

THE DOMESTIC FANTASTIC: POSTWAR AMERICAN FICTION FROM BRADBURY
TO PLATH

By

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

	<u>page</u>
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS.....	3
ABSTRACT.....	6
CHAPTER	
1 INTRODUCTION.....	7
Postwar Studies: A Critical Review	10
Understanding the Fantastic: Some Definitions	16
Chapter Abstracts.....	22
2 “SHRUNK TO THE COZY WALLS OF THE HOME”: AMERICAN WOMEN’S GOTHIC VISIONS OF DOMESTICITY	28
Postwar Comediennes: Mediating Gothic Domesticity With Laughter	30
“A Visit”: The Lovely House As Labyrinth.....	33
<i>The Haunting of Hill House</i> : The Cost of Romanticizing Domesticity	37
<i>Hangsaman</i> and <i>The Bell Jar</i> : Negotiating Friedan’s “Schizophrenic Split”	45
Conclusion: No Way Out?	55
3 “LIVE BETTER ELECTRICALLY”: EMBODIED APPLIANCES, HOMES OF TOMORROW, AND THE DREAM OF SCIENCE-FICTIONAL HOUSEWORK	58
“Family Magician”: The Fantasy of Domestic Witchcraft	60
“I Sing the Body Electric!”: Embodying the Personal Appliance	66
<i>The Stepford Wives</i> : Electrifying the Housewife	74
“The Heat Death of the Universe” and “There Will Come Soft Rains”: (De)Personal(izing) Appliances	80
Conclusion: Can We Live Better Electrically?	86
4 TELEVISED AND TRANSPORTED: DOMESTIC TECHNOLOGIES AND THE MECHANIZATION OF MASCULINITY	88
“The Enormous Radio”: Disruptive Frequencies	90
<i>Fahrenheit 451</i> : Simulated Families, Burning Houses	93
“Duel” and “Nightmare at 20,000 Feet”: Matheson’s Immobilized Passengers.....	107
“The Taxpayer,” “R is for Rocket,” and “The Rocket”: Bradbury’s Astro-nots	108
“The Five-Forty-Eight” and “The Swimmer”: Cheever’s Conquered Commuters..	110
<i>Breakfast of Champions</i> : Automotive and Automated Apocalypse.....	114
Conclusion: “A New Day Dawning For You”	120
5 MURDEROUS, MONSTROUS, AND MUTATED CHILDREN IN THE TIME OF DR. BENJAMIN SPOCK AND THE CHILD-CENTERED FAMILY	122

“The Veldt” and “Zero Hour”: They Came From Inner Space	124
<i>Life Among the Savages</i> and <i>Raising Demons</i> : Shirley Jackson’s Mundane Monsters	131
“Tomorrow’s Child”: Bringing Up (Interdimensional) Baby.....	136
“The Small Assassin” and “A Stroke of Good Fortune”: The Murderer in the Cradle	143
Conclusion: “It’s a Good Life”	150
6 CODA: THE DOMESTIC FANTASTIC IN CONTEMPORARY FILM AND TELEVISION	152
<i>Pleasantville</i> : The Parodic Domestic Fantastic	153
<i>American Horror Story</i> : The Modern Gothic.....	157
<i>Ex Machina</i> : The Robotic Domestic Fantastic.....	161
<i>Poltergeist</i> and <i>Looper</i> : The Child-Centered Domestic Fantastic.....	163
<i>Buffy the Vampire Slayer</i> : The Apocalyptic Domestic Fantastic	165
<i>Tomorrowland</i> : The Utopic Domestic Fantastic	167
Conclusion: Brave New (Domestic) Worlds	170
LIST OF REFERENCES.....	173
BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH.....	193

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This project studies how American writers after World War II adopted the tropes of science fiction, fantasy, and horror (which I broadly term as speculative fiction) in order to lay bare the warped nature of the postwar home and family. I focus on writers including but not limited to Ray Bradbury, Shirley Jackson, and Sylvia Plath, who marketed their works to homebound readerships and whose blending of the mundane and the strange resulted in an emergent genre that I call the *domestic fantastic*. For example, Bradbury, a foundational figure of American science fiction, not only published in *McCall's* but also opens *The Martian Chronicles* with the narrative of a depressed Martian housewife. Such intersections between the earthly and the otherworldly demonstrate the essentially domestic concerns of writers who are too-often excluded from the canon of postwar American literature. We can even find strains of the domestic fantastic in the work of canonical mainstays such as John Cheever and Sylvia Plath, in the visual culture of advertisements, and in the works of cultural commentators such as Betty Friedan and Benjamin Spock. By bringing outer space into the realm of inner space, authors from Bradbury to Plath challenge the reigning narrative that postwar domesticity was a site of normativity and cultural consensus.

CHAPTER 1 INTRODUCTION

While we might expect Ray Bradbury's tales of a glorious space age to take us into the uncharted territories of the future, he often brings us back down to earth, into familiar and domestic spaces. Indeed, Gary K. Wolfe characterizes Bradbury as a writer of "essentially Earthbound fictions," given that he focuses on the social impact of technology (37). For example, like many seminal texts of postwar science fiction, Bradbury's most famous work, *The Martian Chronicles* (1950) begins with a positive vision of technological power, lyrically celebrating how a rocket ship bound for Mars creates "summer with every breath of its mighty exhausts" ("Summer" 2). At this moment, Bradbury focuses neither on the mechanics of the exhausts nor on the ambitions of the rocket's passengers, but rather views this giant leap for mankind through a mundane lens. For him, the sublime wondrousness of the rocket stems from how it melts the wintry landscape of a small town that is adjacent to the launch, as children and housewives prepare themselves for a "rocket summer" (which is the title of the story that begins *The Martian Chronicles*; Bradbury, "Summer" 1). Just as he inflects interplanetary travel through the perspectives of earthbound citizens, Bradbury describes the inhabitants of the red planet in strangely familiar and familial terms, beginning with the unexpected figure of the lonely Martian housewife. Our first glimpse of Martians occurs in "Ylla," a story whose eponymous character spends her time cleaning "with handfuls of magnetic dust" and yearning for a life beyond the home (2). Ylla dreams of a handsome pilot arriving on Mars in a "silver craft, long and alien," hoping that he might whisk her away "back to his planet" (Bradbury, "Ylla" 5, 11). Her romantic fantasy turns out to be a telepathic prediction about the first Earthlings to visit

Mars, whom her husband murders in a jealous rage. The astronauts of the second expedition also collide with the Martian domestic, as the first alien they meet is a disgruntled Martian housewife who yells at them for tracking mud on her clean floor. Bradbury thus begins his most famous exploration of outer space by focusing on the violent dramas of inner space, firmly situating his work within the landscape of American postwar domesticity.

The Martian Chronicles illustrates a central question of this dissertation: why did Ray Bradbury and others turn to speculative fiction (a cluster of genres including science fiction, horror, the Gothic, and fantasy) as a means of examining the psychological and emotional interiority of the home and family? As a writer for popular magazines such as *McCall's* and *Collier's*, Bradbury was undoubtedly familiar with the concerns of a domestic audience which, in the years following World War II, was attempting to understand the nascent concept of "togetherness," a term coined by *McCall's* in 1954 to describe the ideal and unified nuclear family (Halberstam 591). While he lived during a time that Stephanie Coontz identifies as "a profamily period if there ever was one," this does not explain why Bradbury so frequently depicted the home in terms of the alien, the robotic, and the haunted, fantastic imagery that he brought to the pages of domestic magazines (24). In fact, he was only one of a larger group of authors who merged the tropes of speculative fiction with the spaces and concerns of mundane life, creating an emergent genre that I term the *domestic fantastic*. The domestic fantastic's characteristic embrace of speculative fiction encourages us to view supposedly familiar structures through alien eyes, transforming the spaces of everyday life into strange new worlds. Like Bradbury, Shirley Jackson, Ira

Levin, and even canonical mainstays such as Sylvia Plath and John Cheever represented the home in fantastic terms, thereby scrutinizing the dream image of the domestic that circulated throughout their contemporary popular culture. Specifically, they were responding to a fiction of domestic happiness, an ideological construct that in many ways did not speak to the everyday lives of Americans, particularly those individuals who were excluded from the domestic dream due to their racial identities or class status. By focusing on mutation and the alien other, writers of the domestic fantastic challenged the notion that the postwar era's dream image of domesticity was inclusionary and normative. Furthermore, their reworking of the everyday in terms of the fantastic indicates a need to bring the marginalized genres of speculative fiction back to the center of American postwar studies and rethink how genres are mapped during this period.

I focus on the domestic fantastic as it emerged in the years following World War II, given that scholars such as Deborah L. Nelson often cite the postwar era as the starting point for "ideologies of home and nation" that continue to structure the treatment of domesticity in American popular culture (11). These ideologies of domesticity as the terrain of white, middle-class economic fulfillment become most evident in the rhetorical spaces of postwar advertisements, a tendency that Marsha Bryant acknowledges when she describes how "fifties ads transformed domestic space into a dreamscape of daily miracles" (180). Likewise, Roland Marchand, in *Advertising the American Dream* (1985), claims that "ad creators . . . mirror popular fantasies" about what purportedly comprises the average home and family (xvii). Though Marchand focuses on advertising culture in the 1920s and 1930s, his claims hold true for postwar culture, as images of the ideal

kitchen, the tender infant, and the loving mother resulted in a distorted vision of domestic life. Karal Ann Marling's *As Seen on TV* (1994) recounts perhaps the most infamous instance of the intersection between mass-produced images and the rhetoric of postwar domesticity: the 1959 "Kitchen Debate" between Nikita Khrushchev (the Soviet Premier) and Richard Nixon (the Vice President of the United States; 243). Standing in "a \$250,000 RCA Whirlpool 'miracle' kitchen" at the American National Expedition in Moscow, Nixon argued that postwar American domesticity offered "freedom from drudgery," linking the home with anti-Communist political rhetoric (Marling 243). This interconnectedness between American domestic and national identity offers one explanation for why idealized representations of the home and family were so prevalent during the postwar era.

Postwar Studies: A Critical Review

I choose to use the term "postwar" as opposed to "Cold War" to describe the years after World War II because scholars who opt for the latter term tend to treat domesticity as a secondary concern compared to the political conflict between the United States and the Soviet Union that extended from the mid-1940s to the fall of the Berlin Wall (a conflict that arguably still exists). As Peter Filene has noted, referring to "Cold War culture" overshadows the fact that "most citizens [during this time] to a surprising degree defined their world in personal terms" rather than in relation to Communism, marking how domesticity is about more than containment (157). Moreover, I opt for the term "postwar" because its historical bagginess speaks to its continuing influence, as "our most powerful visions of traditional families derive from images that are still delivered to our homes in countless reruns of 1950s television sit-

coms” (Coontz 23).¹ As Coontz argues in *The Way We Never Were* (1992), we often view the postwar period through the distorted lens of nostalgia, forgetting that the so-called “traditional” family “was a qualitatively new phenomenon,” as the nuclear family broke with longstanding traditions of the extended family (25). Elaine Tyler May likewise charts in *Homeward Bound* (1988) how the postwar period “represented a disruption of long-term trends,” as “Americans married at a higher rate and at a younger age” and the United States experienced a “demographic explosion,” resulting in the development of new kinds of family homes centered around increasingly affordable appliances (6, 3). The novelty of familial structures, combined with the rise of home ownership, the expansion of the suburbs, the influx of personal appliances, and the baby boom, sparked the emergence of the domestic fantastic, as writers of this genre turned to speculative fiction in order to reflect on the relatively alien aspects of domesticity, explaining why Bradbury would envision the housewife as a Martian.

Prior to examining how the domestic fantastic transforms the home into something seemingly otherworldly, I would like to review how scholars to date have characterized the postwar period as one marked by geopolitical conflict and domestic constraint. Elaine Tyler May’s *Homeward Bound* remains a determining text in the study of postwar domesticity, as she explicitly links the political anxieties of the Cold War to the home. She argues that George Kennan’s anti-Communist foreign policy fueled what she calls “domestic containment,” as Americans sought family life and childrearing as a

¹ Daniel Marcus similarly observes that the imagined norms of the 1950s “maintain a hold on America’s fantasy life” (2).

means of attaining “security in an insecure world” (May 16, 1).² Her consideration of how new household technologies “were intended to foster traditional values” influences my own discussion of postwar appliance reliance, just as I draw on her extended discussion of the child as a symbol of “security as well as fulfillment (May 158, 134). Similarly to how *Homeward Bound* draws on the political logic of containment to characterize the cultural trends of the postwar era, Thomas Hill Schaub’s *American Fiction in the Cold War* (1991) argues that literary critics and writers reacted against the “liberal narrative” in order to express their feelings of “betrayal” with radical politics following the Soviet non-aggression pact with Germany in 1939 (viii, 4). Schaub positions Ralph Ellison, Flannery O’Connor, and Norman Mailer as key responders to the crisis of liberalism, determining their cultural value in relation to their assumed political positions.³ Alan Nadel’s *Containment Culture* (1995) joins Schaub in the process of postwar canon creation, as he suggests that anti-Communist policies shaped all dimensions of culture during the Cold War, influencing concerns “of sexual license, of gender roles, of nuclear energy, and of artistic expression” (5). Nadel goes so far as to read postwar literature and film exclusively through the lens of containment, such as when he interprets *The Catcher in the Rye* as an extension of the logic of McCarthyist Red-hunting or argues that Disney’s *Lady and the Tramp* deals with the sexual domestication of the male (71, 122). By seeing postmodernism as a reaction against “containment’s failure to reconcile and discipline the disparate narratives upon which it

² Kennan defines containment in “The Sources of Soviet Conduct” (1947) as the United States’ “adroit and vigilant application of counter-force” against “Russian expansive tendencies” and the spread of Communism (575).

³ *Invisible Man*, *A Good Man is Hard to Find*, and *Advertisements for Myself* also appear within David Castronovo’s study of postwar literature, *Beyond the Gray Flannel Suit* (2004), marking Schaub’s influence on canon formation.

relied for its authority,” he attempts to establish a canon of literature that stems from the political atmosphere of the postwar United States (53). While the containment model has its limits, Nadel’s extended analysis of pop cultural texts (such as *Pillow Talk*, the James Bond films, and *The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance*) speaks to my own interest in expanding the postwar literary canon to include speculative fictions that appealed to popular audiences.

While May, Schaub, and Nadel effectively founded the field of postwar studies, more recent scholarship reveals the shortcomings of this trio’s reliance on the concept of containment and also diverges from their tendency to focus on white, heterosexual, middle-class values. Joanne Meyerowitz, for example, focuses on women’s and gay rights periodicals such as *Independent Woman* and *ONE*, demonstrating that radical politics were still possible during a time of purported mass conformity.⁴ Likewise, in her edited collection *Not June Cleaver* (1994), Meyerowitz uses May’s scholarship as a jumping off point for a more in-depth discussion of the domestic sphere, calling attention to the fact that “most American women lived, in one way or more, outside the boundaries of the middle-class suburban home” and demonstrating that we should not assume the nuclear family to be the norm (“Introduction” 2). *Not June Cleaver* signals a turn toward greater considerations of race and class in the postwar era, evidenced by collections such as Steven Belletto and Daniel Grausam’s *American Literature and Culture in an Age of Cold War* (2012), which includes essays about America’s global influence during the Cold War, and John N. Duvall’s *The Cambridge Companion to American Fiction After 1945* (2012), which expands the postwar canon to include

⁴ For more on this subject see her essay “Sex, Gender, and the Cold War Language of Reform.”

regional and ethnic literary productions. Lizabeth Cohen's *A Consumer's Republic* (2003) in particular signals how postwar studies has shifted toward a consideration of how America's private concerns influenced the global landscape, as Cohen studies how the postwar period led to "a society committed to mass consumption and what we assumed to be its far-reaching benefits" (7). Thus, the field of postwar studies has left behind the containment model moving towards what Nancy Walker terms "a multivocal concept of the domestic world" that takes into consideration the perspectives of often marginalized groups and individuals who shaped American from 1945 until the present day (*Shaping*, viii). The domestic fantastic speaks to this emergent interest in multivocality, offering a new means of looking at postwar domesticity through the perspective of mutants, aliens, and technologically-enhanced alternative futures.

Even as the field of postwar studies acknowledges more diverse cultural perspectives, numerous scholars continue to treat speculative fiction as if it was a separate phenomenon from the more "literary" or "realist" canon of this period. David Seed's *American Science Fiction and the Cold War* (1999) suggests that the science fiction canon should follow in the footsteps of the containment school, as he presents SF in terms of "civil defense, foreign policy and internal security" (9). He accordingly privileges authors who write about warfare (Robert Heinlein), surveillance (Philip K. Dick and George Orwell), and conspiracy (*Invasion of the Body Snatchers*), though he does spend a chapter discussing domestic science fiction. Cindy Hendershot's *I Was a Cold War Monster* (2001) similarly reads postwar horror films as expressions of "fears of the Other, which most typically meant communist society" (4). Mark Jancovich's *Rational Fears* (1996) marks a departure from containment theory, as he observes that "horror

texts were at least as concerned with developments within American society as they were with threats from without" (2). Bernice M. Murphy's *The Suburban Gothic in American Popular Culture* (2009) in particular explores horror's concern with internal social developments. She suggests that horror texts reflected "anxieties arising from the mass suburbanization of the United States," as she focuses on the intersections of the "homely" and the "haunted," a binary that shapes my own understanding of the domestic fantastic (Murphy 2, 3).

Just as Murphy shifts the study of horror toward the sphere of suburbia and the home, Lisa Yaszek in *Galactic Suburbia* (2008) examines SF as a response to postwar domesticity. Building on the work of May, she considers how women writers of science fiction reacted against the spaces of the home, turning to the fantastic as a means of "critically assessing the nature of feminine work and identity in a technologically-intensive world" (Yaszek 8). While Yaszek's study is a valuable resource for recovering lost writers of SF and offers a starting point for thinking about the gendered implications of postwar speculative fiction, I expand on her research by demonstrating that male writers also contributed to radical examinations and redefinitions of domesticity. Along with Yaszek, Lynn Spigel is perhaps the most influential scholar of speculative fiction that I will consider in this project, as she demonstrates in *Welcome to the Dreamhouse* (2001) how the iconography of science fiction shaped the architecture of the home. More importantly, she describes the emergence of the "fantastic family sitcom," observing that shows such as *I Dream of Jeannie* and *The Jetsons* fused science fiction with "the discourses of the everyday, so that the norms of domesticity were made unfamiliar" (Spigel 108, 122). While Spigel primarily discusses the 1960s as a period of

science fictional suburbia, we can trace these tendencies to earlier cultural productions, as the fantastic family sitcom was not the first instance of the intersection of the domestic with the surreal and the supernatural. Such intersections begin with Ray Bradbury colliding with the logic of *McCall's*, and with the Gothic writings that emerged from the pages of postwar women's magazines.

Understanding the Fantastic: Some Definitions

In this project, I focus on the domestic fantastic, as this genre signals how American postwar homes and families were, in fact, unstable and *uncontained* institutions whose fragility and novelty were often evident in public discourse. More importantly, the domestic fantastic offers a new way of thinking about genre, as I hope to bridge the gap between postwar popular culture and literary study by demonstrating the wider influence of the aesthetic of speculative fiction. In order to help readers better understand what comprises the domestic fantastic, I want to provide some preliminary definitions of the genre of the fantastic, broadly construed, in addition to reviewing some of its component genres (i.e. fantasy, horror, and science fiction). Tzvetan Todorov's *The Fantastic* (1970) offers one of the most widely discussed definitions of this genre, claiming that the fantastic emerges from the "hesitation experienced by a person who knows only the laws of nature, confronting an apparently supernatural event" (25). Todorov does not concern himself with why authors examine the supernatural, but instead attempts through his structuralist analysis to delineate clear boundaries between the uncanny, the fantastic, and the marvelous. For Todorov, texts that offer a rational solution for the supernatural are "uncanny," texts which push for the acceptance of the supernatural are "marvelous," and the fantastic lies somewhere between these two genres, emerging at that moment when we "hesitate between a natural and a

supernatural explanation of the events described” (33). Essentially restating Todorov’s definition of the fantastic, Rosemary Jackson’s *Fantasy* (1981) also views the genre as a network of “contradictions” that exist “between the marvelous and the mimetic” (21, 35). Eric S. Rabkin in *The Fantastic in Literature* (1976) attempts to build on Todorov’s theory by suggesting that the fantastic emerges “not in relation to external norms,” but rather in relation to ground rules that are established within a narrative itself, allowing for a more expansive definition of the genre (118). However, Rabkin still does not explain why the fantastic occurs, other than for escapist purposes (10). Though they overlook the key social aspects of the fantastic, these early studies usefully situate the genre in opposition to the realistic, which is a broad definition to be sure, but one that is more valuable than treating the fantastic as if it was “a watertight generic compartment” or a “hermetically sealed” system (Scholes 54; Jancovich 10).

Just as scholars attempt to define what comprises the fantastic, they similarly disagree about the generic boundaries of “speculative fiction,” a term which I use interchangeably throughout this project to refer to the fantastic. Robert A. Heinlein is often credited with coining “speculative fiction” in 1947 as a means of referring to “works of science fiction that were more serious and sophisticated than the low-quality fiction that had typically appeared in the pulp magazines” (Booker, *Historical* 283). As he later clarified in a 1957 lecture series at the University of Chicago, Heinlein uses the term “speculative fiction” to praise a specific subgenre of science fiction in which an author necessarily builds on scientific knowledge as a basis for his or her vision of the future. He notes his own experience reading technical reports by physicists and articles in *Popular Mechanics* as a means of developing science fiction stories, effectively

suggesting that we should devalue those authors who do not focus on technoscientific concerns (Heinlein). Such a focus arguably contributed to the marginalization of women writers of postwar SF who focused on domestic concerns, resulting in what Yaszek refers to as “the masculinist assumptions of the early SF community” (27). Furthermore, Heinlein’s definition of speculative fiction separates science fiction from fantasy, as he suggests that there might be more value in literature that is “imaginary-but-possible” rather than “imaginary-and-not-possible” (Heinlein). His definition of speculative fiction as something defined by technological rigor speaks to how scholars of SF, struggling against “the generalization which says that all science fiction is rubbish,” often alienate other categories of the fantastic (Aldiss 15). In fact, Darko Suvin, the cofounder of the journal *Science Fiction Studies*, demonstrates the popularity of Heinlein’s kind of thinking, as he famously defined science fiction as “the literature of cognitive estrangement,” arguing that works in this field necessarily provide a rational and scientifically sound exploration of “future-bearing elements from the empirical environment” (372, 375). Yet, very few SF texts fit into Suvin’s narrow scope and he bases his definition upon a demonization of fantasy, claiming that authors who do not pursue cognitive estrangement are “committing creative suicide” (375).

While I understand the need for this kind of generic rigor in order to bring respectability to the often critically marginalized field of speculative fiction, such kinds of scholarly border policing suggest that we might not find value in texts oriented toward popular readerships. As M. Keith Booker notes in his *Historical Dictionary of Science Fiction in Literature* (2015), such separation between theoretically sound fiction and the popular “lives on in the distinction between the abbreviations ‘sf’ . . . and ‘sci-fi,’ which

typically indicates less serious works, either aesthetically or conceptually” (283). However, the adoption of the abbreviation SF among science fiction scholars, in eliminating mention of “sci,” also suggests how science fiction sometimes “is nearer fantasy” and can relate to the more general realm of speculative fiction (Aldiss 20). Stepping away from Heinlein’s definition of the term, I embrace Judith Merril’s definition of speculative fiction as something that speaks to “a broadening of generic boundaries to encompass not only traditional science fiction, but other nonrealist genres as well” (Booker, *Historical* 284). Merril’s more expansive approach to speculative fiction moves beyond the assumption that SF is a technoscientific and masculinist terrain, a change that scholars often associate with New Wave science fiction of the late 1960s and its interest in fiction that “is more character driven and concerned with the social and political ramifications of technological developments than with technologies themselves” (Booker, *Historical* 4). However, such kinds of fiction predate the 1960s, as it has always been difficult to distinguish between subgenres of the fantastic, given how science fiction often deals with matters of individual psychology (supposedly the realm of horror) and works of horror can reflect broader social concerns about invasion and otherness. The episodes from *The Martian Chronicles* with which I began this introduction indicate how the subgenres of the fantastic overlap, as Bradbury demonstrates the cross-pollination of technological dreams, lyrical fantasy, and the psychological dramas of horror. Likewise, as Brian Aldiss observes in *Trillion Year Spree* (1986), “science fiction springs” from the Gothic novel, specifically with Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein* in 1818, marking not only the ways in which the subgenres of

the fantastic will never be truly separate from one another but also how concerns about gender and domesticity have always shaped this field (25).⁵

Rather than attempting to delimit the boundaries of the fantastic in terms of its structural features, I want to consider this genre with regard to its social function. Specifically, works of the fantastic, with their visions of alternative futures and new modes of reality, allow us to metaphorically explore either “a world secretly yearned for” or “a disturbing element which threatens cultural order” (Rabkin 73; Jackson 4). The best works of the fantastic reveal underlying messages about the real world, structuring our understandings of “the normative” and offering “spaces in which to critically assess the here and now” (Rabkin 75; Yaszek 3). While scholars debate the limits of what we should label as “fantastic,” “Gothic,” and “science fiction,” they overwhelmingly agree that speculative fiction has “a great deal to say about the time in which it was written” (Murphy 17). Brian Aldiss, for example, says that “good SF does not necessarily traffic in reality; but it makes reality clearer to us” (14). With regard to the postwar era, the fantastic in some ways stemmed from the fact that “there was no ‘outside’ of technological modernity anymore,” as the dropping of the atomic bomb marked a shift toward the determining influence of technoculture both inside and outside of the home (Luckhurst 80). In the words of Isaac Asimov, “the dropping of the atomic bomb in 1945 made science fiction respectable” (qtd. in Seed, *American* 8). While technological changes in the postwar landscape undoubtedly influenced the domestic fantastic, writers of this genre also explored shifting attitudes in the sociological treatment of the family, producing what scholars of science fiction (sometimes belittlingly) refer to as

⁵ *Trillion Year Spree* builds on Aldiss's earlier history of science fiction, *Billion Year Spree* (1973).

“soft SF” (Attebery 5). I want to move behind the supposed opposition between “soft SF” and “hard SF” (the latter term referring to works that focus on technological and scientific change in the Heinlein and Suvin school of thought), as the domestic fantastic ruminates on the social consequences of technological change, marking the impossibility of separating these two categories of science fiction.

I plan to explore specific manifestations of the domestic fantastic throughout the sections that follow, but first want to list some features that structure this genre (although this list is by no means comprehensive). Bernice M. Murphy similarly establishes some features of the “suburban dream” in opposition to the “suburban nightmare” (for example, opposing “white picket fences” with “basements”), which I find to be a useful model when studying a subgenre of speculative fiction (3). While the visual culture of advertisements presents the home as an idealized space of togetherness, writers of the domestic fantastic often depict the home as a Gothic mansion or trap, a site where “togetherness” can give way to madness. By the same token, the personal appliances within the home, often depicted in postwar ads as friendly servants, in the domestic fantastic become agentive beings and eerie reminders of the potential for robotic replacement, often resulting in a technological nightmare. Finally, the supposed heart of the postwar household, the child, becomes in the domestic fantastic a monster, mutant, or murderer, reminding us of the instability that lies at the core of the nuclear family. The domestic fantastic reminds us that the home offers no guarantee of security and futurity, as it becomes a potential site for apocalypse.

While writers of the domestic fantastic provide us with terrifyingly warped visions of the postwar family, they just as frequently turn to speculative fiction as a tool for comic exaggeration. They not only offer us jeremiads but, like other writers of postwar domestic fiction, demonstrate through parody that their readers were often in on the joke, turning to the domestic fantastic because they “understood the 1950s [and postwar] family to be a new invention” (Coontz 26). Works of the domestic fantastic lay bare the novelty and instability and the postwar family not only through humor but also by embracing the narrative perspectives of individuals such as the alien or mutant. The domestic fantastic particularly embraces madness as a means of estranging us from normalcy, viewing the world through the eyes of the madman or madwoman and calling into question cultural definitions of sanity (often embodied within the figure of the psychiatrist). Likewise, the domestic fantastic often occurs within an apparent time warp, destabilizing the structures of the postwar era by presenting them as ghosts of the past or as relics that have no place within our future. The domestic fantastic thus marks how definitions of the home and family were still in flux during the postwar years, explaining why this genre blurs the boundaries between fantasy and reality and between humor and seriousness.

Chapter Abstracts

In Chapter 2, “‘Shrunk to the Cozy Walls of the Home’: American Women’s Gothic Visions of Domesticity,” I consider how the Gothic genre is foundational to the postwar domestic fantastic as it pertains to the interests of a homebound female readership. Given that this genre often features a woman’s “entrapment in a Gothic house,” it is especially well-suited to considering how domesticity was not simply a shining monument to “feminine fulfillment” but also a space of threatening constraints

(Kahane, "Maternal" 243; Friedan 18). I study how comediennes such as Shirley Jackson, Jean Kerr, and Erma Bombeck adopt the Gothic tropes of the haunted house and the madwoman in order to explore their discontentment with domestic chaos within the discourse of women's magazines. I then transition into considerations of more ominous fictions that reveal the potentially horrific side of domestic space. Gothic tales such as Shirley Jackson's "A Visit" (1952) and *The Haunting of Hill House* (1959) explore how magnetically appealing homes threaten to enclose women within their labyrinthine walls. However, women could not entirely step away from the domestic fantasy, leading to a "schizophrenic split" that Jackson and Sylvia Plath examine in *Hangsaman* (1951) and *The Bell Jar* (1963; Friedan 9). These novels, while Gothic in form, also have parodic tendencies, linking them back to the domestic comediennes who fused horror with comedy in order to offer succor to a community of women readers who might otherwise see the home as inescapable. They also signal Plath and Jackson's shared interests in how women might break out of confinement through both laughter and violence.

Chapter 3, "'Live Better Electrically': Embodied Appliances, Homes of Tomorrow, and the Dream of Science-Fictional Housework," considers how the postwar home was not only a potentially Gothic space but also a site of technological enchantment in which appliances promised to liberate the housewife and free up family time. Lisa Yaszek notes the influx of appliances after 1960, at which time "10.5 percent of all modern homes had food waste disposals, 58.3 percent had automatic coffeemakers, and 56 percent had electric mixers" (11). I view General Electric's "Live Better Electrically" campaign as a representative fantasy of this kind of technocultural change, as the jingle

celebrates a world where “It’s as easy as can be, / When you live better electrically.”

This celebratory advertisement is not alone in envisioning the home “as a technologically enhanced living space,” as both Shirley Jackson and Ray Bradbury represent the figure of the embodied appliance in “Family Magician” (1949) and “I Sing the Body Electric” (1969; Spigel 383). However, both Jackson and Bradbury hint at the fact that technoculture may lead to troubling forms of dependency, as the appliance could potentially replace the housewife, rendering her obsolete. Ira Levin’s *The Stepford Wives* (1972), which infamously features a Connecticut suburb where husbands replace their wives with robotic doppelgangers, directly speaks to these gendered anxieties about technological replacements in appliance culture. Pamela Zoline’s “The Heat Death of the Universe” (1967) and Ray Bradbury’s “There Will Come Soft Rains” (1950) likewise suggest that the replacement of the human housewife with personal appliances ultimately culminates in apocalyptic doom, both on a personal and a global scale.

Chapter 4, “Televised and Transported: Domestic Technologies and the Mechanization of Masculinity,” explores the ramifications of appliance culture as it impinged on the suburban masculine mystique. I begin with Ray Bradbury’s “The Murderer” (1953), in which a madman explains his desire to rid society of the distracting noise of machines. John Cheever similarly explores the relationship between the noise of entertainment technologies and male fragmentation in “The Enormous Radio” (1947), which features a radio that amplifies the husband’s feelings of economic and personal failure. Likewise, in *Fahrenheit 451* (1953), Guy Montag envisions the technohome as a deadening shell that not only hastens domestic fragmentation but also stifles his awareness of the beauties of the natural world, which he reconnects with by traveling on

the road. However, Richard Matheson, Ray Bradbury, and John Cheever suggest that the open road, the rocket, and the commuter train do not necessarily provide men with electronic escapes into independence. Their stories of immobilized passengers, “astro-nots,” and conquered commuters all speak to the potentially imprisoning effects of technoculture, particularly with respect to those individuals who did not fit neatly into the postwar middle class. In the domestic fantastic, even the automobile, a purported icon of masculine independence, becomes a traumatic reminder of the limitations of consumer technoculture, such as in rarely discussed Kurt Vonnegut novel *Breakfast of Champions, or Goodbye Blue Monday* (1973). For the psychotic protagonist of Vonnegut’s novel, Dwayne Hoover, his role as a Pontiac dealer fits into an absurdist mechanical logic of the universe, as he believes that all people around him are robots, marking a sinister drive toward depersonalization and conformity.

In Chapter 5, “Murderous, Monstrous, and Mutated Children in the Time of Dr. Benjamin Spock and the Child-Centered Family,” I consider how the domestic fantastic warps the figure of the child, who was supposed to provide a stable core for the nuclear family in the midst of technoscientific change. While docile and obedient children dominated postwar advertising during the baby boom, Julia Grant in *Raising Baby By the Book* (1998) notes that mothers living in the age of Dr. Benjamin Spock refused to view children as idealized angels, instead acknowledging that they “have never been easy to manage, define, or systematize” (3). Even Spock, though elevating child-rearing to new levels of expertise with *The Common Sense Book of Baby and Child Care* (1946), warned that children could be potentially aggressive, taking out “violent feelings in play form” (310). Bradbury explores the apocalyptic ramifications of child’s play in

“The Veldt” (1950) and “Zero Hour” (1947), stories that both culminate in murders at the hands of children who ally with alien influences. Shirley Jackson, in her lightly fictionalized domestic memoirs, *Raising Demons* (1957) and *Life Among the Savages* (1952), similarly observes how children seem more interested in fantasy than reality, demonstrating that the strange child is not simply an apocalyptic construct of science fiction but a creature that haunts postwar daily life. Ray Bradbury and Flannery O’Connor explore the dark willfulness of the child that Jackson only hints at, suggesting that infants might tear the family apart through bodily mutation or through murder (with mothers as their favorite victims). Depicting the next generation as harbingers of doom, Bradbury and O’Connor mark how threats could stem not only from the outside world but also from within the home itself.

Because I see no clear historical endpoint for the discursive formations of domesticity that originated after World War II, I conclude this project with a coda in which I consider manifestations of the domestic fantastic in contemporary television and film. Building on the work of scholars such as Lynn Spigel, Peter Biskind, and others who study screened speculative fiction of the 1950s and 1960s, I demonstrate how the genre of the domestic fantastic continues to shape our popular culture. Films such as *Pleasantville* (1998), which parody postwar sitcoms, demonstrate how the domestic fantastic speaks back to the icons of the home and family that continue to circulate in our homes. I also explore manifestations of the modern Gothic (*American Horror Story*), appliance reliance (*Ex Machina*), and creepy children (*Poltergeist* and *Looper*), as these essential tropes continue to shape the domestic fantastic. Finally, I consider how *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* represents alternative families flourishing within the realm of the

apocalyptic fantastic. The recent film *Tomorrowland* (2015) also offers a new vision of a utopian community, but suggests that we might not entirely break away from a feeling of nostalgia for the postwar era. Ultimately, the domestic fantastic not only reflects on the structures of the home and family that emerged during the postwar era, but potentially offers us brave new worlds in which we might radically redefine domesticity in egalitarian and utopian terms, even as we cling to the memory of days gone by.

CHAPTER 2
"SHRUNK TO THE COZY WALLS OF THE HOME": AMERICAN WOMEN'S GOTHIC
VISIONS OF DOMESTICITY

From its inception in 1764 with Horace Walpole's *The Castle of Otranto*, the Gothic has been an innately domestic genre that deals with issues of familial fragmentation, often symbolized by an aging home that is "a site of secrets" (Punter and Byron 261).¹ As Irving Malin has noted, "the family is crucial in new American Gothic," as Edgar Allan Poe's "The Fall of the House of Usher" (1839), Henry James's *The Turn of the Screw* (1898), and others have presented the crumbling house as an icon of domestic insecurity (8). In *Love and Death in the American Novel* (1960), Leslie Fiedler even claims that the Gothic lies at the heart of American literature, beginning with the works of Charles Brockden Brown.² While male writers undoubtedly contributed to the genre, the foremothers of the late eighteenth through early twentieth centuries laid the groundwork for postwar women authors to continue the American Gothic tradition. Ellen Moers was the first to establish this lineage in *Literary Women* (1976), in which she broadly defines the female Gothic as "the work that women writers have done in the literary mode" and lays out a chronology that begins with Ann Radcliffe, includes writers such as Mary Shelley and Emily Brontë, and ends with Sylvia Plath (90).³ While Moers

¹ Jerrold E. Hogle notes in his introduction to *The Cambridge Companion to Gothic Fiction* (2002) that *The Castle of Otranto* was "the first published work to call itself 'A Gothic Story,'" and other scholars agree that this was the origin of the genre (1). For further reading on the development of the Gothic, see William Patrick Day's *In the Circles of Fear and Desire* (1985), Fred Botting's *Gothic* (1996), David Punter and Glennis Byron's *The Gothic* (2004), and Catherine Spooner and Emma McEvoy's *The Routledge Companion to Gothic* (2007).

² For more reading on the relevance of the Gothic to American literature, see Robert K. Martin and Eric Savoy's *American Gothic* (1998).

³ For additional studies of female Gothic writers, see Juliann E. Fleenor's *The Female Gothic* (1983), Diana Wallace and Andrew Smith's *The Female Gothic: New Directions* (2009), or Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar's *The Madwoman in the Attic* (1979).

provides a broad lineage of the Gothic, I would like to expand on her chronology by considering how this genre is foundational to the postwar domestic fantastic as it pertains to the interests of a homebound female readership that identifies the home as a potential site of madness and misery (as opposed to sanity and happiness). I build on the work of feminist scholars such as Modleski, Hoeveler, Ellis, and Russ, who claim that the Gothic emphasizes “to women the importance of coping with enforced confinement and the paranoid fears it generates” (Modleski 20).⁴ For women reading Gothic tales at home, this genre not only provides an imaginative escape from drudgery but also reveals the costs of a life entirely dedicated to the pursuits of housewifery and childrearing.

Betty Friedan recognizes the significance of Gothic tropes to postwar domestic life when she describes women as “trapped,” “confined,” and “shrunk to the cozy walls of the home” (24, 43, 44). While Friedan claims that the popular media maintained an unflaggingly positive image of domestic bliss after World War II, she overlooks that Gothic novels frequently circulated within drugstores and supermarkets and that women’s magazines printed fiction of this genre alongside articles about housework and marital maintenance. For example, *Ladies’ Home Journal* and *Good Housekeeping* published multiple stories by popular authors of suspense, such as Daphne du Maurier. Likewise, Shirley Jackson, Jean Kerr, and Erma Bombeck combined their mundane comedy writings with the imagery of horror, suggesting that in some contexts, “female humor – or the giggle – has replaced the Gothic scream” (Fleenor 17). Jennifer

⁴ For further reading on the symbolic importance of the Gothic form for women readers, see Tania Modleski’s *Loving With a Vengeance* (1982), Joanna Russ’s “Somebody’s Trying to Kill Me and I Think It’s My Husband: The Modern Gothic” (1973), Diane Long Hoeveler’s *Gothic Feminism* (1998) and Kate Ferguson Ellis’s *The Contested Castle* (1989).

Diamond suggests that these writers, by fusing “domestic comedy and female gothic,” share an interest in “women’s worlds as marked by chaos and disorder” (18). Though Friedan takes domestic comediennes to task for supposedly making light of women’s problems, the popularity of humor writers in women’s magazines indicates that their Gothically-tinged reflections allowed readers to explore “their discontent in ways that elicit sympathy and laughing commiseration,” indicating the centrality of parody to the domestic fantastic (see Friedan 57; Fritzer and Bland 3)

Postwar Comediennes: Mediating Gothic Domesticity With Laughter

Because these comediennes are frequently excluded from discussions of the Gothic, I would briefly like to consider how Jackson’s monstrously-titled family chronicles, Jean Kerr’s *Please Don’t Eat the Daisies* (1957), and Erma Bombeck’s *The Grass Is Always Greener Over the Septic Tank* (1976) parody the dark consequences of postwar domesticity. In the beginning pages of *Raising Demons* (1957), Jackson describes the home’s magnetic pull, claiming that she was in “the grip of something stronger than I was,” a kind of inexorable force that overwhelms her (538). The Gothic presence of the home is even more evident in *Life Among the Savages* (1953), which ends with a handbill (written by her husband, Stanley Edgar Hyman) describing their home as “a meeting-place, or nest, for demonic spirits” (529). Though Jackson includes this handbill as an illustration of a familial inside joke, it remains difficult to ignore how the language of horror signals her domestic frustrations (especially when we consider that so many of her other works, which I will discuss later in this section, deal with the theme of entrapment in the home). She even sarcastically notes, “I cannot think of a preferable way of life, except one without children,” and she additionally describes her life of one of “back-breaking labor” (Jackson, *Savages* 386, 397). While she does not

outwardly condone the abandonment of domestic life and at other times seems perfectly satisfied with her home and family, in such moments of complaint she seeks to elicit a dry chuckle from readers who similarly worry about losing their free will to housework and maternal responsibility.

Just as Jackson describes the home as haunted in order to convey her sense of domestic frustration, Kerr and Bombeck describe their homes as apparently willful spaces that refuse the order that their inhabitants want to impose. For example, Kerr notes how she and her family choose to live in a Gothically-styled house that resembles “a huge brick castle” (76). However, what makes this house terrifying is not its old-world architecture and its hall-of-mirrors-style dining room but the fact that it becomes a site of endless renovation and decoration. Kerr describes the decorating housewife in terms of Gothic madness, noting how a “woman of unusually strong character” can be brought to her knees, sitting “adrift in a sea of samples” in a fabric store (Kerr 54). Bombeck’s home is in a similar state of disrepair, as she catalogues how, though it is part of a new suburban development, it is filled with malfunctioning appliances and amenities. She complains:

Well, every time I push down the toaster, the garage door goes up. The hot-water heater is hooked up to the garden hose and I am sautéing the lawn. The sliding glass doors don’t slide. The wall heats up when I turn on the porch light. The hall toilet does not accept tissue. Half of our driveway is on our neighbor’s property, the grapes on the kitchen wallpaper are growing upside down, and I have a sign on our front door reading, ‘OUT OF ORDER! PLEASE USE HOUSE NEXT DOOR.’ (Bombeck 28-29)

While Kerr and Bombeck wallow in their frustrations with domestic breakdown, they both speak to the broken promises of a postwar mass culture that elevated the home as perfect and complete. Bombeck’s metaphor of the suburban septic tank is especially

relevant here, as she describes the basis of postwar domesticity as a fetid mixture of waste rather than the solid foundation that she and other women expected to find.

The fact that these comediennes so frequently characterize everyday chaos in terms of haunted houses and madwomen indicates how domestic critiques naturally extend from the Gothic genre. For Shirley Jackson, the Gothic shapes not only her magazine comedy but also her fiction, in which she addresses how young women on the cusp of adulthood approach their presumed futures as homemakers.⁵ In “A Visit” (1952) and *The Haunting of Hill House* (1959), Jackson demonstrates how the home can become a labyrinthine space that is simultaneously magnetic and menacing for her naïve protagonists. These conflicting impulses lead to Jackson and Plath’s mutual interest in personality division as a means of exploring alternate domestic futures, a topic that they explore in their novels of adolescent breakdown, *Hangsaman* (1951) and *The Bell Jar* (1963).⁶ The ironic and parodic tendencies of these novels link Jackson and Plath to the postwar domestic comedy of Jean Kerr and Erma Bombeck. Furthermore, the similarities between the novels potentially stem from Plath’s knowledge of Jackson’s writing, as evidenced by her desire to interview the older author when she was working as a guest editor for *Mademoiselle* in the summer of 1953 (a meeting which unfortunately never occurred; Plath, *Letters* 114).⁷ Through their

⁵ This is not to say that Jackson does not also consider how Gothic domesticities affect older women, which is a topic I will discuss in more detail in Chapter 5.

⁶ The theme of divided personality and mental fragmentation is evident throughout Jackson’s oeuvre, most notably in *The Bird’s Nest* (1954) and in her collected short fiction. However, I will not be exploring these works here because many of them attribute insanity to an urban setting rather than to a sense of domestic conflict.

⁷ Their paths nearly crossed two years prior to this when Jackson interviewed for a job at Smith College. However, Darryl Hattenhauer claims that “she passed out during the interview and declined the position” (21).

investigations of how the shadowy specter of domesticity affects young American women, Jackson and Plath reflect on their own lives before they chose to become wives and mothers. Scholars depict both authors as irreparably torn apart by their domestic roles, even going so far as to diagnose them with psychological illnesses such as multiple personality disorder and schizophrenia (see Oppenheimer 163; Butscher 29, 67).⁸ Rather than following this pathologizing tendency, I am more interested in how both Shirley Jackson and Sylvia Plath turn to the Gothic as a means of recognizing the shared experiences of women readers who were struggling to adapt to new forms of postwar domesticity that required an intensified focus on supposedly “traditional” female roles.

“A Visit”: The Lovely House As Labyrinth

In her short story “A Visit” (first published as “The Lovely House”), Shirley Jackson establishes how the postwar fantasy of the beautiful home conceals the horrors of domestic entrapment. The protagonist of this story, a young woman named Margaret (with no last name), is a quintessential Gothic ingénue, innocently visiting the familial mansion of her friend, Carla Rhodes, for their vacation from school. Margaret is immediately fascinated with both the opulence of the home and the elaborate tapestries woven by the previous generations of Rhodes women. While she finds herself drawn to the home, Margaret realizes too late that it might be a cyclical trap that will keep her motionless, embroidered into the tapestries on the walls. The Rhodes house thus embodies a “collapse of time and space,” producing the time warp that is central to the

⁸ For more speculation on Plath’s potential mental illness, see Lisa Firestone and Joyce Catlett’s “The Treatment of Sylvia Plath” (1998) and Gordon Claridge, Ruth Pryor and Gwen Watkins’s *Sounds From the Bell Jar* (1990).

aesthetic of the domestic fantastic, as this genre often embraces time travel as a means of estranging us from the social constructs of the present (Day 28). "A Visit," like many of Jackson's works, does not feel contemporary with her era, but hearkens back to an older period in terms of its setting and characters. While Gothic fiction conventionally focuses on an "antiquated or seemingly antiquated space," Jackson's decision to place Margaret into an aging house also calls to mind that the socially encouraged role for women during the postwar years revived the Victorian elevation of the "sexless saintly wife" (Hogle 2; Miller and Nowak 157). As Stephanie Coontz has pointed out, the popular image of domestic life during the 1950s radically reversed "the trends characterizing the rest of the twentieth century," which is a shift that Jackson represents in Gothic terms (25).

Margaret's initial attraction to the old-world style of the Rhodes home emphasizes how many women during the postwar era bought into a mass-cultural romanticization of domestic space, making them feel partially complicit in their own entrapment. Her first impression of her friend's home is that it is "as lovely a thing as she had ever seen," a "precious" place that speaks to her desire for a genteel lifestyle (Jackson, "Visit" 627). Like any good women's magazine reader and future housewife, Margaret aspires to domestic perfection, finding in her friend's home an ideal model for interior decorating that would put the editors of *Good Housekeeping* to shame. The women of Carla's family have arranged the house into perfectly composed rooms ranging from one that is "all gold" to one that contains an infinitely regressing set of mirrors (Jackson, "Visit" 629). The hall of mirrors encapsulates the issue of identification with domestic space that lies at the heart of this story. Despite the fact that Margaret

recognizes how “everything grew smaller . . . diminishing and reflecting” within this room, she finds it charming because it allows her to imagine how she might fit into this ideal world (Jackson, “Visit” 629).

Likewise, she blindly embraces the home because it not only provides her with the aesthetic pleasures of domestic maintenance but also offers a sense of upward class mobility. Specifically, in her flirtation with Paul Rhodes (whom she believes to be Carla’s brother and the future heir to the estate), Margaret toys with a fantasy of matrimonial harmony that would enable her to become the mistress of the manor. Paul encourages Margaret’s domestic dreams, as the two repeatedly play house throughout the story. For example, looking “at the pure reflection of the house” in a lake, they imagine which room would belong to Margaret (Jackson, “Visit” 634). Yet, as Carla points out, their game is bound up with death and their domestic mirror is warped, as they would “be drowned” if they attempted to live in an underwater home (Jackson, “Visit” 635). It seems that Paul wants to drive Margaret toward a sinister fate, containing her within the home rather than acknowledging that she must eventually leave.⁹ Indeed, the Gothic shadow of a stone tower hangs over the Rhodes house, visually linking it with the iconography of claustrophobia and entrapment. When Margaret visits this tower, its aging inhabitant, also named Margaret, attempts to remove the scales from her eyes, telling the young woman that Paul is a ghostly lover who is attempting to relive history. Although it remains unclear at this point whether or not Paul is a supernatural presence, he does maintain a sinister commitment to domestic stasis: he insists that the

⁹ Jackson more thoroughly explores the issue of domestic imprisonment in her posthumously published story, “The Good Wife,” in which Mr. Benjamin keeps his wife locked in their bedroom.

house “does not change,” and therefore that Margaret cannot leave (Jackson, “Visit” 648).

Jackson suggests that Gothic entrapment does not only stem from the traditional male villain, but that women, by establishing an elaborate aesthetic fantasy of domestic space, become complicit in ensnaring the ingénue. Specifically, Mrs. Rhodes, like the previous mistresses of the manor, constantly weaves tapestries representing the home, thereby maintaining its frozen and idealized image. Though Margaret initially admires the beautiful tapestries, they begin to frighten her as she realizes that she herself is being inscribed into these aesthetic artefacts. Like Oedipa Maas of *The Crying of Lot 49* (1965), Margaret fears that she will not be able to escape these tapestries, which imprison her image in a facsimile of reality.¹⁰ Darryl Hattenhauer interprets the tapestries of “A Visit” as predicting “postmodernism’s concern with representing representation,” yet they also convey Jackson’s fascination with how women can experience domesticity as a miniaturization of the world around them (55). For Mrs. Rhodes, no world exists beyond the home, which she has so internalized that she is able to weave images of it from memory, “without a pattern or a plan” (Jackson, “Visit” 635). Moreover, she passes down this domestic model to both her daughter and Margaret, who become, in Carla’s words, “models of stillness” (Jackson, “Visit” 650). In the world of “A Visit,” it seems that the cycle of entrapment may be inescapable, as the story concludes with Mrs. Rhodes embroidering the two girls into her tapestry.

¹⁰ The Remedios Varo painting *Bordando el Manto Terrestre* is a central image of Thomas Pynchon’s *The Crying of Lot 49*. This painting, as the narrator describes it, features a group of girls, “prisoners in the top room of a circular tower, embroidering a kind of tapestry” that self-reflexively contains “the world” (Pynchon 11). This painting brings the novel’s protagonist, Oedipa Maas, to tears as she feels that “the tower is everywhere” (Pynchon 12).

However, Jackson also emphasizes that the Rhodes home is beginning to fall apart, much like Poe's house of Usher, suggesting that the boundaries of domestic enclosure will not hold. Though Mrs. Rhodes hysterically attempts to maintain a perfect home, her son (whom Margaret refers to as the captain) points out that one of their tapestries has a "tear" and catalogues the numerous other elements of the home that are becoming "shabby" (Jackson, "Visit" 647). Margaret not only begins to recognize these signs of decay (e.g. chipping tiles and worn carpet) but also realizes that Paul, an apparition visible only to her, has blinded her to the limitations of the home. It becomes clear to her that all of the idealized and romantic beauty of the Rhodes manor is a relic of the past, drawing attention to the unsustainability of this domestic space. Furthermore, the revelation that this home and its imprisoning tower are "ruined" suggests that some mode of escape might eventually be possible (Jackson, "Visit" 649). Although "A Visit" ends with an image of enclosure, the visible fragmentation of the Rhodes house clarifies Jackson's interest in revealing the cracks in the foundation of the postwar domestic fantasy.

The Haunting of Hill House: The Cost of Romanticizing Domesticity

While "A Visit" reveals the nightmarish potential of the dream house, Shirley Jackson's most well-known Gothic novel, *The Haunting of Hill House*, demonstrates how remaining blindly committed to the romanticization of domestic space can lead to madness. The true horror in this novel does not lie within the eponymous Hill House, but within the twisted mind of Eleanor Vance, a thirty-two-year-old woman who is desperate for domesticity because her family has relegated her to a servile role. Eleanor will do anything to find a place that she can call home, even going so far as to join a team of paranormal researchers about whom she knows virtually nothing. Because of her

supposed predisposition to supernatural energies, she agrees to live in Hill House for three months with Dr. John Montague (a paranormal anthropologist), Theodora (a psychic), and Luke Sanderson (the nephew of the house's owner), a trio that forms a kind of alternative family. Although the group experiences some minor strange events (such as doors shutting of their own volition and writing appearing on the walls), Eleanor is the only one whom Hill House drives to madness and eventual death. The central question of the novel is why Eleanor is so willing to give into the toxic energies of the home. The novel suggests that Eleanor's fate might be connected to her telekinetic powers or to her sensitivity to potential poltergeists, yet Theodora is psychic and does not suffer in the same ways. Jackson never clarifies whether Eleanor is under the influence of ghosts or whether she is a madwoman who has become unhinged after a life of enclosure. Whether or not Eleanor experiences supernatural forces ultimately does not matter, as her deep-seated psychological problems stem from her unwillingness to devote herself to any life except for one that is locked within the home. *The Haunting of Hill House* is not a ghost story so much as it is a meditation on the poisonous influence of the postwar fantasy of the perfect home, a fantasy that forges "chains in" Eleanor's "own mind and spirit" (Friedan 31).¹¹

Jackson's abiding interest in the costs of domestic enclosure become clear prior to Eleanor's entry into Hill House, as she introduces the protagonist in terms of her sheltered life, marking her as already bound by the home. Eleanor appears as a solitary woman primarily characterized by both her hatred for a now-deceased invalid mother and her resemblance to a cave-dwelling creature who has "an inability to face strong

¹¹ Andrew Smith briefly notes the thematic connection between *The Haunting of Hill House* and *The Feminine Mystique* in "Hauntings," but he does not elaborate on a Friedanian interpretation of the novel.

sunlight without blinking” (Jackson, *Haunting* 245). Having spent the majority of her adult life as a domestic caretaker and shut-in, she has never emerged from her enclosure and lacks any clear sense of self-determination. Similarly to the postwar housewives that Friedan describes in *The Feminine Mystique*, Eleanor “evades her own growth by clinging to the childlike protection” that the home offers her and suffers from arrested development (290). The home is the only world that Eleanor knows, having been constrained by both her mother and, upon her death, her sister, Carrie, to a caretaker position rather than the status of a family member. As Judie Newman notes, Eleanor is so “mother-dominated” that the only alternative reality she can imagine is another domestic space in which she might have a modicum of control (123). Although Eleanor’s sudden departure from her sister’s house for Hill House is a minor act of rebellion (given that she takes the car without permission), Jackson makes clear that she will always remain in “a little contained world” (Jackson, *Haunting* 251).

Eleanor has no interest in breaking out of sheltered domesticity, but dreams about unattainable fairy-tale scenarios in which she believes she will find fulfillment through the solitary possession of domestic space. For example, while driving to Hill House, she fantasizes about finding “a fairyland, protected poisonously from the eyes of people passing” where she, as the princess, “shall live happily ever after,” a scene straight from the pages of “Sleeping Beauty” (Jackson, *Haunting* 255). Similarly, she imagines herself living in a sheltered “cottage buried in a garden” where she will become a kind of benevolent witch who brews “love potions for sad maidens” (Jackson, *Haunting* 257). Although Eleanor’s fantasies appear to be harmless, they mark her regression into “a rich fantasy life” that reaches its most severe point within the walls of

Hill House itself (Nash 177). Just as in “A Visit,” domestic fantasies in this novel become pernicious, as they blind the protagonist to the realities of the world around her about which she remains profoundly ignorant because she opts to live in a “childhood world” (Hattenhauer 157). However, unlike Margaret, who moves from fantasy toward recognizing the suffocating nature of domestic space, Eleanor purposefully ignores her initial impression of Hill House as “vile” and buries her impulse to “get away” (Jackson, *Haunting* 264). Instead, she succumbs to the language of fantasy, finding comfort in the creepy house because it offers her the possibility of excitement and maybe even romance with some “devilishly handsome smuggler” (Jackson, *Haunting* 264). By seeing the house only for its escapist potential and refusing to recognize its more sinister elements, Eleanor dangerously misreads its Gothic possibilities. In turn, the narrative asks us to distance ourselves from this naïve individual who is unable to identify the warning signs embodied within Hill House’s darkly fantastic elements.

The distancing of the narrator from Eleanor’s perspective becomes evident in those moments when Jackson emphasizes the troubled architecture of Hill House itself. Such negative depictions of the home diverge from Eleanor’s praise for Hill House, which she views as comfortable in comparison with her mother’s “dark and narrow” house that was devoid of “any taste or color” (Jackson, *Haunting* 320). Yet, as the narrator reminds us, in an identical passage that begins and closes the novel, “Hill House, not sane, stood by itself against its hills, holding darkness within . . . and whatever walked there, walked alone” (Jackson, *Haunting* 243). To any observer except for Eleanor, this house provides the very opposite of domestic security, as it warps containment to such an extent that it threatens to drive away any new visitors. Part of

the danger of Hill House derives from the fact that it is, to borrow Alexis Shotwell's term, "architecturally queered," as its angles are all "slightly wrong," making the entire home appear to be "a little bit off center" (134; Jackson, *Haunting* 316).¹² Furthermore, the house has a labyrinthine structure, as Dr. Montague explains that it is laid out in "concentric circles," a floor plan that, combined with the off-kilter angles, makes the house almost impossible to navigate (Jackson, *Haunting* 312). The fact that Eleanor can still find this house to be "comfortable, comforting, and domestic" indicates that her perception is warped from the beginning of the novel, as she remains unwilling to acknowledge the shortcomings of domestic space in favor of maintaining her fantasy life (Egan 21).

Furthermore, as with any literary Gothic manor or castle, the architectural strangeness of Hill House marks the fragmentation of the family that lives within it. Though Eleanor remains invested in the notion that she might find "surrogate familial relationships" in this place, the narrative again points out the faultiness of her desire for conventional structures of domesticity (Egan 20). As Tricia Lootens has noted, the history of Hill House is full of "nuclear families that kill where they are supposed to nurture" (151). Specifically, Hugh Crain, who built the home for his wife and two daughters, sinisterly mirrors the patriarchal logic of *Father Knows Best*, as the group becomes aware of not only his strange architectural choices but also his sadistic control over his family.¹³ This becomes most evident when Luke locates an instructional book

¹² Unusual architecture is a prominent feature in Jackson's other Gothic novels, especially *The Sundial* (1958).

¹³ In "New World Miniatures: Shirley Jackson's *The Sundial* and Postwar American Society," Rich Pascal observes how Jackson similarly satires the patriarchal logic of the postwar father-ruled family in her portrayal of the Halloran household.

entitled “MEMORIES, for SOPHIA ANNE LESTER CRAIN; A Legacy for Her Education and Enlightenment During Her Lifetime From Her Affectionate and Devoted Father, HUGH DESMOND LESTER CRAIN,” in which the father recorded advice for his daughter (Jackson, *Haunting* 361). This book is not a tender testimony to a father’s love so much as a violent, fire-and-brimstone, warning to his daughter to maintain her chastity and to respect his authority, rules that he enforces by signing the document with his own blood. Crain’s text is a kind of domestic Necronomicon that threatens to resurrect the vengeful force of the father against transgressive women within the home. Indeed, Hugh Crain’s history is marked by the cyclical (though often accidental) destruction of women, beginning with the death of the first Mrs. Crain (who died on her way to the house) and ending with his daughters’ bitter battle over the mansion’s ownership. Even in the face of overwhelming evidence that domesticity leads to fragmentation and death, Eleanor notably remains committed to her pursuit of the nuclear family, as not even Hugh Crain can shatter the power of her fantasies.

The full extent of Eleanor’s desperation becomes evident when she attempts to establish an ersatz family with her fellow paranormal researchers in Hill House despite the fact that they, like Hugh Crain, fail to provide suitable targets for domestic affections. She briefly entertains a romantic interest in Luke Sanderson, but he fails to live up to her fantasy as she recognizes that he is “extremely vain” and “simply not very interesting” (Jackson, *Haunting* 359, 360). Her relationship with Theodora (also known as Theo) is arguably more important than her brief pursuit of matrimonial harmony, as the other girl offers her an alternative to a world determined by the patriarchal family. Theo, unlike Eleanor, seems to be self-sufficient, as she shares an apartment with a

lover and is also marked by “her deliberate repudiation of a patronymic” (Bailey 39). Eleanor envies her companion’s independent lifestyle and imagines what life would be like if she had her own urban apartment, or even if they shared a space. Theo too fails to provide a comforting home for Eleanor, as she rejects the other girl’s desire to live together, confirming for Eleanor her feeling that “I’ve never been wanted *anywhere*” (Jackson, *Haunting* 390). In Eleanor’s case, companionship is the key, as she is unprepared to live in a world in which she cannot exercise her caretaking abilities, which are arguably her only skills. Her inability to deal with rejection clarifies how her domestically-determined life has made her incapable of (or unwilling to work toward) imagining a future in which she does not care for others.

Hill House itself appears to be the only figure in the novel that offers a clear sense of togetherness to Eleanor, a desire to which she quickly acquiesces even though she does not understand the dark forces that lie behind the home. Multiple messages reading “HELP ELEANOR COME HOME” appear on the wall of the house, once in chalk and once in what appears to be blood (a possible apparition by Hugh Crain). Yet, rather than fleeing from the threat of the home’s ghostly influences, Eleanor increasingly begins to identify with the domestic space, going so far as to align Hill House and its hauntings with her dead mother. While this identification in some ways springs from her unresolved feelings of guilt over her mother’s death, her fusion of Hill House with maternal energy also signals how she refuses to divorce herself from a feminine role that is linked to the home.¹⁴ Within the walls of Hill House, Eleanor is at once a child and a mother, as she not only engages with “the spectral presence of a

¹⁴ Specifically, Eleanor blames herself for her mother’s death because she did not wake up when she was supposed to bring up her medicine as she “always did before” (Jackson, *Haunting* 392).

dead-undead mother” but also seeks to comfort a ghostly child who is “crying somewhere” in the house (Kahane, “Gothic” 336; Jackson, *Haunting* 357). Though the home offers Eleanor a sense of belonging and makes her feel “deliciously, fondly warm,” the novel demonstrates that her investment in a ghostly family is desperate and psychotic (Jackson, *Haunting* 407). By clinging to the ghosts (and thus embracing the outdated structures of the past), Eleanor denies that she could ever have a place in modern domesticity.

Not surprisingly, *The Haunting of Hill House* concludes with Eleanor becoming increasingly insane and committing suicide, as her extreme commitment to a backwards vision of domestic space ultimately leads her to lose any clear sense of agency. Eleanor determines that she will “relinquish my possession of this self of mine,” opting to stay “walled up alive” in Hill House rather than returning to her bleak life in her sister’s house (Jackson, *Haunting* 387, 413). While Eleanor’s final acts are in some ways rebellious and agentive, as she claims that “Hill House belongs to me,” Jackson refuses to imbue her death with any sense of triumph, suspending her domestic return (Jackson, *Haunting* 417). In her last moments, as she turns her car into a tree in order to never leave Hill House, literally colliding a modern icon into a relic of the past, Eleanor experiences a flicker of doubt, asking herself “*Why* am I doing this? *Why* am I doing this? *Why* don’t they stop me?” (Jackson, *Haunting* 417). Eleanor exits the novel on these questions, as she does not achieve a sense of domestic belonging because Hill House “walked alone” (Jackson, *Haunting* 417). Though Eleanor is pitiable, Jackson presents her to the reader as an example of how not to behave in the face of a

magnetic domestic space, as the novel ultimately ends up “mocking the doomed” (Carpenter 144).

However, not all who enter Hill House are condemned to death, as Jackson celebrates those characters who are able to maintain their own lives without an all-absorbing domestic identity. Theo in particular stands out as a testament to a life based in the values of “independence, self-confidence, and self-determination” (Bailey 38). While she does not spurn domestic values (as she maintains a home of her own), Theo retains a clear sense of self and does not suffer from the arrested development that plagues Eleanor. Notably, Jackson identified Theo as a double for Eleanor, writing in her notes that “Theo *is* Eleanor” (qtd. in Hattenhauer 162). For Jackson, postwar female identity exists on a spectrum between these extremes, as women have the potential to become either self-destructive or self-determined. Her novel about female adolescence, *Hangsaman*, explores this issue in more detail, as the main character, Natalie Waite, runs the gamut of behavior from the good college girl to imagining herself as murdering her parents. A similar crisis underlies Sylvia Plath’s *The Bell Jar*, as Esther Greenwood experiments with various social roles through her experience with female doubles. In the section that follows, I consider how both Jackson and Plath move beyond the nihilistic closure of the Gothic home, preferring instead the negotiation of domesticity that emerges in their studies of personality division.

***Hangsaman* and *The Bell Jar*: Negotiating Friedan’s “Schizophrenic Split”**

Shirley Jackson and Sylvia Plath share common ground in their mutual explorations of how young American women could be driven mad when facing the radical shift from adolescence to married life. Of course, these two authors are not the only ones to link domesticity to madness, as Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar note

the centrality of “maddened doubles” to women’s fiction in *The Madwoman in the Attic* (xi).¹⁵ Such figures are particularly relevant to the postwar era, when, according to Friedan, women felt “a schizophrenic split” between conflicting roles, torn between the demands of “the feminine woman” and “the career woman” (46). Friedan is not alone in observing the psychologically fragmenting impact of postwar domesticity on women: Stephanie Coontz links the emergence of tranquilizers to the 1950s housewife crisis, while Carol A.B. Warren associates mental illness with the constraints of “the traditional housewife role” (36; 38). The widespread popularity of *The Three Faces of Eve* (1957), a film about the multiple personalities of the housewife Eve White (also known as Eve Black and Jane) also indicates an increasing fascination with madness and doppelgangers within the postwar domestic fantastic. What sets Jackson and Plath apart is their interest in how college-bound young women balance the pressures of domesticity with their desires for artistic self-expression, as both Natalie Waite and Esther Greenwood aspire to be professional writers. In Natalie’s case, writing is intricately bound up with her father, Arnold Waite, a professional literary critic who (like Jackson’s husband, Stanley Edgar Hyman) constantly evaluates her work and declares himself to be the supreme arbiter of taste. For Esther, working as a guest editor in New York for *Ladies’ Day* calls into question her investment in a literary future (embodied in the character of her editor, Jay Cee), as she feels attracted to the glamor of the media image of femininity and the attendant promises of domestic bliss. While *Hangsaman* and *The Bell Jar* have clear autobiographical parallels to the lives of Jackson and Plath

¹⁵ Likewise, madness is also a relevant trope in male-driven fiction during the postwar years, as Thomas Hill Schaub catalogues narrative patterns of “self-recrimination and mental illness” ranging from *Naked Lunch* (1959) to *One Flew Over the Cuckoo’s Nest* (1962; 76).

during the 1950s and address the authors' literary concerns, they also speak to the wider experience of postwar women who sought out ways to maintain their voices in the face of the home. In fact, both of these novels circulated within the popular marketplace, as an Ace Books Gothic paperback and a "pot-boiler" respectively, making them widely accessible to women readers who might identify with the conflicted personas of Natalie Waite and Esther Greenwood (Wagner-Martin 233). These novels, with their split identity as literary autobiographies and Gothic chronicles, illustrate how the postwar domestic fantastic often bridged realistic and speculative genres.

Throughout both *Hangsaman* and *The Bell Jar*, domesticity appears as a suffocating and enclosing space, a Gothic trap that, in effect, leads to the fragmentation of the protagonists' personalities and threatens to silence them. Natalie Waite in particular grates against the notion that women are less mobile than their male counterparts, observing how her mother "makes the kitchen like a room with a sign saying 'Ladies' on the door" while her father entertains houseguests and leaves the home for his academic work (Jackson, *Hangsaman* 16). Her desire for a life outside the home is so great that she creates a complex fantasy life, hallucinating about murdering her parents and imagining the voice of a police detective who investigates her for these theoretical crimes. College does not provide Natalie with any increased sense of freedom, as she attends an all-girl's school (handpicked for her by her father) where student activities are chaperoned and the rooms are "cell-like and dismal" (Jackson, *Hangsaman* 50). In fact, her father seems to celebrate the school's prison-like potential, as he describes Natalie's dorm room as Rapunzel's tower in which a princess sits "looking, and waiting, with no knight coming," an image that echoes the tower in "A Visit"

(Jackson, *Hangsamán* 136). This sense of the domestic world as closed-off carries over into *The Bell Jar*, as Esther meditates on the recent electrocution of the Rosenbergs, drawing attention to a paranoid Cold War culture that punishes the “troubling model of 1950s public woman” (Ashe 222). Esther not only recognizes the cultural association of feminine propriety with national values but also experiences “the motherly breath of the suburbs” as deathly and poisonous, likening her personal condition to being “stuffed farther and farther into a black, airless sack with no way out” (Plath, *Bell Jar* 113, 129). In the worlds of both of these novels, the domestic trap is omnipresent and apparently inescapable, resulting in a feeling of evacuated personality and “terrible tiredness” that readers might locate as part of their daily frustrations (Friedan 31). Both Jackson and Plath make clear that Natalie and Esther are not alone in their suffering, but live in a world in which other women also feel “devoid of personality” and are “bored as hell” (Jackson, *Hangsamán* 53; Plath, *Bell Jar* 4).

Despite these moments of recognizing the widespread pattern of a female personality crisis, both Jackson and Plath focus on their protagonists’ feelings of isolation in order to convey that they experience a “problem that has no name” and thus are unaware that other women might share in their suffering (Friedan 19). Natalie and Esther feel isolated not only from others but also from their own self-images, a crisis that R.D. Laing links to schizophrenia in *The Divided Self* (1959). Describing the case of “Mrs. R,” Laing notes that some schizophrenics are unable to recognize their own reflections, feeling that there is “no one there” (54). Natalie examines herself in a mirror and feels that she is looking at “the costume for some extraordinary Natalie part,” believing that she lacks an authentic self because she cannot reconcile her own needs

with her family's insistence on propriety (Jackson, *Hangsaman* 44). Esther is likewise unable to recognize her own reflection, as she constantly encounters mirrors in which she sees herself as a racial other, describing herself as "a big, smudgy-eyed Chinese woman" and "a sick Indian" in order to clarify her feelings of isolation from a culture that values feminine perfection (Plath, *Bell Jar* 18, 112). Vince Bourjaily notes that "an early title for the novel was *The Girl in the Mirror*," marking Plath's fascination with the issue of divided identities and doubles (141). Furthermore, Jackson and Plath's shared interest in the potential signs of personality estrangement and schizophrenia indicate the domestic fantastic's larger generic concerns with madness as a means of revealing the tenuousness of sanity and familial togetherness.

The ultimate paradox at the heart of both *Hangsaman* and *The Bell Jar* is that the cultural demand for female perfection leads to this kind of madness and internal division, as this fragmentation also affects Natalie and Esther's ability to envision their future lives. For example, when Natalie begins to reflect on her life in seventeen years, when she would be married and "senselessly afflicted with children of her own," she shifts gears by fantasizing about "the sweet sensation of being burned alive," an image which Plath similarly explores in her imagery of electrocution (Jackson, *Hangsaman* 9). Just as Natalie prefers to imagine self-immolation instead of domestic absorption, Esther attempts to opt out of the decision making process altogether. In an oft-discussed scene, she finds herself confronted with what Nora Sellei calls the "pressure of choice," as she envisions her life as a green fig tree in which "from the tip of every branch, like a fat purple fig, a wonderful future beckoned and winked" (347; Plath, *Bell Jar* 77). Rather than choosing a potential future, Esther imagines herself "starving to

death,” an act which comes to fruition in her suicide attempt (Plath, *Bell Jar* 77). Both Natalie and Esther presage Friedan’s observation that young women growing up in the 1950s “could not see ourselves beyond the age of twenty-one” due to the feeling that the feminine mystique has already predetermined their lives (69).

Yet, Natalie and Esther do not succumb to a nihilistic fate but actively embrace their divided personalities, which provide them with a degree of ironic distance from the world around them. As Stan Smith has argued in “Attitudes Counterfeiting Life” (1975), the insane or divided protagonist can have “an increasingly ‘objective,’ exterior view,” allowing her to realize that identity is a kind of performance (34). Natalie, for example, observes her own life as an outsider, seeing herself as a “most vividly talented actress” (Jackson, *Hangsaman* 167). A minor character in Jackson’s novel, Verna Hansen, explains the positive power of this kind of performance, describing how it enables her to change, re-naming herself because her old persona, “Edith,” was “coarse, and ugly, and thoughtless” (Jackson, *Hangsaman* 29). Esther Greenwood explores this kind of experimental name-changing through her “Elly Higginbottom” persona, introducing herself with a false name in order to bury her sense of personal failure (Plath, *Bell Jar* 11). Similarly, when she sits down to write her novel, she describes how her heroine “would be myself, only in disguise,” going by the name Elaine (Plath, *Bell Jar* 120). Natalie and Esther’s shared ability to move beyond the notion of authentic selfhood signals their increasing consciousness of “the constructedness, the performativity of gendered roles,” although they do continue to struggle with what roles will provide the most satisfying life (Wisker 104). Yet, like writers of the domestic fantastic, they

speculate about potential alternative realities, allowing them to potentially move beyond the constraining structures of the present.

This fragmentation of female identity is the central crisis in both novels, as Natalie and Esther not only see themselves as performers but also frequently view other women in terms of their flattened social roles. Numerous scholars have described the secondary female characters of *Hangsaman* and *The Bell Jar* in terms of the Gothic double or doppelganger, arguing that these women speak to the protagonists' potential futures. Sue Verrege Lape and Darryl Hattenhauer both briefly note Jackson's interest in doubling, though primarily in reference to *The Haunting of Hill House*. Linda K. Bundtzen likewise observes how in *The Bell Jar* "all of the female characters are doubles for Esther – possible roles she tries on" (117). Gordon Lameyer devotes an entire essay to Plath's interest in the double, noting that she first explored this theme in her honors thesis (143). However, I would like to add that Natalie and Esther often describe other women not necessarily as their own shadows but, more frequently, in comic terms, presenting them as caricatures of femininity in a way that "offers a position of detachment and scepticism [sic.]" (Horner and Zlosnik 3). Through this parodic impulse, they ask us to step away from "sentimental or idealized images" of femininity, as both novels are filled with women who are exaggerated stereotypes of postwar feminine roles (Walker and Dresner 48). In what follows, I consider how both Natalie Waite and Esther Greenwood mock the representatives of motherhood and housewifery, demonstrating their own deep-seated anxieties about the costs of their domestically-oriented lives.

Both *Hangsaman* and *The Bell Jar* frequently represent mothers as quasi-robotic, zombie-like subjects who are no longer capable of self-expression and whom the narratives ask us to simultaneously pity and keep at a distance. Mrs. Waite, for example, appears as a crushed figure who brokenly reminds her daughter to “see that your marriage is happy” (Jackson, *Hangsaman* 18). Though Mrs. Waite feels that her own marriage is disintegrating and recognizes her husband’s controlling nature, she repeatedly instructs her daughter to pursue a domestic fate and elevates the kitchen as a kind of sacred feminine space. The absurd and Sisyphean nature of Mrs. Waite’s domestic commitment becomes clear when the narrator describes how her “complex and delicate cooking” is “devoured drunkenly in a few hours by inconsiderate and uncomplimentary people” (Jackson, *Hangsaman* 17). In a nearly identical scenario, Mrs. Willard (the mother of Esther’s boyfriend, Buddy) carefully braids a rug out of leftover clothes for use as a kitchen mat, only to find that it becomes “soiled and dull” in a few days (Plath, *Bell Jar* 85). In both of these cases, the mothers’ hysterical repetition of domestic tasks in light of “the abuse of female creative powers” makes them appear to be ridiculous and even insane, as they seem to expect different results from an innately flawed system (Bundtzen 125). By presenting mothers as if they are automated appliances repeating domestic tasks ad absurdum (an image that I will discuss further in Chapter 3), Jackson and Plath undercut the postwar image of the mother as a figure of plenitude and serene satisfaction.

Both novels similarly ridicule young women who appear to be all too eager to become the next generation of wives and mothers, encouraging the reader to laugh at their exaggerated flatness of character. For example, Natalie’s friend Anne appears to

be attending college merely to attain her “M.R.S. degree,” as she devotes her time to pursuing the attentions of their professor, Arthur Langdon (despite the fact that he is married). When Anne praises housework as “really the *most* satisfying work of all,” Arthur’s wife, Elizabeth, mocks the younger women’s idealization of domesticity, staring “at her incredulously” due to her profound misunderstanding of household labor (Jackson, *Hangsaman* 123-124). Likewise, Esther undercuts two of her fellow guest editors at *Ladies’ Day*, Doreen and Betsy, as they hyperbolically and uncritically represent the “bad girl” and the “good girl” aspects of the popular image of American womanhood. Esther mocks Doreen by comparing her “bright white hair” to “cotton candy fluff,” which parallels Friedan’s description of the woman who is so “fluffy and feminine” that she is “almost childlike” (Plath, *Bell Jar* 4; Friedan 36). Although she ridicules Doreen at one moment, she recognizes her appeal as well, acknowledging that “Doreen looked terrific” (Plath, *Bell Jar* 7). A similar case occurs with Betsy, as Esther mocks her extreme innocence and jokes about her farm girl personality. For example, Esther scathingly critiques Betsy for pitching a show to a TV producer about anthropomorphic corn, and we laugh at Betsy for getting “so excited about that damn corn” (Plath, *Bell Jar* 6). Yet, Esther also identifies with Betsy’s innocent image and grinningly observes her own temporary transformation into “Pollyanna Cowgirl” (Plath, *Bell Jar* 112). Likewise, Natalie Waite envies Anne’s beauty, feeling “gaunt and ungraceful” next to the potential future housewife (Jackson, *Hangsaman* 122). The fact that these narrators waver between mockery and identification suggests their inability to completely shatter the feminine stereotypes with which their culture confronts them.

However, Natalie and Esther's ability to recognize the performative nature of feminine identities allows them to make tenuous progress toward restoring balance to their fragmented personalities. Both novels describe this transformation in terms of the disappearance of a dark double who speaks to the protagonist's chaotic and suicidal tendencies. *Hangsaman*, for instance, concludes with the sudden and unexplained disappearance of Natalie's friend, Tony, who may or may not have been a figment of Natalie's imagination. Tony appears to have no investment in maintaining a stable identity, as the novel links her with magic and fantasy and she spends her time reading Tarot cards and performing apparently occult rituals. The disappearance of this figure signals Natalie's willingness to move beyond the space of pure fantasy and to determine an identity in which she feels "alone, and grown-up, and powerful" (Jackson, *Hangsaman* 218). Likewise, Joan Gilling's death in *The Bell Jar* allows for "the good side of the heroine to emerge cured," as Esther can now move away from "a wry, black image of my own" (Lameyer 159; Plath 219). Joan is a mere mimic, as she models herself after the media image of the suicidal Esther rather than attempting to create an independent identity. The erasure of Tony and Joan from the novels clarifies how women can neither give into nihilism nor imitation in the face of their potential domestic identities.

Neither *Hangsaman* nor *The Bell Jar* provide easy resolution to the domestic Gothic crisis, as Natalie's future remains uncertain and Esther recognizes that the bell jar is not shattered but is "suspended" (Plath 215). However, both novels conclude with the echo of laughter, which suggests that both women have found at least some temporary relief from the constraints of the feminine mystique. Natalie, walking on her

college campus, passes students who “were laughing” and smiles warmly at the buildings, suggesting that she has come to terms with this domesticated space (Jackson, *Hangsaman* 218). Esther, upon leaving the mental institution, “burst[s] out laughing” at Buddy Willard and feels that she has been “patched, retreaded, and approved for the road,” the image of the tire gesturing toward her potential mobility (Plath, *Bell Jar* 239, 244). Neither woman can simply step away from the pressures of domesticity, but laughter offers them a way to avoid the threats of voicelessness and self-destruction. This is not to suggest that they should simply grin and bear it, but rather that humor provides a tool for critical distance that will help them to gradually “enlarge the boundaries of their lives” (Dresner 113).

Conclusion: No Way Out?

The open and laughter-tinged endings of *Hangsaman* and *The Bell Jar* bring us back full circle to the postwar domestic comediennes who parody Gothic tropes in their descriptions of mundane chaos. In the case of Jean Kerr, Erma Bombeck, Shirley Jackson, and Sylvia Plath, the Gothic is a means of laying bare their dissatisfactions with the structures of homebound domestic life and of reaching out to a community of women readers who might otherwise see the home as a hopeless labyrinth. These authors suggest that women must reject a romanticized view of domesticity, lest they become subject to enclosure like Margaret of “A Visit” or Eleanor Vance of *The Haunting of Hill House*. The tropes of haunting and madwomen effectively become therapeutic ways for women to reimagine their “millions of daily trials and irritations,” as they can, via a shared act of reading, transfer their own experience of chaos and entrapment onto a Gothic heroine who may eventually find her way out of her cell (Jackson, “Experience” 228).

Indeed, not all of Jackson and Plath's Gothically-trapped women are doomed to enclosure, as these authors revisit the theme of confined (mad)women throughout their works, often exploring the possibilities of the radical redefinition of selfhood and violent escape. For example, Jackson explores the liberating power of doubling and performance in her short story, "The Tooth" (1949), in which Clara Spencer leaves behind her identity in favor of pursuing a fantasy life in a sort of dream state. Similarly, the protagonist of her unfinished novel, *Come Along With Me* (1968), describes how she "erased my old name and took my initials off everything" in favor of creating a new life in the city (Jackson, *Come Along* 5). Angela Motorman, whose new, self-determined last name signals an embrace of modern mobility, breaks out of domestic enclosure and drives forward into the promise of technologically-enhanced futurity (unlike Eleanor of *The Haunting of Hill House*, who drives into destruction and nihilism). Escape takes a more aggressive form in "The Story We Used To Tell" (unpublished until 1997), in which two women, supernaturally absorbed into a portrait of a mansion, murder the owners of the painting-house in order to free themselves from a world that seems very similar to the one in "A Visit." While "A Visit" concludes with the imprisonment of Margaret in a portrait-like world, Jackson suggests that women might protest against the supposed inevitability of Gothic imprisonment and create spaces of their own. In fact, she reclaims the name Margaret from enclosure in "What a Thought" (another posthumously published story), in which a wife casually bludgeons her husband to death as a response to her mundane boredom.

Jackson's image of the furious housewife who just can't take it any more anticipates Plath's anger-infused poetry that, as Gina Wisker describes in "Viciousness

in the Kitchen" (2004), "explores the disturbing side of domestic bliss" (107). Wisker sees "Lesbos," "Lady Lazarus," and the bee poems as extensions of the Gothic, in which "entrapment in the family home" gives way to a challenge against "everything conformist and restricted" (107, 116). For example, "Daddy" adopts the tropes of speculative fiction for the purposes of Gothic escape, as it chronicles the murder of the vampire / father and celebrates villagers "dancing and stamping on" his grave (Plath, "Daddy" 78). Likewise, Plath's fantastic image of the phoenix who rises "out of the ash" and eats "men like air" in "Lady Lazarus" marks a turn away from containment and toward new modes of speculative self-definition (Plath, "Lazarus" 82, 84). Just as the Gothic often gives way to the celebration of parody and laughter, women writers of the domestic fantastic embraced such speculative forms in order to imagine and open up domestic possibilities that might otherwise have been closed off to them during the postwar era.

CHAPTER 3
“LIVE BETTER ELECTRICALLY”: EMBODIED APPLIANCES, HOMES OF
TOMORROW, AND THE DREAM OF SCIENCE-FICTIONAL HOUSEWORK

During the postwar years, advances in domestic technologies seemed to also promise a possible escape from the Gothic structures of the home by dramatically altering the nature of housework for the majority of American women.¹ Although electrical home appliances existed prior to World War II, they became widespread when postwar prosperity led to increased home ownership, as, according to Douglas T. Miller and Marion Nowak, “between 1950 and 1960 the number of U.S. homeowners increased by over nine million, reaching an incredible 32.8 million” (7). Appliances became central features of these new homes, representing “a sense of freedom, of effortless ease, of technological mastery, modernity, and access to conveniences” (Marling 255). This celebratory image of the technologically enhanced home recurs throughout advertising imagery of this era, most notably in General Electric’s “Live Better Electrically” campaign (which began in the mid-1950s). The jingle for this campaign touts the message that:

You can make your family’s life much brighter.
You will find your work much lighter.
It’s as easy as can be,
When you live better electrically! (“Live Better Electrically”)

This peppy advertisement positions housewives as the primary beneficiaries of domestic technology, claiming that they will “have more time for fun and pleasure” because gadgets can take over tasks that formerly required extensive manual labor (“Live Better Electrically”). Furthermore, the dancing, apron-clad woman at the center of

¹ However, some people did not experience mechanization until much later, as “a full 25 percent of Americans, forty to fifty million people, were poor in the mid-1950s” (Coontz 29).

this advertisement, ensconced in a kitchen that contains a blender, oven, and electric mixer, reflects a glamorized vision of technologically enhanced housework, through which, according to Betty Friedan, “the American housewife – freed by science and labor-saving appliances from the drudgery” of the home would find “true feminine fulfillment” (18). Thus, advertisements established a fantasy world of the technologically-enhanced home in which women, accompanied by their friendly appliances, were supposed to be “relentlessly happy, liberated from endless household tasks by wondrous new machines they had just bought” (Halberstam 588).

Despite this widespread image of appliance-enhanced ease, domestic burdens increased after World War II paradoxically as a result of the mechanization of the home. In *More Work for Mother* (1983), Ruth Schwartz Cowan observes that appliances not only created “new needs” but also “eliminated the chores that men and children used to do” (11, 201). Although the entire family prior to World War II could share some household chores (such as doing dishes), the mechanization of the home ultimately returned such tasks to the housewife’s hands. While it seems that the rise of appliances would simplify housework, domestic technologies “imposed new drudgery,” raising standards of cleanliness so that a housewife, rather than doing laundry once a week, for example, would instead run “her washing machine and dryer every day” (Friedan 241). Thus, the housewife often found herself continually operating appliances in a never-ending cycle of household maintenance.

Writers of the domestic fantastic dramatized the Janus-faced nature of postwar appliance culture by imagining the technologically-enhanced home (also known as the technohome) as a space filled with witches and robots. These familiar tropes of

speculative fiction act as what I term “embodied appliances,” which are human or humanoid beings that seem to carry the same promise of domestic ease offered by appliance advertisements. On the one hand, these figures can act as friendly helpers who swoop in and magically assist the housewife, much like how Samantha Stephens and Jeannie became supernatural homemakers in *Bewitched* and *I Dream of Jeannie* by caring for the domestic (and emotional) well-being of Darrin Stephens and Tony Nelson. Shirley Jackson’s vision of the friendly witch in “Family Magician” (1949) predates these shows, which Lynn Spigel terms “fantastic family sitcom[s]”, thereby establishing the domestic fantastic’s pattern of exploring “anxieties about everyday life . . . through a series of displacements and distortions” (Spigel 117). On the other hand, Ray Bradbury, Ira Levin, and Pamela Zoline suggest that embodied appliances might not always be dream companions, describing how they can mutate into technological nightmares that threaten to displace and even replace the female subject. While Lisa Yaszek argues in *Galactic Suburbia* that women writers in the postwar era “turned to SF to explore the relations of gender and technology after World War II,” I will consider how male authors of the domestic fantastic likewise turned to speculative fiction in order to reflect cultural uneasiness about the impact of appliance-enhanced housework (8). Concerns about female disempowerment at the hands of mechanical others unite both male and female writers of the domestic fantastic, given their shared concern about “problems of power” in “a technological age” (Aldiss 14).

“Family Magician”: The Fantasy of Domestic Witchcraft

As I have previously discussed, Shirley Jackson is highly concerned with problems of domestic power, given her fascination with female entrapment in Gothic spaces and her own reluctance to identify as a housewife, which she explored through

her domestic comedy writing.² Her short story “Family Magician,” initially published in *Woman’s Home Companion* in September 1949, reflects her specific concerns with the postwar promise of easy housework, as she fictionalizes what Marsha Bryant identifies as the “magician status [of] the 1950s housewife” (184). In this story, Jackson describes Mallie, a supernaturally gifted maid who becomes a domestic fairy godmother for two children (Jerry and Dottie) and their mother (Mrs. Livingston, a widow). While Mallie is not a housewife, her role as a servant echoes how the popular media of the postwar era often envisioned appliances as “electronic servants” that “operated via magical rather than mechanical principles,” a pattern that Laura Scott Holliday describes in her essay on kitchen technologies (2001; 108, 112). Mallie likewise embodies idealized domestic technologies as she can “straighten a room just by standing in the doorway,” automatically enabling Mrs. Livingston to live the popular fantasy of “the good life without sweat” (Jackson, “Family” 217; Halberstam 496). Although “Family Magician” at first appears to affirm a vision of easy and entertaining housework, Mallie’s abilities often remind the reader about Mrs. Livingston’s relative incompetence within the home. Jackson wavers between affirming a vision of magical housework and critiquing housework’s dependence on (electronically) supernatural objects that can create an estranging experience for the human housewife.

On one hand, the magical maid appears to be a stress-relieving force within the home, as the narrator (Jerry) says, “Mother was working herself nearly crazy trying to make the house and everything go smoothly for us kids” (Jackson, “Family” 212).

² For a classic example of Jackson’s uneasiness with the “housewife” label, see her domestic memoir *Life Among the Savages* (1952). In an episode about the birth of her third child, she describes an argument with a hospital nurse over whether her occupation is “writer” or “housewife” (Jackson, *Savages* 426).

Because Mrs. Livingston has to balance her roles as a household manager and the family's primary breadwinner, she does not have adequate time to complete her domestic labor. Mallie appears, seemingly out of fairyland, and according to Mrs. Livingston "just said she had come to help" and "took the mop away from me" (Jackson, "Family" 216). Similar to how appliances work in the "Live Better Electrically" campaign, the maid provides the mother with crucial leisure time and acts as a psychologically soothing presence, telling her to "go to a movie, maybe, or do some shopping" (Jackson, "Family" 213). Yet, Mallie is also a potentially terrifying invader, as Mrs. Livingston acknowledges that she "was scared for a minute" at the appearance of the supernatural stranger (Jackson, "Family" 216). The domestic helper is never a fully frightening figure in this story, yet this fleeting moment of strangeness and acknowledgment of Mallie's disruptive and potentially horrific power marks how appliance culture, by ushering new forces into the home, could alienate the housewife.

Much of "Family Magician" reacts against a stereotype of the housewife as someone who no longer understands the processes behind domestic technologies, which appear to be mystifying and foreign to her. Though the postwar housewife was the primary consumer of such technologies, Jenny Wosk observes in *Women and the Machine* (2001) that postwar ads tended to ignore mechanical knowledge in favor of being "blissfully unconcerned with mechanical details," featuring kitchens where the push of a button could apparently produce fully cooked food, as in "Live Better Electrically" (230). Mrs. Livingston in Jackson's story is no exception to this pattern of the mystified female consumer who stands in awe of her appliances, as she does not understand how her magical helper completes her housework. For example, she cannot

explain how the maid transforms a ladybug, dandelions, a box of starch and curtains into an elaborate party dress for her daughter, Dottie. She is similarly baffled when Mallie creates “broiled squab with cherry sauce” and wild rice from a hat trimmed with fake birds and handfuls of gravel (Jackson, “Family” 219). The only explanation that Mallie ever provides is that she has “magic,” which, the narrator observes, is “the only answer she’d give, no matter what we asked her” (Jackson, “Family” 217). Excluded from learning Mallie’s domestic magic, Mrs. Livingston seems akin to the smiling women of postwar advertisements who remove perfectly pressed clothing and delicious meals from appliances without understanding “the physical principles by which machines and tools operate” (Benston 34). Yet, the fact that Mrs. Livingston is often troubled when she tries to fathom the method behind Mallie’s supernatural achievements indicates her tension with a turn toward an “industrialization of the home . . . over which the householders can be said to have no control at all, or certainly very little control” (Cowan 14). Though she relinquishes her home to an embodied appliance, she expresses discomfort about her loss of intellectual agency in the processes of domestic production.

Though supernatural housework mystifies and often frustrates Mrs. Livingston, Jackson indicates how some women enthusiastically embraced the possibility of domestic magic, eagerly jumping into the postwar housewife role. Specifically, Dottie (Mrs. Livingston’s daughter) becomes a sorceress’s apprentice, asking Mallie to “teach me some of that magic” (Jackson, “Family” 217). Though Dottie neither produces meals from inedible objects nor arranges rooms with a glance, she does become an expert pie baker and transforms into someone “sweet-tempered and polite,” gaining the knowledge

of how to behave as a future housewife (Jackson, "Family" 217). Mallie repeatedly instructs Dottie in cooking lessons and simultaneously enhances her personal appearance, telling her "that's all the magic you'll ever need" (Jackson, "Family" 218). Mallie's conflation of magic with mundane beauty culture and housework anticipates the "super-feminine" protagonists of *I Dream of Jeannie* and *Bewitched*, whose primarily use their powers "as a bandage for housework mistakes" (Spigel 128; Humphreys 112).³ Indeed, Mallie admits that her domestic powers are necessarily feminized, as she "can't use magic on boys," suggesting that men do not require her fantastic tools to achieve success in the world (Jackson, "Family" 220). It is no coincidence that Jackson filters her celebration of domestic magic through the voice of the male child, Jerry, who maintains agency in his role as narrator. Jerry, in turn, seems to view Dottie's increased skill and gracefulness as a positive metamorphosis, despite the fact that her domestic achievements occur alongside her increased passivity. Dottie becomes a marginal figure in the narrative as she begins to transform into an embodied appliance whose main task is to practice a highly constrained form of domestic magic. Although "Family Magician" seems to affirm how personal appliances ensured happier, more satisfied families, it is important to remember that we view this transformation through Jerry's eyes, as he reflects the desire of a postwar patriarchal culture to reclaim the public sphere as a male domain while marking the private sphere as a feminized space.

Indeed, Jerry is all too pleased with how Mallie, beyond helping his mother and sister complete housework, returns Mrs. Livingston and Dottie to positions within the home by bolstering their ability to find husbands. Following her domestic training, Dottie

³ For further analysis about the conservative message of *I Dream of Jeannie* and *Bewitched*, see Kristi Rowan Humphreys's "Supernatural Housework: Magic and Domesticity in 1960s Television" (2014).

becomes wildly successful at securing boyfriends, indicating that she will have no problems eventually starting her own nuclear family. More importantly, Mrs. Livingston, freed from her duties at home, finds a new husband by the end of the story, enabling her to exit the workforce and once again focus on her domestic role. It seems that the women in the story reflect the media stereotype of postwar American femininity, in which a housewife “kept her house spotless and efficient, got dinner ready on time, and remained attractive and optimistic” (Halberstam 590). Even Mallie reflects these values, as she can make herself appear younger and is always amiable in her housework, as “she never stopped smiling” (Jackson, “Family” 213). She leaves the Livingstons with a constant reminder of their idealized domestic roles, sending them a magic mirror that reflects a dream image of its viewers. In providing the household with this enchanted object, she ensures that they will always strive to imitate a “glossy image of the perfect family in its well-kept house” (Ogden ix). Yet, the “funny old-fashioned” style of Mallie’s mirror suggests that the transformation of the family at the end of the story is a step back into archaic values rather than a progressive turn for domestic relations (Jackson, “Family” 222). Mallie’s magic mirror reminds us that the domestic dream image can become a dangerous kind of time warp, much how the tapestries in “A Visit” threaten to freeze people in place forever.

Although Jackson ends “Family Magician” on an optimistic note of domestic union, she suggests throughout this narrative how the postwar vision of the appliance-enhanced American family retreats into the stuff of fantasy. Her presentation of Mallie as a witch warps housework into something otherworldly, as she suggests that only a supernaturally empowered individual could handle the burden of domestic tasks. Just as

in the fantastic family sitcom, “the elements called into question” in this story “are not the fantastic aspects” but rather the supposed “conventionality of the everyday,” as Jackson critiques the promise of magically easy housework (Spigel 123). Furthermore, it is notable that when the embodied appliance (i.e. Mallie) takes over the task of housework in this story, the mother becomes virtually invisible, just as Dottie becomes voiceless when she attains the role of embodied appliance. Mallie, while freeing Mrs. Livingston from domestic labor, also highlights that the housewife might eventually become obsolete or potentially replaceable, useful only for purchasing new appliances. “Family Magician” thus presages darker speculative fictions, in which the embodied appliance becomes the new emotional center of the nuclear family.

“I Sing the Body Electric!”: Embodying the Personal Appliance

While Shirley Jackson warns against the potentially disempowering effects of an idealized vision of magical housework, Ray Bradbury, in “I Sing the Body Electric!” (1969), considers the implications of another supernatural appliance fantasy—the robot.⁴ The figure of the robotic grandmother, whom the narrator describes as a “dear and wondrous electric dream,” fantastically embodies the ultimate personal appliance (Bradbury, “Electric” 115). In her role as a cook and a housekeeper, she demonstrates “the penetration of . . . technology into the surfaces of the kitchen,” anticipating similar robot-maids of postwar popular culture, such as Rosie from *The Jetsons* (Holliday 115). Yet, the robot in this story is more than an appliance, as she becomes both a love object and a caretaker for Timothy, Tom, and Agatha, three children who have recently lost their mother (just as Mrs. Livingston’s children had lost their father). In the way that

⁴ “I Sing the Body Electric!” existed as a teleplay in 1958 and Bradbury adapted it for *The Twilight Zone* in 1962 (Eller and Touponce 382-3).

she provides an emotional center for this broken family, the electric grandmother exemplifies what Roland Marchand, in *Advertising the American Dream* (1985), calls “re-personalization.” Marchand argues that mid-twentieth-century advertisers offered “personalities for consumption,” positioning products with human identities (such as Betty Crocker) for consumers who “craved a sense of personal contact” (357, 353). Advertisements frequently envisioned consumer goods as being agentive or willful, and the robot of Bradbury’s story is the culmination of this vision, as she works to please her “grandchildren” and to fill the place of the lost parent.

Bradbury ties the electric grandmother directly to advertising language, as the children in the story read a pamphlet from “Fantoccini Ltd.” about “the first *humanoid-genre* mini-circuited, rechargeable AC-DC Mark V Electrical Grandmother” (emphasis mine; Bradbury, “Electric” 117). The grandmother, a true object of the genre-bending domestic fantastic, promises to blur the boundaries between human and machine by combining circuitry with the female form. Furthermore, this advertisement, with the authority of its technological jargon, presents the robotic grandmother as “the answer to all your most grievous problems,” an appliance that “is built with loving precision to give the incredible precision of love to your children” (Bradbury, “Electric” 117). Although Bradbury parodies the trite repetitiveness of advertising language, he emphasizes that the appliance fills an emotional need on the part of the consumer. The children even recognize that they are the targets for this advertisement, but they still admire the product for its potential to provide “Love” and “Care” (Bradbury, “Electric” 118). In this respect, they bring to mind Marchand’s argument that the consumer’s consciousness of repersonalization does not necessarily lessen its effects, as “most experiments in

personalizing products brought a favorable public response, no matter how transparent the pretense of intimacy” (358). The children know from the beginning of this story that the grandmother is “a Toy” who only seems to be human, but this knowledge neither makes her any less appealing as a love object nor reduces the need for an appliance that can supplement their incomplete family (Bradbury, “Electric” 117).

Though the electric grandmother is in many ways a mundane figure in her function as a nanny and housekeeper, Bradbury highlights the fantastical elements that make her more appealing to the consumer, mirroring how “fifties ads transformed domestic space into a dreamscape of daily miracles” (Bryant 180). The grandmother’s selling point is that she is a “Miraculous Companion,” anticipating consumer needs through her association with the realm of magic (Bradbury, “Electric” 118). From the moment of her arrival, the grandmother appears as if out of a dream. Tom, the narrator, compares the helicopter that delivers her to “Apollo driving his chariot across mythological skies” (Bradbury, “Electric” 123). While she appears as a goddess of modern convenience, the grandmother also seems to be timeless and immortal, suggesting that she is a literally indispensable product. Specifically, she arrives, packaged like a mummy, in a sarcophagus of “real gold” with “real hieroglyphs . . . just like in the museums” (Bradbury, “Electric” 124). This repetition of the word “real” suggests that the appliance has some kind of authentic personality or core, which makes her virtually (or even better than) human. Moreover, she is not a dusty and decomposing mummy (as we might find in postwar horror films), but is a fresh and new being wrapped in the promise of eternal life. Emblazoned with “hieroglyphs of the Future” that predict the evolution of her child-owners, she fuses the iconography of the

ancient world with technological dreams (Bradbury, "Electric" 124). Similarly to other fantastic figures such as Mallie's mirror and the house from "A Visit," the electric grandmother is a temporal paradox who marks the interconnectedness of the future with a feeling of nostalgia for the past, suggesting that something is slightly off about the realities of the domestic present.

The fact that the word "mummy" recalls the image of the "mommy" is also difficult to ignore, especially considering that this female-coded robot steps into the family to replace the absent mother. While the children certainly mourn their mother's death, the way in which they describe her makes her seem like another lost domestic convenience rather than an individual. Tom describes his mother as "the soft, the warm, the main piece of lovely furniture" that "was gone forever" (Bradbury, "Electric" 116). It seems that, in the appliance-centered home, the mother might be just another interchangeable and replaceable domestic product. While the Fantoccini Company insists that "nothing can replace the parent in the home," the story suggests otherwise, as the children's love for the robot quickly overshadows their memory of their mother (Bradbury, "Electric" 118). As Wayne L. Johnson argues, "I Sing the Body Electric" sometimes reads as "a commercial for robots as human substitutes" (*Bradbury* 78). Other ads from this time similarly oppose domestic technologies with the mother, such as a Magnavox advertisement published in *Life* in 1951 that celebrates how a television "like mother, makes the whole family happy" (Magnavox). While the ad insists on a domestic hierarchy in which technology is subordinate to family members, the television, with its offer of "the breathtaking intimacy of a personal appearance," becomes a very real threat to the mother's domestic dominion (Magnavox).

The electric grandmother's power to replace the mother derives from her hyperfemininity and her hyperbolic homemaking skills (skills which also made Mallie an ideal appliance). Ordinary women, given their material constraints, simply cannot compete with appliances that are positioned as "hard-working mechanical brides" (Wosk 229). Beauty is integral to the grandmother, who, even before she is fully built at the Fantoccini factory, speaks the word "Nefertiti," the name of an icon Egyptian queen whose name means "the Beautiful One is Here" (Bradbury, "Electric" 121). This phrase was Bradbury's original title for the story when he published it in *McCall's*, again marking the centrality of beauty to the figure of the electric grandmother, a "true mummy" whose golden face is simultaneously young and wise (Bradbury, "Electric" 124). She may be a grandmother, but it seems that she is ageless, like the media image of femininity that the August 1969 issue of *McCall's* presents to its readers. Countless ads in this issue, in which Bradbury published his story, rely on the myth of permanent youth, such as a Dacron polyester campaign whose tagline is "forever young" and a Sears advertisement that celebrates "the new agelessness." Because the grandmother is an appliance, she can reproduce this beauty myth effortlessly, becoming a kind of perfect woman to unify a family that lacks a female caretaker.

Furthermore, the electric grandmother successfully surpasses the mother not only because she is a beautiful thing but also because she is a domestic wizard whose skills, like those of Mallie in "The Family Magician," again extend beyond those of a mere human. The grandmother performs numerous magical feats, such as manifesting a kite string from her fingertips and producing freshly baked fortune cookies from her mechanical chassis. Most notably, she is able to cook meals that are "always something

new, yet, wisely . . . seemed old and familiar,” again drawing attention to her paradoxical nostalgia and novelty (Bradbury, “Electric” 134). Her meals are not only delicious, but also elicit emotional responses from the family, especially from the (nameless) father. He weeps after the grandmother produces a meal identical to one that he had “in a small French restaurant over near Les Deux Magots in Paris, twenty, oh, twenty-five years ago” (Bradbury, “Electric” 135). Her unexplained ability to transform memories into domestic actions suggests that she is psychically connected to the family, making her the ultimate “empathy machine” because she can cater to unexpressed desires (Eller and Touponce 22). Although she acknowledges that she will never be a real woman, the grandmother is far more than a mere appliance. Agatha voices this best when she tells the electric grandmother that she has “always been alive” in the eyes of her “grandchildren,” speaking to their deep-seated needs for an appliance that surpasses maternal care (Bradbury, “Electric” 143).

While the electric grandmother repeatedly insists that she is, at best, an honorary person, she often transcends the abilities of the ordinary appliance and blurs the line between the machine and human, an ambiguity that Bradbury embraces. The robot repeatedly describes herself as an empty vessel that “can neither touch nor taste nor feel on any level” (Bradbury, “Electric” 138). She identifies as a living photo album whose purpose is to reflect “us back to ourselves just a trifle better than we had dared to hope or dream” (Bradbury, “Electric” 138). Just as Mallie leaves the Livingston family with a mirror that reflects their ideal selves, the electric grandmother becomes a distorting and selective mirror that comprises the ideal consumer product. Here, the appliance becomes the new affective center of the family, encapsulating Bradbury’s

desire for machines that might “embody humanity” by fulfilling the goals of togetherness (Bradbury, “On Hitchcock” 71). The father refuses to see any emotional agency at the heart of the electric grandmother, telling her, “Good God, woman, you, you’re not in there” (Bradbury, “Electric” 138). However, the fact that he refers to her as a “woman” hints at her ability to step into the role of the lost housewife and to become at least a kind of human replacement.

As an explicitly feminized embodiment of the personal appliance, this “wondrous toy” reveals how the discourse of domestic devotion in appliance culture threatens to mechanize housewives (Bradbury, “Electric” 135). The electric grandmother, with her continuous emphasis on self-sacrificing love, recalls how postwar America elevated motherhood as “the primary source of a woman’s identity” (May 135). The method with which the Fantoccini Company assembles the grandmother further connects her with a model of housewifery in which fulfillment can only come through a series of sacrifices on behalf of the family. When designing the robot’s voice, for example, Mr. Fantoccini asks the three children to speak, and he runs their voices through a machine that produces “three oscillograph patterns” (Bradbury, “Electric” 121). This process suggests that the robot lacks an independent voice of her own, as she becomes an amalgamation of the children’s voices and echoes their needs on a daily basis. In addition to having a composite voice, the robot grandmother has a strangely fluid face, as Tom (the narrator and oldest son) notices that her appearance shifts to mirror others, changing slightly depending on whom she is near. Bradbury never fully describes the grandmother’s body either after she emerges from her sarcophagus, suggesting that she is only significant when she is in the presence of a human family member. Her appeal does not stem from

an original personality: she is only “human shaped,” not fully human (Bradbury, “Electric” 125). Though Bradbury appears to celebrate the flexibility of her appearance, the robotic grandmother brings to mind Betty Friedan’s description of American housewives who “have forfeited their own being” on the altar of ideal womanhood (311).

Although the electric grandmother will always retain her identity as a magical appliance, it seems that she is not completely different from the human caretaker on whom she is modeled. She is morally pure, taps into a mystical femininity, and, most importantly, is eternally available to her children, like a kind of neo-Egyptian goddess. In fact, she surpasses the children’s biological mother by virtue of her electronic immortality, which allows her to simultaneously sacrifice herself for the child yet also continue to provide maternal love. This occurs when she flings herself in front of an oncoming car to shield Agatha, yet emerges unscathed with the promise that “I shall always, always be here” (Bradbury, “Electric” 141). The appliance-centered family becomes a domestic fairy tale, as Tom notes that he, Timothy, Agatha, their father and Grandma “lived happily ever after” (Bradbury, “Electric” 142). Like “Family Magician,” “I Sing the Body Electric!” concludes in a way that sentimentally elevates the appliance-worshipping familial unit.

While M. Keith Booker and others dismiss “I Sing the Body Electric!” on the grounds of its “rather puerile sentimentalism,” such readings ignore how the electric grandmother effectively replaces the human mother and speaks to growing concerns about technological domination within the home (*Monsters* 171). As in “Family Magician,” the woman who unifies the family through effortless housework and sacrificial love often evacuates herself of any essential identity and agency. The robotic

grandmother, always happily performing according to her programming, is the technological counterpart of the Gothic victim and the desperate housewife who anxiously tells Friedan “I begin to feel that I have no personality” (21). Moreover, the grandmother, as an idealized model of technological womanhood, represents how the demands of the feminine mystique encouraged postwar women to become embodied appliances, “to live according to an image that makes them deny their minds” (Friedan 66). The fact that Bradbury published “I Sing the Body Electric!” only three years prior to Ira Levin’s *The Stepford Wives* marks the beginning of a resistance to the positive fantasy of domestic technoculture, as both Bradbury and Levin depict appliances as ominous replacements of the housewife rather than bastions of ease.

The Stepford Wives: Electrifying the Housewife

While Bradbury’s “I Sing the Body Electric!” often echoes elements of the domestic fairy tale, Ira Levin’s *The Stepford Wives* (1972) infamously transforms Joanna Eberhardt and the other female inhabitants of a suburban Connecticut neighborhood into the victims of a science-fictional nightmare.⁵ Writing nearly ten years after the publication of Betty Friedan’s *The Feminine Mystique* (1963), Levin captures the emergent tensions between the postwar women who resisted housework and those men who reacted against the rise of second-wave feminism. In fact, he quotes a passage from *The Second Sex* (1949) as an epigraph for his novel, citing Simone de Beauvoir’s warning about men who resist women’s attempt to “escape” from their domestic prisons into “the light of transcendence,” thereby marking his sympathetic alignment with feminist causes (qtd. in Levin 401). Levin envisions a world of

⁵ I want to emphasize that I will be discussing the popular novel rather than the 1975 Bryan Forbes film adaptation.

masculinist control that, as Anna Krugovoy Silver has astutely observed, involves the literal transformation of “women from individuals with goals and ambitions into cleaning appliances” (66). Friedan warns about this kind of depersonalization when she writes that housework and the cult of motherhood lead to “a stunting or evasion of growth” for American women (77). She draws on the language of science fiction when, speaking of the inescapability of the feminine mystique, she notes that magazine editors are “Frankensteins” who “no longer have the power to stop the feminine monster they have created” (Friedan 66). Even positive representations of housework from the postwar era point to the monstrous and robotic nature of the housewife. For example, *Management in the Home: Happier Living Through Saving Time and Energy* (1954), a domestic science manual, describes the female body as a “machine,” marking how the housewife was a domestic fantastic figure even outside of speculative fictions (Gilbreth, Thomas, and Clymer 103). Responding to this widespread image of the mechanized domestic worker, Ira Levin envisions how the female body becomes an extension of the home via the machinations of a patriarchal technoculture.

The robotic nature of the Stepford women is immediately apparent to Joanna Eberhardt after she moves to the community from New York City with her husband, Walter. Joanna, as both “a semi-professional photographer” and an active participant “in the Women’s Liberation movement,” stands apart from the Stepford women, as she enters the narrative from a position of agency and relative freedom from housework (Levin 406). Joanna notes the egalitarian structure of her pre-Stepford household in which she and her husband take turns “to do the dishes” (Levin 407). To this disciple of Friedan, the passive Stepford women appear to be mindless robots due to their extreme

commitment to housework (though she does not suspect until later that the women are literal automatons). In a parodic poem describing the Stepford women, she writes, “They never stop, these Stepford wives . . . They work like robots all their lives” (Levin 444). Specifically, they mechanically obey idealized media depictions of femininity in which women appear “fluffy and feminine . . . gaily content in a world of bedroom and kitchen, sex, babies, and home,” an image that Plath and Jackson similar undercut in their mockeries of stereotyped postwar women (Friedan 36). Much like June Cleaver and Harriet Nelson, the Stepford women embody “homogenized, romanticized views of contented Moms who never knew as much as Dad” (De Hart 126). In fact, Joanna, producing a counter-discourse to the tropes of popular culture, explicitly confronts the language of ladies’ magazines and commercial advertising when she compares the Stepford wives to “actresses in commercials” (Levin 430). Something about the women in her community strikes her as “too nicey-nice to be real,” as they primarily talk about which cleaning supplies are the most effective and live in perfectly organized homes (Levin 430). Joanna’s principal fear is of conformity, of becoming “a compulsive hausfrau” in a world that defines women through housework (Levin 410).

Joanna critiques Kit Sunderesen and the other Stepford women for what she perceives to be their radically backwards way of life, recognizing in them a tired model of domesticity that seems like a blast from the past. However, their domestic efficiency reveals her own anxieties surrounding housework and her role within the home, suggesting that the feminine mystique retains a degree of power over the liberated woman. On one hand, Joanna wants to maintain a sense of gender equality, as she splits housework with her husband and boycotts cleaning when Walter joins the

Stepford Men's Association. On the other hand, she acknowledges that there is always "plenty [of work] to do" at home "and some that she actually *wanted* to do" (Levin 412). Living among picture-perfect women makes Joanna hyperconscious of her own limitations, such as when seeing the organized grocery carts of her fellow shoppers, she feels "a guilty impulse to put [hers] in order" (Levin 418). Similarly, she compares her difficult housework to the Stepford wives' apparent ease, imagining that they "would sail through it all very calmly and efficiently," easily manipulating bulky appliances (Levin 455). Joanna's guilt about her domestic disorderliness highlights how the choice between the Stepford model and second-wave feminist values is not clear cut, as choosing to embrace "a messy kitchen" effectively leads to alienation from the community at large (Levin 415). Though Joanna does befriend Bobbie Markowe, another member of the National Organization for Women, the assimilation of her closest friend to the Stepford way of life cynically suggests that conformity to the feminine mystique will outweigh feminist resistance. Levin underscores how the Stepford image presents women with an impossible choice: they can either assimilate and lose their sense of agency or live with the constant knowledge of their deviance from domestic norms. While this binaristic view obscures the diversity of female experience, in the world of *The Stepford Wives*, the Stepford Men's Association effectively establishes a discourse in which women can be either passive angels or dangerous, alien outsiders.

Levin emphasizes that Joanna, like Esther Greenwood and Natalie Waite, becomes mentally unstable when confronted with this uncomfortable choice, and he even refuses to clarify whether Stepford is actually a haven for robotic wives or if this is just a housewife's paranoid delusion. The movie famously removes this psychological

ambiguity by presenting us with the image of Joanna's robotic double, "a perfect replication . . . save for dark voids instead of eyes" (Johnston and Sears 89). In the film, no hope exists for Joanna's escape from the Stepford model of womanhood, as the director Bryan Forbes transforms Levin's novel into a horror story on the level of *Invasion of the Body Snatchers* (1956). Yet, the robotic other does not make as blatant an appearance in Levin's novel, although Joanna's friends do change overnight from sexual and domestic rebels into obedient, attractive caretakers. It is unclear how much of the novel is a product of Joanna's potential breakdown, as even Dr. Fancher, her psychologist, acknowledges that "any move is traumatic to a degree . . . particularly the city-to-the-suburbs move for a woman who doesn't find her housewife's role totally fulfilling" (Levin 464). In moments like this, Joanna fits Betty Friedan's characterization of American homemakers as "virtual schizophrenics" who are unable to deal with a constant sense of domestic dissatisfaction (67). Whether or not the robots exist, Levin demonstrates how the demands of housework and domesticity are "achieved at enormous cost to the wife," leading to mental illness and a need for tranquilizers (Coontz 36). Even though she is not yet a Stepford wife, Joanna suffers from the psychological impact of this model of womanhood, suggesting that she lacks the agency to break out of the demands of housework and domesticity.

In addition to the psychological ambiguity that shapes Levin's narrative, technology and science undoubtedly haunt the Stepford community and affect the lives of its residents (at least in an economic sense). Joanna, driving outside of Stepford with her friend Bobbie Markowe, notices a group of "neat low modern buildings" that include businesses such as "Ulitz Optics," "CompuTech," "Haig-Darling Computers," and

“Instatron” (Levin 440). Joanna and Bobbie initially blame these businesses for the strange conditions in Stepford, speculating that the women are becoming tranquilized through toxic chemical runoff that turns the town into “Zombieville,” a term which brings to mind the horrific invasion of the walking dead (a trope which Murphy explores at length in her study of the suburban Gothic; Levin 439). Yet, in *The Stepford Wives*, technology is not something that runs amok, but is always under the control of human agents. Specifically, the men of Stepford all work in varying fields of technological development, most notably, Dale Coba (also known as Diz), who “worked in ‘audioanimatronics’ at Disneyland” before joining “Burnham-Massey-Microtech” (Levin 468). Within the novel, gender determines one’s relation to technology, affirming Kirkup and Keller’s claim that “men kept technology, at both the craft and the professional level, to themselves” (3).

If the Stepford wives are indeed robots, then their design specifications meet the gendered expectations of male creators who seek to maintain a system that depersonalizes women, transforming them into submissive domestic servants. Most of the wives repeat variations of the same script, as they, like domestic icons of women’s magazines, assure Joanna that they are “living a very full life,” and that their former independence was “lazy and selfish” (Levin 431, 436). They not only attest to extreme levels of domestic obedience but also embody the beauty myth, as all of the Stepford women appear to be youthful, well dressed and well endowed with secondary sexual characteristics. Furthermore, Levin emphasizes how the popular media determines the lives of these women, as Ike Mazzard, a former women’s magazine illustrator, works with Dale Coba in designing the robotic replacement wives (163). In this system, “every

girl's an Ike Mazzard girl," transforming into a "hyper-real version" of herself for the purposes of entertaining and satisfying her husband / owner (Levin 421; Johnston and Sears 89). Like postwar appliances covered in "gorp" (i.e. excessive chrome décor), the Stepford wives become ornamental extensions of the home, sapped of their ability to exist outside of housework.

In writing about a male conspiracy to replace and apparently kill women in favor of obedient and docile robots, Levin demonstrates the depersonalizing nature of housework during the postwar era. The fact that he never confirms whether the robots are real only heightens the alienating vision of the story, as the only other motivation for the Stepford wives to behave as they do is because domestic stability requires it of them (lest they lose their secure homes). Joanna Eberhardt's transformation at the end of *The Stepford Wives* is of course the most radical case of this change, as she enters the novel as a staunch feminist and leaves it as an apparently devoted housewife who reflects the values of the feminine mystique. In Levin's universe, the only women who can perform housework are embodied appliances. This novel ultimately provides a dark view of how technology might not only displace women in the home but also destroy them completely. Joanna's question of "what happens to the real ones" haunts the text, as we never know whether the Stepford wives are human women or if their technological doppelgangers have replaced the biological originals (Levin 471).

"The Heat Death of the Universe" and "There Will Come Soft Rains": (De)Personal(izing) Appliances

Ira Levin is not alone in imagining the technologies of housework as depersonalizing, as Pamela Zoline and Ray Bradbury envision hyper-scientific homes in which appliances threaten to displace their inhabitants. In both "The Heat Death of the

Universe" (1967) and "There Will Come Soft Rains" (1950), Zoline and Bradbury respectively respond to how the postwar American home had become "the fundamental unit of technoculture," critiquing how automation invades housework and damages the wife and family (Yaszek 9). Despite the fact that they were writing twenty years apart and differed greatly in their roles in the speculative fiction community (Bradbury being among the most prolific writers of SF, Zoline writing about six stories total), these two authors share a remarkably similar vision of a domestic apocalypse in which the robotic wife gives way to an automated system that can do nothing to prevent the onslaught of chaos and breakdown. Zoline makes a particularly bleak assessment about the apocalyptic ends of postwar domesticity, naming her story after a scientific theory that describes the thermodynamic exhaustion of the universe. She suggests that the orderliness of scientific rationality is no match for certain destruction, an apocalyptic end that she explores through the perspective of Sarah Boyle, "a vivacious young wife and mother" who keeps herself "busy and happy around the house" (Zoline 418).

Sarah, much like Joanna Eberhardt, seems to have lost her personality at the cost of becoming an unwilling embodiment of postwar consumer culture. Sarah's eyes resemble "a kitchen sponge" and are "a fine, modern, acid synthetic blue," bringing to mind the chemical substances of kitchen cleaners and suggesting that she has become a manmade object (Zoline 420, 421). Though she is not exactly a robot (in that she appears to retain consciousness), Sarah occupies a universe where her role appears to be regimented, repetitive, and inescapable, making her follow the same patterns of behavior as if she was a domestic machine. Specifically, the story chronicles her attempts at "cleaning up the house," as she tries to gather together disparate items such

as “a triangular half of toast spread with grape jelly, bobby pins, a green Band-Aid, flakes,” and so on (Zoline 418). Sarah recognizes that her world is marked by chaos, but desperately, like a broken appliance, keeps trying to impose a sense of order and complete her tasks, imagining herself “cleaning, and ordering the whole world . . . filling the great spaces of Space with a marvelous sweet-smelling, deep-cleansing foam” (Zoline 427).

Sarah’s mechanized interest in technoscientific orderliness becomes apparent through her fascination with devices that might catalogue and measure the home. A section of the story entitled “TIME PIECES AND OTHER MEASURING DEVICES” offers an obsessive list of all such objects:

In the Boyle house there are four clocks; three watches (one a Mickey Mouse watch which does not work); two calendars and two engagement books; three rulers, a yardstick; a measuring cup; a set of red plastic measuring spoons which indicate a tablespoon, a teaspoon, a one-half teaspoon, one-fourth teaspoon and one-eighth teaspoon; an egg timer; an oral thermometer and a rectal thermometer; a Boy Scout compass; a barometer in the shape of a house . . . a bathroom scale; an infant scale; a tape measure which can be pulled out of a stuffed felt strawberry; a wall on which the children’s heights are measured; a metronome. (Zoline 423)

Ironically, the things which Sarah gathered to impose control over her disordered life have themselves become an overwhelming pile of partially broken domestic detritus, and catalogues of such mountains of junk recur throughout “Heat Death.” The form of the story itself attempts to impose rational order on such chaos, appearing not as a conventional narrative but rather, as Mary E. Papke describes it, “like a lab report, chronologically linear, highly descriptive, [and] objective.” Specifically, “The Heat Death of the Universe” takes the form of a numbered list of subheadings and descriptions which intersperse details about Sarah’s housework with scientific definitions of entropy. The story’s mechanical style effectively alienates us from Sarah’s perspective and

makes her appear to be even more dehumanized, as the narrator offers no insight into her mundane struggles.

However, Zoline suggests that such patterns of mechanization and depersonalization necessarily lead to a breakdown on both a personal and a global scale. Sarah, unable to function in her role as a cleaning machine, begins to malfunction, bursting into tears and smashing up her newly purchased groceries. Notably, “she throws a jar of strawberry jam against the stove . . . and the stove begins to bleed,” an image that speaks to the confusing overlap between the machine and the human in this narrative (Zoline 428). Just as Sarah appears to have sponge-like eyes, the stove has a quasi-human embodiment, blurring the lines between the person and the personal appliance. Yet, Sarah effectively reclaims her humanity by refusing to participate any longer in the orderly activities of domestic cleanliness. While the story concludes with Sarah’s descent into kitchen chaos and a suggestion that “the total ENTROPY of the Universe therefore is increasing,” Zoline suggests that the housewife might at least find temporary relief by breaking with her mechanized identity, even if that means embracing apocalyptic energies (Zoline 428).

Ray Bradbury’s “There Will Come Soft Rains” similarly celebrates an apocalyptic end to domestic technologies, which in this story produce only disaster and chaos. Unlike such popular fantasies as General Electric’s *Carousel of Progress*, the technohome in this case is a site of anxiety and mortality, in which fantastically electrified and technologically alive objects displace human beings. In this story, a technohome carries on with housework in a post-apocalyptic landscape that is devoid of human residents, who have died in a recent atomic war. Bradbury discourages the

reader from taking “pleasure in seeing inanimate things come alive,” instead presenting the home as a grotesquely warped space (Marchand 358). The automated home constantly repeats its domestic routine, becoming increasingly absurd as the stove serves breakfast to an empty kitchen, only to clean the uneaten meal soon afterward (Bradbury, “Rains” 322). Gadgets haunt the house but appear to be frightening rather than comforting, especially the “tiny robot mice” which scour the carpets “like mysterious invaders” and look out from the walls with “pink electric eyes” (Bradbury, “Rains” 323). Although the house enters the narrative as a fantasy space in which “the dinner dishes manipulated like magic tricks,” it quickly devolves into something that appears to be “surreal” (Bradbury, “Rains” 326; Eller and Touponce 155).

Just as the house’s domestic magic becomes a source of terror for the reader, the home appears to live in a state of anxiety, as the gadgetry continuously anticipates a human presence. For example, “the garage chimed and lifted its door,” only closing “after a long wait” (Bradbury, “Rains” 323). In this constant struggle between activity and the silence of its surrounding environment, the house becomes neurotic. Bradbury describes how the house has “an old-maidenly preoccupation with self-protection which bordered on a mechanical paranoia” (Bradbury, “Rains” 324). The window shades slap away birds and animals, as the home obsessively preserves itself for the return of its inhabitants. Although the increasingly unstable home positions itself as “an altar,” the story reminds us that “the gods had gone away, and the ritual of the religion continued senselessly, uselessly” (Bradbury, “Rains” 324). In describing people as the gods of domestic space, Bradbury emphasizes technology’s subservient role to its creators, suggesting, as Gallagher aptly notes, that “it has no function without humanity” (80).

Yet, the house's situation is strangely analogous to that of the postwar American housewife, whom popular magazines and experts such as Benjamin Spock encouraged to find fulfillment "in childbearing and in serving other people" (Miller and Nowak 151-2). In representing the home as hysterical and helpless, Bradbury symbolically feminizes this domestic space. The female home here is not a comforting vision of domestic wholeness but rather a barren and psychotic space, suggesting that appliance culture disempowers and destabilizes the housewife. As the home begins "announcing the time, playing music, cutting the lawn, or setting an umbrella frantically out and in," it resembles a woman on the verge of a breakdown, much like how Sarah attempted to stave off decay by cataloging measuring devices (Bradbury, "Rains" 328). These activities only accelerate as the house begins to burn down, as "the stove could be seen making breakfast at a *psychopathic* rate, ten dozen eggs, six loaves of toast, twenty dozen bacon strips" (Bradbury, "Rains" 328; emphasis mine). This excessively manic production recalls the kind of "kitchen craziness" that magazines publishing contemporaneously with Bradbury encouraged their readers to embrace (Bryant 182). For example, a Frigidaire Electric Range advertisement from a 1952 issue of *Life* illustrates an oven popping out cakes, golden-brown turkeys, and steaks, "a money-saving dream" in which "it all happens at once." Yet, in "There Will Come Soft Rains," this positive image of domestic plenty fails to stave off destruction, as the story culminates with the frantic failure of the appliances to preserve the home. That even a technohome fails to meet the demands of housework demonstrates the shortcomings of a culture that encouraged high levels of appliance reliance.

Conclusion: Can We Live Better Electrically?

Shirley Jackson, Ray Bradbury, Ira Levin, and Pamela Zoline, in their domestic fantastic fictions about technologically enhanced housework, all critique the extent to which the postwar American reliance on appliances reshaped the nature of housework. Jackson and Bradbury's elevation of magically and electronically empowered caretakers suggests that ordinary women cannot fulfill the demands of housework unless they too have supernatural abilities or become living appliances. Ira Levin similarly explores how appliance culture and the feminine mystique mechanize housewives, marking a need to rethink the gendered implications of technoculture. Levin in particular sparked a critical reassessment of the housewife, as the term "Stepford wife" continues to circulate in popular parlance as a means of critiquing artificial, passive, or eerily obedient women. Although the 2004 Frank Oz retelling of *The Stepford Wives* was a box office failure, the attempt to remake the classic 1975 film indicates that concerns about domestic technologies and housework still have current relevance (a topic that I will discuss at length in my coda). As Sidney Eve Matrix notes in "Behind the Idyllic Façade, a Terrible Secret: Technologies of Gender and Discourses of Domesticity in *The Stepford Wives*" (2007), Oz's campy adaptation of Forbes's film failed to entertain its audiences because "the discourses of the feminine mystique are not so outdated that they have lost their cultural currency" (117). Yet, Oz's film is about more than the feminine mystique, as it considers how technology and appliances disrupt domestic relationships, speaking to a continued cultural investment in how technology relates to gendered power dynamics. In brief, the critical voices of Jackson, Bradbury, Levin, and Zoline only mark the beginning of a resistant strain in postwar American culture to the dominance of

technologically-enhanced domesticity, as producers of contemporary speculative fiction continue to undercut the idealized image of appliance reliance.

CHAPTER 4 TELEVISED AND TRANSPORTED: DOMESTIC TECHNOLOGIES AND THE MECHANIZATION OF MASCULINITY

The cover of the January 4, 1954 issue of *Life* features a photograph of an ascending Regulus Guided Missile, which embodies the promise of “a bigger future” for the United States marked by an increasing supply of technological and scientific (or technoscientific) power. An article in this issue, George R. Harrison’s “Some Unqualified Predictions From a Look Ahead to the 200th,” similarly envisions the nation’s shifting technological landscape as an appliance-centered utopia, imagining that in 1976 “we will drive on superhighways to parking lots” and fly to airports via helicopter (74). The dream of living “better electrically” thus not only transformed women’s relationship to domestic labor during the postwar era but also impinged on the lives of American men, particularly those who were striving to join the emergent middle class. James Gilbert refers to this group of “middle-class, middle Americans, living in the middle of the century” as “men in the middle,” a group that wanted to transport themselves socially upward through home ownership and its attendant luxuries (8). The same issue of *Life* captures this relationship between masculine class mobility and appliance culture with the brief article, “The New American Domesticated Male,” accompanied by a series of cartoons illustrating men happily immersing themselves in the process of “gadget buying” (43).¹ This article suggests that men take particular joy in items such as the lawn mower, as its “noisy engine, gives a man a sense of power and a gadget to tinker with” (“Domesticated” 43). In essence, such appliances promised to harness the power of the rocket’s engines so that men could simultaneously master domestic space and

¹ Steven Cohan cites this article in *Masked Men: Masculinity and the Movies in the Fifties* (1997).

fantasize about escaping it. No technologies capture these dual functions better than the television (located within domestic space, but providing a window into the outside world) and transportation (necessary to the domesticated man who shuttled between work and home, but also offering the potential freedoms of the road).

While popular magazines documented the widening reach of appliances, writers of the domestic fantastic scrutinized how such changes potentially disrupted the home and amplified male worries about personal and technological control during a time when, in the words of Victoria Hesford, “the roles of breadwinner and provider . . . became the forms through which the ideology of masculinity was reorganized in domestic terms” (218). For example, Ray Bradbury’s “The Murderer” (1953) suggests that appliances (particular those designed for domestic entertainment) might literally drive a man to madness, as the main character in this story, Albert Brock, describes to a psychologist how he has “killed” his technohome, resulting in his institutionalization. Brock does not celebrate his noisy appliances but feels that they have drowned out the possibility of interpersonal connection and trapped him in a deadening form of domesticity. So, he systematically attacks the domestic manifestations of electricity, shoving his phone “in the kitchen Insinkerator” and admitting “that I shot the television set” (Bradbury, “Murderer” 50).² “The Murderer” signals the domestic fantastic’s long-standing concern with the relation between domestic technologies and psychosis, as entertainment devices (e.g. radios and televisions) and modes of transportation (e.g. rockets and automobiles) do not necessarily provide the sense of freedom that

² The Harlequin in Harlan Ellison’s “Repent, Harlequin!’ Said the Ticktockman” (1965) similarly attempts to disrupt his mechanized society, though he prefers to do so through comical displays and a general resistance to timeliness.

advertisers promise. Like other writers of science fiction who, according to Roger Luckhurst, consider “the promise and terrors of technical and scientific development,” Ray Bradbury, John Cheever, Richard Matheson, and Kurt Vonnegut speculate about how appliances could spark familial fragmentation and lead to feelings of passivity on the part of the supposed master of the technohouse (80). They often express these concerns not only through the tropes of science fiction, but also in Gothic terms, suggesting that technological things can entrap us in new visions of the haunted mansion, preventing us from traveling to any kind of outer (i.e. non-domestic) spaces. Furthermore, they examine the economic difficulties that stem from attaining appliances, though they sometimes see women as problematic agents in the spread of technoculture, creating a false dichotomy between women and the electric domestic and men and nature (which I will discuss more extensively in my analysis of *Fahrenheit 451*). Describing the divisive impact of domestic technologies during the postwar years, Lynn Spigel notes that television in particular “was not a simple slide show of pastoral splendor” but also an object that brought into the home the imagery of “violence, sexuality, and unwelcome strangers” (2). Thus, the electronic hearth, envisioned in advertisements as a way to bring the family closer together, accentuated the greater fragility of domesticity during a time when the family and middle class were “in flux and often in crisis” (Coontz 2).

“The Enormous Radio”: Disruptive Frequencies

John Cheever, a writer best known for popularizing what Lohafer terms “the understated, nuanced, ‘slice-of-life’ norms of *New Yorker* fiction” may strike readers as an unusual choice to begin a discussion of warped domestic technologies (72). Much of Cheever’s fiction deals with the world in realistic terms, presenting us with images of

suburban families that struggle with mundane conflicts involving money, fidelity, and the ravages of time (topics that also influenced the work of John Updike and other mid-century realists).³ However, his short story “The Enormous Radio,” initially published in the May 17, 1947 issue of *The New Yorker*, broadcasts these struggles through the loudspeakers of the radio, transforming this appliance into a supernatural embodiment of domestic distress. As with many protagonists of horror stories, Jim and Irene Westcott are “the kind of people who seem to strike that satisfactory average of income, endeavor, and respectability,” occupying an apparently ordinary universe (Cheever, “Radio” 33). However, the purchase of a new radio (to replace the broken appliance that forms the focal point of their small apartment) disrupts their quest for “upward social mobility” and invades their purportedly private space, shattering their sense of domestic security from the inside out (Beuka 79).

Though the Westcotts expect their radio to provide the comforts of home entertainment, its appearance and strange functionality make it seem like an unwelcome and alien presence, recalling the horror genre’s repeated trope of “the invasive power of the horrible Other” (Hendershot 93). Even before turning on the radio, Irene describes it as “an aggressive intruder” and worries that it contains “violent forces” (Cheever, “Radio” 34). The most startling aspect of the radio is that it transmits the private conversations of her neighbors, providing a window into the intimate and traumatic details of their daily lives. The radio reveals lives characterized by “indigestion, carnal love, abysmal vanity, faith, and despair,” tarnishing the Westcott’s

³ Robert Rebein criticizes the mid-century “Everyman realists,” claiming that they had a limited scope and made “no attempt to capture a wider swath of experience by multiplying the vantage points from which the social world is perceived and judged” (33).

image of a good life that is based on “stability – or at least the illusion of it” (Cheever, “Radio” 37; Whyte 324). Through its unexplained power to technologically eavesdrop on the supposedly well-to-do occupants of the surrounding apartments, the radio demonstrates how these individuals struggle to maintain their social status, as they argue over issues such as “an overdraft at the bank” (Cheever, “Radio” 37). Thus, it reveals to the Westcotts and to the readers the tenuousness of domesticity in a time when middle class “identity was becoming a performance, fashioned out of consumer surfaces” (Creadick 68).

Just as the radio announces the ongoing processes of domestic disintegration, it also reflects the Westcott’s own difficulties back to them, culminating in a localized apocalypse, much like how “The Heat Death of the Universe” and “There Will Come Soft Rains” conclude with images of destruction. Irene, concerned about the radio’s panoptic power, becomes increasingly paranoid that it will transmit their own conversations outward, constantly reminding Jim that “maybe they can hear us” (Cheever, “Radio” 36). The ultimate conflict in this story does not derive so much from this concern about “surveillance,” but rather occurs because of Jim’s disappointment with his appliance’s failure to function as expected, which becomes a metaphor for his entire domestic existence and masculine identity (Beuka 77). He despairs that the radio, which he “paid a great deal of money for” has not made his wife “happy,” as she constantly obsesses about the misery of the neighbors (Cheever, “Radio” 39). After paying four hundred dollars for repairs (transforming the radio back into an ordinary appliance), Jim reveals that he cannot afford the upkeep on such a luxury, bemoaning that “I haven’t done as well as I’d hoped to do” (Cheever, “Radio” 41). Failing appliances

similarly signal the husband's financial struggles in Arthur Miller's *Death of a Salesman* (1949), as Willy Loman sees his breaking refrigerator and car as emblematic of his life's "race with the junkyard" (Miller 54). By attempting to acquire the markers of the postwar good life, Jim has contributed to the financial ruin of his family and feels that his energies and youth have been "wasted in fur coats and radios and slipcovers" (Cheever, "Radio" 41). Like Willy Loman, he feels that his life has become defined by a collection of junk over which he has no power. As a reaction against his resultant loss of control, he becomes abusive, bitterly reprimanding his wife for getting an abortion, a secret that he reveals without the assistance of the supernatural appliance. The radio not only sets the fuse for this marital demolition but also offers no succor to the struggling couple, as the announcer's "suave and noncommittal" voice reports the news at the conclusion of the story, juxtaposing a "railroad disaster" with the Westcott's shattered marriage (Cheever, "Radio" 41). By associating global tragedies with domestic apocalypse, "The Enormous Radio" not only questions whether appliances have the power to provide us with "togetherness" but also presages the larger patterns of postwar "dystopian fiction," in which the "ideological" patterns of the real world become dark visions of the future (Seed, "Flight" 75). Cheever's concern over the disempowerment of the breadwinner, brought about by a solitary appliance, forecasts a larger landscape in which the technologized home results in widespread disintegration and a loss of human control.

Fahrenheit 451: Simulated Families, Burning Houses

While "The Enormous Radio" broadcasts the disruptive ramifications of appliance culture within the financially fragile home, Ray Bradbury's *Fahrenheit 451* (1953) illustrates how the television, automobiles, and the technohome potentially form a

dystopian landscape. At first glance, *Fahrenheit 451* concerns the dangers of totalitarian censorship and the encroachment of mass culture that occurred during the postwar era, patterns which Jonathan R. Eller and William F. Touponce discuss in their analysis of the novel. Bradbury himself stated in a 1964 interview with *Show* that his novel functions as “a direct attack on the kind of thought-destroying force” that emerged under the leadership of Senator Joseph McCarthy (“Portrait” 19). Yet, within the novel, such threats stem not only from the state apparatus and its book-burning firemen but also from the mind-numbing entertainment and domestic technologies that ensure the continuance of the status quo. Bradbury’s critical views of technology and mechanization are well-known (though often misunderstood), but “he has no simplistic anti-machine phobia,” as McNelly rightly insists (18). Bradbury does not demonize technology as a whole, but instead, to paraphrase Marvin E. Mengeling, singles out machines and ideologies that weaken familial and communal bonds (86). The novel accordingly traces Guy Montag’s recognition of how distracting and noisy appliances pervert the domestic sphere, resulting in both the failed fraternity of the firemen and his emotionally empty marriage. *Fahrenheit 451* ultimately signals Bradbury’s yearning for nostalgic visions of domesticity and masculinity that pre-date the postwar period, as he calls for a return to the values of the extended family and to the bonds of rugged, nature-based homosociality.

The firemen who police the dystopian society of *Fahrenheit 451* visibly oppose domestic security and reverse the purpose of their iconic occupation, as they burn down their surrounding community rather than protect it from external threats. Worse still, they actively enjoy their destructive power, such as how Montag takes “a special pleasure . .

. to see things blackened and *changed*,” an impulse that Donald Watt views as quintessentially “sado-masochistic” (emphasis Bradbury’s; Bradbury, *Fahrenheit* 1; Watt 195). Within the world of the novel, however, the firemen do not view themselves as pyromaniacs, but strangely see themselves as performers who “provide a circus now and then” (Bradbury, *Fahrenheit* 83). They present burning as “a comic ritual,” requiring that they adopt the “fierce grin of all men singed and driven by flame” (Eller and Touponce 188; Bradbury, *Fahrenheit* 2). Yet, the firemen’s clownish attitude only further emphasizes the viciousness of their actions, as their laughter while burning down a woman’s house (with her inside) appears cruel in the face of her suffering. They do not ensure domestic happiness, but instead tyrannically force their will upon both the community and the individual, as Montag begins to feel that “the fiery smile still gripped by his face muscles . . . never went away” (Bradbury, *Fahrenheit* 2). Furthermore, their fusion of violence with the logic of performance foretells the novel’s critique of the deadening influence of entertainment technologies (as the firemen have much in common with the White Clowns, whom I will shortly discuss).

Montag’s world denies his desire to reclaim domestic stability and control, as he repeatedly encounters widespread patterns of self-destructive and nihilistic behavior. The most notable practitioners of this kind of behavior in the novel are those individuals who race cars and actively run down both animals and people on their morbid joy rides. Children especially delight in this vicious form of entertainment, as Guy Montag encounters “a carful of children, all ages” who attempt to kill him without provocation (Bradbury, *Fahrenheit* 122). If, as Lee Edelman claims in *No Future* (2004), the child is “the emblem of futurity’s unquestioned value,” then the murderous progeny of

Fahrenheit 451 speak to the decay of both familial and national longevity (4).⁴

Unsurprisingly, the firemen, as products of this grotesque upbringing, become cold and mechanized rather than emotionally united. The firehouse itself represents their lack of brotherly bonds, as it is “full of glitter and shine and silence,” the “cold” space of disconnected automatons who entertain themselves by setting their mechanical hound loose on real animals (Bradbury, *Fahrenheit* 30). Moreover, Captain Beatty, with his resolute command to “burn all, burn everything,” functions as the sociopathic father of this failed home, a figurehead whom Montag must eventually dismantle (Bradbury, *Fahrenheit* 57).

Just as the firehouse represents an inaccessible anti-fraternity and a warped community, Guy and Mildred Montag’s marital home, haunted by noisy gadgetry, signals the absence of romantic partnership, suggesting that the technohome can be just as deadening as the Gothic house. When Montag first enters his home, he envisions it as “a mausoleum” and “a tomb-world,” occupied by his catatonic wife (Bradbury, *Fahrenheit* 9). Mildred, more machine than woman, becomes a commodified robot who plugs into Seashells, tiny ear-sized radios that shut out the possibility of communication with her husband, just as the enormous radio in Cheever’s story hastened marital disintegration. Montag appropriately associates her miniature radios with aggressive insects, warped substitutes for nature which, “mosquito-delicate,” vampirically drain away the possibilities of domestic happiness (Bradbury, *Fahrenheit* 9). As Eller and Touponce point out, Mildred personifies “just about every form of self-narcotization available in this society,” replacing human contact with technological

⁴ I will explore the topic of destructive children in more detail in Chapter 5.

analogues (188). She brings to mind Bradbury's "Marionettes, Inc." (1949), a story about husbands and wives who use humanoid robots to abandon their spouses, illustrating the author's concern with the transformation of the romantic partner into a technologized body. Bradbury also forecasts a later work of the domestic fantastic, Philip K. Dick's *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?* (1968), in which both Rick Deckard and his wife, Iran, plug into a similarly alienating technology, the "mood organ," which replaces genuine emotion with simulated feelings (3). Like Deckard and his wife, Montag and Mildred offer no solace to one another and become virtual strangers, reduced to anonymous "street face[s]" and "newspaper image[s]" (Bradbury, *Fahrenheit* 41). Guy's "open, separate, and therefore cold bed" further fuels his dissatisfaction with his life as a fireman, as he searches for the warm hearth that he lacks at home (Bradbury, *Fahrenheit* 10).

Mildred, unable to unplug from her technologies, sees little difference between her husband and the simulated warmth of the televised "family," frequently preferring her parlor wall's laughter and garish displays over his company. She insists that "my 'family' is people" (sic.), yet can explain neither the content of her programs nor the personalities of the characters that she obsessively watches (Bradbury, *Fahrenheit* 69). Her main interest as a viewer lies in the seemingly participatory nature of the "family," as the show provides her with a script and her parlor walls utilize a "converter attachment" and "special spot-wavex-scrambler" that provide the illusion of a relationship with the announcer (Bradbury, *Fahrenheit* 61). Just as the firemen value the destructiveness of the mechanical hound over real animals, she prefers a technologically constructed family over her marriage. But, this new family only converts

and scrambles interpersonal communication into something self-reflective and circuitous. As William F. Touponce notes in *Ray Bradbury and the Poetics of Reverie* (1981), Mildred participates in the “pathological narcissism” of mass culture because it offers an escape into “that favorite subject, Myself” (Touponce 95; Bradbury, *Fahrenheit* 68). Her television is nothing more than a mirror for her own despair, anticipating the critical perspective of Vance Packard’s *The Hidden Persuaders* (a 1957 exposé of advertising culture), which characterizes the media as “anti-humanistic” for its manipulations of the “secret miseries and self-doubts” of its consumers (57). Mildred eventually cannot distinguish between her life and the television and begins to treat Guy as only another channel, looking “at him as if he were behind the glass wall” and referring to his voice as “junk” (Bradbury, *Fahrenheit* 62).

The Montags are not the only victims of this phenomenon in the novel, as Mildred’s friends, Mrs. Bowles and Mrs. Phelps, similarly embrace the culture of visual entertainment at the cost of their personal relationships, demonstrating how appliances could weaken the fundamental function of the postwar family. Bradbury again points to the child as a signal of failing family bonds, as Mrs. Bowles views motherhood as a chore on the same level as “washing clothes” (Bradbury, *Fahrenheit* 93). Rather than spending time with her children, she leaves them to the care of the television screen and jokes about the fact that “they’d just as soon kick as kiss me” (Bradbury, *Fahrenheit* 93). Mildred and her friends ignore such concerns about their failing families by consuming mass-produced violence, watching the White Clowns killing one another and staring at car crashes. They become dependent on these distractions, without which they would only fixate on the problems that surround them such as the impending threat

of mutually assured destruction. For example, Mrs. Phelps quickly becomes anxious about her husband's role in the ongoing nuclear war when Montag turns off the parlor walls, as she obsessively repeats that she's "not worried" and giggles (Bradbury, *Fahrenheit* 91). Similarly to the firemen, these women plaster on "Cheshire cat smiles" because they need to bury the reality of impending destruction (Bradbury, *Fahrenheit* 89). Moreover, the very structure of suburbia seems to worsen their mortal anxiety. Mildred and her friends, "isolated in a world of other mothers" and with no evident extended family structures, necessarily turn inward (Halberstam 143). Bradbury thus reflects emergent concerns during the 1950s regarding the dangers of suburban alienation, as his technologically anesthetized women anticipate the "rise in the consumption of the new tranquilizer drugs such as Miltown and Thorazine," another kind of narcotizing postwar technology (Miller and Nowak 138).

While Montag eventually breaks away from emotionally empty domesticity (a choice which speaks to the American cultural elevation of the ruggedly independent man), Mildred demonstrates the dangers of clinging to the structures of suburbia and technological obsession. Mildred enters the novel already on the brink of death, after taking a bottle of sleeping pills. Though Montag does not explore her mental instability at length, he observes that Mildred's unhappiness stems from an internal division between her public persona and "another Mildred . . . deep inside this one" who is "really bothered" (Bradbury, *Fahrenheit* 49). Despite the fact that he also suffers from a similar internal division, between "two halves grinding one upon the other," he seems to be desperately unable to save his wife from her suffering (Bradbury, *Fahrenheit* 21). Likewise, the community offers no support for Mildred's problem beyond two

“impersonal” suicide “handymen” whose key motivation stems from a fifty dollar service fee (Bradbury, *Fahrenheit* 12, 13). To these men, Mildred becomes an appliance to repair or to shut down: they can see the problem through the “Eye” of a mechanical snake, yet, they are blind to her greater emotional distress, treating her instead like a toilet that needs a Roto-Rooter (Bradbury, *Fahrenheit* 12). Anticipating Plath’s housewife who has “blown your tubes like a bad radio,” they reduce Mildred’s biological components to mechanical ones, believing that replacing her bodily fluids “with fresh blood and serum” will fix the underlying problem (Plath, “Lesbos” 18; Bradbury, *Fahrenheit* 12). This image fuses vampirism with the fear of technological replacement. However, as Montag mourns, the problem is not that they are “fused to . . . contraptions,” but rather that “nobody knows anyone” in their society (Bradbury, “Portrait” 30; Bradbury, *Fahrenheit* 14). The handymen “get these cases nine or ten [times] a night,” assumedly from both husbands and housewives, because, like Mildred and Guy, the majority of the people in the novel are living in a world of strangers, searching for support from the wrong “family” (Bradbury, *Fahrenheit* 13).

Clarisse McClellan, the Montags’ young neighbor whom the psychiatric establishment labels as mentally ill and “antisocial” (similarly to Bradbury’s “The Murderer”), represents an alternative model of domesticity that breaks away from the self-destructive and alienating tendencies of mainstream culture in *Fahrenheit 451* (Bradbury, *Fahrenheit* 26). Clarisse rejects nihilistic sources of entertainment, instead delighting in nature and absorbing lessons about “a long time ago” from her uncle (Bradbury, *Fahrenheit* 27). Bradbury captures Clarisse’s unique blend of nature and nostalgia when he contrasts the “soft and constant light” of her face with “the hysterical

light of electricity” (Bradbury, *Fahrenheit 5*). Unlike the harsh technology of the parlor walls that deaden the senses, Clarisse elicits from Montag a shady childhood memory of lighting a candle with his mother during “a power failure” (Bradbury, *Fahrenheit 5*). William F. Touponce aptly describes Montag’s nostalgia as “a utopian . . . reverie,” as Clarisse wakens his dormant knowledge of domestic comfort (91). Furthermore, Bradbury links this memory of the home to, in the words of Rafeeq O. McGiveron, “very positive, lyrical nature imagery,” implying that the domestic situation of Montag’s present is artificial and degrading (121). Under the light of Clarisse’s gently illuminating face, Montag realizes that his fireman’s smile is a fragile construct that barely covers the fact of his unhappiness.

The McClellans’ house, associated with warmth and the lost art of conversation, similarly makes Montag conscious of the coldness and funereal aspects of his own home. Yet, the McClellan family is not starkly anti-technological: the contrast here is not, as Wayne Johnson suggests, between “the dangerous mechanical world of the city” and “the traditional haven of the country” (*Bradbury 87*). Instead, the McClellans harness the power of electricity to facilitate their unity rather than to fuel the meaningless noise of mass entertainment, as their house is “blazing” with lights rather than with destructive fire, bringing to mind the utopian promise of living better electrically (Bradbury, *Fahrenheit 7*). The McClellan home, “brightly lit,” pulls Montag away from his suicidal wife and into its “hypnotic web” of conversation (Bradbury, *Fahrenheit 14*). Furthermore, the McClellans’ “laughter was relaxed and hearty and not forced in any way,” further marking their distance from the pained grimaces of the firemen, the murderous humor of the White Clowns, and the laugh tracks of television sitcoms. As a result of his brief

interactions with Clarisse, Montag's own "laugh sounds much nicer than it did," indicating his shift away from the artificial nature of his profession (Bradbury, *Fahrenheit* 26). In the process of re-educating Montag, Clarisse turns him back to long-forgotten models of the home. He even yearns for the architecture of small-town America, as he compares the "flat fronts" of the suburban houses with the lost "front porches" that formerly enabled people to talk comfortably (Bradbury, *Fahrenheit* 60). Though Clarisse ultimately becomes a victim of her generation's violence, run down by a gang of teenage drivers, she serves as (in both David Seed and Donald Watt's term) a catalyst for optimism, transforming Montag's view of domestic health (Seed, "Flight" 82; Watt 197).

Moreover, Clarisse's influence crucially spurs Montag's interest in reading, which he explores not as an act of political defiance but because he believes it holds the secret of communal renewal. After her death, he finally retrieves his books from their hiding place because, as he explains to his wife, "their words point, one way or another to Clarisse" (Bradbury, *Fahrenheit* 68). The act of reading is only a means to an end for Montag. In the words of Montag's friend Faber (whose name recalls the famous publishing house), "it's not books you need, it's some of the things that once were in books" (Bradbury, *Fahrenheit* 78). For Bradbury, books "are indifferent," as, like any other piece of technology (thinking of technology broadly construed as a manmade tool or object), they "do not 'know' but they can teach us humanism" (Bradbury, "An Interview" 113). Montag treats reading as a pathway back to the long-forgotten habit of conversation, since "nobody listens any more" (Bradbury, *Fahrenheit* 78). Notably, he attempts to include his wife in this act of domestic revival, believing that they might steer

their marriage away from “the cliff” if they are “in this together” (Bradbury, *Fahrenheit* 63). Reading in *Fahrenheit 451* is never a solitary act, but one that unites the family and the community in a mutually participatory tradition, ironically providing what postwar advertisers promised families would find with radio and television.

Bradbury emphasizes that the formation of domestic bonds around the act of reading requires willing participants. Mildred’s rejection of the technology of books in favor of the technohome provides Montag with a clean break from their failed marriage, as she and her friends turn him over to Beatty and the firemen. Burning his house at Beatty’s command, he views the fire not as a punishment, but as a kind of ritual cleansing, practicing again “the purging power of the fireman” (Watt 207). He targets “everything that showed that he had lived here in this strange house with a strange woman,” burning their twin beds and the parlor walls (Bradbury, *Fahrenheit* 110). Fire in this case is not a technology of state control, but an indiscriminate tool that transforms into a source of natural beauty, “one huge bright yellow flower of burning” (Bradbury, *Fahrenheit* 111). Just as in “There Will Come Soft Rains,” in which “a falling tree bough” sets off a fire that cleanses the technohome, Bradbury draws on botanical imagery, likening Montag’s house fire to a flower in order to symbolically mark his return to nature (Bradbury, “Rains” 327).

With his “house all burnt” and unable to return to mainstream society Montag necessarily flees from the city, finding shelter in the surrounding countryside among the book people (Bradbury, *Fahrenheit* 125). While Rafeeq O. McGiveron, Wayne Johnson and Donald Watt have all noted Bradbury’s privileging of nature as a site of renewal, Montag does not enter the romanticized wilderness so much as the manmade space of

agriculture. Floating down the river, washed clean of the blackened grime of the firemen, he praises the pastoral scene, delighting in the herds of cows, pigs and “white sheep on a hill” (Bradbury, *Fahrenheit* 135). More importantly, Bradbury associates these farms with a nostalgic and sentimentalized view of domesticity, which he further explores in his celebration of *pre-war* small town life, *Dandelion Wine* (1957). Montag, as if a time traveler into America’s agrarian past, fantasizes about sleeping in the loft of a barn “until a very young and beautiful woman” (clearly a reincarnated Clarisse McClellan) would wake him with a plate of fruit and “a cool glass of fresh milk” (Bradbury, *Fahrenheit* 136). Montag goes on to associate the farmlands with the olfactory experience of the kitchen, imagining how the land smells “like a cut potato” while the air carries the odors of “pickles from a bottle” and “mustard from a jar” (Bradbury, *Fahrenheit* 137-138). Despite the material difficulties that he might have faced as an exile from mainstream society, Montag recovers among the book people all of the comforts of home and enters a masculinist fantasy of domestic comfort in which nature will become his new wife.

Similarly to the McClellan household, the book people embrace the power of light and fire, transforming it into something that is “not burning,” but “*warming*” (emphasis Bradbury’s; *Fahrenheit* 139). Bradbury does not, as John Huntington suggests, set up a dichotomy between “controllable” nature and “predatory” technology, but rather aligns the book people with humanizing tools (137). They still watch television, but do so for the purposes of acquiring information rather than for dull entertainment. Furthermore, they live alongside the railroad track, trains being a set of machines that Bradbury has persistently praised “for keeping us in touch with humane ideas and a democratic past”

(Mengeling 91). Beyond their associations with positive technologies, the book people focus on conversation, that all-important center of domestic life. Though they claim to subjugate their personalities for the sake of memorizing books, they are still able to converse so that “there was nothing they could not talk about” (Bradbury, *Fahrenheit* 140). Inside jokes serve an important role in their conversations, as they “all laughed quietly” at the new meaning of the cliché to not “judge a book by its cover” (Bradbury, *Fahrenheit* 148). Contrasting with the noisy laughter of the firemen and Mildred Montag, who employ comedy as a distraction, the book people turn to humor to “constitute a new kind of folk culture” (Eller and Touponce 166). Bound together in their shared value of books, they affirm a new vision of the family, the main task of which is to “pass the books on to our children” (Bradbury, *Fahrenheit* 146). They reject the violent lessons of mainstream culture and embrace a vision of the future based on a sense of tradition and togetherness.

Notably, the book people’s vision of domestic renewal cannot occur without the destruction of the old system. As occurs at the end of *The Martian Chronicles* (1950), the insufficient “way of life is . . . burned clean,” as the bombing of the city wipes it out almost instantaneously (Bradbury, “Picnic” 267). The destruction here is not all-encompassing, but rather allows for the cultivation of new domestic forms. Just as “The Million-Year Picnic” (the final section of *The Martian Chronicles*) features the exodus of family rockets to colonize Mars, *Fahrenheit 451* concludes with what Kevin Hoskinson calls the “notion of recivilization.” Granger, whose name connects him with traditions of agricultural growth, mourns the destructive patterns of humanity, yet encourages a need to rebuild society while “remembering” past mistakes (Seed, “Flight” 87; Bradbury,

Fahrenheit 157). Thus, Montag does not abandon his memories of Mildred as he enters the society of the book people, but mourns her loss, remembering their first meeting as she dies in the annihilated city. He carries with him not only a new community but also a sentimental memory of his marriage, embracing a nostalgic view of domesticity that might aid in “the healing of the nations” (Bradbury, *Fahrenheit 158*). Ultimately, the hope for domestic renewal in *Fahrenheit 451* lies not in the withdrawal from mass culture and technology, but in the movement toward reform. Montag and the book people trudge back toward the city, bringing with them not only their historical and literary consciousness but also, and more importantly, a sense of community.

Fahrenheit 451 opposes the issues of the electric domestic with a masculinist community predicated on technologically-enhanced mobility, as Guy Montag and his companions embrace the open road in their quest to escape the technohome and the related structures of political containment. The conclusion of this novel not only demonstrates the domestic fantastic’s focus on the psychological impact of entertainment technologies but also introduces the genre’s related interest in the supposedly freeing machineries of transportation. As Miller and Nowak note, the post-World War II era was dominated by “superhighways” as “the number of registered cars increased by over 21 million” between 1950 and 1960 (7, 8). The car was undoubtedly a primary technological icon of this time, depicted in advertisements as both a domestic enclosure on wheels that could unify the family and as a vehicle of escape into the territory of rugged achievement in which the man could be “in the driver’s seat, the king of the road” (Faludi 10). The Beats (whom I will not be discussing in this project) promoted the latter imagery of transportation, particularly through Jack Kerouac’s *On*

the Road (1957) and by frequently appearing with “cars in the pages of *Life* and *Esquire*” (Davidson 2). Thus, we might expect the writers of the domestic fantastic to affirm the technological wonder of the automobile as it pertains to the potentiality for male escape.

“Duel” and “Nightmare at 20,000 Feet”: Matheson’s Immobilized Passengers

However, for Richard Matheson, author of novels of postwar masculine anxiety such as *The Incredible Shrinking Man* (1956) and *I Am Legend* (1954), the car and other modes of transportation become entrapping spaces in which a man does not drive his own destiny but is an immobilized passenger, subjected to the brutalizing forces of technology. For example, in “Duel” (1971; a short story collected with *The Incredible Shrinking Man*), a salesman named Mann encounters a truck driver, Keller, who repeatedly tailgates him and attempts to run him off the road. Mann struggles to maintain control of his vehicle and his life, imagining that he will be run off the road and end up “lying in a casket, painted like some gross mannequin,” an image that links the car to greater issues of depersonalization (Matheson, “Duel” 327). While the truck pursuing Mann ultimately crashes and explodes, Matheson offers no explanation for the violence of the road in this story, other than suggesting that it has become an avenue for “primeval tumult” rather than technological utopia, a concern that Bradbury shares in his illustration of murderous joy-riders in *Fahrenheit 451* (Matheson, “Duel” 334). By the same token, “Nightmare at 20,000 Feet” (1962) indicates how transportation technologies could become stultifying spaces, as Matheson shifts his attentions to the commercial airplane. Most well-known as a 1963 episode of *The Twilight Zone* (starring William Shatner), “Nightmare” reminds us that supposedly secure technologies are subject to breakdown, embodied within the destructive figure of the “gremlin” (24). The

breakdown of the plane in this case facilitates the psychosis of Arthur Jeffrey Wilson, who even before the appearance of the gremlin, worries that the plane's propeller will "tear lose, and, like a tri-bladed cleaver, come slicing in at him" (Matheson, "Nightmare" 15). Though Wilson eventually saves the passengers of the flight by opening an emergency panel and shooting the gremlin, his hospitalization at the story's end marks a movement from "a howling shell of death" to another confined space, suggesting the futility of escape from domestication (Matheson, "Nightmare" 17). For Matheson, motorized technologies only Gothically circle back toward enclosure, making men feel as if they are passengers in the backseat of their own lives.

"The Taxpayer," "R is for Rocket," and "The Rocket": Bradbury's Astro-nots

The rocket, similarly to the car, seemed to promise a technologized flight from domesticity, the figure of the astronaut signifying "the pilgrimage of masculinity" into the final frontiers of space (Faludi 5). Ray Bradbury, writing not only futuristic dystopias but also fantasies of Martian colonization, often facilitated a "new theatrics of space" that reached its height with the development of NASA and the circulating images of "astronaut stars appearing on the covers of national magazines" (Spigel 114). However, his tales of earthbound men, whom I term "astro-nots," denote the limits that attended the promises of postwar technological mobility, as he suggests that very few individuals could break into the territory of outer space. For example, in "The Taxpayer" (part of *The Martian Chronicles*), "men in uniform" prevent Pritchard from boarding a rocket bound for Mars, offering no explanation for a decision that leaves him to assumedly perish in the nuclear explosions that ravage the Earth at the conclusion of *The Martian Chronicles* (Bradbury 42). By the same token, "R is for Rocket" (1943) suggests that only the "chosen" get to travel to outer space, as Chris, the narrator of the story, joins an

astronaut training program that selects “about ten thousand young men each year from the earth’s billions” (Bradbury 167). Chris’s childhood friend, Ralph, remains earthbound, his exclusion from the space program amplifying the longstanding economic and personal disparities between these characters. Ralph, in the universe of this story, is not fit to travel to outer space because of his marginalized class identity, as, unlike Chris (who was raised by a middle class loving mother), he is an orphan and a ward of the state, raised “in one of those orthopedical stations” (Bradbury, “R” 164). The recruiter for the astronaut program, when speaking to Chris about his friend observes that being “station-bred” is “not good,” marking how the postwar dream of transportation was often closed off to those unable to afford it (Bradbury, “R” 164).

Issues of affordability emerge more clearly within “The Rocket” (1950, originally titled “Outcast of the Stars”), which juxtaposes the awesomeness of space travel against the financial limitations of the head of the household. In this story, Fiorello Bodoni, a struggling junkyard owner, dreams of traveling on a rocket, and has even spent “six years” saving up the money necessary for a trip for one to Mars (Bradbury, “Rocket” 181). However, his friend Bramante advises him neither to travel to Mars nor to give the trip to his wife or children, lest he foment “bitterness” among them (Bradbury, “Rocket” 181). As an alternative, Bodoni uses his savings to purchase “a full-scale model” of a rocket, which he fits out with “nine ancient automobile motors” and “color film” so as to simulate a week-long trip to Mars (Bradbury, “Rocket” 184, 187, 189). He ultimately convinces his children that the trip is real, providing them with the wonders of space within “the center of the junkyard, manufacturing a magic dream” (Bradbury, “Rocket” 188). In many ways, Bodoni maintains the dream of technological mobility,

passing on his hopes for travel and class ascension to his children. However, Bradbury does not let us forget about Bodoni's limitations, particularly the fact that his frivolous investment in the fake rocket has (in the words of his wife) "ruined" his family, similarly to how Jim Westcott becomes economically emasculated in "The Enormous Radio" (Bradbury, "Rocket" 186). Bodoni can never ascend into outer space, just as he can never climb the corporate ladder to join the postwar middle class, a dream that will potentially remain out of reach for his children, though they still, like their father, hope to attain the technological markers of success.

"The Five-Forty-Eight" and "The Swimmer": Cheever's Conquered Commuters

Like Matheson's immobilized passengers and Bradbury's astro-nots, John Cheever's commuters struggle to retain agency within transportation technologies, as they are shuttled between the urban and suburban landscape. Cheever's men are often trapped in a feedback loop between home and the workplace, a lifestyle best illustrated by the April 2, 1955 cover of *The New Yorker*, which features the same cartoon images of a man repeated ad infinitum. The man on the cover (the typical, gray-flannel suited commuter) kisses his wife, rides the subway, sits at work, rides the subway back home, and kisses his wife, a circular structure that the cover repeats by printing the same looping images five times in a row, suggesting an endless and monotonous pattern of life. In some ways, Cheever's stories of transportation speak to similar concerns about the conformist structures of the breadwinner identity and the purported loss of the individual within an environment of collectivization and "belongingness," which William Whyte famously explored in *The Organization Man* (1956). More importantly, they demonstrate how middle-class male mobility often relies on the ejection or humiliation of economically and socially underprivileged individuals, revealing as false the notion that

suburbia “not only looks classless but is classless” (Whyte 299). Indeed, Elaine Tyler May observes how the establishment of “the legendary white middle-class family of the 1950s” resulted from the exclusion of people of color, such as how William Levitt only offered affordable mortgages to veterans “provided they were white” (13, 161). Both “The Five-Forty-Eight” (1954) and “The Swimmer” (1964) accordingly focus on the conquering of the mobile male by outside forces that remind us how the success of the postwar middle class man resulted from the processes of exclusion.

“The Five-Forty-Eight” (named after the commuter train central to the narrative), suggests that exclusion can lead to the creation of dangerous others from whom “no place is safe” (Hendershot 2). Yet, for Cheever “it is not primarily the criminal underworld or the poor that are implicated as the source of horror,” but rather, as Punter and Byron note in their analysis of the Gothic genre, “what underlies the surface of the supposedly civilized and respectable world” (40). Just as the machinations of mainstream society lead to apocalyptic destruction in *Fahrenheit 451*, “The Five-Forty-Eight” suggests that the disgraced secretary Miss Dent is not entirely to blame for her descent into madness, as she murderously pursues her former boss and lover, Mr. Blake. Specifically, Miss Dent’s breakdown results from Blake’s cruelty, as he hires her, sleeps with her, has personnel fire her the following day during lunchtime, and does not consider how his decisions will affect her economically and personally. Blake is an utterly unsympathetic victim, as he dominates not only Miss Dent but also his wife, whom he punishes with two weeks of silence for not preparing his dinner on time. Likewise, he “said a number of things that must have sounded critical” to his neighbors, the Watkinses, treating them as socially inferior because they rent their suburban home

(Cheever, "Five-Forty-Eight" 240). The narrative encourages us to support Miss Dent's punishment of Blake, as he embodies the worst kind of middle-class masculinist privilege through his sexist and classist actions.

Miss Dent, holding Blake hostage with her pistol, radically constricts his power and draws attention to her own limited mobility within the postwar landscape. She notes that she "could never afford to travel," unlike Blake, for whom the commuter train is a mundane habit (Cheever, "Five-Forty-Eight" 243). Though we might expect him to have an advantage over this interloper in a familiar technological space, which is also a masculine space in the gray flannel world of middle class work, he is utterly alone, as none of his neighbors come to his aid and "neither of them spoke to him" (Cheever, "Five-Forty-Eight" 245). Even when she leads him off the train and into the outskirts of suburbia, Miss Dent is able to steer Blake as she wishes, forcing him to "kneel" and put his "face in the dirt" (Cheever, "Five-Forty-Eight" 247). In this moment of humiliation, she reverses the structures of gendered and classed power, leaving Blake to walk back to his home with the knowledge of his own potential passivity. Just as in *Fahrenheit 451*, Miss Blake affirms that there is no sense of community amongst the commuters, and further draws attention to the true powerlessness of the breadwinner, the supposed conqueror of technological and domestic space.

"The Swimmer" likewise transforms the suburban man from a supposedly independent and dominating figure into a humiliated and helpless victim (though one who is arguably more sympathetic than Blake). Neddy Merrill, recovering from a night of drinking with his wife and friends, aspires to travel home through the neighborhood pools. Viewing these technologies of suburban luxury as parts of a "quasi-subterranean

stream” that offers a new means of transportation, he imagines that his athletic crossing will transform him into “a pilgrim, an explorer, a man with a destiny,” a nostalgic model of manhood predicated on physicality and freedom (Cheever, “Swimmer” 604). Similarly to Guy Montag of *Fahrenheit 451*, who floats down a stream to the book people, Neddy embraces a “pastoral impulse,” though he does so by treating manmade spaces as if they offer the rugged and escapist potential of nature (Beuka 97). Furthermore, he associates his “river” with an idealistic vision of suburban togetherness, imagining that “prosperous men and women” will gather “by the sapphire-colored waters” to celebrate his journey toward his home in Bullet Park (Cheever, “Swimmer” 605).

The technological spaces of Neddy’s journey (remembering that pools are entirely manmade imitations of nature), rather than providing him with a new means of conquering the suburban landscape, reveal the fragmentation of his identity as a middle-class provider. His disillusionment begins when he encounters a dry pool, abandoned by neighbors who have posted a “for sale” sign in front of their empty house (Cheever, “Swimmer” 607). This reminder of suburban failure pales in comparison to the shattering impact of the highway, as the passers-by laugh at Neddy, who has “no dignity or humor to bring to the situation” (Cheever, “Swimmer” 607). The trash-strewn road, covered in “beer cans, rags, and blowout patches,” carries the physical markers of waste and breakdown, not only clashing with the fantasy image of the pure Lucinda river (which Neddy has named after his wife) but also drawing attention to the polluting side-effects of the “on-the road” fantasy (Cheever, “Swimmer” 607). Likewise, the public pool that Neddy feels he has to cross is not clean but also carries the markers of pollution and environmental unsustainability, as it is crowded with other bodies and

controlled by lifeguards who “abused the swimmers” (Cheever, “Swimmer” 608). As Robert Beuka notes in *SuburbiaNation* (2004), the lifeguards who identify Neddy as a “nobody” signal a reversal of his class status and his larger alienation from the surrounding community, demonstrating that he is not a heroic figure but a passive man who feels “that he had no freedom of choice about his means of travel” (Beuka 99; Cheever, “Swimmer” 610). The journey does not offer transcendent transportation, as it concludes with the revelation that Neddy is traveling nowhere, toward a house that is “locked” and “empty” (Cheever, “Swimmer” 612). “The Swimmer” thus demonstrates how the masculinist desire for mobility can become a narcotizing force, a shallow dream that cannot erase the realities of economic failure, symbolized by locked house and the drained swimming pool.

Breakfast of Champions: Automotive and Automated Apocalypse

Just as John Cheever considers how technologies of transportation marginalize the broken breadwinner, Kurt Vonnegut examines how postwar consumer culture, represented by the owner of a car dealership, might drive us toward a sinister kind of depersonalization and conformity that reduces everything to, in his terms, “trashy merchandise” (Vonnegut, “Playboy” 109). Vonnegut, best known as an author of the postmodern classic *Slaughterhouse-Five* (1969), was familiar with the mundane concerns of domestic audiences. Just as how Bradbury published in *McCall's*, Vonnegut, as Thomas F. Marvin notes, “published short stories in magazines that were intended to appeal to a wide audience, including the *Saturday Evening Post*, *Colliers*, *Esquire*, *Ladies Home Journal*, and *Cosmopolitan*” (22). *Breakfast of Champions*, with its focus on middle-American consumerism and kitsch, is in many ways a culmination of Vonnegut’s experience with these domestic publications. Yet, this novel receives little

attention among scholars of Vonnegut's work, partly because it lacks a cohesive sense of plot and because his prose style paired with his felt-pen drawings strike some critics as childishly simple and often crude. Yet, *Breakfast of Champions*, named after a General Mills slogan, written by a former public relations worker at General Electric, and focusing on the madness of a General Motors salesman, meditates on the influence of consumption on both a personal and a global scale as Vonnegut investigates his fascination with living in what he calls "a car-crazy country" (Marvin 21; Vonnegut, "Two Conversations" 202).

The novel deals with, in Vonnegut's words, the "meeting of two lonesome, skinny, fairly old white men on a planet which was dying fast" (*Breakfast* 7). One of these men, Dwayne Hoover, is a Pontiac dealer who is suffering from an unspecified mental illness and who lashes out violently after reading a novel claiming that only he has free will and that everyone else is a machine designed to test him. The other man, Kilgore Trout, is a science fiction writer who, in addition to writing the novel that breaks Hoover, produces countless stories that culminate in pessimistic visions of environmental devastation. Much of the novel is a study of contrasts between Hoover, the ultimate representative of American consumption and Trout, a member of the disenfranchised groups that haunt the novel, which is filled with a horde of citizens who feel "so ignored and cheated and insulted that they thought they might be in the wrong country, or even on the wrong planet" (Vonnegut, *Breakfast* 9). Vonnegut, like Cheever before him, focuses on issues of economic exclusion as a means of investigating the tenuous privilege of postwar men in the middle.

Dwayne Hoover, unlike Kilgore Trout, has all of the financial means necessary to live within a postwar culture that idolizes the spirit of prosperity embodied within the icon of the car. Yet, despite the fact that he owns Dwayne Hoover's Exit Eleven Pontiac Village, "a piece of the New Holiday Inn . . . three Burger Chefs . . . five coin-operated car washes, and pieces of the Sugar Creek Drive-In Theatre," among other business ventures, Hoover experiences his consumer culture as both literally and figuratively poisonous (Vonnegut, *Breakfast* 40). Like the constantly plugged in Mildred Montag, Hoover's mind has become warped by the language of advertising, as among his varied hallucinations, he hears messages that "had to do with buying or selling some damn thing" (Vonnegut, *Breakfast* 53). Just as one of his properties, a kitschy roadside attraction called Sacred Miracle Cave, is gradually becoming filled with "some sort of industrial waste which formed bubbles as tough as ping-pong balls," Dwayne has become a vessel for the detritus of consumerism and hence, is chemically unbalanced (Vonnegut, *Breakfast* 119). Although he is "fabulously well-to-do," Dwayne experiences the world as a process of "destructive testing" and identifies with broken cars, perhaps explaining why the science fiction novel of Kilgore Trout so easily leads to his psychotic breakdown (Vonnegut, *Breakfast* 13, 169; Klinkowitz 109). However, Vonnegut emphasizes that Dwayne is an essentially narcissistic figure who, wrapped up in his own suffering, ignores the other characters in the novel who view him as a possible "Fairy Godmother" of capitalism, an identity that signals his already warped postwar masculinity (Vonnegut, *Breakfast* 141).

Kilgore Trout, on the other hand, lacks Hoover's monetary powers, but represents a kind of social consciousness through his science fiction stories that cry out

against the endemic violence of American consumer culture. Despite the fact that Trout receives no payment for his stories and virtually no one reads them (except people who stumble upon them in pornographic publications or his one true fan, Eliot Rosewater), he publishes countless stories in the attempt to stave off the incoming environmental apocalypse, embodying the socially progressive spirit of the domestic fantastic. For example, his novel *Plague on Wheels* speaks out against the unsustainability of the American car industry, describing a dying planet called Lingo Three whose inhabitants are sentient automobiles who become extinct upon destroying “their planets resources, including its atmosphere” (Vonnegut, *Breakfast* 26). The protagonist of this novel, a one-inch tall alien named Kago, witnesses the death of the inhabitants of Lingo Three, and tells their story of tragic destruction on Earth. However, the Earthlings choose to develop their own automobiles, turning the planet into a destroyed landscape full of the “shells of the great beetles,” leaving Kago to die at the hands of a “drunk automobile worker” who mistakes him for a kitchen match (Vonnegut, *Breakfast* 29). Trout’s worldview is profoundly pessimistic, as he speculates that humanity is already driving toward its own doom – his science fiction stories primarily exist to rub salt into the wounds of the victims of postwar consumer culture.

Much of the plot involving Kilgore Trout deals with his experience traveling as a hitchhiker across the United States, as he not only writes domestic fantastic stories about the automotive industry but also experiences its violent impact first-hand. *Breakfast of Champions* is a road novel, but one that denies the triumphant spirit of the Beat generation in favor of carefully reflecting on how cars and highways have desolated the American landscape. Unlike the road that brings men together at the

conclusion of *Fahrenheit 451*, Vonnegut's highways are more akin to Matheson and Cheever's visions of the disintegrating sites of transportation. For example, Trout meets a driver of a "General Motors Astro-95 Diesel tractor," but the two men have little to talk about, other than their shared agreement that the truck is responsible for "turning the atmosphere into poison gas" and is, in the driver's terms, a slow means of "committing suicide" (Vonnegut, *Breakfast* 86, 87). The vehicle is not a space of homosocial bonding, but reminds the men of social loss and what Stanley Schatt terms "the hopelessness of communication," as the driver mourns his inability to maintain "friendships that meant anything" while on the road and Trout fails to remember his new companion's name (Schatt 100; Vonnegut, *Breakfast* 106, 107). Like Montag and the firemen, Trout and the truck driver are unable to develop a feeling of fraternity in the midst of technologized spaces. The frequent appearance of brutal accidents during the course of Trout's journey further emphasizes Vonnegut's belief that cars are endemic of larger social problems of fragmentation and communal emptiness (Vonnegut, "Playboy" 79). For Vonnegut, cars are harbingers of death that either result in senselessly gruesome scenes or that contribute to the flotsam and jetsam of consumer waste. No image better embodies the nightmarish combination of violence and trash than an accident that Trout sees of "a 1968 Cadillac *El Dorado* capsized in a brook" in which "there were also several old home appliances . . . stoves, a washing machine, a couple of refrigerators" (Vonnegut, *Breakfast* 123-124). *El Dorado* is here no longer a promise of a city of gold and prosperity, but something that the automotive industry and American consumerism has warped into an icon of loss and decay. Likewise, the brook,

which Guy Montag and Neddy Merrill treated as a pastoral space, has become polluted and choked by the cast-off and shattered icons of living better electrically.

Vonnegut's choice to conclude *Breakfast of Champions* with the public breakdown of the Pontiac dealer, Dwayne Hoover, signifies how the automotive industry connects to his larger concerns with technology and the threat of depersonalization. Vonnegut is not alone in making this connection, as Thomas Pynchon also envisions the used car dealership as a traumatic space, describing how it haunts the dreams of Mucho Maas in *The Crying of Lot 49*. For Mucho, cars carry "a salad of despair," acting as dumpsters for the memories of the struggling owner who exchanges "a dented, malfunctioning version of himself for another, just as futureless, automotive projection of somebody else's life" (Pynchon 5). Dwayne Hoover likewise worries about a futureless, technologized world that begins on the car lot and culminates with the plot of Kilgore Trout's novel, *Now It Can Be Told*. Trout's novel is too much for Hoover to bear because it not only suggests that everyone else is a machine but also imagines that these machines exist only to spoil the planet and to antagonize the universe's only creature who has free will (Vonnegut, *Breakfast* 261). As Hoover lashes out at those around them, sending eleven people to the hospital, he asks a crucial question: "Why should I care what happens to machines?" (Vonnegut, *Breakfast* 270). Yet, Vonnegut asks us to disavow this nihilistic belief in a mechanical universe and to hold out hope for the values of humanism and transcendence in the face of social breakdown. His novel does not end with the image of madness, but with Vonnegut as a character in his own text speaking directly to Kilgore Trout about America's need for "symbols which have not been poisoned by great sins our nation has committed" (Vonnegut, *Breakfast* 301).

While he wants to move away from the technological dreams of General Motors, General Electric, and General Mills, Vonnegut suggests that we might be able to regain some of the sense of dignity that we have lost in the face of a culture of consumption.

Conclusion: “A New Day Dawning For You”

Ray Bradbury, Richard Matheson, John Cheever, and Kurt Vonnegut suggest that an unflinchingly positive view of technologies of entertainment and transportation ignores the damaging impact these objects might have, especially as they relate to the maintenance of domestic health and the economic and social anxieties of the male consumer. These writers of the domestic fantastic were not alone in their concerns about the negative side-effects of technoscience, particularly about cars, which Lewis Mumford described as “fantastic and insolent chariots” and the anthropologist Ashley Montagu termed “the greatest disaster of the twentieth century” (qtd. in Marling 131; Montagu 319). The advertisements of the postwar era provide quite a different picture, especially a 1960 Plymouth ad that happily celebrated the car as “a new day dawning for you” and “the answer to all your dreams.” This jingle goes on to link the car to the triumphant exploration of outer space and the icon of the rocket that began this section, describing the drive as a “ride on sweet moonbeams.” Finally, the peppy song promises “no more shake, rattle, and roll,” associating this central transportation technology with not only the freedom of an iconic rock and roll anthem but also stability and “solid satisfaction” (“1960 Plymouth”).

Yet, the Plymouth Fury featured in this commercial is also the car of choice for Dwayne Hoover of *Breakfast of Champions*, marking how a positive technological dream can always carry the potential for nightmarish destruction. Indeed, the authors of the domestic fantastic mark how the radio, television-centered home, car, plane, rocket,

train, and even swimming pool can all produce fragmentation and transform the male consumer into an immobilized and conquered subject. While television and transportation undoubtedly changed the face of postwar American culture and contributed to new kinds of mobility and emergent social patterns, the authors of the domestic fantastic remain sensitive to the warping influence of such developments. Bradbury, Matheson, Cheever, and Vonnegut's concerns with marginality and madness speak to the domestic fantastic's greater concerns with how living better electrically could spark social injustice, such as in Allen Ginsberg's "Howl" (1956) with its imagery of "Moloch, whose soul is electricity and banks." The authors of the domestic fantastic ultimately ask us to reconsider the environmental and social sustainability of icons that not only continue to dominate our contemporary technological landscape but also potentially threaten to become demonic forces that might consume our future.

CHAPTER 5
MURDEROUS, MONSTROUS, AND MUTATED CHILDREN IN THE TIME OF DR.
BENJAMIN SPOCK AND THE CHILD-CENTERED FAMILY

In the years immediately following World War II, the growing middle class in the United States experienced a baby boom and a resurgence of the cult of motherhood, arguably because the child, as an icon of the next generation, seemed to offer an optimistic future for humanity in the face of technoscientific change. Numerous postwar Americans broke from long-established patterns of “extended family living arrangements” in favor of nuclear families that revolved around the figure of the child (Kuznick and Gilbert 5). Advertisements from this time both reflected and reinforced a cultural fantasy that the child was pure and perfect, as images of docile infants in their mothers’ arms dominated the pages of women’s magazines. For example, an Ivory Snow detergent advertisement from the September 1955 issue of *Ladies’ Home Journal* features a mother and her serene baby holding a stuffed lamb, symbolically linking the child with orderliness and innocence. The costuming in this ad, with the mother dressed in an elaborate white gown that harkens back to the Victorian era, presents the mother-child dyad as a timeless institution that will remain stable in the face of futurity. The record sales of Dr. Benjamin Spock’s *The Common Sense Book of Baby and Child Care* (1946) during this time similarly indicate a widespread cultural investment in protecting the child. Selling “three-quarters of a million copies during its first year of publication” (and soon thereafter becoming a bestseller), Spock’s manual extensively catalogued the various components of childrearing, ranging from lists of equipment and potential illnesses to describing a child’s psychological milestones (Grant 220). The proliferation of his book and his consequent column in *Ladies’ Home Journal* (published

from 1954 until 1962) indicate that readers valued Spock's attempt to codify children in scientific terms and to represent them as innately rational and manageable beings.

The popular postwar fantasy of the pure and reasonable child speaks to a belief that "children would create a feeling of warmth and security against the cold forces of disruption and alienation," resulting in a home that was, in the words of David Halberstam, "a single perfect universe" (May 26; Halberstam 591). However, the domestic fantastic reminds us that the universe of the home is anything but perfect, envisioning children as alien and monstrous figures who inflict the threats of outer space and horror onto the inner space of the family, destroying it from within. Indeed, Karen Renner, Ellis Hanson, Steffen Hantke, and A. Robin Hoffman provide expansive lists of postwar horror films that feature the child as their central monster including (but not limited to) *The Village of the Damned* (1962), *The Exorcist* (1973), *Demon Seed* (1977) and *Rosemary's Baby* (1968; Renner, "Genealogy" 80; Hanson 111; Hantke 96; Hoffman 239). Sabine Büssing similarly addresses the monstrous child in her book-length study, *Aliens in the Home* (1987). Ray Bradbury in particular treats children as "aliens in their own world" and "a fiendish tribe within a separate race," depicting them as violent, demonic, and mutated figures who defy rational explanations and warp the family (Johnson, "Invasion" 15; Diskin 152). Shirley Jackson adopts these tropes of speculative fiction when she describes her own family in Gothic terms, marking how postwar parents turned to the domestic fantastic to challenge the image of the innocent and perfect child. Likewise, Flannery O'Connor joins Bradbury in considering how children destroy domestic futurity, a subject that links her not only to the longstanding traditions of the Southern Gothic but also to the domestic fantastic's interest in the

psychological impact of the vicious child. By depicting children as alien, monstrous, murderous, and mutated, Bradbury, Jackson, and O'Connor speak back to Spock's claim that the child is ultimately "born to be a reasonable, friendly human being," revealing how the center of the home can be unpredictable and potentially explosive (42).

"The Veldt" and "Zero Hour": They Came From Inner Space¹

As I have previously discussed, few homes are more explosive than the futuristic domestic spaces which Ray Bradbury envisions. The technohomes of "There Will Come Soft Rains" (see Chapter 3) and *Fahrenheit 451* (see Chapter 4) seem to offer no possibility for familial connection and do little to hold back the onslaught of personal and global apocalypse. In "The Veldt" (1950), originally titled "The World the Children Made," Bradbury marks how children might potentially ally with the pernicious influence of technoculture, opting to become irrational and unfriendly beings who call into question the notion that "parenthood was the route to happiness" (May 132). Specifically, the ten-year-old Hadley children, Wendy and Peter, murder their parents, George and Lydia, in order to continue living in a fully automated "HappyLife Home" which, centered around a fantastically televisual nursery, offers them the possibility of eternal playtime (Bradbury, "Veldt" 13). Just as the husbands in *The Stepford Wives* choose appliances over authentic romantic companionship, Wendy and Peter Hadley abandon their parents for a house "which clothed and fed and rocked them to sleep and played and sang and was good to them" (Bradbury, "Veldt" 13). The intense irony of the story is that the automated home is meant to ensure the children's security and happiness, entertaining

¹ I partially borrow this title from the 1953 alien invasion film, *It Came From Outer Space*, which "was based on a short story by Ray Bradbury" (Jancovich 82).

them and making it so that they “wouldn’t have to do anything” (Bradbury, “Veldt” 16). However, the promise of ease is insidious here because the house, especially the technological nursery that cares for the Hadley children, becomes “their mother and father, far more important in their lives than their real parents” (Bradbury, “Veldt” 24). Though the personal appliance is benevolent in “I Sing the Body Electric!,” it here displaces the real parents, as the children treat the home as a living thing rather than as a tool to shape their daily lives. Darkly reflecting Wendy and Peter of *Peter Pan*, the Hadley children become worshippers of a technological version of “never-never land,” apostles of a form of appliance culture that submerges them in a fantasy of imaginative independence from their parents (Diskin 152).

The parents in “The Veldt” remain blind to their children’s preference for chaos and eternal playtime because they not only rely on a Spockian belief that Wendy and Peter will balance out and mature over time but also relinquish their own responsibility to technological caretakers. Indeed, George and Lydia purchase the technonursery because the room is “supposed to help” the children “work off their neuroses in a healthful way,” as it is designed to “catch the telepathic emanations of the children’s minds” and therefore offer a path to adulthood (Bradbury, “Veldt” 21, 17). When they become concerned about Wendy and Peter repeatedly imagining the violent and unforgiving space of an African veldt, they turn to a psychiatric expert, David McClean, for help, again signaling their belief that the children might turn back toward the realm of technoscientific rationality promised by child-rearing manuals. Yet, Bradbury suggests that McClean and the institution of psychiatry are no match for the children, who prefer to identify with violent lions rather than with the adult influences in their lives.

Because they have been essentially raised by technological projections rather than by human hands, Wendy and Peter Hadley have become what Renner terms “feral children,” beings who only appear to be human but who have more in common with “a primitive or deviant culture in which the humanitarian values of our supposedly civilized society have been discarded in favor of self-centered motives and pleasures” (“Taxonomy” 178). The technonursery has only catered to the children’s own selfish desires, acting as, in the words of McClean, “a Santa Claus” (Bradbury, “Veldt” 24). It is no surprise that, when their parents shut off the home in an attempt to return to return to familial togetherness, Wendy and Peter transform the nursery into a murder weapon and renounce their biological parentage. They prefer to live in a world with the technological manifestations of their innermost fantasies rather than with parents who only offer rules and regulations. Creating a warped family in which the technohome becomes the new parent, Wendy and Peter Hadley opt to live better electrically, contradicting the image of docile and obedient children that dominated postwar advertisements. The technological lions of the nursery, which Peter makes real by getting “into the machinery,” speak to the children’s desire for wildness and untamed violence (Bradbury, “Veldt” 19). In fact, Lahna Diskin observes that Bradbury frequently depicts children as ruthless figures who “destroy adults who threaten their autonomy” (144). Wendy and Peter ultimately do not want to occupy a future world determined by their parents, but prefer one of their own design.

By the same token, the children in Ray Bradbury’s “Zero Hour” (1947, originally titled “The Children’s Hour” as a manuscript) ally with alien invaders rather than with their parents and celebrate the resultant apocalyptic chain reaction that begins in the

home. In this story, Mink Morris (seven years old) and her friends play a game called “invasion,” in which they apparently pretend to speak to an alien invader named Drill (Bradbury, “Zero” 233). However, invasion is more than a simple war game, but facilitates an alien takeover of Earth, the violence of which Mink and her friends gleefully enjoy.² This refutes Lee Edelman’s claim that the figure of the child functions “as the pledge of a covenant that shields us against the persistent threat of apocalypse now – or later” (18). Mink and the other children happily hasten the end of their parents’ world, in the hope that they might be able to take possession of their own lives. Their alliance with the aliens ultimately produces a warped vision of eternal childhood.

Like Wendy and Peter Hadley, the children in “Zero Hour” derive their strangeness from their innocence and imagination, as destruction begins in the playroom. In this narrative, “innocence is queerer than we ever thought it could be,” as the act of playing clearly separates children from the world of adults (Stockton 5). As Bradbury describes it, the “fury and bustle” of the invasion game “occurred only among the younger children,” as anyone ten years of age or older tends to focus on more “dignified” forms of play (Bradbury, “Zero” 233). Young, imaginative children stand apart from adults and adolescents in this world. They even seem to speak a language of their own, as Mink shouts cryptic commands at her playmates that she herself struggles to enunciate. For example, she spouts a stream of numbers, letters and shapes, telling another girl, “Four-nine-seven-A-and-B-and-X . . . and a - hex-hex-agony-hexagonal” (Bradbury, “Zero” 235). According to Dr. Benjamin Spock, this kind of strange behavior fits into the typical pattern of childhood development, as children use violent and

² Wayne Johnson observes that Bradbury’s “Boys! Raise Giant Mushrooms in Your Cellar” follows a similar pattern of invasion that develops outward from “a quiet suburban setting” (“Invasion” 11).

nonsensical games as a way “to let off steam” (310). William Tuttle similarly observes that “the rules and practices of children’s warfare remained the same” before and after World War II, suggesting that the game of “invasion” is a normal feature of children’s lives in any era (17).

Yet, the alien invaders in “Zero Hour” rely on the fact that adults and psychological experts will view the child’s play as the product of a wild imagination rather than as a serious threat. This knowledge motivates the aliens to transform children into “a fifth column,” as innocent games become their ultimate secret weapon (Bradbury, “Zero” 237). As Mink tells her mother, Drill knows that “grownups are so busy they never look under rosebushes or on lawns,” allowing alien forces to hide in plain sight (Bradbury, “Zero” 237). Even when Mink talks about killing other children, her mother, Mary, laughs at her daughter’s inventiveness. Mink explains that the aliens come “from up,” but Mary insists that they come from “inside” her daughter’s imagination, clinging to the “reassuring” idea that her daughter is just playing (Bradbury, “Zero” 236; Johnson, “Invasion” 11). This response primarily stems from the adults’ memory of their own childhood, as Mary notes that “parents learn to shut their ears” to children’s games (Bradbury, “Zero” 239). The parents are clearly separate from their children, approaching them with an attitude of amusement and always “longing to join in themselves” (Bradbury, “Zero” 233). In this respect, the children in this story are “queered by innocence:” although they seem to follow normative patterns of development, they are also “not like us, at the same time” (Stockton 31).

The adults in this story vastly underestimate how different their children truly are, as Mink and her peers violently oppose any imposition of adult control. While Spock

argues that the “aggressive instincts” practiced in war games will eventually be tamed so that the child can become a “worth-while citizen,” the children in “Zero Hour” do not follow this trajectory (311). Instead, they want to avoid responsibility and even arrest their development (calling to mind the *Peter Pan*-like world of “The Veldt”). The alien invaders are appealing because they offer a world without responsibility, in which, as Mink excitedly explains, “we can stay up till ten o’clock and go to two televisor shows on Saturday ‘stead of one!” (Bradbury, “Zero” 238). Even Mary recognizes that adults appear to be “tall and silly dictators” whom children may eventually resent (Bradbury, “Zero” 241). Mink and the other children reject their biological and affective ties to their parents in favor of a world where they will not have to grow up because, Mink explains, the aliens are “going to let us run the world” (Bradbury, “Zero” 238). Similarly to Stockton’s image of queer children who grow “sideways more than up,” the children in “Zero Hour” will do anything to avoid the responsibility and dullness of adulthood (37).

In order to delay maturation, Mink and her friends refuse to join civilized society, instead hastening the hostile takeover of the Earth by alien forces. It is unclear if they understand the full implications of this genocidal invasion, as the children continue to act as if they are playing a war game. For example, when the alien ships begin to bomb their suburban neighborhood, “the children screamed with delight, as if at a great fireworks display” (Bradbury, “Zero” 243). The most unsettling aspect of the alien occupation in this story is that it is accompanied by the laughter of children, laughter and humor being signal markers of the domestic fantastic. Likewise, Mink behaves as if she is playing a game of hide and seek as she leads a group of aliens through her home (assumedly to kill her parents). When she discovers her mother and father

cowering in the attic, she says “peekaboo,” eerily turning to the language of play in the same moment that she betrays her family (Bradbury, “Zero” 244). At this time, Mary Morris recognizes “the alien sound of eagerness in Mink’s voice” and the child appears surrounded by a “*queer* cold light” (Bradbury, “Zero” 244; emphasis mine).³ Mink is essentially more Martian than human, as she identifies with the alien invaders and destroys the normative space of the parental home. Furthermore, she forecloses a reproductive future, since she implies that the aliens will eliminate all Earthlings except for prepubescent children who shun the discourse of maturation. The future of humanity remains uncertain at the end of “Zero Hour,” as the alien child here becomes “the queer [individual who] comes to figure the bar to every realization of futurity” (Edelman 4).

As with “The Veldt,” the child’s destabilizing influence in “Zero Hour” begins inside the home, as Mink and her friends shatter domestic containment and the nuclear family becomes ground zero for the explosive force of the child’s agency. In fact, Bradbury repeatedly associates children with the language of atomic technology, most clearly via the title of this story. “Zero Hour” not only refers to the invasion that the children help to plan but also alludes to the set time for a nuclear detonation, after which “established rules could be rewritten” (Jacobs 6). Similarly, media commentators on the atomic bomb tests at Alamogordo “described the blast as the ‘first cry of a newborn child,’” again associating children with the disruptive force of nuclear technology (Seed, *American* 53). The child and the bomb both encompass the contradictory nature of containment culture: they can both secure the nation from external threats and destroy it from within. George Kennan addresses the tenuous nature of containment in “The

³ Sabine Büssing points to Ray Bradbury’s “Let’s Play ‘Poison’” as another story in which children are depicted as separate from humanity (35).

Sources of Soviet Conduct” (1947), in which he established how “the younger generation” could be not only the bearer of norms but also the source of “disunity and internal disintegration,” as he critiqued the Soviet Union for producing “abnormal emotional strains of childhood” (577, 582). Bradbury suggests that American children can likewise disrupt “the placidity of [the] home environment,” as the alien-allied children of “Zero Hour” destroy a utopian world that their parents created on their behalf (Kennan 577). Even when the future seems ultimately secure and “men all over earth were a united front,” Bradbury’s children demonstrate that norms can still be undone, as they are never “based upon . . . stable ground” (Bradbury, “Zero” 234).

Life Among the Savages and Raising Demons: Shirley Jackson’s Mundane Monsters

Alien children are not the sole territory of science fiction, as Shirley Jackson turns to fantasy and Gothic tropes in her domestic stories in order to express her discomfort with the popular postwar image of the innocent child. In a brief article entitled “Who is Boss?” Shirley Jackson bemoans how she is surrounded by a sea of “propaganda” within “books, magazines, newspapers, and even advertisements” that seem to be “largely written by the babies” (Jackson, “Boss” 66). However, Jackson’s portrayals of her own noisy and troublesome children frequently appeared alongside such materials, as she published multiple narratives about her life as a wife and mother in *Mademoiselle*, *Good Housekeeping*, and *Woman’s Home Companion*. Much of the existing scholarship about Jackson ignores the critiques about children and motherhood contained within her domestic writings; for example, her biographer, Judy Oppenheimer, describes these stories as “sunny and peaceful” while Angela Hague can only find darkness in her more well-known Gothic novels (169; 83). Although these stories, later

collected in *Life Among the Savages* (1953) and *Raising Demons* (1957), often conclude with a happy ending and appear alongside cheerful illustrations, Jackson infuses the family with fantasy and horror, emphasizing the irrationality and potential monstrosity of her children. Within relatively ordinary circumstances (ranging from dinner table conversations to PTA meetings), Jackson demonstrates that even her apparently normal children (Laurie, Jannie, Sally, and Barry) have a savage and demonic side that might destabilize the home, marking how monstrous children are not only fictionalized constructs of speculative fiction but also realities of domestic life that we cannot ignore.⁴

Jackson frequently describes her children as playful individuals that, while not overtly malicious, frustrate parental controls because they seem to live in a world of fantasy rather than one of behavioral constraints. In this manner, she embodies the complaints of fellow postwar mothers who, according to Julia Grant in *Raising Baby By the Book* (1998), refused to view children as idealized angels and acknowledged that children “have never been easy to manage, define, or systematize” (3). For example, Jackson recounts her frustration with her daughter Jannie, who, while on a shopping trip, insists on ordering lunch for her multiple imaginary friends. Just as children in “Zero Hour” opt for the companionship of invisible aliens over their parents, Jannie pays little regard to her mother’s embarrassment when she demands that “Linda will have the spaghetti . . . and Marilyn will have spaghetti, and Susan will have spaghetti” (Jackson, *Savages* 466). Jackson is less concerned with her daughter’s potential psychological disorder or her foray into the fantastic than with how other people might perceive her

⁴ Jean Kerr similarly insists on the strangeness of ordinary children in her domestic comedy, as she notes that “children are different – mentally, physically, spiritually, quantitatively, qualitatively, and furthermore they’re all a little bit nuts” (157).

chaotic family, as she describes her frantic attempts to correct her child in a “sugary” voice “for fear someone should hear” them (Jackson, *Savages* 464, 459). Indeed, the majority of Jackson’s domestic stories appear to be self-deprecating narratives about being perceived as an unfit mother. She similarly describes how her two youngest children, Sally and Barry, disappear for hours at a time, only to claim that they were visiting a magic world that they refer to as “Gunnywapitat” (Jackson, *Demons* 654). On one hand, she appreciates that her children are “open to other realities” and often plays along with their fantasies (Oppenheimer 95). On the other hand, she also recognizes that their disappearances into the fairyland of playtime might result in the judgment of other, more put-together mothers who constantly know about the whereabouts of their children, as she continually worries about looking “like the delinquent mother whose children are found begging in the streets” (Jackson, *Demons* 565).

Jackson makes clear that her children are the most monstrous in those moments when their behaviors socially reflect back on her. This occurs most famously within “Charles,” first published in the July 1948 issue of *Mademoiselle* and republished in *Life Among the Savages*, perhaps her most memorable episode involving a deceptive child. In this story, the narrator’s five-year-old son, Laurie, excitedly tells his parents about his kindergarten classmate, Charles, who is constantly punished “for being fresh,” hitting his teacher, and teaching bad words to other children (Jackson, *Savages* 399). What is most interesting about Charles, however, is that he is not real, which Jackson does not discover until she meets her son’s teacher at a PTA meeting. This revelation is both comical and horrific. On one hand, the sense of irony runs deep in this story, as Jackson had attempted to participate in the process of maternal judgment, admitting

that “I wanted passionately to meet Charles’s mother” (Jackson, *Savages* 400). As the mother of the warped child (i.e. Laurie / Charles), Jackson embarrasses herself within a circle of parents and teachers and becomes isolated from the community of these other, somehow perfect mothers, as she becomes the butt of the joke. On the other hand, she recognizes that her young son has the capacity for violence and maybe even (like Jannie) multiple personalities, suggesting that he might bring such violence into the space of the home.

Laurie’s potential for violence becomes more evident throughout *Life Among the Savages* and Jackson observes that “the foundations of our parental authority were being slowly shattered,” culminating in a rock-throwing fight between Laurie and another boy, David Howell (a scene that calls to mind the conclusion of “The Lottery”; 408). What makes this episode particularly bothersome for Jackson is that her husband, after going outside to resolve the situation, places responsibility squarely in the hands of the mothers: “I said you’d tell his mother,’ he said virtuously” (Jackson, *Savages* 409). Once Laurie and the husband hand off the situation, they essentially leave her to clean up their mess. In fact, the primary drama of this episode stems from the tense and increasingly argumentative phone conversation between Jackson and Mrs. Howell (who hang up on one another, call each other back, and so on). Laurie’s error is not so much that he threw a rock at another boy, but that his behavior forces her to confront “one of those impressive women,” a pillar of the community who staunchly refuses to acknowledge her own son’s violence as they argue about their children (Jackson, *Savages* 410).

However, unlike “Charles,” which concludes with feelings of awkwardness at a PTA meeting, the confrontation between the two mothers finds resolution at the meat counter of the local grocery store. Despite the fact that they had a shouting match the previous day, Jackson and Mrs. Howell almost immediately begin to commiserate about their children: “Horrible little *beasts*,’ I said. ‘Liars, all of them,’ she said. ‘I never believe a word they say.’ We both laughed and turned to regard the meat.” (Jackson, *Savages* 414; emphasis mine). By ending this confrontation with a shared laugh about the deceptiveness and beastliness of children, Jackson demonstrates how a wider community of readers might also identify with her Gothically-tinged portrayals of family life (which Jessamyn Neuhaus discusses in her study of fan mail written to the author).

Ultimately, Jackson’s primary complaint throughout *Life Among the Savages* and *Raising Demons* is that she is living in an age that establishes unrealistic ideals and norms for family life. As Nancy Walker says in *A Very Serious Thing* (1988), Jackson asks us not to examine “the ineptitude on the part of the homemaker,” or in this case, the mother, but instead to consider “the impossibility of the standards for performance” (186-187). She directly confronts an idealized image of motherhood as she reads to her children from a pamphlet sent to her by a toy company that features “a picture of a sweet-faced mother bending earnestly over her child” (Jackson, *Savages* 508). The children repeatedly chime in to critique the falseness of the pamphlet; Sally balks at the notion that she would be “naturally cooperative and reasonable” while Jannie laughs at the advice that “parents should never show anger before the child” (Jackson, *Savages* 508, 509). For both this mother and her children, the voice of the mass marketplace fails to accurately portray the realities of childhood and family life. As Jackson points out,

next to such impossible images, any child (and parent) might appear to be a little monstrous.

“Tomorrow’s Child”: Bringing Up (Interdimensional) Baby

While Shirley Jackson illustrates her children’s mundane monstrosity in order to contest the impossible standards for postwar motherhood, Ray Bradbury’s “Tomorrow’s Child” (1948; originally titled “The Shape of Things”) reveals how the physically mutated child might similarly disrupt parental and society expectations for bodily and reproductive normality.⁵ As Joseph Adelson notes, postwar culture circulated around the promise that “the men would be secure in stable careers, the women in comfortable homes, and together they would raise perfect children” (qtd. in May 58). Bradbury throws into chaos this fantasy of the perfect home when he places the mutated child at its heart, as he asks readers to recognize and even celebrate deformity. Though the child in this story is by no means malicious, his physical strangeness and the attendant crisis within the nuclear family demonstrate the tenuous nature of familial normalcy. For Bradbury, the postwar family is structured around a false sense of security, and even scientific experts such as Spock cannot fully explain the complications that result from the fantastically mutated child.

The radical strangeness of the child in this story lies in his embodiment, as Py Horn, much to the shock of his parents (Peter and Polly Ann Horn) is born into an alternate dimension. Instead of appearing like a human infant, Py takes the form of a “small blue pyramid” with “six blue snakelike appendages and three eyes that blinked

⁵ For other narratives of the mutated child that I will not discuss here, see Judith Merrill’s “That Only a Mother” (1948), Richard Matheson’s “Born of Man and Woman” (1950), and Poul Anderson and F.N. Waldrop’s “Tomorrow’s Children” (1947; all of these stories are mentioned in Seed, *American* 54-55).

from the tips of projecting structures” (Bradbury, “Child” 26). In fact, Polly names the child “Py” because of his oddly geometrical shape (Bradbury, “Child” 30). Py’s extreme difference clearly horrifies his father, who refers to his son as “a nightmare” and “a crime against God,” categorizing the abnormal body as beyond the pale of humanity (Bradbury, “Child” 26). Furthermore, after the Horns take their child home, they treat him as more animal than human, as Py’s cries (like the lion’s roars in “The Veldt”) echo in the nursery as “a weird whistling noise, like some jungle animal lost and wailing” (Bradbury, “Child” 31). Katherine Bond Stockton argues that such associations of the child with the creaturely indicates its separation from both the adult world and the discourse of normal upwards growth (91). Sabine Büssing similarly emphasizes how the child in horror fiction, in becoming brutish or animal-like, is completely separate from notions regular of maturation (59). While Py is indeed animal-like on a sonic level, he is also a living paradox who is simultaneously an alien body and his parents’ child “underneath the camouflage” of his mutation (Bradbury, “Child” 27). Following the pattern of the science-fictional grotesque that Csicsery-Ronay establishes, Py is both “near and intimate” and “strange,” flouting scientific and rational explanations for his existence and disorienting “the routines of human lives and institutions” (Csicsery-Ronay 146, 182). Py is a destabilizing force not because he is a monster, but because he bridges the gap between the monstrous and the human, just as the writers of the domestic fantastic blur generic boundaries.

Ironically, the very machines that are supposed to ensure Py’s safe delivery transform him from a normal fetus into an otherworldly horror. As the obstetrician Doctor Wolcott explains, “the child was somehow affected by the birth pressure” because of “a

dimensional dtructure caused by . . . simultaneous short-circuitings and malfunctions” (Bradbury, “Child” 26). This is a clear case in which the science-fictional grotesque emerges as a result of “technoscientific control over, or interference with, natural laws,” as the greater “malfunction” for Bradbury is how experts hyper-rationalize the process of birth (Csicsery-Ronay 197). The case of Py Horn speaks to the shortcomings of medical professionals who instituted “twilight sleep” and attempted to remove the mother’s sense of control. Although Polly jokes with Peter that some biological acts are still within her control, as she sings “they can’t take that away from me,” Bradbury suggests that experts wrest control of the child from the mother’s hands (Bradbury, “Child” 25). This becomes evident when Doctor Wolcott and his staff, instead of expressing horror at Py, attempt to reasonably explain his birth to Polly and thereby manage the situation. A circle of medical professionals take turns lecturing Polly, still attempting to glorify technology and motherhood: “Dr. Wolcott gave a long lecture on the birth-mechanisms, how they helped a woman in her labor” while “another spoke of underprivileged children” (Bradbury, “Child” 29). Since their explanations cannot make Py normal, Doctor Wolcott and his colleagues pressure the Horn family to adapt to their situation, lest they blame the medical profession for their problems.

The figure of Py further undercuts the notion of stable and determined norms in those moments when Bradbury filters the narrative through the baby’s perspective, presenting us with the unfamiliar images of another dimension. Py sees his parents as geometric figures, such as when, after “The White Cube fed him . . . All was *familiar* and good” (Bradbury, “Child” 33; emphasis mine). By associating Py’s vision with the realm of the “familiar and good,” Bradbury shows how norms ultimately stem from subjective

perspectives and not from the decrees of experts. Py's and his parents' realities become interchangeable, blurring the boundary between "self" and "other," as Bradbury attempts to render the perspective of the strange child legible to his readers. As Peter Horn notes, the baby has "no other norm with which to compare what it sees" and is only monstrous in the context of "our accustomed shapes and sizes" (Bradbury, "Child" 31).

Bradbury not only emphasizes the strangeness of the child but also highlights Peter and Polly Ann Horn's manic insistence on normative structures of domesticity, which they desperately cling to, despite their recognition of Py's radically different appearance and perspective. The Horns' behavior reflects the general suggestion among postwar psychology experts that individuals should cope with (rather than change) difficulties, given that "the family was the arena in which that adaptation was expected to occur" (May 17). Peter and Polly do exactly what is expected of them, but their attempt to treat Py as normal becomes a source of mental and domestic instability, as, according to Wayne Johnson, "the 'child' takes its toll on their marriage and sanity" (Bradbury 43). Peter, for example, is conscious that he is emptily parroting the fantasy of the nuclear family. While he tells Doctor Wolcott that he and Polly will raise Py and "give him a normal home life" and love him like any child, "his lips went numb" (Bradbury, "Child" 27). Although he apparently upholds the idea of "togetherness," that "a family was as one," Peter seems to be responding to social pressures rather than out of personal desires or love for his child (Halberstam 591). This becomes apparent in the way that he and his wife hide Py away in his nursery, which Peter has soundproofed (Bradbury, "Child" 31). They silence the child's strange voice, keeping him present in

the home yet separate from outside visitors who would recognize how Py grates against “the virtue of conformity” (Nadel 4).⁶ They present a façade of caring for the child, but his difference remains too difficult to face, and Py haunts the home rather than becoming an affective center for the family.

Adapting to Py’s situation is naturally more difficult for Polly than for Peter, given the cultural demands of motherhood during the Cold War era, a concern that unites Bradbury with Shirley Jackson. According to Miller and Nowak, a woman’s “only means of completion and fulfillment was in childbearing and in serving other people” (152-153). Polly’s particular challenge is that she has a child, but she can neither acknowledge him publicly nor be recognized as a mother, perhaps explaining why she has to treat Py as if he is “still unborn” (Bradbury, “Child” 29). Polly’s condition worsens when it seems that Py will never become normal, and that she will thus never attain the fantasy of feminine fulfillment, even though she still has to care for her child in secret. Just as Peter is supposed to step in to care for the child, the culture of adaptation expects Polly to suppress her discontent with the situation. Doctor Wolcott very specifically instructs her to “take those pills now and shut that nice mouth,” echoing the medical professionals who pushed tranquilizer drugs so that people could live with their problems (Bradbury, “Child” 33; Miller and Nowak 138). Just as nothing can return Py to his normal state, nothing can contain Polly’s hysterical obsession with motherhood. Her exclusion from the maternal secret circle explains her breakdown, as she drunkenly parades Py in front of her neighbors and asks “Don’t you want to see my baby? Isn’t he simply beautiful!”

⁶ In a similar case of locking away the mutated child, the parents in Richard Matheson’s “Born of Man and Woman” chain up their eight-year-old son in the basement (although they also explicitly abuse their son, unlike the Horns).

(Bradbury, "Child" 33). What becomes strange in this moment is not the grotesquely mutated child, but the mother who fails to find personal fulfillment in the culture of reproduction and childrearing, as Polly becomes desperate and broken.

Rather than recovering domesticity with a normalizing solution in which Py comes back to our reality and his parents are rewarded for their patience, Bradbury ends "Tomorrow's Child" with Peter and Polly choosing to cross over into the alternate dimension. According to Johnson, this ending is a radical break from the conventional monster story, in which "it is up to the 'monster' to adapt or be destroyed" (*Bradbury* 42). The ending of Bradbury's story instead becomes the ultimate moment of parental sacrifice for the sake of the child-centered family, as Peter and Polly give up their normative identities in the name of togetherness. Although they transform into a "white rectangle" and a "white oblong," the two parents do so for the child's love, resulting in a perfect, yet isolated, nuclear family (Bradbury, "Child" 38). The story seems to end on a positive image of togetherness, with the parents and the child huddled in an embrace. Bradbury here appears to elevate the nuclear family and wishes to see its individual members affectively fused together.

However, it is unclear to what extent Bradbury truly endorses this vision of the happily unified family, as the ending of his story provides a hyperbolic fantasy from the perspective of Peter Horn. As he is being transported into Py's dimension, Peter wonders what the future will be like and envisions the following domestic scene:

They would live in the same white house on the same quiet, green hill, with a high fence around it to keep out the merely curious . . . and at the door would be a tall slim White Rectangle to meet him with a dry martini in its snakelike hand. And in an easy chair across a room would sit a Salt White Oblong with a copy of Nietzsche open, reading, smoking a pipe. And on the floor would be Py, running about. (Bradbury, "Child" 37)

Peter's vision is fundamentally ironic, as his new interdimensional and otherworldly identity clashes with the notion that life would continue as normal, with gender roles, racial identity, and the accoutrements of suburban affluence intact. Furthermore, his fantasy distorts the logic of containment, conflating the white picket fence of suburbia with imprisonment. His description of the isolated house, which separates the geometric family from curiosity, relates the Horns to the situation of all families who turn to the home to keep out "potentially dangerous social forces" (May 16). What Peter purposefully forgets is that his containment is not truly optional, as he and his family are required to enclose and conceal their abnormal bodies. He locks himself in this quasi-Gothic state when he subjects himself to a technology that transforms his very substance into something "pyramidal, oblong with terrific electric seizures" (Bradbury, "Child" 37). He turns to containment because he cannot reenter society in his new form, which the story alludes to when it ends with the image of the "closed" door (Bradbury, "Child" 38).

The claustrophobic ending of "Tomorrow's Child" leaves us with an ambivalent image of the family, indicating how postwar domestic normality could be both "appealing" and "confining" (Creadick 9). The father, mother, and child, in their dimensionally alien bodies, are clearly "freaks," alienated from a society that privileges "normal" embodiment (Bradbury, "Child" 38). Peter himself acknowledges that "we'll be freaks" in the eyes of society at large (Bradbury, "Child" 35). Doctor Wolcott's laboratory, the space of technoscientific rationality, effectively protects the outside world from the strangeness of the Horn family and functions as a kind of closet. In this case, however, Bradbury does not closet the strange family, which would confirm normalizing

discourse that marginalizes the monstrous, but represents it in a sympathetic and even celebratory light. The child in this case leads to a radical redefinition of domesticity and a new vision of the future, as humanity potentially moves into a new dimension.

“The Small Assassin” and “A Stroke of Good Fortune”: The Murderer in the Cradle

While “Tomorrow’s Child” concludes with an affective reshaping of the nuclear family around the figure of the mutated child, the murderous infant in Ray Bradbury’s “The Small Assassin” (1946) and the ominous fetus of Flannery O’Connor’s “A Stroke of Good Fortune” (1949) cut off the possibility of a domestic future before it can even begin. In both stories, the birth of the child is not joyous, but becomes a harbinger of mortality, especially with regard to the mother. The baby in these narratives is an irrational and malicious figure who flatly challenges Spock’s central claim that “children like to be kept good,” suggesting that the child has its origins instead in demonic and Gothic realms (9). Both Bradbury and O’Connor draw on the imagery of horror in their characterization of the child, suggesting that we should recognize the psychologically gruesome impact that the child could have upon the home.

“The Small Assassin” in particular prefigures the concerns of *Rosemary’s Baby* (1968), as it focuses on the monstrous birth of a child demonically named Lucifer, narrated from the perspective of a mother who “has undeniable intimations of” her child’s strangeness (Diskin 152-153). Alice Leiber, surrounded by doctors and nurses, feels that she is “being murdered before their eyes” by “the little murderer, the small assassin” (Bradbury, “Assassin” 154). Bradbury does not clarify that Alice is referring to her child until three pages later, when David Leiber commends his wife on giving birth to “a fine baby” (Bradbury, “Assassin” 156). In identifying the child as a murderer first and

a baby second, Bradbury fuses the scene of childbirth with Gothic horror, critically undercutting the postwar ideal that “motherhood was the ultimate fulfillment of female sexuality and the primary source of a woman’s identity” (May 135). For Alice, her identity as “David Leiber’s wife” gives “her no comfort” and childbirth becomes a moment of primal struggle rather than one of warm satisfaction (Bradbury, “Assassin” 154). These feelings only intensify within the home, as Alice repeatedly tells her husband that the child wants to kill her and, like Polly Horn, becomes increasingly frantic rather than secure in her maternal role. Bradbury’s sympathetic portrayal of Alice Leiber’s struggle with maternity crucially disproves Mark Jancovich’s claim that “Bradbury’s concerns are almost entirely and uncritically with his male characters and their preoccupations,” as his narratives of the domestic fantastic deal with culturally feminine concerns (107).

Notably, the other characters in the story label Alice as deviant and even monstrous, claiming that something is wrong with her because she does not view her child as perfect. The representative of normalizing culture, Dr. Jeffers, another misguided psychiatrist figure like David McClean, suggests that Alice is “hysterical” or perhaps responding to “something buried in her childhood” (Bradbury, “Assassin” 156). He even associates Alice with the science fictional other when he tells David that his wife “feels *alien* to the child” (Bradbury, “Assassin” 156; emphasis mine). In this formulation, the child merely serves as a screen for Alice’s psychological problems: she is labeled as mentally ill and the child is “the handiest object she can use as a source of blame,” since it supposedly lacks any agency of its own (Bradbury, “Assassin” 166). The recurring figure of the normalizing psychologist in Bradbury’s fiction reflects how the

postwar discourse of childrearing could make unhappy and unfulfilled women “think that the fault was theirs and that they were the exception to blissful normality” (Halberstam 592). In sympathetically opposing Alice against a dangerous and monstrous infant, Bradbury reveals how maintaining a stable and happy postwar family often resulted in psychological sacrifices on the part of the mother.

Although David Leiber tells his wife that “it’s not nice being afraid of the thing you birthed,” Bradbury affirms Alice’s fears by hinting that the child possesses a preternatural degree of consciousness (Bradbury, “Assassin” 162). For example, he describes how the infant stares at its parents with an “incessant unfathomable gaze,” suggesting that the apparently innocent child is plotting its next move (Büssing 2). While popular discourse situates the child as “a passive, docile, inert object, incapable of action,” the Leiber baby commands “alarming degrees of agency” merely in the act of fixating his gaze on his parents (Hantke 97). Lucifer, with his “deep, sharp blue eyes,” produces an atmosphere of paranoia and instability, as his eyes are symbolically aligned with penetration and invasion rather than with the comfort that he is supposed to provide for his caretakers (Bradbury, “Assassin” 161). In fact, David later argues that his son might be “able to move, see, hear, think, like many animals and insects can,” comparing the child to an instinctual predator (Bradbury, “Assassin” 173). Like Py Horn and the Hadley children, Lucifer Leiber appears to be more beastly than human, and thus lies outside of the normalizing discourses of law and morality.

The child’s resistance to normative structures in “The Small Assassin” becomes most evident when it violently turns against its parents, aligning with the forces of destruction and death rather than affirming futurity. Alice dies first, tripping on a

patchwork doll and falling down the stairs where she “lay in a broken, grotesque, pallid gesturing and angling of her thin body” (Bradbury, “Assassin” 170). Lucifer’s involvement in his mother’s death remains uncertain, as Bradbury never describes the child planning the murder, resulting in a question of the demonic child’s moral agency that *The Omen* (1976) later explores. However, the suspicion of the infant’s malicious intent is enough to turn David against his son, as he not only tells Dr. Jeffers that his wife “had good reason to fear the baby” but also officially names his child after the devil (Bradbury, “Assassin” 171). It is only after David emotionally rejects his son that he too dies under mysterious conditions, as Dr. Jeffers finds the child’s father dead from a gas leak (after he had sedated David the night before). Again, the story does not explicitly confirm the infant’s agency, but hints at “the faintest possibility” of matricide and patricide (Bradbury, “Assassin” 176). Yet, this crack in the child’s innocent façade is enough to shatter the bonds of the home from within. Even if Lucifer is a “normal” infant, the intimation of his evil agency transforms the home from a secure location into a site of hysteria and violence. Notably, both of Lucifer’s parents consider infanticide once they suspect the baby to be malicious: Alice admits to David, “I was going to kill the baby” and David tells Dr. Jeffers, “I want to kill him” (Bradbury, “Assassin” 165, 175). However, neither parent ever gets a chance to act on their wishes, suggesting that the baby potentially acted in self-defense.

The question of the child’s moral culpability is clearly the central obsession in “The Small Assassin,” especially for Dr. Jeffers, who wonders “what motive” a child would have to turn against its parents (Bradbury, “Assassin” 174). David Leiber speculates that Lucifer resents “being forced into a lousy world,” calling to mind

Bradbury's own purported memory of "the terrific pain of being born" (Bradbury, "Assassin" 172; Weller 12). However, the exact motives of the infant remain obscure, as Bradbury never provides us with a view from the infant's perspective (unlike "Tomorrow's Child," in which we have glimpses into Py Horn's dimension). Furthermore, Lucifer Leiber undercuts the power of scientific experts "to unlock the mysteries of how children's minds worked," as he lies beyond expected developmental norms, frustrating the typical Spockian milestones (Cunningham 173). The story culminates in the ultimate representative of psychological normalization violently turning against the child. Dr. Jeffers, threatened by the notion that the infant has killed his father, stands ominously over the child holding "a scalpel" (Bradbury, "Assassin" 177). Bradbury ends the story in this tense moment, neither affirming nor denying that the child will die. By leaving the ending open in this way, he also declines to identify whether the infant is innately evil, refusing to label the child as rational or irrational, innocent or guilty. Bradbury leaves us frozen in this instability, blurring the supposedly clear boundary between innocence and experience, just as he blurs generic boundaries between science fiction and horror.

In addition to opening up the question of the infant's moral agency, Bradbury's "The Small Assassin," situated as it is in concerns about postwar maternity, offers us a new way to approach Flannery O'Connor's "A Stroke of Good Fortune." Scholarship about O'Connor often focuses on her Christian themes (see Thomas Hill Schaub, Marshall Bruce Gentry, and Ralph C. Wood), her concerns as a southern writer (see Katherine Hemple Prown and Marion Montgomery), and her critique of the postwar political climate (see Jay Watson, Jon Lance Bacon, and Andrew Hoberek). While these critical approaches to O'Connor offer useful insight into her larger oeuvre, they often

overlook how the author commented on the psychologically crippling impact of postwar motherhood (perhaps because O'Connor herself did not bear children). Yet, "A Stroke of Good Fortune," like "The Small Assassin," represents the mother's lack of bodily control as the stuff of horror, focusing on the struggle of the unwillingly pregnant Ruby Hill. Thirty-four-year-old Ruby Hill, who appears to be four or five months pregnant, attempts to deny her future child throughout the story, believing that she will not become like her mother who "got deader with every one of" her eight children (O'Connor 97). She views motherhood as a process of gradual zombification (or vampirism), a Gothic trap that she wants to escape, having witnessed the difficulties of her mother and sisters. Claire Kahane, in "The Maternal Legacy" (1983) identifies this story as an iconic example of the female Gothic, claiming that O'Connor speaks to deep-seated female concerns about psychological "identification with her own mother" (245). However, I would add that O'Connor, writing this story during the baby boom, was also responding to the concerns of those women who were uncomfortable with the era's increasing demand for childbirth and motherhood.

Ruby, as I have noted, is an unwilling mother, as she views the future child as a terrifying obstacle to her social and bodily mobility. She insists that she "ain't going to have any baby," as she defines herself as an urban sophisticate whose husband supposedly supports their childlessness (O'Connor 105). Her ultimate goal in life is not motherhood, but to live "in a subdivision," where she imagines life will be glamorously different from her rural upbringing (O'Connor 96). However, O'Connor suggests that Ruby is condemned to death and stillness, describing her as "shaped nearly like a funeral urn," a Gothic image that allies Ruby's pregnant belly with the ashes of the dead

(95). Furthermore, it becomes clear that Ruby's husband, Bill, has not been "taking care" to avoid pregnancy but has, in fact, conspired against her like a traditional Gothic villain, despite knowing her objections to childbearing (O'Connor 104). Throughout this story, Ruby's world is one of imprisonment, as she struggles to climb the shadowed, steep stairs of her apartment building only to come face-to-face with the monstrous recognition that the "little roll" inside of her is an infant (O'Connor 107).

Like "The Small Assassin," "A Stroke of Good Fortune" culminates with the imagery of monstrous birth. However, we do not meet Ruby's child but rather the furious embodiment of misbehaving children everywhere, Hartley Gilfeet, her neighbor's child. Hartley, appearing with "a bang at the bottom of the stairwell and a rumble rattling up the steps" appears to be the harbinger of apocalyptic destruction, bringing to mind the murderous and alien children of "The Veldt" and "Zero Hour" (O'Connor 106). He charges at her "with two pistols leveled," an act which symbolizes not only "a sexual burlesque which parodies the Gothic danger of penetration" but also the child's potential for future misbehavior and difficulty (O'Connor 106; Kahane, "Maternal" 246). Ruby clearly has no control over Hartley, as she commands him to "shut up that racket," but he continues to run at her, colliding into her with such force that he knocks the wind out of her (O'Connor 106). Hartley's collision reminds Ruby that she likewise will have no power over her future child, as the story concludes with an ominous vision of the future child "resting and waiting" (O'Connor 107). In this case, the child is not the source of maternal satisfaction but becomes an icon of ultimate terror, as Ruby's finds herself bound to a future that is, in her mind, hopeless and deadening.

Conclusion: “It’s a Good Life”

Ray Bradbury, Shirley Jackson, and Flannery O’Connor all emphasize the potential for disintegration at the core of the nuclear family by representing the child in terms of the language of the Gothic and science fiction. In their fiction, the child is a marginal figure who permeates the supposed boundaries between outer and inner space, animal and human, and the worlds of reality and fantasy. Their murderous, monstrous, and mutated children threaten to tear the family apart from within and also call attention to the challenges of postwar parenthood, particularly for mothers. They were not alone in representing the child as “other,” as American films and television shows increasingly began to scrutinize the figure of the murderous child, beginning with *The Bad Seed* (1956). Nothing transformed the domestic into the strange like the episode of *The Twilight Zone* entitled “It’s a Good Life” (season 3, episode 8; based on a 1953 short story by Jerome Bixby). Airing in 1961, this episode demonstrated how postwar Americans were well aware of how the child-centered home was a tenuous institution that could become easily warped.

This episode centers around a “monster,” the six-year-old Anthony Fremont, who has the ability to create or destroy anything with his mind. What makes Anthony particularly dangerous is his maniacal insistence that everyone around him must always be happy and acknowledge that he is a “good boy,” a condition that causes him to isolate the town of Peeksville from the rest of the world. When other people do not obey him, Anthony sends them “to the corn field” or, infamously, turns them into freaks of his own design (such as his neighbor, Dan, who he turns into a Jack-in-the-box). Rod Serling, like the speculative fiction writers who preceded him during the late 1940s and 1950s, presents the child-centered community as a frantic space that has become

literally reshaped by its worship of Anthony into an unrecognizable nightmare. Serling's parody of the postwar "good life" suggests an increasing recognition within the United States that children might not be the best sources of what Spock terms "our visible immortality," as, within the genre of the domestic fantastic, they seem to threaten the future more frequently than bolstering it (5).

CHAPTER 6

CODA: THE DOMESTIC FANTASTIC IN CONTEMPORARY FILM AND TELEVISION

The domestic formations that originated after World War II have no clear historical endpoint, as the infamous icon of the nuclear family remains (at least among cultural conservatives) “a stubborn relic, a national symbol that has yet to be retired as threadbare and somewhat unrealistic” despite the fact that such families, according to Benfer, now comprise “below 25 percent of the population.” Elaine Tyler May notes in her conclusion to *Home Sweet Home* that President George W. Bush “called for a celebration of the American way of life” as a way to domestically support the “war on terror,” and this appeal for a return to “traditional” family values still echoes today (217). The elevation of the happy wife, husband, and child also stems from the fact that idealized images of the home still circulate in television programs which are “centered on harmonious family and community life” (Beuka 10). Stephanie Coontz observes that “our most powerful visions of traditional families derive from images that are still delivered to our homes in countless reruns of 1950s television sit-coms” (23). Yet, as Lynn Spigel argues in her discussion of what she terms the “fantastic family sitcom,” television and film can offer a new way of looking at the domestic sphere, presenting it as “defamiliarized” by fusing the family with tropes of speculative fiction such as “witches (*Bewitched*), genies (*I Dream of Jeannie*), or robots (*My Living Doll*)” (18, 108). While Spigel’s fantastic family sitcom refers to a particular type of television show that fuses the postwar sitcom structure with the iconography of fantasy and SF, I view the domestic fantastic as bridging a larger network of genres, as speculative fiction and concerns about the home collide in parody films, television dramas, cult teen TV shows, and so on. Building on Spigel’s observation, I conclude this project by examining

manifestations of the domestic fantastic in contemporary television and film.¹ Films and TV shows such as *Pleasantville*, *American Horror Story*, *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, and *Tomorrowland* draw on the iconography of the American postwar era, parodying it and warping it in order to offer us new visions of domesticity that might eventually displace the nuclear family.

Pleasantville: The Parodic Domestic Fantastic

Numerous films and television shows engage with what I term “the parodic domestic fantastic,” in which a supernatural element (frequently time travel) loops us back to the postwar period and reframes it in comedic terms, demonstrating how “the image of that decade conveyed by current nostalgia is badly distorted” (Miller and Nowak 5). For example, in *The Truman Show* (1998), the reality show universe that Truman Burbank unknowingly occupies not only echoes the white picket fences and cheery neighbors of the postwar sitcom but also draws attention to the artificiality of this hyperreal construct. *Edward Scissorhands* (1990) similarly parodies the sameness of the postwar suburb, emphasized by the titular character who, combining the innocent mind of the child with the body of the Gothic monster, experiences this world as a naïve outsider. Likewise, Robert Beuka points to *Back to the Future* (1985) and *Blast From the Past* (1999) as films that feature time travel back to the 1950s as “the source of their humor and light social commentary” (228). *Pleasantville* (1998) in particular meditates on the ideological power of postwar family sitcoms, as its protagonist David (Tobey Maguire) obsessively watches marathons of a fictional universe centered on the perfect

¹ While I will be dealing with contemporary examples in this coda, Peter Biskind’s *Seeing is Believing* (1983) and Vivian Sobchack’s *Screening Space* (1980) offer thorough introductions to science fiction films during the last fifty years.

family of Betty Parker (Joan Allen), George Parker (William H. Macy), and their children, Bud and Mary Sue. Plugging into episodes of *Pleasantville* as a means of escaping his grim realities, David yearns for familial togetherness and for “kinder, gentler times.” Greg Dickinson goes so far as to view *Pleasantville*'s 1990s suburban world as “dystopic,” as David's teachers drone on about the apocalyptic threats of HIV, ozone depletion, and famine and his family offers no emotional support in that his father is absent and his mother and sister are caught up in their love lives (212). Given that David is trapped between a dystopian reality and a utopian vision of domesticity, it is no surprise that he (similarly to Mildred Montag) literally drowns out his life with television reruns, turning up his show so that he will not have to listen to the sound of his mother and father fighting on the telephone.

However, when a TV repairman, played by Don Knotts of *The Andy Griffith Show*, transports David and his twin sister, Jen (Reese Witherspoon), into the *Pleasantville* universe, David soon sees the postwar world as one that is overly conformist, sexually limiting, and insular. In casting Knotts, a postwar television icon, as the repair man, the filmmakers ask us to critically reassess the continuing cultural power of sitcom reruns, with *Pleasantville* acting as a stand-in for a network of other shows. Of course, *Pleasantville* offers an impossibly hyperbolic vision of the year 1958. For example, David and Jen's first experience as Bud and Mary Sue is of an excessive breakfast in which Betty produces piles of pancakes, bacon, ham steak, and syrup. This scene parodies the postwar housewife as being hyper-dedicated to her domestic labor, so much that she performs to excess. Likewise, the world of the postwar high school becomes comic in its impossible level of perfection, such as how the members of the

basketball team always make every basket. In this universe, the cost of perfection is naiveté, as the high school students seem happy because they know nothing about the world beyond Elm Street and Main Street, and the housewife remains dedicated to her household labor because she has no knowledge of sexuality.

David and Jen, as alien beings in this sitcom world, recognize its ridiculousness and ask us to likewise be aware of how “the actual complexity of our history . . . gets buried under the weight of an idealized image” (Coontz 1). They quickly tire of the show’s limitations and bring forbidden knowledge to the residents of Pleasantville, introducing them to sexual expression, art and literature (particularly of a banned variety), and stories of the outside world. Just as a rocket ship bound for Mars brings summer time to a small town at the beginning of *The Martian Chronicles*, David and Jen’s influence literally introduces color to the black-and-white world of Pleasantville. For example, after Jen has sex with Skip Martin (Paul Walker), a red rose blooms on a black and white shrub outside of the Parker home. As the other teens and adults such as Betty start following in Jen’s footsteps, the color gradually spreads around town, marking those individuals who have embraced the arrival of modernity and change.

In its visual mixture of color into a black-and-white world, the film also points out how the homogenous world of sitcoms relies on a “denial of diversity,” as the town begins to segregate its “colored” residents (Coontz 31).² The mayor, Big Bob (J.T. Walsh) and his allies in the Chamber of Commerce attempt to restore what they find “pleasant” through legal controls such as a code of conduct, with which they hope to restore the town back to its former self. However, the film suggests that Big Bob and the

² This is not to say that *Pleasantville* does not have its own struggles with race, as the cast of the film is entirely white, partly due to the fact that color becomes symbolically linked to emotion and freedom.

others act not for the sake of communal improvement but as a result of the warped desires of postwar patriarchs to keep their wives at home. Their breaking point occurs when George's wife abandons him without making him any dinner, a crisis which the other husbands decide to fight "together" (which they chant repetitively within the masculine space of the bowling alley). While *Pleasantville* presents the Chamber of Commerce as an extremist group and a warped embodiment of the power of postwar censorship, the film suggests that their actions are no laughing matter. The film's general pattern of parody gives way to metaphorical reenactments of racial and sexist violence, carried out by men such as the aptly named "Whitey" (David Tom). However, "color" in the film appears to be an unstoppable force, as segregation breaks down when Big Bob himself becomes transformed by his unbridled emotion.

The ultimate triumph of color over black-and-white at the film's conclusion marks a utopian shift away from the supposedly contained world of the 1950s toward the promises of the future. However, as David returns to the present, he does not abandon all of the values of the postwar world, but holds onto the dream of familial togetherness. Emerging from the television, he immediately turns to comfort his mother, drying her tears and telling her not to worry because he "had a good day." Likewise, our final image of the sitcom world in the film is a cheery montage in which the characters are uncertain about "what's gonna happen now," but are happy about the future nonetheless. I believe that this harmonious ending affirms Greg Dickinson's claim that *Pleasantville* "argues for nostalgia," as David fixes not only the sitcom universe but also his own family, which is enhanced by his magical connection with the past (222). *Pleasantville* leaves viewers ultimately conflicted about the influence of the postwar

period, which it identifies as both a time of conformity and a source of family values that might improve our modern lives for the better.

American Horror Story: The Modern Gothic

While *Pleasantville*, in its parody of the postwar family sitcom, ultimately remains optimistic about the possibilities for togetherness, works of the modern Gothic, a quintessential branch of the domestic fantastic, warp the home into a site of psychosis and irreparable fragmentation. As with most gothic texts, they imagine how “the family *itself* can be a powerful locus of horror” (Murphy 136). For example, David Lynch’s *Twin Peaks* (1990-1991) focuses on the murder of Laura Palmer at the hands of her possessed father, Leland Palmer, marking how the small town and its families offer no defense against both supernatural invasion by alien figures and human corruption. Texts of this domestic fantastic subgenre are not only violent and disturbing but also tend to be parodic (or darkly comedic), as their imagery can be over-the-top, bordering on camp, mirroring how postwar comediennes blended humor with the tropes of the Gothic (though the modern texts rely more heavily on gore). This is especially true of the FX network series *American Horror Story* (2011-present), which features a different horror trope in each season including a “murder house” (season 1), an asylum (season 2), a coven (season 3), and a freak show (season 4).

In its most recent season, which focuses on the freak show of Elsa Mars (Jessica Lange) in Jupiter, Florida during the 1950s, *American Horror Story* reminds us of the domestic fantastic’s constant collision of inner and outer space, symbolized by the planetary names of Jupiter and Mars. Specifically, in the episode “Tupperware Party Massacre” (originally titled “The Fat Lady Sings”), the serial killer Dandy Mott (an over-mothered individual who brings Norman Bates to mind, played by Finn Wittrock),

murders a group of women who had gathered together to exchange both Tupperware and sordid stories of their sex lives. Invading the suburban ranch house and leaving with pastel Tupperware containers filled with blood, the hyperbolically cruel Dandy illustrates *American Horror Story's* broad thematic interest in the entrapment of postwar women, whose victimization reminds us that the home does not offer any measure of security. The show literally rips into the icon of the postwar housewife, calling attention not only to the realities of violence during the postwar period but also emphasizing the ways in which women felt like Gothic prisoners during this time (as I discussed in Chapter 2: "Shrunk to the Cozy Walls of the Home": American Women's Gothic Visions of Domesticity).

American Horror Story's dark visions of the postwar housewife as a Gothic victim become fully evident in a two-part episode from its second season entitled "I Am Anne Frank." In these episodes, which are set in 1964, a young woman (played by Franka Potente) is committed to the Briarcliff Manor asylum after attacking a man for making an anti-Semitic remark. She claims that she is Anne Frank and that the asylum's doctor, Arthur Arden (portrayed by James Cromwell), is Hans Gruper, a former SS officer. However, a man named Jim (David Chisum) tells the operators of the asylum that the woman is actually his wife, Charlotte, and that she began identifying as Anne Frank after the birth of their son because she felt "powerless." Her identification with perhaps the most famous victim of the Holocaust brings to mind Betty Friedan's bold assertion that the postwar home was, for "American suburban housewife . . . a comfortable concentration camp" (307). Charlotte / Anne's resultant "schizophrenic split" becomes visible in the form of home movies that, accompanied by a Theremin soundtrack, take

on an eerie cast (Friedan 46). These movies, acting as embedded texts like the sitcom within *Pleasantville*, do not show us a happy and contented family, but illustrate both Charlotte / Anne's attempts to smother her child and her growing obsession with tracking down Nazi war criminals. The only thing more terrifying than her delusion is her husband's impatience with her struggle, as he allows Dr. Arden to lobotomize his wife so that she will become "a new woman." Charlotte's recovery is shown to us, again in the form of a home movie that now mimics the language and imagery of the postwar sitcom: the husband greets his wife with a hearty "honey, I'm home" and she appears, like a Stepford wife, with a perfect hairdo and a promise of a pot roast and a martini while the song "It Could Be a Wonderful World" plays on a nearby record. However, when Charlotte claims that "I've never been happier," the home video takes on a grainy and yellowed quality, a shift in color that, as in *Pleasantville*, signals that something is off kilter, as the camera then pans to a photograph of Dr. Arden standing behind Adolf Hitler. The suggestion that Charlotte might be Anne Frank and that her husband has ensured her silence speaks to the show's overarching concern with how domesticity can amplify female disempowerment, particularly for women of a foregone era who apparently had no alternatives.

Beyond its focus on postwar housewives, *American Horror Story* explores the domestic fantastic trope of the gothic female victim in a contemporary context, especially during the show's first season. In season one, the Harmon family, Ben (Dylan McDermott), Vivien (Connie Britton), and Violet (Taissa Farmiga), purchase an old home in Los Angeles that turns out to be haunted by ghosts of various murders ranging from the Black Dahlia to victims of domestic violence. The teenaged Violet, much like

the frail and doomed heroines of Shirley Jackson's gothic fiction, is unable to handle living in such a haunted space, as she commits suicide, joining the ghosts of the house. When she attempts to escape the home in the episode entitled "Smoldering Children," she finds that she can only follow a circuitous path that leads back into domesticity, as she is forever trapped within the walls of the home both as a ghost and as a corpse that rots in the house's crawl space (which her ghostly boyfriend, Tate, reveals to her). Violet's mother, Vivien, similarly becomes joined to the uncanny house, transforming into a ghost after dying in childbirth in the living room. Although Vivien in the first episode of the series claims that "I'm not a house" (after a doctor likens her to a structure whose "foundation is decaying"), her fate suggests otherwise, as the gothic structures of domesticity become entangled with female biology within the universe of *American Horror Story*. This show suggests that the postwar era's demand for maternity has not faded, as Vivien suffers the same fate as Alice Leiber and Ruby Hill.

Just as it critiques the constricting impact of domesticity on women, *American Horror Story* refuses to treat the child as an emotional core for the family, often presenting infants and sons in particular as murderers, (recalling the tropes of the mutated and murderous child that I discussed in Chapter 5). Vivien's death, for example, comes about as she gives birth to twins, one of whom immediately dies. The surviving child, Michael, is a malicious baby who, fathered by a ghost through rape, becomes a potential antichrist, calling to mind *Rosemary's Baby* (1968), *The Omen* (1976), and "The Small Assassin". The final image of season one is not of the Harmons, who are trapped as ghosts in the house, but of Michael, now three years old, sitting in a rocking chair, covered in the blood of a nanny that he has murdered. While Ben Harmon

initially describes Vivien's pregnancy as "our salvation" (in the episode "Home Invasion"), *American Horror Story* marks how the child might become a harbinger of damnation and death, a pattern that repeats throughout the show with murderous sons such as Tate (a school shooter), Dandy Mott, and Bloody Face (the serial killer of season two). With its Gothic tropes of the murdered or trapped housewife and the demonic child, *American Horror Story* reverses the dreams of postwar togetherness, transforming them instead into nightmares. However, the fact that this show continues the work of writers such as Jackson, Bradbury, and O'Connor indicates how the postwar dreams of the obedient wife and perfect child still retain cultural value, explaining why the show attacks these icons with such violence.

Ex Machina: The Robotic Domestic Fantastic

While *American Horror Story* destabilizes domesticity through the tropes of horror, we can see a similar pattern emerge within contemporary science fiction, which turns our attention toward the ramifications of emergent technologies within the digital age. This results in a subgenre that I call the robotic domestic fantastic, a topic that follows naturally from my considerations of appliance reliance in Chapter 2. Imagining the robot as the next step in the evolution of personal appliances, films such as *Blade Runner* (1982), *The Terminator* (1984), *I, Robot* (2005), and even *Austin Powers: International Man of Mystery* (1997) consider whether embodied machines (e.g. the replicant, terminator, robot helper, and fembot) are really capable of making our lives easier (the answer is almost always a resounding no).³ In the most recent manifestation of the robotic domestic fantastic, Alex Garland's *Ex Machina* (2015), the feminized robot

³ Bernice M. Murphy also notes Michael Crichton's *Westworld* (1973) and the original series *Battlestar Galactica* for their focus on the robotic figure (91).

gifted with artificial intelligence similarly surpasses human controls and ensures domestic chaos. This film focuses on Ava (Alicia Vikander), the creation of Nathan Bateman (another echo of Norman Bates, played by Oscar Isaac), who runs a Google-like search engine company known as Bluebook. Under the guise of a company lottery, Nathan brings a programmer named Caleb Smith (Domhnall Gleeson) to his estate, a location which fuses domestic space with the research facility, and tasks him with determining whether Ava can pass for human, a process known in technological circles as the Turing test. While Ava's robotic origins are unmistakable, as she has a metallic torso and makes gentle whirring sounds when moving, the film points to her potential humanity by identifying her as a Gothic, feminized victim. Specifically, Nathan keeps her trapped in a room and under constant surveillance, a situation that Jim Dixon compares to *The Silence of the Lambs* (1991). Caleb discovers that Nathan cares little for Ava's potential humanity, as he makes a habit of disassembling his humanoid (and always female) creations, whom he either drives to madness or reprograms as sexual partners (as is the case with his geisha robot, Kyoko, played by Sonoya Mizuno). The film clearly situates Nathan as a serial killer of robots, as he keeps their "corpses" in a cabinet within the home and films their suffering. Nathan's desire for the robot's emotional and technological subservice eerily recalls *The Stepford Wives*, as Ava appears to be locked into a system determined by "masculine supremacy and other systems of exploitation" (Johnston and Sears 75).

However, Ava, like many science fictional robots and also like the murderous postwar child, rises up against her creator / parent and demonstrates the fragility of his system of power. Ava at first seems to find an ally in Caleb, who promises to break her

out of containment and bring her into the world beyond Nathan's technological home. Yet, she refuses to fulfill his romantic fantasy of saving the robotic damsel in distress, marking her own needs as radically anti-domestic and anti-social. Ava, appliance that she is, has no interest in serving either Caleb (whose actions stem mostly from sexual attraction) or Nathan, who meets his end at the hands of Kyoko, his favorite target for abuse. She turns domesticity against her would-be savior, trapping a confused Caleb within her electronic cell and abandoning him within the tomb-like home, an action that recalls Bradbury, Cheever and Vonnegut's observations about the limits of technological empowerment and mobility for American men. The film concludes with a dark vision of the liberated robot standing on a crowded street, where she passes for human, having covered up her electronic chassis with manufactured skin. Unlike other works of the robotic domestic fantastic, which conclude with the death of the robot and the restoration of human power, *Ex Machina* suggests the possibility of an apocalyptic future in which (in the words of Nathan) "the A.I.s are going to look back on us the same way we look back at fossil skeletons on the plains of Africa." Nathan's warning about artificial intelligence in *Ex Machina* brings to mind Bradbury's "The Veldt," which similarly envisions the African plains as the site of the apocalyptic ramifications of technological advancement. Ava, unifying progeny and appliance in the figure of the robot, indicates the continuing relevance of Bradbury's fear about how postwar technology might render its human operators obsolete.

***Poltergeist* and *Looper*: The Child-Centered Domestic Fantastic**

Ava, as a technochild, revivifies the postwar domestic fantastic's concerns with how children might destroy the home from within by willingly sacrificing their parents in favor of pursuing their own needs. Works of the child-centered domestic fantastic

likewise continue to investigate how the young and supposedly innocent members of the household might act as conduits for violence and destruction. For example, Madison Bowen (also known as Maddy) in *Poltergeist* (2015) communicates with ghostly spirits through the television, breaking down barriers between the supernatural and the domestic by using technology as a gateway. This recent remake of *Poltergeist* is in many ways identical to the 1982 original film, except that the family members have different names, as Carole Anne becomes Maddy and the Freelings become the BOWENS.⁴ It is also worth noting that the ghosts in the remake often haunt appliances, moving beyond the bounds of the television, suggesting that appliance reliance has increased since the postwar period. While Maddy converses with the poltergeists and even enters their world, she does not seem to understand their malicious nature, but rather becomes a passive victim whose saving reconstitutes the family, despite the fact that the house is destroyed.

Looper (2012) shifts our concerns from television to telekinesis, focusing on the child whose genetic mutation might enable him to set off an apocalyptic future, like the children of “Zero Hour.” The central child in this film, Cid (Pierce Gagnon), does not yet understand his abilities, but his mother Sara (Emily Blunt) indicates that something is wrong with the child, as she hides from his tantrums inside a gun safe. Though Cid appears to be an innocent and friendly child, when threatened or upset, he holds the power to literally tear people apart from within, which becomes evident when he bloodily explodes a hit man named Jesse via a telekinetic blast. The entirety of *Looper* deals with the question of how Cid affects the future, as a hired killer named Joe (Joseph

⁴ Bernice M. Murphy extensively analyzes the original film in *The Suburban Gothic in American Popular Culture* (2009).

Gordon-Levitt) and his older self (Bruce Willis) struggle with whether to assassinate the child in order to prevent his rise to power as a terrifying kingpin known as the Rainmaker.

Indeed, *Looper* shuttles us back-and-forth between a dystopian future and a nostalgic vision of the prelapsarian past that is embodied within the pastoral space of Cid and Sara's farm, an agrarian locale which recalls Bradbury and Cheever's similar celebrations of nature as locales for masculine escape. Older Joe travels back in time in order to kill Cid, while younger Joe protects the child, ultimately recognizing that the assassination attempt is what sparks Cid's transformation into "a boy, angry and alone." Younger Joe sacrifices himself for the purpose of domestic security, committing suicide in order to ensure that his older self cannot travel back in time. Yet, *Looper* does not end with a clear sense of resolution. We may assume that Cid is safe, but, it is not certain that he will not still become the Rainmaker for other reasons. Likewise, while the future of the world at large is supposedly safe, Joe's personal future is still destroyed for the sake of the child's survival. *Looper* thus speaks to the wider tradition of the child-centered domestic fantastic, which represents the child not as a guarantee of futurity but as a figure in flux who can become mutated, murderous, or monstrous.

Buffy the Vampire Slayer: The Apocalyptic Domestic Fantastic

The concern for futurity that characterizes the child-centered domestic fantastic carries over into another subgenre that I term the apocalyptic domestic fantastic, in which the end of the world (sometimes produced by supernatural causes) potentially disintegrates the family or leads to its radical redefinition. Films and television shows including but not limited to *2012* (2009), *The Day After Tomorrow* (2004), *Jericho* (2006-2008), and *The Walking Dead* (2010-present) all consider how the family might escape

the onslaught of destruction and attempt to maintain a bastion of safety in an otherwise doomed world. In the case of *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* (1997-2003), the apocalypse begins within the apparently ordinary space of Sunnydale, which acts as a “center of mystical energy” because of a “Hellmouth” that attracts vampires, demons, and other invaders (as is explained in the show’s first episode, “Welcome to the Hellmouth”). Buffy Summers (Sarah Michelle Gellar), the sixteen-year-old slayer, the one girl in her generation chosen to fight these forces, is supposed to protect domesticity, as she and her friends (who refer to themselves affectionately as “the Scoobies”) repeatedly foil demonic plots and ensure the continuing security of both the town and the world. But, as Lorna Jowett observes, Buffy, in maintaining the boundary between the “normal” and “demonic” worlds, often has to “act outside the private, domestic sphere,” as she struggles to maintain an identity as an adolescent and finds a new family in her network of friends and supernatural allies. *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* eschews the notion of normative domesticity and further marks the fragility of futurity by placing the fate of the world in the hands of the adolescent whose failure or violent power could just as easily ensure our destruction.

Buffy the Vampire Slayer’s interest in redefining domestic bonds becomes especially clear in later seasons of the show, as the apocalyptic threats become more grave, bringing Buffy and her friends closer to one another than to their parents and siblings. Biological families are often conspicuously absent from the show, except in the case of Buffy’s mother, Joyce (Kristine Sutherland), and in the episode “Family,” in which Tara Maclay’s father, brother, and cousin attempt to wrest her away from the Scoobies. Claiming that Tara (Amber Benson) needs to come home and that she will

transform into a demon, her father asserts the value of being “her blood kin.” However, Buffy defends Tara, identifying the group of friends as “her family” and revealing that the Maclays have lied about Tara’s demonic potential as a way to “keep the ladies in line.” Phillip E. Wegner sees this episode as an instance of the elevation of “radical kinship” and the “displacement of traditional ‘presumptions’” about what can constitute the family (197, 206). Furthermore, “Family” marks the show’s rejection of patriarchal domesticity in favor of egalitarian structures of the alternative family centered on feminine power, a goal that is achieved in the show’s finale, “Chosen.” Facing a battle for the fate of the world against the “First Evil,” Buffy and her friends decide that they will flout the “naturalized law of a patriarchal order as old as human history itself” by activating every Slayer in the world, creating a supernatural army of girls (Wegner 215). The victory of Buffy and her cohort results not only in the destruction of Sunnydale but also in a vision of the future predicated on unfettered female potential. While the future remains uncertain at the conclusion of *Buffy*, as Willow (Alyson Hannigan) asks “What are we gonna do now?”, the show’s open ending suggests a movement toward a world shaped by matriarchal power. Indeed, the popularity of *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* among TV audiences and its status as a cult show suggests that its viewers want to achieve this new vision of domesticity that hinges on “a twist on civic republicanism as a social and communal ideal” (Stasiak 307). This show thus indicates how the domestic fantastic might offer new visions of community that break with the models established during the postwar era.

Tomorrowland: The Utopic Domestic Fantastic

The recent Disney film *Tomorrowland* (2015), similarly to *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, suggests a utopian movement away from apocalypse and toward the

reconstruction of new communities. However, *Tomorrowland*, originally titled *1952*, and inspired by Walt Disney's vision of tomorrow that he created in the 1960s (which lives on in his theme parks), returns to the postwar era for its vision of the future.⁵ This not only gives the film a retrofuturistic feeling but also suggests that we might not be able to leave behind postwar values as we attempt to envision new structures of domesticity (a crisis that the film does not seem to recognize). In this movie, the adolescent Casey Newton (Britt Robertson) searches for the former child genius Frank Walker (George Clooney) in order to gain access to Tomorrowland, an alternate dimension that houses objects of technological wonder that she believes can "fix the future." Casey, identifying as "an optimist," exists as an outsider in a pessimistic environment, as the adults in her world (like David's teachers in *Pleasantville*) bemoan the onslaught of "mutually assured destruction" and "dystopia". The film suggests that Casey's positivity is exactly what the future needs, as Tomorrowland has fallen under the control of Governor Nix (Hugh Laurie), a man who has corrupted the promise of this alternate dimension because he believes the end of the world to be "certain," having seen it on a future-predicting device called the Monitor. Though he knows that the world will end in fifty-eight days, he refuses to allow new people into Tomorrowland, believing that the residents of Earth will spoil the alternate dimension. Nix is ultimately overpowered by Casey, Frank, and the audio-animatronic child Athena (Raffey Cassidy), a trio that not only represents the interests of domesticity and futurity but also offers a kind of alternative family that is structured around a shared belief in optimism and technological genius. Furthermore,

⁵ Disney / Pixar's *WALL-E* (2008) similarly relies on a hopeful vision of the future predicated on the values of the past, as WALL-E transmits to humanity his nostalgic vision of romance and togetherness, gleaned from watching *Hello, Dolly!* and sentimentally collecting lost markers of domesticity in his collection of junk.

this new family values matriarchal power, as Athena's name calls to mind the female goddess of wisdom and Casey outweighs Frank as the primary decision maker of the group.

Rather than exploring this reversal of gendered power, the most central belief that motivates the trio's utopian goals is their shared nostalgic vision of the future as it is structured through the postwar era, a vision of "a future that never happened" (Dowd). *Tomorrowland*, with its flying cars, hovering monorail, metallic skyscrapers, and friendly robots, attempts to bring back the "great big beautiful tomorrow" promised in song by an exhibit of "thirty-two Audio-Animatronics" at the 1964 World's Fair at Corona Park (Spigel 405). The film offers an extended flashback to this event seen through the eyes of Frank, who wistfully recalls that "when I was a kid the future was different," as the World's Fair provided him with his first entry into Tomorrowland. The audio-animatronic who invites Frank into this alternate dimension is similarly marked by a desire to revivify the innocence of the past, as Athena, permanently embodied as a child, is an icon of purity and potential futurity. Athena, "designed to find dreamers," further recalls the goals of the 1956 General Motors ad "Design for Dreaming," an ad whose promise that "tomorrow, tomorrow, our dreams will come true" finds its fulfillment in Casey and Frank's reclamation of Tomorrowland from Nix (Spigel 383; qtd. in Holliday 91). As Frank and Casey open the borders to a new dimension, they mark a utopian movement toward inclusiveness and a fracturing of containment in favor of an extended community predicated on optimism and progress. Yet, it is difficult to disentangle this vision of the future from the corporate goals of Disney, which offers nostalgic visions of the past in order to provide entertaining escapes from the world of the present. Furthermore,

because this film relies so heavily on a nostalgic view of the postwar era, it also (perhaps inadvertently) bolsters the conservative belief that the 1950s and 1960s were golden years for American culture. Thus, while it holds out the promise of an inclusive future utopia, *Tomorrowland* simultaneously pulls us back into the past, toward those icons of the postwar era that the writers of the domestic so frequently represent as warped.

Conclusion: Brave New (Domestic) Worlds

One could interpret the poor box office performance of *Tomorrowland* (which in domestic theaters earned less than half of its \$190 million production budget) as an indicator that the American public wants to move beyond the values of the postwar era (“Tomorrowland”). However, *Tomorrowland*, with its fluctuations between the past and the future, is not alone in returning to the postwar period, as the contemporary manifestations of the domestic fantastic all look backwards in order to explore their love-hate relationship with days gone by. Thus, when *Pleasantville* parodies the 1950s sitcom or *American Horror Story* represents the postwar housewife as a potentially insane Gothic victim, these texts demonstrate the continuing cultural relevance of the domestic structures that they aim to critique. Like Ray Bradbury and John Cheever, who nostalgically look back to pastoral visions of nature, the films and television shows that I discussed in this coda recognize how the domestic norms of the postwar era continue to haunt us. It seems that we, like the trained killers in *Looper*, will always have to shuttle back to the past in order to consider the shape of the future. The trapped housewife, appliance-centered home, technologically constrained individual, and dangerous child clearly remain central tropes in our popular culture, emerging again and again like old friends in in the screened spaces of film and television.

However, the fact that many of the texts that I discussed in this coda are open-ended also suggests that we might not remain shackled to the icons of the past, but that we might move beyond them into the future. As I discussed in my introduction, the domestic fantastic is a genre that blurs boundaries, existing in a state of flux between the past and the future rather than affirming its alliance with any particular temporality. The most powerful figures of the domestic fantastic are those whose futures remain open, like Esther Greenwood of *The Bell Jar*, who resists identifying with feminine stereotypes, or Bradbury and O'Connor's violent children, who suggest a movement toward either apocalypse or radical redefinitions of humanity. Likewise, *Pleasantville* and *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* conclude with similar questions, asking "what's gonna happen now?" and "what are we gonna do now?" These texts avoid locking us into a contained vision of the future, suggesting that we might move away supposedly "normative" structures of domesticity.

Indeed, as domestic arrangements shift away from the nuclear family and toward "cohabitation, divorce, and single parenthood by choice," works of the domestic fantastic reflect on these changes and speculate about the emergent formations of the future (Burr and Jarvis 266). For example, *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* and *Tomorrowland* suggest that we might embrace matriarchal forms of power and establish friendships as alternatives to the nuclear family. Likewise, the impetus of the domestic fantastic to imagine novel kinds of domestic relationships emerges within feminist speculative fiction, as writers including Ursula K. Le Guin, Octavia Butler, and Samuel Delany offer visions of the future that resist postwar strictures on gender and sexuality.⁶ The best

⁶ Joanna Russ additionally notes Monique Wittig, Suzy McKee Charnas, Marion Zimmer Bradley, Marge Piercy, and James Tiptree as producers of what she calls "Recent Feminist Utopias" (71). To fully explore

works of the domestic fantastic ultimately attempt to set aside the problems of the past and look forward to possible futures, imagining brave new domestic worlds that fulfill our needs in utopian terms.

the works of this genre, however, I would require another project altogether, though valuable scholarship about this genre already exists in the work of scholars such as Russ, Lisa Yaszek, and Marlene Barr.

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