her, sure, but never appreciated her or supported her. The first words of Judy Oppenheimer’s biography of Shirley Jackson, “She was not the daughter her mother wanted,”
indicates to the reader that the rest of Jackson’s life was impacted by the immediate dismissal by her mother. As if to drive the last nail into the coffin, Oppenheimer confesses that “Geraldine [Jackson’s mother] had informed her [Jackson] she was an unsuccessful abortion….This was the way Geraldine had made her feel, throughout her life” (14). If Geraldine had wanted a daughter, she would have wanted one who was beautiful, conservative, and socially accepted; she made sure Shirley knew those expectations growing up, yet she received none of them in the daughter she birthed. As Oppenheimer suggests, Geraldine would have preferred her daughter to be a fool—someone who didn’t question her country club life of good upbringing and who would marry a man based on his success and wealth, ensuring that Jackson would never have to work a day in her life. Instead of a fool, however, she got a literary genius. Shirley was “brilliant, messy, torrentially creative, and far from ornamental,” and while many parents would have been pleased to have such an offspring, Geraldine insisted that Shirley never lived up to the standards she desired. When Time Magazine published a glowing review of what would be Jackson’s last novel, We Have Always Lived in the Castle, as well as a current picture of the author, Geraldine’s reaction was as such: “I do not know if the book review is good or not—and I have been so sad all morning about what you have allowed yourself to look like. We are proud of your works, but why do you have to have such a dreadful picture” (246). Jackson’s accomplishments would never matter to her mother because they weren’t the accomplishments Geraldine wanted from her.

Because of the hostility, the resentment, and the overall disapproval Jackson faced as a child, Diane Hoeveler suggests that, for Jackson, home is “a place where we will return in order to be wounded and betrayed once again….a site where victimization, abandonment, disappointment, and abuse lurk around every corner. ‘Home’ is not a cheery vision of families
gathered around their fireplaces, providing moral and emotional support to one another” (279). Jackson never got to experience the “home” that Jacobson, Carsten, and Hugh-Jones described. In fact, she experienced the opposite.

To add insult to injury, Jackson spent most of her life living in communities that expressed the same dismissive attitudes as her mother. She was raised in Burlingame, California, and the town served as her introduction to suburban living and the darker side of humanity. Oppenheimer writes that, even back then, “Shirley could look at the neighborhood, with its flowers and lawns and freckle-faced children—the sort of neighborhood that would be celebrated on television again and again thirty years later, as a fit setting for the Nelsons, the Cleavers—and see beyond it, straight to its false heart” (17). Jackson discerned, through the utopian landscape, the jealousy, gossip, backstabbing, intolerance, and judgment that lurks in the cracks of a happy suburban community, which she would put down in the pages of her first novel *The Road Through the Wall*. During her time there, she learned “people were flawed and carried evil within them...People were where the trouble lay...and she already suspected, even as a child, that they [people] would not be very different no matter where she found them” (Oppenheimer 18). Her mother had set the example of how cold and unfeeling people could be, and outside her door where more malevolent specimens to prove her point.

Perhaps because she expected people to be the same wherever she went, she decided to try her luck with North Bennington, Vermont, the town where Jackson spent most of her adult life and wrote a majority of her notable fiction. In regards to the community, Oppenheimer wants to assume that “Shirley had found her home” (112). Her use of “had found” implies that Jackson was perhaps without a home and was actively pursuing one. Of course, Jackson had a residence before she came to North Bennington, as well as a husband, a son, and an unborn baby in tow.
However, based on the definition of home that was discussed earlier, we expect that Oppenheimer is implying that Jackson had found an environment or a space where she would be protected, welcomed, and understood: a “home” as opposed to a house or a town in which to simply live.

On the contrary, before that declaratory phrase, Oppenheimer describes the character of North Bennington as “a town whose citizenry is overwhelmingly white and Christian, and innately suspicious of those who are not…. These people are…careful to maintain a certain distance, a certain guard. A stranger is not accepted here at face value but is tested, again and again over years” (111-112). Oppenheimer’s description suggests that Shirley had found the exact opposite of a home: not a warm, friendly, compassionate place, but yet another cold, isolating, hostile environment. Jackson felt as though she had “discovered in North Bennington an almost perfect microcosm in which to study the very process of alienation itself” (111). Though the community may have provided Jackson with plenty of material for her dystopian and terrifying fiction, she seemed to sense right off the bat that she would never be accepted. A scientist may be inspired in his work laboratory, but he doesn’t want to live in it. And it seems as though Jackson, by moving into North Bennington, signed herself up to not only observe and dissect but to be observed and dissected.

The Hyman family suffered much persecution from this small town. There was no doubt the Hyman family was different. They were Jewish by heritage, but atheist in practice. There was a possibility that witchcraft was performed in their household. African-Americans and city dwellers were often visitors. The fact that the Hymans were associated with the women’s college in town immediately brought on suspicions that they were Communists. Jackson was not only a working mother who earned her own money, which was disgraceful to some in small towns, but
she was a terrible housewife to boot; her house was always messy and her childrens’ hair was
often unwashed. The Hymans seemed to represent the antithesis of American values in suburbia.
And they paid for it. Oppenheimer writes that neighbors would dump trash in their yard, send
them hate mail, and use soap to paint swastikas on their windows (182). The Hymans brought a
different dynamic to the town than what was traditionally allowed and people didn’t appreciate
it. One might get the sense that the townspeople would have thrown stones at the Hymans if they
were able.

That is probably how North Bennington inspired and motivated Jackson to write her most
notorious piece of fiction. Her obituary in The New York Times claims: “Miss Jackson was
widely known as the author of ‘The Lottery,’ a short story published in 1948 that became a
classic horror tale.” While her novels and other short fiction are later listed in the article, they
acknowledge her first and foremost for that infamous and horrifying short story about a rural
town that holds a lottery every summer to decide which person in the community should be
sacrificed for the good of the crop harvest.

When the story was first published in The New Yorker on June 26, 1948, it received an
intense response from repulsed and horrified readers. They were appalled that Jackson had
depicted a village as having complete disregard for one of their own and that each citizen was
disposable for what was believed to be the “greater good.” When pressed about her agenda in
writing the story, Jackson replied, “I suppose I hoped, by setting a particularly brutal rite in the
present and in my own village, to shock the readers with a graphic dramatization of the pointless
violence and general inhumanity of their own lives” (Oppenheimer 131). It is a jarring
dramatization of the social atmosphere of the ‘50s; it is a representation of societal demands to
ensure the security of the people and to avoid the threat of change. Oppenheimer writes, “She
had told people a painful truth about themselves…And that truth was so bitter, so ugly, so hard to bear, it was no surprise readers raged, cursing her and the magazine that had printed the story” (129, 131). It wasn’t the sacrificial ritual of the story that so outraged readers; it was the community’s willingness to disregard a member’s safety and comfort to protect the safety and comfort of the rest of the population. That was a truth that Shirley herself experienced many times in her life.

It is no surprise that this horrifying story takes place in Jackson’s own village, a community that dismissed her at first sight, treated her with inhumane hostility, and committed pointless violence against her with constant harassment and name-calling. This community was anything but what people would consider a “home.” Two decades had passed since her upbringing in Burlingame, and yet she was still encountering the same hostile atmosphere in these supposedly utopian societies. The “norm” had changed drastically in those two decades, though. The nation was disillusioned after World War II and now there was an even more frightening threat of nuclear war with the Soviets. Where was “home” in post-World War II America? Where was this warm, accepting, safe place? Even if Jackson had received assurance of protection and comfort from her childhood home, no such idea existed in the wake of the Cold War. Elaine Tyler May, in her book, *Homeward Bound*, writes:

> For in the early years of the cold war, amid a world of uncertainties brought about by World War II and its aftermath, the home seemed to offer a secure private nest removed from the dangers of the outside world. The message was ambivalent, however, for the family also seemed particularly vulnerable. It needed heavy protection against the intrusions of forces outside itself. The self-contained home held out the promise of security in an insecure world. It also offered a vision of
abundance and fulfillment. As the Cold War began, young postwar Americans were homeward bound. (3)

When May uses the term “self-contained home,” she suggests that if one could contain one’s family in one’s home, they would be safe from harm. In other words, people aspired to form a barrier between themselves and any hostile outside infiltration. The foreign policy of containment in 1946 suggests that danger from abroad is not a threat if the country is “contained within a clearly-defined sphere of influence” (May 13). Americans used this idea of containment in their communities and their homes, making strict guidelines for their lives and putting up implied barriers to protect themselves. May explains that security in Cold War America was a double-edged sword, however. The home supposedly “promised” to keep one safe in unsafe times, but it, too, was vulnerable to danger. Much like in Jackson’s childhood neighborhood, where acceptance wasn’t handed out freely and people were often suspicious until they had a reason not to be, all Americans were now constantly on guard against danger; they often suspected that their friends and neighbors were possible sources for that danger. People were still hostile and unwelcoming but now they were so because they honestly feared for their life.

May claims that Americans were “homeward bound” in that the home was a place where a family could feel they had control over their lives. The Cold War era was a time where nuclear war was a constant threat. Americans couldn’t be assured that they would be guarded if a nuclear attack occurred, so they compensated for that helplessness by attempting to find security in the aspects of life they could control: namely, the home. Their first line of defense was assigning each family member a specific role. Women were placed in the position of the traditional housewife. Because of this, May’s title has a secondary meaning. While a family unit may have been “homeward bound” in that they focused first and foremost on the efficiency and security of
the home, women were actually bound to the home; they were often imprisoned by housework and childcare responsibilities that accompanied the lot of a housewife. Convicts do not often refer to prison as “home”; therefore, one has to assume that these women bound to their houses were lacking a sense of “home” as well.

There is yet another way to interpret May’s title. Cold War Americans are bound (as in determined or obligated) to make their homes secure and they are also physically bound (as in confined or restrained) to their homes. What they lack is a home where they can feel completely secure, accepted, and loved. Therefore, one could suggest that Cold War Americans are also bound for home. They are desperate to discover those warm comforting feelings of acceptance and security that one gains when truly “home.” It is unlikely Americans at this time had a place that matched those sentiments.

This perhaps is the painful truth Jackson showed people about themselves—not that they were inhumane or inherently evil but that they were homeless. Jackson spent all her life looking for feelings of home that finally she had no choice but to create it for herself on the page. In regards to her collection of comic household stories, James Egan writes, “Her personal setbacks and discouragements…do not surface, nor does her ongoing discontent with her husband’s extramarital love life. Her subtle omissions, to sustain the illusion of domestic tranquility, may point to the idea that a sanctuary or safe place was very critical to her personality and writing” (17). Jackson, like the rest of her fellow Americans, could not, in reality, achieve that place where she felt completely secure and accepted. There was no security or acceptance in Cold War America. Instead she dreamed that she was safe and wrote like she was safe so that she would feel safe to examine, through her fiction, the nation’s desperate search for home.
“The Lottery” took “home” and transformed it into everything home should not be—hostile, dangerous, and anonymous. It shows what a homeless society looks like: no one has a voice, no one is represented, and no one is safe from violence. It is a hopeless situation for all who live there. Because of its shock value, however, people have difficult recognizing these “truths” that Jackson revealed. A more appropriate example of the times would be her much more subtle and must less appreciated short story “Flower Garden.” As opposed to “The Lottery,” “Flower Garden” is a more realistic depiction of the lengths to which small-town America will go to keep change and perceived danger at bay. This fear ultimately creates a “homeless” community much like “The Lottery” where the first priority is the “greater good” and no one is safe from persecution.

In this story, Helen Winning, a member of “the oldest family in town,” envies the new neighbor, Mrs. MacLane, for her freedom to buy and decorate the cottage Helen always wanted. However, it’s that same freedom Helen envies that eventually turns their friendship sour; Mrs. MacLane takes it upon herself to hire a black man, Mr. Jones, to help her tend her garden, violating the town’s rules of containment and threatening their perceived “safety.” Helen decides the safety of the town is more important to her than her friendship with Mrs. MacLane and decides to help the town ostracize her.

Jackson tells a story where both the victim and the victimizer are searching for home. Neither of the characters lives in a totally accepting environment. Because of Cold War containment policies and the social demands of the time, Helen feels she must make the town’s safety her number one priority and so sacrifices her own wants and needs to uphold that duty. Mrs. MacLane chooses to embrace the freedom of living for herself and conducting herself in ways that are true to who she is, but in doing so, the town views her as a security threat and she
is shunned by the entire community. Neither woman has a complete home; Helen has to sacrifice her identity and Mrs. MacLane has to sacrifice community acceptance. Although Helen is shown to be the victimizer here when she ignores and ridicules Mrs. MacLane in order to get her to leave, neither woman ends her story happily. Both the victim and the victimizer end up as lonely at the end of the story as they were in the beginning. When one is alone, one is not supported, cared for, secure, or loved and therefore lacks “home.” The search for home in Cold War America is an unwinnable game, and Jackson reflects this “losing” reality she herself experienced in her fiction.

“Home” requires much more than simply four walls and a roof. To have a proper home, one needs not only a loving and supporting family unit, but also an accepting surrounding community. Not only that, but a person has to accept one’s self and have love for who they are. These were all elusive concepts for Shirley Jackson, who suffered abuse from her parents and husband, ridicule and hate from her community, and inner self-loathing her whole life. Perhaps because Jackson never had the feeling of “home,” her characters couldn’t either. Helen Winning and Mrs. MacLane of “Flower Garden” demonstrate that “home” may be easy to define but is difficult to attain.

I begin this project by looking at the role of the community as one’s home. By illustrating the cultural climate of the time, I reveal the fear and violence that existed in American communities, communities opposite from the loving and supportive definition of home already outlined. The towns of both “The Lottery” and “Flower Garden” work so hard to protect themselves from outside harm that they end up imposing harm internally. What is done for the “greater good” of the community turns out to be for the “greater harm,” and everyone ends up lonely and afraid.
Next, I address how one’s home is a reflection of one’s self. A wife, generally confined to the home, used interior decoration as her primary approach to self-expression, since she was unable to express herself through a career like her husband. The house serves as a symbol for the wife; the wife and the house are interchangeable. Jackson utilizes this relationship between home and housewife to give insight into her character’s personalities and desires.

The next section looks at the role of the family unit. By acknowledging the traditional gender roles women were expected to fulfill, one will see that the home became more of a prison in which the wife loses her individual identity while devoting herself to the well-being of her husband and children. As the “homemaker,” the wife has the sole responsibility of making a safe and comforting environment for her family, receiving no help in this endeavor from other family members, nor from other housewives; competition and reputation creates a hostile atmosphere among housewives. Housewives suffered in silence from exhaustion, depression, and hopelessness.

The last aspect of “home” will examine how women forfeited familial ties, higher education, and economic independence in order to become wives, leaving them with no personal traits on which to base their identity outside of wife and mother. If a woman is confident enough to search for her identity separate from her wife/mother role, she often loses the support of her home and community, who would prefer that she conform to their standards and not her own.

Much like Jackson herself, the women of her fiction are stuck playing a losing hand. Often, in order to feel one aspect of home, another must be forfeited, leaving these characters always searching for something out of reach. None of these women feel a complete sense of home because none of these women are completely satisfied, accepted, validated, or loved. Jackson raises an interesting discussion of women’s priorities, expectations, and desires that still
remains just as relevant today as it did in the time she was writing. In this third wave of feminism, women are still asking the same questions that Jackson had the courage to confront.
II. Community

Jackson wrote in an era when nuclear war was a constant threat in the daily lives of Americans. People sought any comfort they could find that might help them feel safe. Cities had a reputation for being progressive, in that women worked outside the home and different races interacted regularly, and large populations were excellent targets for hostile nuclear weapons. Suburbs in the country offered a less chaotic and more traditional life void of radical ideas and of people who were “different.” Successful, yet nervous, educated young white couples began leaving the cities and settling in the suburbs to vouchsafe the protection and comfort that comes from homogeneity: “Suburbia would serve as a bulwark against communism and class conflict” (May 20). The homogenized suburbs contained only white patriotic middle-class families, so it was assumed that their neighbors shared their own values and virtues. Dan Dodson writes, “‘Suburbanism’ is…nice families segregated into nice homes away from the pollution of both industry and the heterogeneous masses of the inner city” (228). The suburbs implied a safe haven for these white families, who assumed that the threats of communism, nuclear war, integration, and other frightening ideas could not penetrate the barricade of suburbia.

Because these families clung with white knuckles to the idea of safety in their neighborhoods, they were on the defensive against any infiltration. World War II was the catalyst for a fear of domestic danger lurking among one’s neighbors. With billboard slogans such as “Loose Lips Might Sink Ships” and “Free Speech Doesn’t Mean Careless Talk,” Americans were reminded that any random person might be a covert enemy agent (Bergbauer). This idea only became more probable with the acceleration of the Cold War in the ’40s when many Americans became persuaded by and sympathetic to the teachings of Karl Marx. Even Shirley
Jackson and her husband were brief members of the Young Communist League while they were in college (Oppenheimer 60, 64). The idea that one’s neighbor could be a communist was not very far-fetched. Jon Lance Bacon explains, “The possibility that Communism was spreading at home as well as abroad generated much of the anxiety experienced by Americans during the period of the Cold War. The House Committee on Un-American Activities and the Senate Internal Security Subcommittee…were fighting Communist infiltration, they claimed, by exposing party members and sympathizers in public life” (9). The government made it very clear that patriotic Americans should be on the lookout for Communists and that such people might reside right next door.

Families holed up in suburbs, “safe” from the dangers of the world, took the government’s suggestions seriously and kept a close watch for anyone who may be the slightest bit un-American. Arlene Skolnick explains, “There was also a sort of McCarthyism of marriage and the family toward anyone who deviated from the prevailing family patterns: the unmarried adult, the working woman, the childless couple, the ‘effeminate’ male” (65). Since the attitude of the time, especially in the suburbs, was to embrace traditional gender roles and cling to the family unit, people who didn’t outwardly embrace that attitude immediately caught attention from their neighbors. Angela Hauge explains, “In Jackson’s fiction, the enemy frequently resides within the home or in the house next door, exemplifying the fears of the time that Communists had infiltrated every level of governmental, business, and social organization” (88). White middle-class Americans realized that Communists could be anywhere, even next door, and made it their ambition to protect themselves from this perceived danger. They felt a sense of duty to protect their neighborhoods as well as their own families and themselves.
However, Richard Pascal explains that this “sense of duty” was “inspired not by love or deep moral awareness, but by anxiety and insecurity” and was “a bonding mechanism whose primary function is to ensure cohesiveness” (134). People didn’t band together to make their communities safe because they sincerely loved and cherished their neighbors as though they were family. They joined forces because they were afraid of any kind of danger infiltrating their suburban bulwark. These families seemed to have made a deal with their communities in that they would be model Americans who would not make waves so long as the community would help shield them from danger. Fritz Oehlschlaeger writes, “People can be brought to work together wholeheartedly and without mercy if they believe that their protection depends upon it” (263). Protecting one’s community was done not only for one’s own protection but for the “greater good” of the whole town and was achieved using whatever means necessary, no matter how ruthless such “protection” might prove to be.

**Community Violence in “The Lottery”:**

Jackson accentuates this idea in her most outrageous and popular story, “The Lottery.” Although Jackson’s story features a rather improbable situation for a modern village, it touches on the darker side of humanity, the side that resorts to violence to accomplish goals for the “greater good.” In the case of “The Lottery,” it appears that the “greater good” is a good crop harvest. It is Old Man Warner who reminds the crowd, “Used to be a saying about ‘Lottery in June, corn be heavy soon’” (232). Warner, who has participated in the lottery for seventy-seven years, is aware of the original use of the lottery, but also admits that the saying that used to
remind people of its purpose is no longer recited. He insinuates that the town makes the yearly sacrifice now for different reasons or perhaps for no reason.

Rene Girard might suggest that sacrifices such as the one that takes place in Jackson’s story are not really about bringing a strong harvest. Rather, he argues that human sacrifices “serve to protect the entire community from its own violence” (Violence 8). He explains that when people become frustrated with each other and entertain anger, envy, hatred, jealousy, quarrels, these frustrations are transferred, so to speak, to an individual that they can then sacrifice, eliminating these frustrations through one large act of violence and thus restoring harmony to the community. Girard explains, “When men no longer live in harmony with one another, the sun still shines and the rain falls, to be sure, but the fields are less well tended, the harvest less abundant” (Violence 8). Girard seems to imply that a community’s need for violence distracts people from their everyday responsibilities. Therefore, if they take the time out to address this violence by inflicting it on one person all together as a community, they appease their thirst for blood and can enjoy reduced tensions and great productivity for a while.

A thirst for violence is definitely apparent in Jackson’s fictional village. Bobby Martin, a schoolboy, is described to have “already stuffed his pockets full of stones, and the other boys soon followed his example, selecting the smoothest and roundest stones” (227). These boys can hardly contain their enthusiasm for selecting the best stones they can find, fully aware that they will use these stones to kill one of their neighbors. Jackson writes, “Although the villagers had forgotten the ritual and lost the original black box, they still remembered to use stones….Mrs. Delacroix selected a stone so large she had to pick it up with both hands” (235). Although these people no longer remember why this tradition was first established, they continue with it because
they thirst for violence. Each person being able physically to cast his or her own stones lets every citizen participate in the violence, thus satisfying a primal need.

Ritual sacrifice is unique in that it is an individual act but also a group act. Amy Griffin writes, “The base actions exhibited in groups (such as the stoning of Mrs. Hutchinson) do not take place on the individual level, for here such action would be deemed ‘murder.’ On the group level, people classify their heinous act simply as ‘ritual’” (45). Even though there is the individual feel to the stoning in that each person gets to cast her own stone and quench her own thirst for violence, it is done as a group activity so no one person can be blamed for the death. Griffin seems to suggest that if the whole group is participating because of a shared desire/belief, what they do transcends “murder” and transforms into “ritual,” a word that often is freighted with notions of respect and reverence. Because everyone believes in satisfying the need for violence in this horrifying way, it is no longer labeled as immoral and illegal. Now it is sacred. John G. Parks expands on this idea when he writes that Jackson “is concerned with the nature of belief, with the way desperate people grasp a belief and make it their truth, with how belief and madness combine and lead to desperate behavior, and how belief is a form of madness itself” (“Waiting” 75). These villages believe that this ritual will bring them a good harvest and alleviate their thirst for violence. As Girard has suggested, the corn will mostly likely not grow better based solely on this ritual, but the community believes that it will, and that is enough reason for them to keep doing it. To a modern reader, the idea that people could believe in this kind of ritual makes the reader doubt the villagers’ sanity, especially because they are represented as a modern, civilized community in every other way. However, these villagers believe these ideas and participate in this ritual because they are afraid of what will happen if
they don’t believe and don’t participate, a concept that doesn’t seem so crazy to many modern Americans.

This fear of what will happen if ritual is surrendered can be seen in Old Man Warner. When there is talk of other communities nearby giving up the lottery, Old Man Warner denounces these communities as a “pack of crazy fools” and explains, “Listening to the young folks, nothing’s good enough for them. Next thing you know, they’ll be wanting to go back to living in caves, nobody work any more, live that way for a while…First thing you know, we’ll all be eating stewed chickweed and acorns” (232). Old Man Warner would rather keep things the way they are than roll the dice on what things would be like without the lottery.

He seems to feel that the continued use of the ritual establishes some stability and security in his way of life and dreads any kind of change that may come about if it’s taken away. If the town gives up this ritual, the harvest may dwindle, people may go hungry and die, strangers may see that the village is vulnerable and usurp it. For Old Man Warner, it’s not only that he’s comfortable with this way of life they’ve chosen, but he feels as though his whole existence depends on it. Parks writes, “Shirley Jackson reveals a fundamental problem here, one especially crucial in American culture: the revelation of the imagination that sees evil only out there, and which thus must be smashed at any cost” (“Possibility” 322). Old Man Warner thinks he sees the evil that lurks outside of their village, perhaps “evil” that exists in the cities or enemies from abroad. He believes that the village’s participation in this ritual keeps those evils at bay. If the village foregoes the rituals, they may forego their safety, allowing evil to penetrate their suburban barrier.

Old Man Warner views the lottery as a ritual he can partake in that will give him security in an unpredictable world. As stated earlier, not only was it an unpredictable world because of
the threat of nuclear war, but also because America experienced dramatic social change in this era. Populations were shifting from the cities to suburbs, technology was advancing at an accelerated rate, and women and African Americans were both fighting for their rights. The structure of American life was rapidly changing, and people who feared what these changes would bring participated in whatever rituals they thought might conserve the safety of bygone eras where problems seemed simpler than those we faced in the dawning nuclear age. Girard writes:

Men feel powerless when confronted with the eclipse of culture…Since cultural eclipse is above all a social crisis, there is a strong tendency to explain it by social and, especially, moral causes. [R]ather than blame themselves, people inevitably blame society as a whole, which costs them nothing, or other people who seem particular harmful for easily identifiable reasons. (Scapegoat 14)

In the case of “The Lottery,” the townspeople cannot control the weather to ensure a good harvest. They apparently can’t control people’s tendency toward violence. They can’t control where people move, how fast technology advances, who gains more rights, or who drops bombs on whom. Therefore, they find a common enemy to blame for this lack of control, specifically Mrs. Hutchinson, and then they mob against her, giving her no escape, and kill her so as to feel as if they have had control over *something* and that at least the threat of change has subsided for the moment.

In a strange way, the village sees this ritual as a way to keep order in the town. By keeping people’s violence in check, it promises a productive harvest, maintaining the status quo. Jason Stevens writes, “Order does not maintain the instrumentalities of justice, nor does it protect the powerless; it is but regulatory violence imposed upon indiscriminating destruction” (223).
Stevens seems to be agreeing with the village in that order can only be upheld if people give in to this need for violence. Otherwise, people will try to take control of their fear in their own way, which could lead to chaos. That explains why the ritual takes place in the town square led by a man who usually organizes things such as square dances and the Halloween program (228). Daniele Schaub writes, “As the square stands for firmness and stability, organization and construction, it is the source of order….And if stability is gained at the expense of one villager, no one need to worry: the existence of the square justified such injustice provided it serves the group” (82). Because of the authority the town square represents, it adds another layer of certainty to the villagers’ actions. They are performing their ritual in the town square, which represents the whole community; no matter what they do there, they know they are doing it for the “greater good” and the safety of the town, so that vindicates their actions.

Even though the townspeople feel a need to perform this ritual, they do not seem to enjoy the killing much; they seem to want to get it over with as fast as possible. Mr. Summers says, “Let’s finish this quickly,” as though people want to rush back to normal everyday life and put their act of violence behind them (235). However, they participate energetically in the ritual, no matter how much they dislike it, because, as Randy Bobbit explains, “No one in ‘The Lottery’ wants to be the first to speak against the ritual, for fear of isolation” (9). The townspeople of Jackson’s fictional village would rather belong in their community than be either targeted for persecution or exiled from the village entirely, leaving them without the security of the town. One may wonder what damage could result from just mentioning that other towns have given up a ritual such as a lottery. However, people feared that littlest objection could cause a big wave of change in their lives. Girard writes, “The persecutors imagined such venomous concentrations of poison that even very small quantities would suffice to annihilate entire populations” (Scapegoat
16). The smallest offense, the smallest step out of place can set someone apart from the greater group and their goals; when that happens, one is no longer “with” the group but “against” the group and regarded as a threat. When someone mentions that “some places have already quit the lottery,” Old Man Warner replies, “Nothing but trouble in that” (232). Old Man Warner assumes that anyone who is against the ritual is a troublemaker, and troublemakers won’t be tolerated in a time where safety is so precariosus.

With regard to the Cold War in America, no troublemaker or crime seemed insignificant. Girard writes, “The accusation of poisoning makes it possible to lay responsibility for real disasters on people whose activities have not been really proven to be criminal” (Scapegoat 16). Simply suggesting that the ritual be abolished can be considered poisonous because then that thought could spread to others. Those who criticize current practices are just as poisonous as if they were actively threatening the group’s way of life, and they will be rejected by the group. People who are rejected no longer have the security of the group, and their shield against the supposed dangers of Cold War America would be shattered.

In which case, it seems fitting that Tess Hutchinson was the one chosen for the lottery since she said negative things about it. Peter Kosenko suggests that Tess’s many faux pas the day of the lottery—her lateness, her attempts to break the rules by including her married daughter, and her verbal objection of fairness—have made her a likely candidate to be sacrificed. He writes, “In choosing Tessie through the lottery, Jackson has attempted to show us whom the village might have chosen if the lottery had been in fact an election” (32). Tess speaks out against the lottery, spewing her poison to all the villagers, and therefore she must be disposed of. Kosenko suggests that her death should be a warning to others in the village because it instills “the villagers with an unconscious fear that if they resist this order, they might be selected in the
next lottery” (27-28). Tess serves as the example of exactly what not to do if one wants to remain a part of the group and alive. Because she speaks up against the lottery, she dies, so speaking up really gets you nowhere in Jackson’s world. Carol Cleveland would agree with Kosenko; she writes, “As elsewhere in Jackson’s world, those whose death society finds convenient do in fact die…As soon as she began to demand full attention, to disturb the peace, it became necessary to dispense with her completely” (204). The name of the game in Jackson’s world and in Cold War America is to blend in, not make waves, and to conform to the beliefs, lifestyles, and personalities of those around you or pay the consequences.

**America’s “Lottery” Ritual:**

If Jackson’s ritual still sounds absurd, it was actually not far from the reality of the time. The ritual of lynching of black people by white Americans sounds much like what is taking place in Jackson’s fictional town: white people felt as though their authority and supposed superiority were being threatened by the black population’s efforts to gain more civil rights and opportunities. In order to feel as though they had some control over their situation, white people targeted black people as the catalyst for changing society and inflicted violence upon them in an effort to restore the old order and the traditional power and control whites had employed. However, white people didn’t just Lynch someone randomly every year based on a lot draw. They focused on people who were specifically trying to step out of their traditional social station since those people were the ones who were the most direct threat to the white person’s security. Carol E. Henderson writes that lynching “represents the most grotesque form of ‘disciplinary action’ enacted against those who ‘transgress’ the racial and sexual borders of American society.”
(141). Henderson suggests that lynching was punishment to black people who stepped out of their “place.” In Girard’s terms, black people who “transgress” the borders white people so strategically put in place were seen as poisoning the white people’s way of life and their “superiority.” So even though a person chosen to be lynched may have done nothing more than talk back to a white person or suggest more rights for the African-Americans, to let that go without punishment was unacceptable for white people. For white Americans to say that black people are poisoning their way of life sounds offensive and threatening, making every black person sound much more dangerous. White people hoped lynching sent a message that they will never see black people as their equals. By forming a mob and attacking and/or killing a black person, the white people take control over their social situation and demonstrate themselves to be superior to black people now and forever.

Jackson was no stranger to this kind of prejudice, nor did she shrink from it. Jackson and Hyman had a close friendship with writer Ralph Ellison that spanned many years. Ellison became like a family member. However, they faced much discrimination themselves because of their diverse household. Arnold Rampersad tells a story of what one of the Hyman children remembers about how North Bennington, the small town where the Hyman family lived, viewed their close bond with Ellison: “It was, ‘Shirley Jackson’s a witch, married that Jew from New York. That nigger comes visit them once in a while, he teaches at the Commie place up the hill, where the girls are.’” (239). Hyman, Jackson, and Ellison all faced public scrutiny and were deemed “outsiders,” much like the characters of Jackson’s fiction. Perhaps they were seen as the threat or the “poison” of the community in those Cold War times. Oppenheimer writers, “North Bennington was the village of ‘The Lottery’ and the village of Life Among the Savages, simultaneously, all in one. A kindly neighbor could be a stone-thrower, but a stone-thrower
could also be a kindly neighbor” (185). North Bennington was a cute, cozy community where Jackson wrote about her children, but it was also the setting for one of her most ruthless, violent stories. Jackson knew the great possibility of a warm acquaintance turning into a cold enemy in an instant and accentuated this contradiction in stories such as “The Lottery” and “Flower Garden.”

Community Violence in “Flower Garden”:

When the reader first hears of Mrs. MacLane’s arrival in “Flower Garden,” there is much anticipation about this new neighbor. Helen is clearly more excited about a new neighbor than her mother-in-law. When the elder Mrs. Winning says she heard gossip at the store that the newcomer was going to start painting the house, Helen replies, “Then that must mean someone’s coming!” to which her mother-in-law comments, “Can’t take more than a couple of weeks to paint inside that little house” (84). Helen seems to be counting the days until someone moves in because she can’t wait to meet them. The elder Mrs. Winning seems more reserved about the idea of newcomers and is preparing herself for the change that is coming to her life. The elder Mrs. Winning is like Old Man Warner in that she is satisfied with things staying the way they are. When Helen laments about how winter is dragging on, her mother-in-law replies, “Got to be cold some of the time” (83). The elder Mrs. Winning feels no need to rush things and would prefer that they run their course in the same way they always have. When she hears that her new neighbor will start painting her house, she knows that time is running out and that a change will come to their community sooner than later.
As soon as there is a whisper about who this mystery neighbor is, people start to evaluate how well she will fit into their community. The first description the reader receives of Mrs. MacLane comes from gossip in the town store, specifically the grocer, who says that she and her son “seem like nice people. They say her husband’s dead” (85). Mrs. MacLane immediately stands out to her neighbors because she is not married. The grocer realizes that the first question people will ask about these newcomers is whether or not they represent the proper family unit, and the grocer explains immediately that she does not because she is not married. Though she may have good reason for being single and though she’s not necessarily a Communist because she’s single, the fact that she has no husband immediately sends up a red flag of sorts to her neighbors that she is a person of interest that will need watching.

Much like the elder Mrs. Winning, the grocer does not seem eager to embrace this change to the town. Helen asks expectantly, “Have they really moved in to stay?” to which the grocer replies “drily,” “She’ll have to stay for a while….Brought a week’s worth of groceries” (86). It doesn’t matter if the grocer wants her to stay; now she has to stay, which seems to be an inconvenience to the grocer since he now has to adjust to her presence in the town.

Helen, however, is pleasantly surprised with her new neighbor Mrs. MacLane and how she has decorated the cottage. When Helen sees the inside of the cottage, she thinks, “She has done it right; this is the way it should look after all, she knows about pretty houses” (87). Helen sees a lot of herself in Mrs. MacLane: they both wanted to live in that house, they both have the same decorating taste, and they both have little boys about the same age. If Helen believes that she herself is an asset to the town, then there’s no reason why Mrs. MacLane wouldn’t be an asset as well. Therefore, Mrs. MacLane, at first glance, seems to be an acceptable addition to their community. Helen “realized, with a quick wonderful relief, that it was really going to be all
In a hearing before the U.S. Commission on Civil Rights in California in 1960, Franklin H. Williams explained, "From the late 1800's, the judicial condemnation of racism in its various forms has been fairly consistent... prohibitions against racial inter-marriage, restrictive covenants, segregated public schools" (159). As if to convince Mrs. Maclane further, Helen insists that the Joneses are "strange people" for what seems to be no more reason than that they are a mixed-race family of divorce (95). Almost as a forewarning, Helen informs Mrs. MacLane that "The government at the time sent out signals that interracial marriage was not patriotic. In fact, Helen is so happily distracted with Mrs. MacLane that she accidentally starts breaking some containment rules and shakers the daily routine: Helen stays longer at Mrs. MacLane's cottage than she knows she should have, forgets about the hamburger that is to be used for her husband's lunch, and irritates her mother-in-law by being late. Helen's complaint with her new friend is short-lived, however. Mrs. MacLane still feels that Billy isn't welcome in their neighborhood. The fact that Billy sits quietly on a wall and later vails over that wall implies that Billy is crossing the boundary between where he is allowed to live and not allowed to be (93, 95). May explains, "Blacks were excluded from the suburbs by de jure segregation and the FHA's redlining policies more than by poverty" (70). It wasn't that black people couldn't afford to live in the suburbs. Rather, white people felt that they were abiding by the rules of containment in not letting them.

"The mother was white, a girl from around here, A local girl" (95). Because one lived in a right, after all" (87). Whenever new people come into our lives, we suffer anxiety about whether they will fit in or cause trouble. Helen is happy to see that Mr. MacLane will fall into the former category. In fact, Helen is so happily distracted with Mrs. MacLane that she accidentally starts breaking some containment rules and shakes the daily routine: Helen stays longer at Mrs. MacLane's cottage than she knows she should have, forgets about the hamburger that is to be used for her husband's lunch, and irritates her mother-in-law by being late. Helen's complaint with her new friend is short-lived, however. Mrs. MacLane still feels that Billy isn't welcome in their neighborhood. The fact that Billy sits quietly on a wall and later vails over that wall implies that Billy is crossing the boundary between where he is allowed to live and not allowed to be (93, 95). May explains, "Blacks were excluded from the suburbs by de jure segregation and the FHA's redlining policies more than by poverty" (70). It wasn't that black people couldn't afford to live in the suburbs. Rather, white people felt that they were abiding by the rules of containment in not letting them.
contained village didn’t mean there wasn’t evil lurking next door, and here is an example of one such situation that the town has already faced; one of their own broke the barrier of containment, pursued a relationship with someone who was unwelcome, had “illegal” mixed-race offspring with that person, and then disgraced herself as a wife by running off with someone else. Now Mr. Jones and his children, who have stayed in the area, though outside of town, have to deal with the backlash. Helen says in regards to his older daughter, “people talk about her a lot, you know….Think of her mother, after all” (95). Though nothing much is known of his daughter except that she is at the age where she can work, the villagers automatically assume the worst of her and label her as someone who shouldn’t be associated with because of who they associate with her. Much like “The Lottery,” merely being associated with radicals or radical ideas or “evil” people is enough to be considered a threat.

That is why the people of Helen’s town must make sure to continue practicing traditional white treatment of black people and why Helen doesn’t punish her son Howard for calling Billy Jones a “nigger.” Mrs. MacLane’s son quickly catches on that this is a word he should use for Billy as well, and so repeats the term to Billy in order to fit in with Howard (94). This is reminiscent of Davy from “The Lottery” who is given stones by his classmates with which to stone his mother (235). Kosenko writes, “The village makes sure that Davy learns what he is supposed to do before he understands why he does it or the consequences” (32). What Davy will learn when kids put stones in his hands is that he has to follow everyone else and throw them at his mother, and he will go ahead and perform that act so he fits in with his classmates and the rest of the town. He may not understand the implications of killing his mother, but it’s clear he does understand that he needs to do what everyone else is doing. Teaching children while they
are young the importance of conforming to the majority group is a common practice in Jackson’s fiction and in Cold War America.

When Helen sees how upset Mrs. MacLane is because of the boy’s name-calling, Helen only insists that Howard leave Billy alone and shrugs off the boys’ actions by insisting that “Children will call names….There’s not much you can do” (96). Children’s calling of names is a traditional pastime that Helen doesn’t feel needs mending, especially when that pastime encourages boundaries between races and reinforces white supremacy. By allowing Howard to call Billy a derogatory term, Helen is allowing her son to continue thinking that he is better than Billy simply because of the color of his skin, ensuring Helen’s safety by prolonging segregation. When Mrs. MacLane breaks that security barrier and invites Billy into the neighborhood to help her, gossip travels fast, as it would when everyone is keeping a close eye on each other. The next day, the elder Mrs. Winning says to Helen, “Mrs. Blake tells me your friend Mrs. MacLane was asking around the neighbors how to get hold of the Jones boy” (96). The fact that the elder Mrs. Winning uses “your friend” to describe Mrs. MacLane when it’s not really necessary indicates that Helen is associated with Mrs. MacLane and her actions. Indeed, Helen was present when Mrs. MacLane hired Billy, and perhaps the town holds her responsible for not stopping the situation when it happens. Her mother-in-law continues, “You tell her about them?” as if she’s doubtful that Helen informed Mrs. MacLane of the town’s feelings about the Joneses. If Helen had informed Mrs. MacLane of the town’s opinions on the Jones family, then obviously Mrs. MacLane wouldn’t have hired Billy, so the fact that Mrs. MacLane is still looking for Billy raises suspicions. As if Helen knows she shouldn’t have let the interaction happen, she answers her mother-in-law’s inquiry “weakly” and hides in the pantry to avoid any more questions (96).
In the pantry, Helen laments to herself, “she shouldn’t have done it…She should have asked me first” (96). Helen perhaps figures that Mrs. MacLane, just coming from the city into the suburbs, may not know the rules of how things are done in the neighborhood and wishes that Mrs. MacLane would have consulted her before making assumptions.

When Mr. Jones shows up to work in the garden, Helen suggests, more so than questions, Mrs. MacLane’s motives when she asks, “Of course you won’t have him any longer than just today?” (99). For Mrs. MacLane to actually hire him and for him to be a constant presence in the neighborhood would be against the rules because it would be letting outsiders in, crippling the barrier of containment that surrounds the suburb.

Interestingly enough, Mrs. MacLane answers Helen’s suggestion with a “tolerant” smile. Friends often “tolerate” each other’s flaws in order to maintain the happiness of their relationship. Mrs. MacLane’s smile suggests that she is willing to tolerate Helen and her rules, when up to now, Helen felt as though she was the one tolerating Mrs. MacLane’s ignorance of the rules. A noticeable rift forms between the two women and their different belief systems, and that rift comes to the forefront of their friendship. Helen was willing to be tolerant, or patient, of Mrs. MacLane’s adjustment period into the suburb since she seemed to be a good fit in the neighborhood and because she had grown close to her. However, Helen lacks tolerance for anyone’s distinct disregard for the “safety” of the community. Mrs. MacLane, coming from the city, is tolerant of those who are less fortunate and/or a different race, a trait that America nowadays has come to regard as honorable. However, her tolerance is regarded as apathy towards the security of the neighborhood at a time when zeal is needed.

Once the neighborhood learns of Mrs. MacLane’s intentions with Mr. Jones, there is no more tolerance for Mrs. MacLane’s actions. When Mr. Burton comes over the next evening, he
says to Helen, “I wish you’d tell your friend Mrs. MacLane to keep that kid of hers out of my vegetables… the colored boy. He’s been running loose through our back yard. Makes me sort of mad, that kid coming in spoiling other people’s property” (101). Mr. Burton emphasizes his discomfort with having non-white people in the neighborhood. He seems to be complaining about Billy destroying his backyard, but he only says “running loose,” which implies Billy is only passing through Mr. Burton’s yard without causing it harm. Billy’s mere presence “spoils” Mr. Burton’s property because when he looks out his back window, he now sees people who “don’t belong” in his neighborhood, even if they aren’t doing anything wrong. Billy being in Mr. Burton’s backyard “ruins” Mr. Burton’s view of a neighborhood protected from danger. Moreover, Mr. Burton acts as if Billy has become so familiar with Mrs. MacLane that Mrs. MacLane could be mistaken for his mother. That alone would be against the law, reminding of us the inter-racial relationships taboo. Breaking the law means breaking the rules of containment and allowing danger to enter.

Mr. Burton associates Helen with these dangerous actions that Mrs. MacLane is engaging in by again calling Mrs. MacLane “your friend”; perhaps Mr. Burton even believes Helen supports Mrs. MacLane’s actions. It’s clear that the neighborhood has shunned Mrs. MacLane because of her blatant disregard for containment. Helen worries, “[P]retty soon they’ll stop coming to me first, they’ll tell someone else to speak to me” (101). If Helen loses the support of the neighborhood, she loses the containment that she clings to so tightly.

As much as Helen may want to stand up for her friend’s reputation, she knows that real safety is in numbers, and she is determined to protect her family, her lifestyle, and herself at all costs. She would rather feel secure and participate in actions that are wrong, such as disowning a new friend and admirable woman that the community has shunned than do the honorable thing of
standing up for Mrs. MacLane, even if it means suffering the loss of acceptance in her community. In order to protect her reputation, Helen sacrifices Mrs. MacLane’s reputation by joining the majority and forsaking her friendship. May writes, “[I]f presumably subversive individuals could be contained and prevented from spreading their poisonous influence through the body politic, then society could feel secure” (14). Mrs. MacLane’s actions are “poisonous” to the rules of containment: she is a disruption in the well-oiled machine that is the suburb, and no one wants her ideas causing a kink in the system. The community must prevent her from infiltrating their way of life and the best way to do that is to make her feel unwelcome. There is no middle ground with the rules of containment. One must follow them completely or else.

Although the reader feels as if Helen initially had great affection for Mrs. MacLane, her role in society becomes the leadership of ostracizing Mrs. MacLane. Joan Wylie Hall writes that Jackson’s fiction often “criticizes racism but probes much further into the pressures that cause an otherwise sympathetic character to turn on persons of a different race and social class” (29). Here, Helen isn’t even turning her back on someone of a different race or social class; she is turning her back on someone who is just like her. It’s likely that Helen probably would have remained friends with Mrs. MacLane if no one else in the neighborhood had minded Mr. Jones’ presence. Instead, she is pressured into doing what’s “best” for the community, and the community believes that what is best is for Mrs. MacLane to live there no longer. Pascal acknowledges that “the conception of the small communal group…is bound together less by love and respect than by fear, guilt, and dumb tradition” (133). Helen isn’t giving up her friendship with Mrs. MacLane because she loves and respects her neighbors more than she loves and respects Mrs. MacLane. Rather, Helen fears losing the security of the neighborhood and, behind that, her cold in-law family. Moreover, her neighbors make her feel guilty for encouraging a
relationship with a woman who poses as a threat to their suburb. And lastly, the tradition of the neighborhood is that they follow the rules of containment without question and do whatever is necessary to preserve stasis.

People feel as if Mrs. MacLane has broken a hole in their barrier; she has introduced danger into all of their lives and made them feel uncomfortable by not following the rules of containment. Thus, the townspeople in turn make her feel uncomfortable and insecure by ignoring her and making her feel unwelcome in the community, treating her as they feel she has treated them. Though the community does not get together and throw stones at Mrs. MacLane, the way they shun her from her new community seems to follow its own ritual. Helen begins by not letting her son Howard play with Mrs. MacLane’s son anymore; as soon as Mrs. MacLane makes an agreement with Mr. Jones, Helen secretly sends Howard home. Helen leaves shortly after but at least has the decency to say good-bye first. The next day, when Helen ventures into town, she leaves Howard at home, and she doesn’t wait for Mrs. MacLane to be ready; Helen simply tells Mrs. MacLane’s son Davey to tell his mother she was in a hurry. Then Helen starts going to the store earlier so she wouldn’t have to run into Mrs. MacLane on the way there. After about a week of avoiding Mrs. MacLane, Helen “was no longer embarrassed about going by, and even looked at it frankly once or twice” (101). Helen was obviously pressured by the community to discontinue her friendship with Mrs. MacLane, and perhaps that leads to Helen’s embarrassment about avoiding her former friend. It seems as the “ritual” progresses, Helen becomes more comfortable with it, perhaps even proud of her choice to forfeit their relationship, which allows her to look at Mrs. MacLane’s house frankly.

From then on, Helen actively participates in the ritual instead of just trying to avoid Mrs. MacLane’s presence. When in the store talking with Mrs. Burton, Helen makes judgments about
Mrs. MacLane, saying how she is “like a second mother to Billy,” a comment that Mrs. Burton’s husband made earlier in the story (104). Helen has whole-heartedly allied herself with the town and their opinion of Mrs. MacLane. When it appears Mrs. MacLane may have overheard Helen, Helen acts as though she did nothing wrong, and when Mrs. MacLane moves on, Helen laughs with Mrs. Burton about the situation and perhaps at Mrs. MacLane’s expense.

When confronted by Mrs. MacLane, Helen is disgusted with her straightforwardness about the situation, perhaps because Helen doesn’t wish to be chastised for her decision to choose community acceptance over her friendship with Mrs. MacLane, but also because she again violates the rules of containment. Helen thinks, “[T]his is complaining. People treat you as you treat them,” and she “wanted desperately to go over and take Mrs. MacLane’s hand and ask her to come back and be one of the nice people again” (105). Helen obviously misses Mrs. MacLane’s friendship because she wants her to be on good terms with the community again so their friendship will be allowed. However, Helen knows that’s not possible because even in her efforts to set things straight, Mrs. MacLane continues to break the rules of containment. Helen knows “you mustn’t ever talk about whether people like you, that’s bad taste” (105). If Mrs. MacLane followed the rules of the containment, she wouldn’t have to wonder; she would feel liked because they would accept her in the neighborhood. She obviously isn’t accepted and questioning why is just another hit against her.

Because the story is told from the point of view of Helen Winning, the reader feels as though it is just one person attacking another. The mob mentality of “The Lottery” is somewhat lost in “Flower Garden,” and all of Girard’s wisdom on the group’s need to soothe their thirst for violence seems to be missing. Yet Helen seems to serve as a representative of the town because the townspeople come to her to express their discontent with her “friend.” The reader learns how
the community feels about Mrs. MacLane from their conversations with Helen. Because Helen is her “friend,” it is Helen’s responsibility to diffuse the situation. This is evident when Mr. Burton visits the house and expresses his discontent about Billy being in his yard. Then Mrs. Burton asks Helen if it’s okay if she doesn’t invite Davey to her son’s birthday party. Helen seems to stand in the town’s way of expressing their displeasure directly to Mrs. MacLane. Perhaps out of respect for Helen, because Helen is usually an upstanding member of the community and belongs to the oldest family in town, the villagers come to Helen to reason with her first, much as Helen did with Mrs. MacLane about Mr. Jones. The villagers informed Helen that her friendship with Mrs. MacLane is no longer appropriate and that she needs to dispose of it. If reasoning with Helen had not worked, then the townspeople may well have started hurling stones at Mrs. MacLane or her home. That’s not necessary, however, because Helen listens to their grievances, turns against her friend, and ultimately forces Mrs. MacLane to move away. It is the desire of the whole community that she be victimized. Helen is their willing instrument.

Majority consensus within the narrative victimizes Mrs. MacLane for the good of the community, but the reader is bound to disagree with that vote. In regards to Jackson’s stories that present this victim/victimizer scenario, Bernice Murphy writes, “Our sympathies lie firmly with the persecuted outsider rather than the representative of ‘normality’” (Suburban Gothic 17). That is definitely true in the case of “The Lottery;” readers feel the injustice and terror as if they were the ones with the black dot on their paper, not to mention that most Americans found the ritual extremely disturbing. The same is true for “Flower Garden.” The reader definitely feels for Mrs. MacLane’s ostracism. She was merely taking pity on and befriending a family that the town had completely written off. Mrs. MacLane is a tolerant, patient, kind person who is shunned for these attributes because she shows them to the “wrong” kind of people. Jackson wants the reader to
sympathize with the victims of her stories because she, too, was similarly ostracized. She wants to accentuate that conformity is a scary and harmful practice that needs to be questioned and not just blindly followed.

Much like Tess Hutchinson, Mrs. MacLane somewhat brings her isolation upon herself. Helen did warn her of what was and was not acceptable in their village and Mrs. MacLane intentionally conducted herself in unacceptable ways. Mrs. MacLane ignored all of Helen’s warnings, invited a black man into her home, and perhaps even flaunted his presence to the town by having him work outside without a shirt on. It was though Mrs. MacLane was setting herself up to be thrown out of the town. Why would she be so careless? Why would she so blatantly break the rules? Perhaps she felt she had found a home in the town. She had made friends there. She was becoming settled there. She may have assumed she was now regarded as a member of the town and that it was safe to be more vulnerable and allow her true self to shine through. She may have assumed that because she had been welcomed so warmly, she could now welcome others just as warmly. She may have trusted that others would confide in her any grievances they had so that they could work them out together. Her assumptions would normally not be out of place in an actual home. An actual home protects, welcomes, and understands its occupants. However, this town was not a home, as its citizens demonstrate at the end. Mrs. MacLane has assumed incorrectly.

“Flower Garden” reveals the same lesson as “The Lottery.” Citizens in “The Lottery” turn their backs on one of their own because they fear change. If someone chose not to abide by agreed-upon traditions, the community would feel vulnerable to danger. The only crime Tess Hutchinson is guilty of is choosing the wrong piece of paper, but she pays the price so that everyone else in the town can feel safe. Their actions are so extremely violent, however, that the
reader cannot relate to the scenario. If Jackson had included that Tess Hutchinson was a communist, perhaps many of the readers of the time would have encouraged the town to stone her, because then she would have been an actual threat to their security. The domestic spies of the Red Scare were considered dangerous enemies to American citizens, and there was no way of differentiating them from one’s neighbors besides following the patriotic rules of containment. And while neither Tess Hutchinson nor Mrs. MacLane may have been communists, their communities sacrificed them in order to uphold their tortured perceptions of security.

Indeed, it was a false sense of security. By conforming societal bylaws of conduct, people thought they would keep out the dangers of the era: nuclear war, communism, and integration. However, such guidelines filled the people with a sort of paranoia, warning them to look constantly over their shoulders for any intrusion, no matter how slight, that could disrupt their everyday lives. Any small provocation might cause them to turn on one of their own. Mrs. MacLane’s involvement in the town, as harmless a woman as she appeared, wreaked havoc on the minds of the townspeople once she had broken the rules of containment because suddenly their shield against the harsh outside world had been penetrated. The rules of containment were established in order to show communist enemies that America was a strong and brave country, but in the end, Americans became cowering cowards toward their neighbors next door as a response to their neighbors abroad. The suburbs may have been secure from the outside world, but its inhabitants were anything but.
III. The Home

Unfortunately for war-weary Americans anxious about the nascent nuclear age, homogenous suburban communities were not enough to keep one safe in postwar America, as we can see in “The Lottery” and “Flower Garden.” May writes, “Neither the world nor the newly forged suburban community could be trusted to provide security. What mattered was that family members remained bound to each other—and to the modern, emancipated home they intended to create” (26). What was really defining about the Cold War era in America was people’s commitment to their homes and their families; everything seemed to depend on the success of the family unit. Wives were responsible for the house running like a well-oiled machine. Husbands were responsible for maintaining financial security. Both were expected to instill American values into their children and raise them to be contributing citizens. Ultimately, it was the family/home unit that would provide maximum protection and ensure a promising future.

Each home was an integral part of the community it comprised and of America as a whole. Kenneth T. Jackson writes, “Housing is an outward expression of the inner human nature; no society can be fully understood apart from the residences of its members” (3). Even if we wanted to judge towns like “The Lottery” and “Flower Garden” based on what we learned about the society as a whole, it would not be an accurate criticism if we did not examine the individual homes. As we’ve learned, the house is an extension of a person, as though it were a person’s clothes or skin. The home manifests—in its structure, its design, its knickknacks—its owners’ passions, preferences, and taste. Iris Marion Young writes, “The home displays the things among which a person lives, that support his or her life activities and reflect in matter the events and

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values of his or her life” (139). The home essentially tells people how we live our lives from day and day. We can learn a lot about people simply by investigating their places of residence.

Kathy Mezei and Chiara Briganti expand the metaphor, insisting that the home is more than a layer of clothes or skin; homes are “fruitful replications or images of mental structures…therefore, literary houses and their spaces constitute archetypes of the psyche” (841). In other words, if a house is neat, one can infer that the owner of that house is generally a no-nonsense, organized person. If a home is messy, its owner may be frazzled, flighty, or flustered. Ultimately, the space of one’s home represents the space of one’s mind.

The home, then, tells us everything we need to know about its inhabitants if we are perceptive enough to intuit what it has to say. Writing about our homes, as Jackson often does, preserves who we are at a certain space in time. Marilyn Chandler writes:

> Just as the history of the United States is a story of settling, building homes, domesticating land, and defining space, our fiction is, among other things, a history of the project of American self-definition wherein house-building and, for women, housekeeping, have been recognized as a kind of autobiographical enterprise—a visible and concrete means of defining and articulating the self. (3)

Chandler raises the issue of separation of gender roles in the home—the man as the house-builder and the woman as the housekeeper. These titles serve as identity markers in the history of American homes. This idea is not false—traditionally, men live most of their life out of the house and women live theirs in the house. If the woman is the one who keeps up the house, cleaning and decorating it, then it can be assumed that one’s family home is not actually a representation of the entire family; rather, it is a mostly a representation of the wife/mother who is entrusted with its well-being and therefore takes the greater pride in it. Young writes,
“Traditionally and today women furnish and decorate houses more than men. Often a home reflects a woman’s taste and sensibility, often the style and image she projects of herself and her family” (141). Although the home may be shared by the family, the image it actually projects is that of the matriarch and the matriarch’s hopes for her family’s image.

In Cold War America, the concept of separate gender spaces is culturally embraced. Men have the active role in the marriage, leaving the home in order to earn a living and support the family financially. The women, then, stay in the home. Unlike the man, who can express himself through his work, the woman’s only outlet for expressing herself is in the way she decorates her home. With regard to interior design, Simone de Beauvoir writes:

…she will also find in this décor an expression of her personality; it is she who has chosen, made, and “hunted down” furniture and knickknacks, who has aesthetically arranged them in a way where symmetry is important; they reflect her individuality while bearing social witness to her standard of living. Her home is thus her earthly lot, the expression of her social worth, and her intimate truth.

Because she does nothing, she avidly seeks herself in what she has. (471)

Men have always been able to define themselves by their careers. Through their work experience, men identify and interact with what interests them, receive regular evaluation on how well they perform, and are compensated according to how much their company values them. Women, however, aren’t allowed any of those assessments because they are confined to the home. In this type of marriage, it could be said that the man makes the money and the woman spends the money; she uses her husband’s income to buy identifiers for herself and her family to “show off” to others since she can’t define herself by her career as her husband can.
Even though Jackson had a career that she could identify herself by, she still remained first and foremost a housewife, spending the majority of her time in her home. It’s no wonder that most of her writing, then, revolves around the theme of the home. Jackson’s affinity for houses is clear in her Library of America anthology. Of the stories included, eight of them begin with the word “home” or “house” in the first sentence, and fifteen others open with the setting of home in the first sentence—in total, half of the stories complied begin with some reference to home. The novels included in the collection are the two books that feature home structures in their titles—*We Have Always Lived in the Castle* and *The Haunting of Hill House*—and three stories include the word “home” or “house” in the title. Her two memoirs open with both the image of and the word “house”: *Life Among the Savages* opens with, “Our house is old, and noisy, and full,” where *Raising Demons* begins with, “I do not have the slightest understanding of the events which got us out of one big white house which we rented into another, bigger white house which we own, at least in part.” It is clear by this repeating theme in her fiction that Jackson believed in the integral part one’s home played in one’s life. Lenemaja Friedman writes, “She creates microcosms, private worlds set apart from the larger universe…Even in the tales of family life, the experiences are almost entirely confined within the limits of the house, and they center on the mother who is, of course, Shirley Jackson herself” (44). Jackson’s own world, like the world of most of her readers, revolved around the microcosm that was her home. Naturally, her fiction often takes place in and deals with issues surrounding the home.

Many housewives felt trapped by their homes. Jackson, in later years, developed a rather aggressive case of agoraphobia, so she was literally trapped in her home, unable to step outside of it. A woman trapped by her housewife duties is a theme that Jackson often employed in her fiction, and it was a theme that many readers could relate to. Elaine Showalter writes, “The
traditional images of a heroine trapped in a gothic house, particularly apt in the postwar period when American women were repeatedly told that they were designed and destined to find fulfillment inside the home, took on additional meaning as these houses came to symbolize the female body, and the destiny of pregnancy, childbirth, and maternity” (391). If one's home defines the person living there, then the image of home and inhabitant can be interchangeable; therefore, the home serves as a symbol for the central inhabitant: the wife. The common literary scenario of a heroine being trapped in her home suggests that a woman is trapped by herself or her gender—more specifically, by her role as housewife. Both the home and the female body will be filled with offspring, and offspring will make it even more difficult for the wife to leave the home or her role as housewife. She is immersed in her role all day every day. In this way, she is trapped in her home because she is trapped in her housewife role because she is a woman. If the home defines her, it defines her as a prisoner. Chandler writes, “Very quickly the houses we build around ourselves become prisons, just as do the social structures, laws and codes by which we regulate our lives and modify our freedom” (20). In Jackson’s era, American families regulated their lives to the point where they had very little freedoms to step outside the social “norms,” locking themselves into roles and personas that they may not have been completely satisfied with. In the case of the housewives, who spent all their time in their homes, this translated to a feeling of imprisonment.

**The homes in “Flower Garden”:**

The fact that these women were defined by their homes might explain why a story entitled “Flower Garden” actually begins with the image of a home. People often assume that the
garden in this story is going to be the most meaningful and important symbol because of the title, but, instead, the story opens by establishing Helen Winning’s home as “an old Vermont manor house” (83). In doing so, Jackson gives top billing to the home, introducing it before the titled garden or even the main characters, indicating to the reader to pay the home some attention. Helen’s home is a “big old house at the top of the hill where her husband’s family had lived for generations” with “oddly-matched austere bedrooms” and is “noisy” and “dark” (84, 89, 90). This description matches what most people think of when they think of a “manor house”—large, perhaps rundown, with dark hallways that echo. The image does not convey a warm, cozy family home. The home is at the top of the hill, and we find out that the Winnings are farmers, so one can assume that the home is isolated from the rest of the community, as it most likely sits on many acres. The rooms are “oddly-matched” because many generations have lived there, so one can imagine the styles have changed from one generation to the next and remnants of all of them have been left behind. The rooms are also “austere,” as in they are cold, unadorned, and lacking in comfort. Jackson does not present a nurturing environment with the Winning house.

That’s not to say that the home hasn’t nurtured anyone in the past. Helen’s children are currently being raised in the house like all their relatives before them. Jackson describes Helen’s children playing in the corner of the kitchen, “where uncounted Winning children had played with almost identical toys from the same heavy wooden box” (83). The house seems to be well equipped to raise families since it has been doing so from the time it was built; in this way, the house is like its own character in the story, perhaps a nanny, sheltering and protecting the Winning family so that it can continue to thrive and prosper. In regards to Jackson’s fictional homes, Friedman writes, “Well-built old houses with character and personality…were like people. They not only reflected the egos and foibles of their original owners, who often had
unusual tastes, but they also exerted a mysterious force of their own” (104). The Winning wives and mothers saw to the upbringing of the many generations of children, but some credit must be paid to the strong, tested, enduring house itself. In that way, the house becomes like another matronly figure whose sole purpose is to meet the needs of the family. One can assume the home has done its job successfully, since the family lives on; because they still inhabit it, many Winning family members must have been more than satisfied with the house.

The fact that it’s a manor house implies that it has been influential in the creation of America. Many American manors were built by captains of industry, plantation owners, or wealthy politicians; these people were considered to have much influence and authority. A manor in England, according to Merriam-Webster dictionary, was a territorial organization, where a lord enjoyed a variety of rights over land and tenants. To live in a manor, then, suggests that one has some kind of authority over others. In the case of the American rich, who owned these homes, they helped America become a successful, wealthy country, and they were often idolized by other Americans for their achievements.

Though it’s not stated that the Winnings are “rich,” they still retain much of the prestige that comes with owning a manor house; the Winning family is considered to be “the oldest family in town” (83). When Helen reflects on her family unit, she thinks that “they must resemble some stylized block print for a New England wallpaper: mother, daughter, and granddaughter, with perhaps Plymouth Rock or Concord Bridge in the background” (83). Helen considers the family an American icon and synonymous with the idea of patriotism, like the associations made with historical markers such as Plymouth Rock and the Concord Bridge. In this way, the Winning family serves as the exemplar for all other Americans to follow. Their home is a symbol for this prestige, authority, and patriotism, but also for its endurance. It has
outlasted countless years and inhabitants and still remains standing. The Winnings have a home that has been tried and remains true to their needs. Like any good Cold War family, if something has proven itself useful over the years, there seems to be no reason to implement change.

Like the home, Helen has had to prove herself useful over the years. When the story opens, the reader learns that Helen has lived with the Winnings for eleven years; although she had been a Talbot, “she was now officially a Winning” (83). One assumes that a woman becomes a member of her husband’s family on the wedding day, but here Jackson implies that Helen had to work for her Winning status, perhaps for the last eleven years. Now that she looks like her mother-in-law and is well accustomed to the way the Winning house runs, she can be accepted into the family.

Being accepted into the family, though, does not mean that she get any kind of authority. Helen laments that “her mother-in-law would never relinquish the position of authority in her own house until she was too old to move before anyone else” (83). In the ’40s and ’50s, the trend was that a couple would marry and then move into their own home, leaving their relatives and beginning their own families. May writes, “The popular culture was filled with stories about young adults who shifted their allegiances from the old ethnic ties to the new nuclear family ideal…multigenerational households faded as the stories increasingly revolved around the middle-class nuclear family” (25). Helen’s situation is different from the standard at that time. Most young wives bought a single-family home with their husbands, giving them authority in their own lives to run their household as they saw fit. Helen, however, is governed by the older generation in a house that she did not choose.

In many ways, the house doesn’t belong to Helen at all. She did not choose to live there; Jackson explains that Helen “had wanted, long ago, to buy the cottage [down the hill] herself, for
her husband to make with his own hands into a home where they could live with their children” (84). Helen would have preferred to live the nuclear family ideal, separate from her in-laws as most women her age were doing. Moreover, Helen most likely didn’t pay for the old manor house; if it has been around for generations, it has surely been paid off long ago. She has obviously not been able to decorate the home to reflect herself and her family, since the rooms are “oddly-matched” and “austere,” suggesting they haven’t had a modern, fresh makeover. Helen is merely a boarder in a home that she does not own; she suggests as much when she thinks, “she had at least given them another Howard, with the Winning eyes and mouth, in exchange for her food and her bed” (90). Helen has paid her rent by contributing to the house in the only way she is allowed—adding more generations to continue the legacy of the home and the family.

Not only does she not own the home, but she is only a passerby in a long line of women who have and who will live in the manor. Murphy writes, “‘Young’ Mrs. Winning knows that she is only the latest in a long succession of wives to inhabit the house” (“People of the Village” 111). Helen is mostly referred to as “Mrs. Winning” in the story, but so is her mother-in-law. If both women are in the same scene, Helen is referred to as “young Mrs. Winning” and her mother-in-law is referred to as “old Mrs. Winning.” Jackson explains that, after eleven years, the women “had grown to look a good deal alike” with hands that moved “similarly,” and Helen tries “to anticipate her mother-in-law’s gestures of serving” (83, 90). It’s almost as if a transformation is taking place where the young is turning into the old, so when the old is gone, the young will keep traditions alive and teach the new young Winning wives who join the family in the future. If one’s home is supposed to reflect one’s personality, then the manor house reflects the personality a Winning mother is supposed to display. Though Helen may wish to be
unique and have more freedom, so long as Helen is a Winning, she will not be thought of as unique; rather, she is merely a carbon copy of the old Mrs. Winning and all the Mrs. Winnings before her.

In that way, Helen is trapped in what seems more like a prison than a home. Much of her everyday routine is regulated by what her mother-in-law demands. Though Helen wants to linger over her morning coffee, when her mother-in-law begins to stack plates, that indicates “that the time for sitting was over and the time for working had begun” (83). When Helen stops by the cottage to meet her new neighbors, she leaves because of “her sudden guilt about the three pounds of hamburger and dinner for the Winning men,” but invites the new neighbors over for lunch “without the permission of her mother-in-law” (89). Helen returns to her home “reluctantly,” and her tardiness irritates her mother-in-law (89). It’s clear that Helen has a very strict routine without the freedom for dawdling, daydreaming, or even making her own choices. Every minute of Helen’s day is dictated by her mother-in-law’s routine, which is directed toward the needs of the family.

If Helen’s home represents a prison, then the cottage down the street represents freedom. Helen wished to buy the cottage when she was first married and make it her own. It represents the life she could have had if she and her husband had not moved in with her in-laws. She would be in charge of her own house, her own routine, and her own décor, free to decorate the home to represent who she is instead of living in a home that doesn’t reflect her uniqueness. When Helen steps inside the cottage, it as though she is getting the chance to see what could have been; it “was exactly as Mrs. Winning might have done if she were eleven years younger” (88). The bedrooms are all done in “garden colors,” presenting one cohesive design, unlike the oddly-
matched rooms of the Winning manor. The cottage has been made over for one family and one family only, not generations of them, like the Winnings.

Not only does Mrs. MacLane’s cottage present one cohesive design, but it reflects who she is as a person. She centers her living room décor on a blue bowl that is the color of both her son’s eyes and her own eyes (88). She uses all garden colors because she loves gardens (88). She has a picture of her son Davey on the mantle, along with Davey’s deceased father (88). Their nuclear family is the only history in the house; there are no portraits of generations long gone. Everything in her home is bright and vibrant because she is a vibrant young woman who has a lot of energy and enjoys meeting new people. In Helen’s opinion, she decorated her home the “right” way because a “lady” “knows about pretty houses” (86, 87). Mrs. MacLane’s home not only displays who she is to her new neighbors but also suggests that she will be a good fit in their community; all that information can be found in the way she adorns her home.

Where Helen’s home is big, old, noisy, and dark, Mrs. MacLane’s home is small, little, delicate, clean, and bright; Mrs. MacLane’s home certainly seems to serve as the opposite to the Winning manor. One gets the feeling that Mrs. MacLane’s home is cozy and more apt to nurture its new owners, unlike the Winning manor that has a harsher, stricter approach. Perhaps it is more nurturing because Mrs. MacLane herself is a nurturing person. It’s implied that she moved out of the city for Davey’s health; Helen agrees that the move “has been good for Davey already….There’s color in his cheeks” (92). Where Helen feels “terribly tied down” having her son around all the time, Mrs. MacLane would prefer to keep Davey “home as long as possible” (91). Because of “perfunctory Winning affection,” Helen is distanced from her family members and uses a traditional hands-off approach with her children (102). Mrs. MacLane, a nurturer of both children and plants, prefers to immerse herself in what she loves.
Like all things that need nurturing, it seems Mrs. MacLane is also immersed in a delicate environment. Her son is described as “small and weak,” so he can be considered delicate (92). She plants bulbs, which yield delicate spring flowers. And in her “small” home, she has a “delicate stair-rail” (87). These depictions suggest that the home is fragile and needs careful looking after. Though Helen’s home may be big and old, it has stood the test of time. True, Mrs. MacLane’s home has stood at least the last eleven years, long enough for Helen to covet it her whole married life, but it most likely doesn’t have the foundation of Helen’s manor house. Mrs. MacLane finds merit in Helen’s manor house when she says, “I love old houses; they feel so secure and warm, as though lots of people had been perfectly satisfied with them and they knew how useful they were. You don’t get that feeling with a new house” (92). Mrs. MacLane recognizes that homes that have lasted through generations take on a certain august grandeur. With her own home, Mrs. MacLane admits that she’s taking a bit of a gamble, because she does not know how well it will protect her; she is well aware of all the nurturing it will need.

Her green garden can be seen as a symbol of this sentiment. Daniele Schaub writes, “on one hand, green denotes fertility, peace, balance…But on the other hand, green implies ignorance unripeness, inexperience” (81-81). A symbolic garden may be strong enough to grow or fragile enough to wilt. Like the gamble Mrs. MacLane takes with an untested home, she also gambles on her garden. When spring comes to the town, Mrs. MacLane’s garden “began to show colors and become an ordered thing, still very young and unsure, but promising rich brilliance for the end of the summer, and the next summer, and summers ten years from now” (92). In the beginning, the community was unsure about Mrs. MacLane, because they didn’t know much about her, but they thought she showed promise toward being a good fit in their town; this
uncertainty is reflected in Mrs. MacLane’s garden. One can’t be sure of what the future holds, but all the signs suggested that things were going to flourish now and “ten years from now.”

Of course, this turned out to be a naïve assumption of both the garden and Mrs. MacLane. Unfortunately, the garden needed more nurturing than Mrs. MacLane could provide, so she asked for help from a man who was not accepted by the town. Because of this, the community decided she wasn’t as good a “fit” for the town as they had hoped she would be. This is reflected in her ruined garden, which suffered from the summer heat: “The flowers wilted under the morning sun, and no longer stood up fresh and bright; the grass was browning slightly and the rose bushes Mrs. MacLane had put in so optimistically were noticeably dying” (104). Mrs. MacLane’s home and garden couldn’t withstand the test of time; it buckled with its first challenge. When Mrs. MacLane awakes to find a tree branch crushing what’s left of her garden, she gives up her efforts, claiming that she’ll leave it “for the next people to move” (107). The summer sun and the townspeople both have tested Mrs. MacLane’s resilience just as Helen’s resilience had been tested by her mother-in-law. Mrs. MacLane, however, was not willing to conform to the age-old ways and traditions, and so she fails her test and has no choice but to surrender.

Those elements that wore down Mrs. MacLane and her garden seemed to have the opposite effect on Helen’s garden. Helen doesn’t have the delicate flowers of her neighbor because “no flowers would grow well around the Winning house, because of the heavy old maple trees which shaded all the yard and which had been tall when the house was built” (89). At first, when Mrs. MacLane begins to talk of the garden she will have, Helen is disappointed by her inability to grow the delicate blubs that Mrs. MacLane speaks of. However, it’s the shade provided by the maple trees that keeps her yard “smooth and green” and protects the grass and
bushes from the same harsh sun that wilts Mrs. MacLane’s garden (104). Mrs. MacLane didn’t have anything to shield her delicate flowers from the beating sun, and as a result, no matter how much she and Mr. Jones nurtured the garden, they couldn’t protect it wholly. The Winning house, however, had tall old trees to act as a shield for their garden area so that it could grow even when the sun was threatening. They had deep roots of already established plants that they could trust to survive even the most threatening weather.

This could be an elaborate analogy for the Cold War containment. The town knew Mrs. MacLane’s presence was a gamble; they didn’t know her, but she seemed at first glance to be filled with promise. However, she violated her probationary period by allowing an unacceptable outsider to cross their barrier, and from then on, the hot sun of rage from the townspeople beat down on Mrs. MacLane, wilting her hope for her new home and garden. Helen places her trust in a lifestyle that may not be perfect, but that has been tested over the years, and she chooses to forgo whatever affection she may have had for Mrs. MacLane and follow the established rules that tradition demands: she aligns herself with her husband’s roots. Mrs. MacLane, just fresh from the city, has no roots; she attempts to plant some through gaining the town’s acceptance, but because she doesn’t conform to their foolproof ways of living, her new roots are ripped up, and she decides to try them someplace else.

This is not a functional home environment. Mrs. MacLane isn’t nurtured by the community; they refuse to allow her to establish roots there because they fear what kind of changes she will bring in with her forward thinking and untraditional relationships. However, unlike “The Lottery,” the reader gets an inside view of what the world would be like if the town allowed Mrs. MacLane to stay; they get this preview from the interaction between Davey and Billy Jones. In one scene, Davey asks Billy to build a house with him (102). Billy says, “we can
pretend the whole garden is our house” to which Davey replies, “And we’ll ask my mommy and your daddy to come in our house” (102). Billy and Davey here demonstrate that people of different races can live together in harmony if only they were willing to share. The house is not only Davey’s or Billy’s; they refer to it as “ours.” Helen, passing by, even acknowledges that this partnership seems to work; she thinks, “And Billy acts as though he had as much right there are Davey” (102). Billy acts as though he has much right there because Davey allows him to act that way. Even though it is Mrs. MacLane’s yard (therefore it is Davey’s by extension), Davey shares it equally with his friend. Friedman writes, “their own relationship is one of sharing—a give-and-take common ground” (62). They both contribute ideas on how to make their “home;” they listen to each other’s ideas and add onto them. Their first instinct is to share it with their parents; it is not only a space for them to enjoy but for all to enjoy. Helen and the community have isolated themselves. They refuse to share with people that aren’t the same as them because they wish to maintain their safety and superiority; they aren’t willing to compromise. As Davey and Billy show, no ground-breaking, earth-shattering change occurs. Davey and Billy’s playing does not appear to be any different from Davey and Howard’s playing or any other boys’ playing. Nothing bad has happened to the community since Davey and Billy became friends. Virtually nothing has changed except the townspeople’s comfort levels.

In some ways, Mrs. MacLane’s home seems to be the more desirable living environment; its nurturing ways match more to the definition of home discussed in the introduction than the cold prison of Helen’s home. Mrs. MacLane knows that a home should involve sharing, compromise, and empathy, and she shares these virtues with all she meets. However, it is not a completely successful home because it does not provide safety for her and her son. The home and the garden cannot protect her from the challenges, the pressures, and the persecutions that
are brought to the door. The cottage does not hide her private life; because Mrs. MacLane refuses to conform, her life becomes uncontrollably public, which gives the town the opportunity to ostracize her.

Helen’s home, however, is a dismal environment where hopes are squashed and dreams die. She has no authority or voice in her home. Yet her home protects her privacy because she conforms to the Winning lifestyle, and that lifestyle takes no risks where security is involved. The Winning lifestyle, like the Winning house, has endured many years and proven itself effective. Because Helen abides by it, she can rely on her home. What Helen’s home lacks in empathy, it gains in security.
IV. The Housewife

A young bride of post-World War II America had as much to be fearful of as she did to look forward to. She had her whole marriage ahead of her, yet her individual life was over. Simone de Beauvoir portrays the termination of opportunity for a young girl after she takes her wedding vows: “now she is married, there is no other future in front of her. The doors of home are closed around her: of all the earth, this will be her portion. She knows exactly what tasks lie ahead of her: the same as her mother’s….She has nothing more to expect, nothing more to want” (486). The young wife has little to fantasize about. She knows that she will spend her days taking care of the home until she gives birth, at which point she will split her time between taking care of the home and taking care of the children, just as her mother did and just as the other wives around her continue to do. There will be little difference between her life and the life of the wife next door.

Though she is married to a man, she spends more time tending to her home. In this way, one could say the wife is married not to her husband but to her home. Elaine Showalter writes, “Housewifery had become women’s default identity…The woman was the wife of the house, wedded to it…Caring for it was like the obsessive cleansing, purification, and care of her own female body, scrubbing away its dirt and impurity, its signs of sexuality and procreation” (391-392). The housewife was no longer regarded as a person with womanly characteristics. She and her home were interchangeable. The wife’s success was judged on how successful the home was. As Showalter has already demonstrated, houses were symbols for the female body and the destiny of pregnancy, childbirth, and maternity. Jackson took this sentiment a step further by creating maternal characters out her houses, demonstrating that the home was responsible for the
same tasks as a housewife. The relation between the home and the housewife was so blurred that often it was hard to tell one from the other.

As Showalter suggests, women did give up nearly everything to get married. They didn’t just give up unique future opportunities. They often sacrificed family and the financial security they previously enjoyed. Elaine Tyler May writes, “Women who relinquished ties to relatives or gave up job possibilities were more likely than men to intensify their commitment to marriage because they had given up other sources of income and emotional support” (186). It was not socially acceptable for a woman to work if she were married and her husband could financially support them, so if she was working before she got married, she would usually quit her job to become a housewife. Because of the nuclear family trend in post-war America, this also meant moving away from parents and in-laws so that the husband and wife could have control over their own family and lives.

Since these women sacrificed so much for their marriage, they were determined to make housewifery meaningful. Showalter continues, “This is one reason why so many women who abandoned occupational aspirations considered homemaking to be a new career” (186). Women did not have the opportunity to go out into the world and prove themselves like their husbands did. Therefore, they determined their value by their housework. With every wife performing the same tasks, the only way a woman could set herself apart is if she kept up a better house than her neighbor. Zita Dresner writes, “Upwardly mobile and ambitious, the women competed at home while their husbands competed at the office, striving to prove that they could keep up with or surpass their neighbors” (31). Wives who were confined to their home and neighborhood all day could really only compete with the other wives around them. Since they lived so close to each other, this allowed them to keep a watchful eye. They likely boasted to each other in the street or
on the phone about their newest appliances or remodeled rooms. In this way, they felt as though they were accomplishing some kind of goal by proving that their home was better in some way than their neighbors’.

As this housewife microcosm became more intense and more compact, minor issues started to become more newsworthy, and inconsequential moments became more monumental. Dresner writes, “The more removed they [housewives] become from objectively significant experience, the more importance housewives attach to trivial concerns, such as bodily odors, dull floors, graying hair, and ring-around-the-color, because these become the only ‘problems’ about which they feel they can do anything” (30). These housewives weren’t curing cancer or stopping wars. They were confined to their homes, so the kinds of issues they could tackle were limited. Most of these issues were housekeeping related, so these housekeeping issues became, in the eyes of a housewife, much more significant than they might be to someone outside the home.

One way these housewives proved their homes were better than their neighbors’ was by investing in all the latest appliances. The purchase of these new machines not only showed a family’s financial prosperity, but also implied that the housewife was better equipped to do her everyday work. People often associate the invention boom of appliances in the ’50s as a helpful hand to the housewife in order to get more done more efficiently. May disagrees and explains, “Appliances were not intended to enable housewives to have more free time to pursue their own interests, but rather to achieve higher standards of cleanliness and efficiency, while allowing more time for child care” (171). Appliances actually generated more work because the bar was raised when it came to the upkeep of the home, creating more tasks for the housewife and consuming more of her time. Betty Friedan writes, “Each scientific advance that might have freed women from the drudgery of cooking, cleaning, and washing, thereby giving her more time
for other purposes, instead imposed new drudgery, until housework not only expanded to fill the
time available, but could hardly be done in the available time (240-241)” The chores of a
housewife completely consumed her time and energy, draining her of any opportunities to pursue
personal hobbies or interests.

Because housewives had all these new machines to help them around the house, the list
of everyday chores grew longer. Women were expected to wear many more hats than that of
housekeeper. May writes, “The 1950s version of the ‘superwoman’ was the wife and mother who
could fulfill a wide range of occupational roles—early childhood educator, counselor, cook,
nurse, housekeeper, manager, and chauffeur—all within in the home” (185). Competition
between housewives led to the invention of home-care appliances which lead to more skills the
woman was expected to learn. In order to be successful, the wife was expected to be, in essence,
a “superwoman” who could do any chore and assume any role her family needed. In this way,
the entire success of the family came to depend on the wife.

Women portraying anything less than “superwoman” status would be noticed by the other
neighborhood mothers. Let us remember that neighbors were already watching each other to
ward off communist infiltration, and now the wives were watching because they were in
competition with each other. A woman had to be very careful regarding what she did and said
because she was constantly under scrutiny. Eunji Hwang writes, “Motherhood is not just a
relationship between a mother and her child. There is a third party involved; the mother is always
afraid of someone overhearing her if she is not nice to her children” (117). If word gets out that a
woman is not a fit mother, then she not only loses the competition, but she may just lose the
respect of her community and the security its esteem had provided her.
With the incessant competition and the endless chores, “Superwoman Mom” never gets a break. Where her husband can leave the office at 5:00 and come home and relax, his wife is forever at work. If her career is homemaking, she never gets to leave “the office.” May writes, “For housewives, the home was the workplace; for men, it was the arena for leisure and freedom away from the job” (193). All day long, the wife tends to the children. All evening long, the wife tends to the husband. The only time of day left is night, when she sleeps. Every waking moment is devoted to someone other than herself and confined to a space that comforts and consoles—that nurtures—every other family member but her.

The only reprieve the housewife is granted is her daily trip to the grocery store to fetch the sustenance the family needs. Simone de Beauvoir suggests this is the “best time of day” for the housewife because “all the time they are doing their marketing, waiting in lines, in shops, on street corners, they talk about things that affirm their ‘homemaking worth’ from which each one draws the sense of her own importance; they feel part of a community” (479). Out of their homes and interacting while they shop, the housewives can relate to each other and share suggestions or stories. In the home, these women are doing the work alone. There is no one there who can understand all that they do. When they gather together and discuss their work with people who understand, it validates a lifestyle that isn’t always appreciated. De Beauvoir writes, “What they seek first of all from each other is the affirmation of their common universe” (584). Unfortunately, a portion of that common universe revolves around competition, making it difficult to have meaningful, honest friendships. De Beauvoir writes, “Each one competes with her companion….it is through her attentive and competent eyes that she can admire her [neighbor’s] well-cut dress, her elegant interior” (587). A woman in the market would never tell of any serious issues she’s having with her chores or lifestyle in general because she is aware of
the constant scrutiny from other wives. Therefore, a woman can’t be completely honest with her fellow housewife, and no concrete ties can be made. These women share simply superficial acquaintances with each other.

Because of these dishonest conversations, it was difficult to know how other housewives were really getting on. If a woman was discontent with her marriage or her role in the home or community, she most likely felt like she was the only one, since she never heard any other woman say such things. Friedan writes, “If a woman had a problem…she knew that something must be wrong with her marriage, or with herself. Other women were satisfied with their lives, she thought. What kind of woman was she if she did not feel this mysterious fulfillment waxing the kitchen floor? She was so ashamed to admit her dissatisfaction that she never knew how many other women shared it” (19). Housewives were too proud to admit that they struggled with anything because to do so would be admitting that one wasn’t a “superwoman,” and not being a superwoman was unacceptable in postwar America.

Nor were they supposed to be dissatisfied, as Friedan mentions above. Housewifery and motherhood were a married woman’s lot in life. She virtually had no other lifestyle to choose from. May suggests that women didn’t air their discontent, “given the widely shared belief that children provided women with happiness and fulfillment” (157). What America believed at the time was that women were meant to be mothers and housewives, and American women believed them. They strived for nothing more than to get married and birth babies. Women often attended school and sometimes even college, but in doing so, they were simply biding their time until engagement rings found the way to their fingers. Friedan writes, “Their only dream was to be perfect wives and mothers; their highest ambition to have five children and a beautiful house, their only fight to get and keep their husbands” (18). The only accomplishment women wanted
was marriage, and many of them achieved that in their early 20s. Then what? They had their whole lives ahead of them, and they had already won their heart’s greatest desire.

It’s not surprising, then, that these women quickly became discontented. When one wants for nothing, there’s nothing worth working for. These housewives quickly became accustomed to mind-numbing routines of chores that had to be repeated every day. De Beauvoir writes, “Day after day, one must wash dishes, dust furniture, mend clothes that will be dirty, dusty, and torn again. The housewife wears herself out running on the spot; she does nothing; she only perpetuates the present” (474). Sure, the housewife’s efforts help her family get through their day and work toward their accomplishments, but in reality, she is accomplishing nothing on her own. Instead, she is only trying to maintain the status quo. De Beauvoir continues, “So the wife’s work within the home does not grant her autonomy; it is not directly useful to the group, it does not open onto the future, it does not produce anything” (484). The housewife, in the harshest of terms, is a slave to the family; her work often goes unnoticed and unappreciated, and she is rarely recognized as an outstanding member of the family even though her efforts are what keep the family’s days running smoothly. When she realizes her lack of freedom, discontentment materializes.

Discontent was not just found in a few women; it was widespread. In the results of an anonymous survey given to housewives of Levittown, May explains, “Women in Levittown often complained about feeling trapped and isolated, facing endless chores of housekeeping and tending to children. For them, suburban life was not a life of fun and leisure but of exhausting work and isolation” (173-174). Many women were unhappy with the lot of the housewife, and yet few spoke up publically and even fewer did anything to change their lot. May continues, “The wives not only put up with these problems but claimed to be satisfied with their marriages.
Why? What did they gain? Here, women’s responses were even more concrete than their husbands’. For these women, life was ‘economically comfortable and secure’” (202). Let us remember, these women sacrificed everything to become wives. They gave up education, familial ties, and economic independence. Society did not look favorably on a working woman or a divorced woman. Even if a woman was so bold as to divorce her husband, where would that leave her? De Beauvoir writes that the wife “is forced to involve her whole self in marriage: she has no profession, no skills, no personal relations, even her name is not her own; she is nothing but her husband’s ‘other half.’ If he abandons her, she will most often find no help, either within or outside of herself” (506). The wife, essentially, at least by society’s terms, is nothing without her husband. Should she choose to remain married but forego the draining, mind-numbing housework, her husband may choose to leave her, for life is not so scary for an unwedded man. He, at least, has his own income. The life of an unmarried woman was much too frightening a concept. May writes, “Defying the consensus could lead to a loss of economic security, social reputation, or community support. Adaptation was clearly safer than resistance. Those who chafed against domestic containment…buried their discontent” (183). Though women may have started to realize how dire their lot in life was, their overall quality of life would be better if they kept quiet about it, or so they assumed.

Therefore, they found ways to cope with this discontent. Friedan writes, “Most [housewives] adjusted to their role and suffered or ignored the problem…It can be less painful, for a woman, not to hear the strange, dissatisfied voice stirring within in her” (26). For those who could not ignore that voice or for women who hadn’t yet realized what was wrong, they sought the help of skilled professionals:
Some doctors told their women patients they must get out of the house for a day, treat themselves to a movie in town. Others prescribed tranquilizers. Many suburban housewives were taking tranquilizers like cough drops. ‘You wake up in the morning, and you feel as if there’s no point in going on another day like this. So you take a tranquilizer because it makes you not care so much that it’s pointless. (Friedan 31)

Shirley Jackson was no stranger to this kind of treatment. Oppenheimer writes in her biography that Jackson regularly suffered from “innumerable ailments,” such as headaches, being “tense,” and “burning the candle at both ends” (147). Her doctor often prescribed her medication for some of these ailments, including codeine, and she did her own share of self-medicating with cigarettes, alcohol, and sugar. Jackson took the “numbing” approach to deal with her stressful life of raising four children on her own while supporting a lazy, unfaithful husband.

That wasn’t Jackson’s only way of dealing with her housewife issues, though. A coping mechanism she used to help not only herself but countless others was her comic and eccentric stories of the housewife/mother life often published in magazines and then later in two full-length memoirs. In these stories, Jackson highlights the absurdities of what otherwise would be a boring, routine existence. Much like the women in the markets who validate each other’s efforts, Jackson’s stories brought a universal voice to the women confined to their home. Some women took “breaks” from their day, and some women numbed themselves with pharmaceuticals, but Jackson encouraged them to instead laugh at themselves and their situations to ease their pain: “‘Laugh,’ the Housewife Writers tell the real housewife, ‘if you are feeling desperate, empty, bored, trapped in the bedmaking, chauffeuring and dishwashing details. Isn’t it funny? We’re all in the same trap’” (Friedan 57). Laughter may have helped these discontented women cope, but
when the chuckles subsided and the drugs wore off at the end of the day, housewives could not
dismiss their lost hopes and dreams, their numbing chores, and their oppressive neighbors. In the
morning, they would still be trapped in and by their homes.

The Housewife in “Flower Garden”:

Helen has given up a great deal to marry and become a member of the Winning family. First, one can infer that she gave up her youth. When she was a Talbot, she had “dark hair which
she wore cut short,” but now that she was a Winning, “her hair was beginning to grey where her
mother-in-law’s hair greyed first, at the temples” (83). Naturally, graying hair comes with age,
and Helen is in her 40s, so the fact that her hair is no longer dark is not surprising. For Jackson,
though (and for Helen, by extension), Helen was young when she wasn’t a Winning and Helen is
now old and is a Winning. Even if her graying hair is not actually related to her becoming a
Winning, it certainly feels, for Helen, that the two coincide. After all, living with overbearing in-
laws, an unaffectionate husband, and unruly children brings about the kind of stress that might
turn a woman’s hair gray quicker than normal.

Not only did she sacrifice her youth, but she sacrificed her family. It is mentioned that
Helen was a Talbot, but we hear nothing more about her immediate family after that. It seems as
though they don’t even exist. Helen doesn’t visit her mother or call her on the telephone. The
ever Mrs. Winning seems to be the only matronly figure in her life. If Helen was so frustrated
with her mother-in-law’s authority in the house, even if she couldn’t air her grievances to her
other housewives (not that they could understand, since most of them probably upheld nuclear
family homes), one would imagine that Helen would at least turn to her mother for advice.
Moreover, it seems most appropriate for Helen to look to her own mother for guidance on how to be a successful housewife instead of mimicking her mother-in-law’s every move. However, because she is now a Winning, a woman in a long line of other Mrs. Winnings, she has had to sacrifice any closeness with her biological mother to learn the ways of the Winning family.

The reader gets the impression that Helen has also had to sacrifice friendships by marrying a Winning. When she was young, she used to fantasize about marrying the grocer’s son, “and although he still called her Helen and she still called him Tom, she belonged now to the Winning family and had to speak critically to him, no matter how unwillingly, if the meat were tough or the butter price too high” (85). It’s expected that a woman should surrender any longstanding crushes she may feel when she enters marriage, but in this case, Helen has sacrificed more than a crush from afar. It’s suggested that she shared intimacies with this man, most likely platonic since she merely “hoped secretly” to marry him, but intimacies that allowed them to call each other by their first name. First names are scarce in this story; nearly everyone is referred to by a title and their last name. Even Helen does not call Mrs. MacLane by her first name, though we are led to believe that they were dear, close friends up until Mr. Jones entered. However, now that Helen is married, she must be critical of the grocer, even though she does so “unwillingly.” To be unguarded and forgiving to someone is unacceptable if one is a Winning, as we see later with Helen’s treatment of Mrs. MacLane.

Most obviously sacrificed by Helen because of marriage, however, is her dream for the future, signified by her desire to own the cottage down the hill and plant a garden there. Now that Helen was “accustomed” to living in the Winning house, she had “only a great kindness left toward the little cottage” since she “had given up all hope of ever living there” (84). Helen is accustomed to living in the Winning house; she may be used to living there, but that doesn’t
mean she *enjoys* living there. In fact, she is trapped in the home. Criminals may grow accustomed to living in their prison cells, but they are always happy to leave them when it is allowed. However, Helen has given up all hope of ever living in her cottage, meaning she has given up hope of fulfilling whatever dreams she may have had for the home and perhaps herself. Like her relationship with the grocer, the reader is compelled to believe Helen had great affection for the home because of the way she stands in front of it and imagines how it would look if she lived there (85). But like her relationship with the grocer, this fantasy has to be surrendered as well.

If these dreams had been replaced with realities that were just as good as or better than the fantasies, perhaps Helen would not yearn for what she doesn’t have nearly as much. Yet her home is a prison in which she is trapped with no authority over her family or her life and her husband is a cold man who barely acknowledges her existence. When her husband comes home for lunch, he merely nods to his wife but kisses his mother, showing that not only does Helen recognize the elder Mrs. Winning’s authority in the house, but her husband recognizes it as well (90). Her husband has been raised a Winning, and Winnings are not prone to affection, as can be seen in the youngest Howard Winning as well:

…in the warm darkness Mrs. Winning sometimes found an opportunity of sitting next to her husband so that she could touch his arm; she was never able to teach Howard to run to her and put his head in her lap, or inspire him with other than the perfunctory Winning affection, but she consoled herself with the thought that at least they were a family, a solid respectable thing. (102)
It’s clear that Helen misses affection if she tried to teach young Howard to run to her and put his
deep in her lap. Affection was just another sacrifice Helen had to make in order to marry into the
Winning family.

However, Helen is determined, like the housewives of the time, to make all her sacrifices
meaningful, which she believes she has done since they are a family, which is solid and
respectable. When the neighbors look on the Winnings, as neighbors of the era tend to do, they
would see a strong, unified family unit, the most important thing you could be in Cold War
America. Because of what her marriage stands for, Helen makes sure not to voice any of her
complaints. Even though Helen has some discontentment with her marriage and the life she has
adopted, it’s safer for her to stay committed to her family. She has no other family and no other
friends—those were surrendered when she married. The only support system she has is the
Winning family. She may have the support of the community presently, but if she were to break
up her marriage, that “solid respectable thing,” she would lose that respect and that support and
be all alone. It’s better for a woman like Helen to be married, even if that means she has to
sacrifice and suffer.

Though the elder Mrs. Winning was the reason for much of Helen’s discontentment, one
would assume that at least Helen had it easier than most housewives because she had an extra
pair of hands to help her perform all her “superwoman” tasks. Yet the reader doesn’t get the
sense that there is any less work for Helen to do. Whenever the reader sees Helen in her home,
she is almost always doing work. The only time she gets to sit down and not work is when she is
eating a meal, as we see when the story opens and Helen and Mrs. Winning are finishing their
coffee. Moments after that, though, the women are up and clearing away breakfast. Whenever
the mother-daughter duo discusses anything, they are always performing some chore. When
Helen tells her mother-in-law about the cottage, they are both busily sewing away (90). When Mrs. Winning suggests that Mr. Jones shouldn’t work for Mrs. MacLane, she and Helen are putting away the dishes (96). In fact, even when Helen thinks, she busies herself with work: “She took a long time settling the plates in even stacks in order to neaten her mind” (96). There is too much housework to do to sit down and think or talk. One must be able to multitask if one is to get everything done in the time allotted. When Helen returns from the cottage an hour late, she starts preparing lunch with her coat on so as to not lose any more time (90). No breaks exist for the housewife, and if one insists on taking a break, that time must be made up for somehow.

It doesn’t appear that the Winning household has any new-fangled appliances to help them get their work done, which is perhaps why they work every minute of every day, even though it’s been theorized that machines don’t really help the housewife’s plight. They seem to help Mrs. MacLane, however, who has many appliances and seems to have much more free time. Like any good Cold War wife, Helen immediately starts judging Mrs. MacLane the minute she meets her. When Mrs. MacLane comes to the door, she instantly determines that she’s in her 30s, she’s a lady (and a pretty one at that), and that “she knows about pretty houses” (86-87). She essentially is sizing up this newcomer to attest whether Helen is better than she is and whether she will fit into the neighborhood. When Helen notices the electric coffee pot, the waffle iron, and the toaster in the kitchen, she assumes that Mrs. MacLane “couldn’t have much trouble cooking, not with just the two of them” (88). A Cold War mother was supposed to be able to do it all, and Helen implies that Mrs. MacLane perhaps isn’t a “superwoman” like her housewife neighbors; perhaps she doesn’t aspire to be. After all, Helen herself seems to place much more emphasis on tending the garden and making curtains than she does on the daily chores.
Helen knows, however, that as she is judging Mrs. MacLane, Mrs. MacLane may very well be judging her. Helen, calling on the MacLanes, “wondered with a suddenly stricken conscience if perhaps she had not been too forward, almost pushing herself in,” and when she goes to leave, “she felt certain, although Mrs. MacLane was pleasant and cordial, that her [Helen’s] visit was extended past courtesy and into curiosity” (87, 89). Helen knows what is proper, so she is aware when she acts discourteously by inviting herself in and overstaying her welcome. She most likely assumes that Mrs. MacLane notices these actions as well.

Although Helen does make judgments about Mrs. MacLane’s lack of chores, she seems to enjoy the freedom that comes along with not having to work every second of every day. When the reader sees Helen and Mrs. MacLane together, they are never tending to any sort of household chore. They are often walking together or sitting to enjoy a cup of coffee, something Helen could never do in her own home; her mother-in-law would start shelling peas or setting the table and Helen would be obliged to help her. Perhaps this relaxed atmosphere allows Helen to open up to Mrs. MacLane in a way she cannot open up with her mother-in-law. Helen is able to lament about the trials of motherhood with Mrs. MacLane. She asks, “Don’t you feel terribly tied down having him with you all the time?” which implies that Helen feels tied down having her children around her all the time and is looking for some kind of validation for her feelings and affirmation of a common universe (91). Helen would never criticize the lot of the housewife in front of her mother-in-law because the elder Mrs. Winning is an authority figure, not a friend. It would be as if a grade school student were trying to relate to her teacher. However, Helen sees Mrs. MacLane as an equal and a friend and attempts to open up to her about her hidden discontent.
Helen gets to share an affirmation of a common universe with other housewives, as we see when she is in the store by herself:

She stopped and chatted with the grocer, with other young mothers in the town, with older friends of her mother-in-law’s, talking about the weather, the reluctance of the town to put in a decent swimming pool, the work that had to be done before school stated in the fall, chickenpox, the P.T.A. One morning she met Mrs. Burton in the store, and they spoke of their husbands, the heat, and the hot-weather occupations of their children… (103)

Helen gets plenty of chances to talk to people on her daily trips to the market, like most housewives of the time do. But in all that talking, never does she mention anything personal about herself. When she talks with Mrs. MacLane, however, she feels comfortable enough with her to mention her hopes and dreams and those she had to sacrifice for her married life. She tells Mrs. MacLane, “I’d give anything in the world to live in your house” (92). In a time when housewives are in constant competition with each other and women always want to be one step ahead of their neighbors, Helen’s confession wipes away all that dishonesty and bravado that she assumes with the other housewives, and she is able to achieve a new intimacy with Mrs. MacLane that she doesn’t find with anyone else.

Helen should have known better, really, since she’s had intimacy and affection with people before whose relationships she’s had to sacrifice because of her marriage. It’s her intimacy with Mrs. MacLane that eventually puts Helen in the uncomfortable position between the town and her newfound friend. The town uses the moniker “your friend” with Helen when discussing their dissatisfaction with Mrs. MacLane’s actions. The rest of the town, especially the housewives, are, of course, keeping a close eye on Helen, as neighbors tend to do, and an even
closer eye on Mrs. MacLane, since she’s a newcomer. Even though Helen seems to be “winning” the competition between the housewives because she’s got the “weight of the old Winning house” to support her, associating with Mrs. MacLane is dangerous to her status in the town. It seems that to be unguarded and forgiving with someone is unacceptable not only if one is a Winning, but also if one is an American housewife, since making an intimate connection with a neighbor threatens one’s status in the community. Women did not form bonds with each other because they were in constant competition with each other. If they formed intimacies among themselves and one woman did something the community deemed unacceptable, that woman’s friends would also be held accountable. Therefore, women only related to each other superficially, talking about the weather and their husbands, so nothing could jeopardize their position in the neighborhood. Though these women retain their secure, stable homes, they did so at the cost of utter and desperate loneliness.
V. The Self

Elaine Showalter claimed that housewifery had become a woman’s default identity in Cold War America. A woman and her home were one in the same. Betty Friedan claims that a woman is interchangeable not with her home but with her husband—not in the way that they are equal partners or even carry the same workload, but that the wife “renounces all active goals of her own, all her own ‘originality,’ to identify and fulfill herself through the activities and goals of husband, or son” (121). A woman’s identity is mother and housewife, that much is certain, but Friedan seems to take that concept a step further to say a woman forfeits any “originality” of her own. If one identifies with a house, at least then the wife can explore her own creativity through decorating and cooking and craft projects. Friedan suggests that a housewife is not even granted her own creativity unless that creativity serves the purpose of her husband and children. She decorates the home and cooks the meals perhaps using her own creativity but only in ways that she knows will be acceptable to her husband and children. In this way, the woman literally takes herself out of the family equation. Her personality, or “originality,” disappears and only the identity of her husband and children remain.

Friedan explains that a woman “has no identity except as wife and mother. She does not know who she is herself. She waits all day for her husband to come home at night to make her feel alive. And now it is the husband who is not interested. It is terrible for the woman, to lie there, night after night, waiting for her husband to make her feel alive” (29). In the case of Helen Winning, she has relinquished every meaningful relationship and abandoned every dream so that she can marry her husband, and yet now she cannot even get a kiss “hello” from him when he comes home to lunch, even though she’s the one who cooked it for him. She relishes the
moments she gets to sit close enough to him that she can touch his hand. She has sacrificed everything that made her a unique person for him, and now all she asks is that he fill that void and make her feel like a person again, but he refuses. When a woman has given up all identifying traits for marriage and then is physically rejected by the person she gave them up for, how does she discover who she is? What is left with which to forge an identity?

The only other person that the wife shares anything in common with is the mother. At least the mother can understand and relate to the wife’s plight. However, the wife has been observing the mother her whole life and looks at her through a complicated lens. Adrienne Rich writes that the biological mother “represents the culture of domesticity, of male-centeredness, of conventional expectations” (247). The young naïve wife follows in her footsteps by getting married, but perhaps believes her marriage will be different from the one she witnessed in her childhood. She wants more for herself than average and ordinary: “‘Matrophobia’…is the fear not of one’s mother or of motherhood but of becoming one’s mother….But where a mother is hated to the point of matrophobia, there may also be a deep underlying pull toward her, a dread that if one relaxes one’s guard, one will identify with her completely” (Rich 235). Helen Winning finds her mother-in-law to be overbearing and stubborn, and yet she is quickly transforming into her. Though the elder Mrs. Winning is not her biological mother, she is the only matronly figure in Helen’s life, and since Helen’s husband has rejected her, old Mrs. Winning is the only sense of identity that Helen is offered. Helen observes qualities in her mother-in-law that she despises and wishes to distance herself from, but at the same time, she’s “anticipating” her mother-in-law’s gestures in order to imitate her.

Perhaps making a friend in Mrs. MacLane was Helen’s way of distancing herself from her mother. By making friends with a younger, more progressive woman, Helen may have been
trying to delay the “underlying pull” toward completely identifying with her mother. Rich notes how disorienting this can be to one’s sense of self:

Matrophobia can be seen as a womanly splitting of the self, in the desire to become purged once and for all of our mothers’ bondage, to become individuated and free. The mother stands for the victim in ourselves, the unfree woman, the martyr. Our personalities seem dangerously to blur and overlap with our mothers’; and, in a desperate attempt to know where mother ends and daughter begins, we perform radical surgery. (236)

Helen knows she is trapped in her husband’s ancestral home and that she is under the authority of her mother-in-law. Perhaps it feels as though she is held captive by her mother-in-law because the elder Mrs. Winning spends so much time molding Helen into a Winning woman. Helen is involved in this process of completely surrendering her identity for the identity of a Winning woman, and it certainly seems that it cannot be stopped once it has been started. Yet Helen grasps desperately at whatever bit of identity she may have left through her obsession with the cottage and her friendship with Mrs. MacLane. To completely transform into her mother-in-law, she knows, means surrendering any intimacy or affection with another. Sharing intimacy and affection seems to be, to Helen, the key to freedom. Once that is gone, she will be her mother-in-law, an unfree woman, forever trapped by her family and constantly sacrificing herself for their benefit with nothing in return. Thus, her friendship with Mrs. MacLane, in a way, is a “radical surgery” that she pursues to test the waters of a different life.

At the end of the story, however, she makes the decision her mother-in-law would make and fully accepts her position in the Winning family and in the community. Helen, of course, is not entirely satisfied being her mother-in-law; she misses her friend and is disappointed she had
to surrender a relationship that could have been deeply rewarding. Yet she has to choose who she is going to be—free or unfree—and she cannot be both, so she chooses to be old Mrs. Winning instead of Mrs. MacLane.

“The Tooth”:

Does Helen regret her actions at the end of “Flower Garden”? Will she come to realize she chose the wrong fate? Will her identity be lost forever and she destined to be a martyred mother? Jackson does not give us any of the answers. Helen seems satisfied with herself and her choice at the end of the story, but how will she feel when she realizes she is alone yet again? For those answers, we look to another of Jackson’s stories that focus on the lost identity of a Cold War wife and mother. In “The Tooth,” Jackson shows us what happens after a wife makes the choice to be free instead of trapped—perhaps an inside look into the future of Helen Winning.

Clara Spencer of Jackson’s “The Tooth” is discontented with her housewife identity, which is manifested in a toothache. Her husband reminds her of how troublesome this toothache has been in their marriage when he says, “[T]hat tooth’s been bothering you off and on for years; at least six or seven times since I’ve known you you’ve had trouble with that tooth….You had a toothache on our honeymoon” (208). That toothache has been present as long as she’s been associated with her husband, perhaps because of her husband and what his presence means to the surrender of her own identity. In regards to his acknowledgement of her toothache, Pascal suggests it “indicated clearly that the tooth represents the deeply rooted lifetime-old self inculcated by the domestically oriented small community, and further implied that she was never happy being that self” (248). The toothache is a physical manifestation of the oppression forced upon her by the traditional gender roles adopted in marriage and the loss of identity suffered
when she takes on the housewife/mother role. Clara says, “I just feel as if I were all tooth. Nothing else” (208). She no longer has her own identity, but has assumed the identity of the tooth ache and all it stands for.

Clara takes a bus to the city to visit her dentist and rid herself of her painful tooth. Intentional or not, Clara’s arrival in the city offers her the opportunity to shed her housewife/mother identity. Jackson portrays the city as a place devoid of all the common rules by which housewives live their lives: “[T]he city stands as a glistening dream of freedom in which communally inculcated patters of self-abnegating behavior do not hold” (Pascal 248). The rules of suburbia are not followed within the city limits. In the city, time rushes faster and one’s only responsibility is to oneself. Without their everyday responsibilities, women, while in the city and surrounded by strangers, lose all sense of purpose, because their obligations as mother and housewife no longer exist. While some women become frightened and helpless in this situation, such as Margaret in Jackson’s story “Pillar of Salt,” who cannot even convince herself to cross the street, others, such as Clara Spencer, are able to embrace the opportunity of ridding themselves of oppression and finding their identity devoid of the titles of “mother” and “wife.”

Clara seeks out the dentist that can remove her tooth and can therefore remove the pain, annoyance, and sorrow of this imposed identity. When describing the dentist, Jackson writes, “perhaps all human ailments were contained in the teeth, and he could fix them if people would only come to him in time” (215). Not only does Clara’s tooth ache, but she is also discontent with her life. One can assume that Clara is a young wife, because otherwise she might be more used to the expectations placed upon her if she had dealt with them longer. In that case, she “caught the problem” early enough to be able to take care of it without much effort. Perhaps if other wives had realized the same solution Clara realized, it’s possible many more of them would
have extracted themselves from the demands of housewifery. Clara wishes to ask the dentist, “How far down do the roots go?” in order to assure herself that her individual identity is still salvageable and that she will be able to have her own life once this oppression has been lifted from her (216).

The dentist is able to rid her of her ailments, both physical and psychological. The story suggests that when a person keeps all discontentment bottled up, as Clara has done since she is not supposed to voice her complaints, the ache for change will manifest itself in physical pain. Just before her tooth is removed, Clara thinks to herself, “Remember…the taste of all of it. And the outrage” (219). Clara finally faces her misery head on and gives words to it. The dentist represents the medicinal power of giving voice to one’s discontentment.

Once Clara’s tooth has been pulled, she wanders into a crowded ladies’ restroom and refreshes herself with a wet paper towel. She dries her face and, for the first time as a new woman, she “glanced into the mirror [and] she realized with a slight stinging shock that she had no idea which face was hers” (221). Mary Lowe-Evans and Karen Willingham-Sirmans explain, “The implication is that without the pain, restrictions, and responsibilities symbolized by the abscessed tooth, Clara has no ‘self’ to recognize” (97). The aching tooth represented her all-consuming identity of mother and housewife, and without those titles to define her anymore, she is unrecognizable even to herself. She has to identify herself all over again.

Jacques Lacan’s mirror stage illuminates the process of an infant coming to terms with her own individuality separate from that of her mother. He describes this experience of forming one’s identity as “a function of the mirror stage…which is to establish a relation between the organism and its reality” (124). In relation to Clara’s situation, it is as if Clara has been reborn and now must figure out who she is, just as an infant must learn how to do. The slate has been
wiped entirely clean, and Clara’s new reality is completely unknown to her. When she looks in
the mirror, she has to figure out which face is hers so that she can learn what her new reality will
be. Clara looks in the mirror and discovers “no one was familiar in the group, no one smiled at
her or looked at her with recognition; you’d think my own face would know me, she thought”
(221). It is not anybody else’s responsibility to determine someone else’s identity; it is a task that
she must accomplish on her own by looking in the mirror and discerning that she is an individual
separate from everyone else.

Julia Kristeva explains this difficult procedure of separating one’s self from another or
from a group and finding one’s own identity: “I see a face. A first differentiation takes place, and
thus a first self-identity. This identity is still unstable because sometimes I take myself to be me,
sometimes I confuse myself with my mother. This narcissistic instability, this doubt persists and
makes me ask ‘who am I?’, ‘is it me or is it the other?’” (130). Clara looks in the mirror, and she
sees faces. She becomes aware that each face represents an individual. In order to discover what
face represents her, she lifts her hands and puts it in on her cheek. She is disappointed to learn
that she was “the pale, anxious one with the hair pulled back” and can’t understand why she
didn’t claim one of the prettier faces (221). She is making over her identity and wishes to choose
a new face in addition to a new lifestyle. However, part of her mother/housewife identity still
exists because she appears as she was before the tooth was pulled. In this case, Clara is not trying
to separate herself from her mother, but trying to separate herself from the mother that she was.
Her previous self was “pale” and “anxious.” She sees herself in the mirror as she was when she
was a mother/housewife even though she no longer holds that identity. She throws away all the
identifiers located on her person; in doing so, she completely abandons and destroys the old
identity of housewife/mother so that she may have the control over her new reality.
This story seems to suggest that a woman cannot have freedom of self while she is a mother/housewife; she must shed that identity in order to be who she truly desires to be. Jackson, however, seems to argue that it’s not the role of housewife/mother that keeps a woman from discovering her true identity. Rather, it’s that Cold War culture consumed a woman with the responsibilities and expectations of others, causing her to forget to consider her own passions, for the sake of “domestic” security. Bottling up those frustrations until they manifest themselves in physical pain is a barrier to one’s freedom of self. Jackson merely demonstrates the danger of such high societal demands on both men and women of the time and the psychological harm that comes with hiding behind a brave smile and not recognizing one’s own discontentment with one’s role.

When one looks in the mirror, all of society’s ideologies fall away and only one’s reflection stares back, void of the daily responsibilities and obligations, of lovers and spouses, of mothers and children. Only one true person looks back, separate from anything or anyone. Lacan suggests that people truly learn they are their own person when they look in a mirror. Clara looked in the mirror and saw only herself looking back. With neither her husband nor the exotic stranger Jim nor her children nor anyone else crowding her view, she is able to see herself in her most basic state. She looks directly at her fresh face as if it were a blank slate. She asks herself, “Who am I? Is it me or is it the other?” She has to differentiate between what parts of her identity are self-imposed and what parts are imposed by another.
“The Tooth” in “Flower Garden”:

One does not assume that Helen Winning will hop a bus for the city and completely discard her mother/housewife identity as Clara Spencer does. If Helen does not have the courage to stand up for a friend, she most likely won’t have the courage to forfeit completely her way of life, especially after she has sacrificed so much for it. Clara Spencer was a younger wife than Helen, we assume, and yet it still took dire circumstances for her to get on the bus. She succumbed to much pain and suffering before she felt oppressed enough to do something about it. Helen has suffered for eleven years, sacrificed at least two friendships (the grocer and Mrs. MacLane), and still hasn’t reached her breaking point. Perhaps she never will.

If Jackson is correct in that a woman must consider her own passions in order to find her identity, then the situation looks rather bleak for young Mrs. Winning. Helen has sacrificed so many of her passions for her married life that now she may be spent. As we have learned, she has “given up all hope” of ever living in the cottage, her greatest passion so far as the reader is aware. Now she’s had to sacrifice another friendship for her marriage and for her town, and perhaps she will give up all hope of ever having affection and intimacy in her life. If she has no hope, she will lose the motivation to examine her life and choose new dreams. As Clara Spencer shows us, it is one’s own responsibility to find her identity, and if Helen Winning refuses to evaluate her life because she has given up all hope, then she will never find out who she is or who she could be as an individual apart from her husband, her children, and her house. Helen, we can say with a degree of certainty, will never discard her mother/housewife identity.

Mrs. MacLane, on the other hand, seems to have undergone the same process as Clara Spencer, only where Clara got on a bus and left her husband behind, Mrs. MacLane’s husband
passed away. We cannot be sure what Mrs. MacLane’s home life was like when her husband was alive, though we can certainly make some assumptions based on what the average housewife/mother’s life is like and what Helen’s housewife/mother’s life is like. Perhaps Mrs. MacLane’s identity was squashed by her husband. She did come from the city, where she dreamed of having a garden. Perhaps her husband’s presence kept her from attaining her dreams, such as growing a garden, just as Helen’s marriage prevents her from owning the cottage down the hill.

Now that her husband is gone, Mrs. MacLane seems only to retain her husband’s surname and nothing else. Perhaps Mrs. MacLane uses her widowhood as a way to ease the tension with her new neighbors, tension that would exist if she were merely a single lady. Perhaps it is not Mrs. MacLane who suggests that she be referred to by her husband’s name; the town may refer to her that way because they are more comfortable viewing her as a widower than as a single woman. Mrs. MacLane’s marriage makes her less of a security threat than if she was a woman who had never married.

Liberated from marriage, Mrs. MacLane is still focused on her son’s life, to be sure, but there is also a freedom to her life. She has an identity outside of her son. In fact, Davey takes on more of his mother’s personality than she does of his, which we see in his love for gardens. There is no mother figure in her life to dictate her actions. She is the only mother there is, and she chooses to be a mother however she feels is best. We know that Mrs. MacLane’s home is done in a décor that resembles who she is as a person and the things she is passionate about. She does not need the affection of others because she has the affection of her son. In fact, she doesn’t seek out friends; they seem to seek her out, and because she has such a loving nature, she accepts their friendships willingly. She is confident in who she is to the point that she refuses to conform
to the identity the village wishes to impose on her. To conform to the village’s identity would be
to put someone else’s passions and ethics before her own, which she clearly isn’t willing to do,
perhaps because she’s been down that road before and doesn’t wish to travel there again. It
would also mean treating Mr. Jones in a hostile manner, even though he has done nothing to
deserve it. Mrs. MacLane, with her loving and courageous character, would not be hostile to
someone for no reason, unlike the townspeople, who are hostile toward Mr. Jones, his family,
and later toward Mrs. MacLane.

Mrs. MacLane represents a woman who has her own identity and Helen Winning
represents a woman who has forfeited the chance to develop one. What Helen needs, in order to
forge an identity, is to cut her mother-in-law from her life. If Helen had her own authority, she
could leave her husband and find someone who can give her adequate affection, and she could
embrace those pursuits about which she is passionate. If Helen did, she might find herself, at
least for a while, completely alone with no support system. She would lose her family. She
would lose the approval of the community and be forced to move away, just as Mrs. MacLane
must do at the end of “Flower Garden.”

Of course, she doesn’t do any of those things, and we have no reason to suspect that she
will. Helen compensates for her lost self with the one thing that Mrs. MacLane doesn’t have—a
home. It’s a dysfunctional and suffocating and lonely home, but she has one. Mrs. MacLane may
know who she is, but she is chased away from the home she was attempting to make out of the
cottage and the community. Clara Spencer knows who she is at the end of “The Tooth,” and in
the end, she runs “barefoot through the hot sand” (224). But what is she running toward? We
know what she’s running away from—her home, or the home she had up until that point. Where
will she live now? Can she find a home if she doesn’t have family, doesn’t have a community?
These women have worked hard to find out who they are when the rest of the world wanted them to forget their identity, but what have they to show for it? They are still just as lonely as the housewives holed up in their houses with no identity to speak of.
VI. Conclusion

Jackson’s protagonist in *We Have Always Lived in the Castle*, Constance Blackwood, is not unlike our Mrs. MacLane from “Flower Garden.” They are both nurturing women who tend to children who need an extraordinary amount of looking after (Constance looks over Merricat, a mass murderer, and Mrs. MacLane looks after her son, who tends to be sickly). They both garden, as nurturing women in Jackson’s fiction often do. Most notably, they both live alternative lifestyles outside of the social norms. Where Mrs. MacLane is not as confined to her home, as are most housewives her age, Constance is confined to her home though she’s young enough not to be. Constance chooses to stay in her home, avoid society, and tend to what’s left of her family when the culture of the time dictates that she should be out securing a husband. Her friend, Helen Clarke, comes to visit Constance one day and suggests that she reacquaint herself with society. She says, “It’s spring, you’re young, you’re lovely, you have a right to be happy. Come back into the world” (445). Lynette Carpenter spots “[s]everal unspoken premises [that] lie behind this piece of advice, not the least ludicrous of which is assumption that the world, or in this case the village, could make Constance happy. Of course, Helen Clarke also assumes that Constance is not happy” (34). Helen assumes that because Constance isn’t doing what she “should” do, namely, finding a husband and settling down with him as opposed to locking herself up in her family home with her little sister and invalid uncle, that she must be unhappy. Later in the novel, when Constance does actively seek a relationship with her cousin Charles, she alienates herself from her sister and is used and mistreated by Charles. Charles’s presence in her life actually brings her much unneeded stress and pain. Because of that, the reader is led to
believe that a “normal” life of marriage and childbearing would not make Constance any happier than she is with her sister and uncle. In fact, it may make her much less happy.

Helen Winning has this same kind of misunderstanding with Mrs. MacLane. When Mrs. MacLane confronts Mrs. Winning about the dissolution of their friendship, Mrs. Winning inwardly reflects: “She wanted desperately to go over and take Mrs. MacLane’s hand and ask her to come back and be one of the nice people again” (105). Helen assumes that the village can make Mrs. MacLane happy. However, Mrs. MacLane has already discovered what makes her happy. She has a clear grip on her identity and knows that if she succumbs to the conformity of the community, she will have to surrender parts of that identity. Helen, however, is not capable of evaluating her own happiness because she has forfeited any unique identity she may have had when she entered marriage. The only identity she has is what society demands: a wife and mother and nothing more.

Betty Friedan, like Mrs. MacLane, realizes it takes more than community acceptance for a woman to be happy. She writes, “Love and children and home are good, but they are not the whole world, even if most of the words now written for women pretend they are. Why should women accept this picture of a half-life, instead of a share in the whole of human destiny? Why should women make housework ‘something more,’ instead of moving on the frontiers of their own time…?” (67). Friedan premises her Feminine Mystique on “the problem that has no name.” These women whom she writes about have cast aside their individual identities to the point where they can’t even tell why they are unhappy; they simply know that they are unhappy or aren’t as happy as they could/should be. Even if they realized they were living a half-life, what could have been done about it? One woman speaking out against society would result in ostracism—Mrs. MacLane serves as evidence of this. History tells us that it took a social
movement of thousands of women to make Americans, especially American housewives, realize
the unfairness in their lives and speak out about it.

Friedan condemns the likes of Jackson, who has the chance to make a change but refuses.
She writes:

When Shirley Jackson, who all her adult life has been an extremely capable
writer, pursuing a craft far more demanding than bedmaking, and Jean Kerr, who
is a playwright, and Phyllis McGinley, who is a poet, picture themselves as
housewives...they implicitly deny the vision, and the satisfying hard work
involved in their stories, poems, and plays. They deny the lives they lead, not as
housewives, but as individuals. (57)

Friedan, in this instance, is making the same mistake made by Helen Clarke and Helen Winning.
She is assuming these women want to be more than housewives and wish to encourage other
housewives to demand more from their lives. However, Jackson was a housewife first and
foremost. There is a good chance she didn’t know she wanted more. There is a good chance she
didn’t know she deserved more. Who could tell her? Her overbearing mother? Her demanding
unfaithful husband? Who was there to tell Helen Winning that she should demand more? No one.

Jackson was just as self-conscious as any other housewife at the time, no matter how
successful of a writer she was. Zita Dresner informs us that Shirley enjoyed writing because she
could do it at home in her free time, she could always maintain a posture of being an amateur
even if her writing was successful, and there was little disappointment if she didn’t get
something published because she was just “writing for fun” (31). Jackson may have pursued a
career and she may have been commended regularly for her skill, but like any housewife, she
was nervous about what kinds of consequences she may have to deal with for stepping outside of
the boundaries in a world where judgment and scrutiny ran rampant.

Whether or not she meant to, Jackson did contribute to Friedan’s cause. Angela Hauge
writes, “Had Friedan more carefully read Shirley Jackson’s literary fiction, she would have
understood that Jackson’s characterizations of middle-class women are in fact portraits of the
women she described in The Feminine Mystique, women who, lacking any sense of self or ability
to function in the world outside the home, begin to fragment and dissociate when forced to act
independently” (76). The old writer’s credo is that you should “write what you know.” That’s
what Jackson did. She knew these women were trapped in their homes, had no clear concept of
what home should be, and couldn’t choose between themselves and their responsibilities. She
was these women. All of her fears, her anxieties, and her desperation moved from inside of her,
through to her pen, and onto her page. She may not have realized the “problem” of American
housewives at the time, but she certainly felt that she had a “problem with no name” and
projected that into her stories.

It makes sense, then, that American housewives have no concept of home if they do not
have any concept of themselves. Perhaps Jackson had an affinity for peculiar, expressive houses
because she saw herself in them but didn’t know how to display her own character as well as the
house displayed its character. It also makes sense, then, why a story entitled “Flower Garden” is
not really about a garden at all, but is about a little cottage. Helen Winning’s personal emptiness
reflects the emptiness of the small cottage on which she focuses her desires. She wants someone
to move in and fill up the emptiness she feels inside, since that void is not filled by her husband
or her mother-in-law. Mrs. MacLane comes into the house and warms up Helen’s life by paying
her the attention and the affection she has been so starved for. Not only that, but Mrs. MacLane
displays Helen’s own character in decorating her home in almost the exact way that Helen would have decorated it herself. When Mrs. MacLane lives in the cottage, Helen can literally see herself living there, too. Helen gets an inside look into what could have been her life had she not let her identity fade away into nothing more than a Winning mother. However, it is too late for Helen. She cannot change her fate now. Thus, at the end of the story, the cottage will be empty once more, leaving Helen empty as well.

The interesting factor to “Flower Garden” that is missing from “The Lottery” is that these characters make their own choices. Whereas Tess Hutchinson was chosen “randomly,” Mrs. MacLane chooses to disregard the rules of containment. Helen answers this by choosing to forfeit her friendship with Mrs. MacLane. Mrs. MacLane chooses herself over the town; Helen chooses the town over Mrs. MacLane. This makes “Flower Garden” a more horrifying situation than “The Lottery”; no one is forcing Helen to ostracize Mrs. MacLane. Helen makes the choice that it must be done. Yet what choice does she really have? Helen does not know she needs to stand up to society’s demands, so how can she make the choice to do so? Mrs. MacLane does know she has to stand up to society’s demands, so how can she choose to conform? Who is to blame? Both? Neither?

These are questions we still can’t answer today. These are the questions that make this piece of fiction and Jackson’s work in general so important not only for Cold War America but in today’s world as well. Women still lack “home.” They still don’t know who they are or who they are supposed to be. They still struggle with the housewife persona, though in a new way. Women have all the opportunities in the workforce they never dreamed of in the ‘40s and ‘50s, but now are judged if they choose to forfeit those opportunities and stay at home to raise a
family. Anne-Marie Slaughter noted recently in *Atlantic Monthly* that “Women Still Can’t Have It All.” In her article of that title, she recalls this:

I’d been the one telling young women at my lectures that you *can* have it all and do it all, regardless of what field you are in. Which means I’d been part, albeit unwillingly, of making millions of women feel that *they* are to blame if they cannot manage to rise up the ladder as fast as men and also have a family and an active home life (and be thin and beautiful to boot). (86)

The idea of being a “superwoman” that housewives in the ’40s and ’50s faced is the same concept women still face, only now women have to be masters of the job force as well as masters of the home. Society still demands too much of its women. The housewives of Cold War America could “have it all” if they married a doting husband and had a family and had the best house on the block with the most impressive furnishings. The culture demanded that Americans led “perfect” lives and that the wives were responsible for the success of that perfect life. If they couldn’t raise their caliber to “perfect,” the women were to *blame*. The same kind of pressure still encumbers our women today. They are expected to make a name for themselves in the work force, claim the high executive positions once reserved only for men, and still make it home to have dinner on the table and help their children with their homework. Society demands perfection from its women—it always has and might do so forever. As long as women wear so many hats that they are no longer sure which one fits them best, their concept of home will forever be incomplete. They will never be able to exist in a place where they are completely accepted and protected and encouraged to be whoever *they* wish to be.

In the end, Jackson would blame herself for her lack of “home.” Her daughter Sally confesses this about her mother:
I think she was made really nervous by the fact that she fought Stanley and she fought the world and fought her parents to be true to herself, and then it soured. She got the four kids and the big house and the smart husband and she went crazy anyway. And I think she felt really bad. She felt bad that the books weren’t enough therapy, that writing a book every year or two didn’t keep her sane.

Because she put her guts into it. But it wasn’t enough. (Oppenheimer 248)

Jackson attempted to conform to the woman she was expected to be by getting married and having a stable home filled with children whom she showered with adoration. Yet that didn’t fulfill her enough. So she tried to be herself, but she didn’t have enough respect for herself, so that didn’t fulfill her either. She put much effort into finding her “home,” finding a place, a person, or an idea where she would feel comfortable and protected and safe to be whoever she wanted to be, but it always proved elusive.

Jackson never gave up hope entirely on her search for home and still believed even at the very end of her life that she would eventually achieve that kind of comfort and support. Darryl Hattenhauer explains, “Writing in this diary that she kept at the end of her life, she wrote about the joy of writing: ‘I am at home here’” (27). Jackson, a woman who never fully understood or experienced what “home” was supposed to feel like, who suffered mental and physical illness, who was self-loathing and constantly abused, still had faith that such a place existed because she could feel it when she wrote for herself. Even though she may not have felt it in reality, she made sure people could feel it in her writing. S. T. Joshi writes, “However haphazardly her household appeared to be run, she took evident pride in providing a loving home for her husband and children. Where the reality of her own family lay, no one but she herself could have answered: perhaps all the carefree, well-adjusted children in her domestic fiction were themselves
imaginary—her greatest fantasy” (11-12). Jackson couldn’t always control her home life, but she could control her writing, and in her writing, she was a woman who had it all.

It is through her writing that we are able to see what “home” looked like to Jackson at the end of her life. In her last novel, *Come Along With Me*, posthumously published unfinished by her late husband Stanley Edgar Hyman, Jackson shows us what perhaps she wished her life had looked like. It begins with a woman who has just buried her husband, much to her relief. Could this husband be the suffocating, demanding Stanley? It’s possible. Like Clara Spencer, once her husband is gone, the widow gets rid of all identifiers of her married life: “I sold the house, I auctioned off the furniture, I put all the paintings and boxes in the barn, I erased my old name and took my initials off everything, and I got on the train and left” (4). The first order of business is that she renames herself, reminding us of all those Cold War housewives who share their husband’s name and have no other identity than that of their home and family: “what is really more frightening than being without a name, nothing to call yourself, nothing to say when they ask you who you are?” (9). Jackson, along with many other housewives, felt they had no way to identify themselves outside of wife and mother; they had no unique qualities. Here, Jackson’s widow is determined to have something to say when someone asks her who she is. She assigns herself the name Angela Motorman, and when she considers saying it for the first time aloud, she was “not actually certain how it was going to sound, because no one had ever said it before in the history of this earth,” and she feels as though she’s “giving birth” (11). She is giving herself a new beginning, a fresh start, with no one’s restrictions or expectations placed upon her. She can be whoever she wishes to be, and she chooses to be Angela Motorman.

She doesn’t need anyone but herself to entertain her: “enjoyment and excitement and a fine high gleefulness I knew I could provide on my own” (3). However, she does still need a
place to live: “a lady chooses her place of residence with caution” (10). She describes the home she’s looking for: “I wanted the barest rock bottom of a room I could have, I wanted nothing but a place to sleep and a place to sit and a place to put my things; any decorating done to my environment is me” (15). She picks a place that she knows she can count on to provide security, protection, and reflect who she wants to be: “I had taken to the house right away…. It was a solid house, a devil to clean, but prepared to stand right where it was forever…” (10).

In this vision of home that Jackson had at the end of her life, she seems to find a way to bridge the gap between Mrs. MacLane and Helen Winning. She finds a stable home, one that has proven itself over the years; it is a home that she knows will provide her the protection and security she desires. However, she wants it to be nothing more to her than a place to sleep, sit, and hold her things. She doesn’t want to be one with her home. She doesn’t want her home to define her or trap her. She wants the home to do what home should do: comfort her at the end of a long day and provide her with a sanctuary in which to relax. Many Cold War husbands saw their homes in this way, but their wives never had the opportunity. Jackson, through Angela Motorman, is determined to know how it feels to settle down in her home instead of run ragged.

If Jackson had to choose whether she wanted to be Mrs. MacLane or Helen Winning, she seems to suggest that Mrs. MacLane had the sweeter life because she knew who she was, she didn’t have anyone ordering her around, and she was free to embrace her passions. As ironic as it might sound, since Jackson was the ultimate housewife whose world revolved entirely around her own home, in the end, Jackson realized that one can get a home anywhere. There were plenty of sturdy houses out there that had proven themselves over the years to provide protection and security. Even if she was chased out of the community because she refused to conform, which Jackson often did refuse to do, it was still better to know who she was than to lose herself in
others’ expectations and demands. If only the realization would have come sooner, not just for Jackson, but for all housewives of Cold War America.
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Appendix J: Thesis Submission Agreement for ScholarWorks@GVSU

Grand Valley State University Libraries
ScholarWorks@GVSU Institutional Repository

Thesis Submission Agreement

I agree to grant the Grand Valley State University Libraries the non-exclusive right to distribute my submitted thesis ("the Work") over the Internet and make it part of ScholarWorks@GVSU.

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1. I hold the copyright to this work, and agree to permit this work to be posted in the ScholarWorks@GVSU institutional repository.

2. I understand that accepted works may be posted immediately as submitted, unless I request otherwise to the University Library.

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Name of thesis: Bound for Home: Containment and Community in Cold War America Through Shirley Jackson's "Flower Garden"

Signature of author: [Signature] Date: 4-28-2013

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Cold War American women wives finding home