

## CASTING OUT DEMONS: HOMAGE TO SHIRLEY JACKSON

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### **ABSTRACT:**

Intense and lively activity regarding North American writer Shirley Jackson was noted in the last decades of the twentieth century and in the beginning of the twenty-first century. The period that immediately followed her death in 1965 foreshadowed a response that led several critics to postulate Jackson as a forgotten writer. Often referred to as an author of horror and weird fiction, Jackson has, for strange reasons, accepted the label, though really a minority of her literary production actually features supernatural elements or delves in gothic themes. This article wishes to pay homage to this supposedly underappreciated and forsaken woman who has been influencing many important authors and canonical works till nowadays and who has changed and continues to change not only the American literature but also the world literary history.

**KEYWORDS:** Critical response; Homage; Literary career; Shirley Jackson.

### **A timely introduction**

North American writer Shirley Jackson is an example of literary historiography gone askew. She is the writer of six full-length novels, two humorous family *memoirs*, four short story collections, four books for children, a juvenile stage play, some thirty non-fiction articles, numerous book reviews and *circa* one hundred separate short stories, the form which she proved more prolific. She is responsible for one of the greatest haunted house stories of American Literature— *The Haunting of Hill House* (1959) — which was adapted to the big screen and made into long feature motion pictures at least three times.

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Ms. Jackson wrote what is likely to be considered the most controversial piece of fiction ever published in the *New Yorker Magazine*, the 1948 short story *The Lottery*. It resulted in hundreds of canceled subscriptions; it was later adapted for television, theater, radio and, in a mystifying transformation, made into a ballet. Joined by Ambrose Bierce's *An Occurrence at Owl Creek Bridge* and Flannery O'Connor's *A Good Man's Hard to Find*, Ms. Jackson is one of three writers of horror stories which are the most anthologized in American literary history. Even though she is now practically forgotten, something which literary scholar Kyla Ward describes as— and I agree with her— “a thing both unreasonable and criminal” (WARD, 1995, p.1). In fact, she *was* successful with the public and the critics of her own time— during the period of her short, though brilliant working life.

Nowadays she lives mainly inside North American and Canadian subconsciousness. Still widely read and studied in elementary and high schools all over North America, few readers, if any, ever return to her in their readings in later life. Except for her last two novels *The Haunting of Hill House* (1959) and *We Have Always Lived in the Castle* (1962)— considered mild bestsellers— few of her other writings have ever been reprinted.

The decades that followed her death—August 8<sup>th</sup>, 1965— continuously marginalized her from literary history. The aim of this article is to bring to life this fabulous American writer.

In order to bring Ms. Jackson back from her unjustly forsaken position, efforts should be directed towards opening new possibilities of seeing her *opus* as part of the general canonical literary history, rather than what happened in the decades that followed her death— the mere labeling of her solely as a horror fiction writer. This is due to the fact that just one piece, among so many, was seen as a polemic and controversial short story — *The Lottery* — and nothing else. We herein do not wish to put aside all preciousness of horror or gothic literature. From our view Ms. Jackson's great production should not be grounded—as it currently is— just as horror fiction Nor should this have been so in her own time to begin with.

We therefore intend to see her work being read, investigated and widely promoted not only inside but also outside the United States. If she failed to cause an overall positive impression in her own lifetime I feel that it is still time for a whole new generation of national and international readers to rediscover her work and learn to appreciate it with due merit.

Readers will certainly be sharpened by the psychological, cultural and sociological insights her literature has to offer. It contributes to the understanding of human interrelationships, whether among peers or between genders, in our contemporary society as complex and multi-layered as it was her own. It is my contention that writers like her can make us more alert to understand the contradictions between official values and everyday social practices. This is what can be overtly seen in her outrageous short story *The Lottery*. In other short stories of hers, which we shall investigate in this paper it is possible to see that even the most complex societies are interconnected, as well as the conflicts that stem from human bonds. Her novels can make readers develop a more sophisticated historical consciousness of the human kind and a richer sense of our own place in society.

Through her *oeuvre*, Jackson has shown readers the impact of larger social and political forces on the lives of particular individuals. Instead of confining her characters to fantastic locations such as castles or haunted places— as gothic and horror fiction often do— she showed us how historical and social forces play out in the lives of the ordinary people she depicted. Her legacy should never have stopped moving readers in that direction. Even though political forces may have tried to shut her up and shun her out. It was not just her characters that were shackled in their historical *milieu* we all are, and so were the critics who helped defile and debase her reputation.

This homage envisions such a task to attempt a rather simple demystification of such an important twentieth century woman. Hopefully this article will work as a contribution to the rewriting of literary history, one of the many goals that have been carried out for so long and through so many stances mainly by literary critics and by the Academia in general.

In order to make the connection between these claims and other existing critical and theoretical productions on Ms. Jackson's life and work it is important to understand the turmoil caused by her own fictional and non-fictional production upon literary critics of her own time and also upon literary scholars since then. So as to accomplish that task I shall briefly describe –rather than explain in depth– the ways and reasons for such a reputation she has held.

It is important to bear in mind that not only during her lifetime but also after her death Jackson has often been described, for better or for worse, as a “writer's writer”. Her admirers constituted a distinguished and eclectic list; such as Isaac Bashevis Singer, Sylvia Plath, Howard Nemerov, Joyce Carol Oates, Kurt Vonnegut, Ralph Ellison, Norman Mailer, Roald Dahl, and Stephen King (HALL, 1993). In stark contrast with her obscurity today Ms. Jackson was fairly popular in her heydays, maybe amongst specialized critics rather than with the general public. I shall then attempt to face the troublesome question of how Jackson was acclaimed as such at her time and also how she has been virtually forgotten in the years that followed her death.

Unfortunately there has been very few critical attention paid to Ms. Jackson. The first book-length study on her life and works was published just ten years after her death, in 1975. It is Lenemaja Friedman's *Shirley Jackson*– still an important and useful piece of work about the writer. The unique biography about the writer was published in 1988– Judy Oppenheimer's *Private Demons: The Life of Shirley Jackson*. Even though the author tries to relate Ms. Jackson's life with her fiction, it is not really a literary study. It has been said to seek the sensational instead of the factual, sometimes using the supernatural themes on her fiction to try to describe real events concerning the life of its author. She even speculates on the possibility of childhood incest in order to explain Ms. Jackson gothic-prone strain.

Sensationalistically or not, Ms. Jackson was said to be a witch. Rumors of supernatural events have always circulated about her. According to American journalist and novelist David Gates (In: SULLIVAN, 1994), Jackson was “widely believed to have broken the leg of publisher Alfred Knopf by sticking pins into a voodoo doll” (p.71).

Bennington College student Elizabeth Frank recalls “a rumor that. . . [Ms. Jackson] had turned a certain male faculty member into a pumpkin” (p.71).

Throughout the flood of mail that followed the publication of the short story *The Lottery* (1948) in *The New Yorker*, Jackson was labeled – for better or for worse: “un-American, perverted, and modern” (SULLIVAN, 1994, p.73). Her reputation was further bewitched by commentaries such as the one made by the writer Harvey Breit: “she was able to be natural even about the supernatural” (1948, p. 117–118). And she loved that! Apparently she loved playing with her audience’s expectations (NORJORDET, 2005). Who would expect loving and light hearted family memory books with titles such as *Raising Demons* and *Life Among the Savages*?

Ms. Jackson’s range confused some readers. As it has often happened in literary history –and needless to say it still does–, many writers are blatantly confused about their characters for many distinct reasons. Even though she mainly wrote about prejudice, neurosis and identity –for some reasons– this research also seeks to show that an evil image was created about her. This image persisted for long “[one] Jackson encouraged, for complicated reasons, that her work is full of ghosts and witches” (LETHEM, 1997, p.2).

It is truth that few of her stories really contained suggestions of supernatural events. Whereas the bulk of exploratory critical work seeks to unravel the supernatural aspects of her works, this one acknowledges the obvious reasons that have lead other researchers to undertake such a path, but it deviates and rows against the stream. Indeed very few of her short fiction pieces and possibly just one of her novels– *The Haunting of Hill House* from 1959, explicitly produce other worldly or supernatural aspects.

It seems to be indisputable that the supernatural was really important to her. She herself “undermined” her reputation on purpose by stating that she wrote about a kind of irrational struggle that “may be the devil or may be intellectual enlightenment” (NORJORDET, 2005, p.1). It is sensible to assume that she sometimes paradoxically uses the supernatural as a metaphor to allude to and to explain everyday ordeals. She used witchcraft and folklore to shed light on what she called the “inhuman world”

In fact Jackson's strong suit was people— psychology and society were explored revealing the evils which lie just underneath their surface. Her characters were:

...dispossessed, misunderstanding or thwarting one another compulsively, people colluding absently in monstrous acts. She had a jeweler's eye for the microscopic degrees by which a personality creeps into madness or a relationship turns from dependence to exploitation (LETHEM, 1997, p.2).

According to the researcher on mythology Barbara G. Walker: "Any unusual ability in a woman instantly raise(s) a charge of witchcraft" (1983, p. 1078). This article wishes to demonstrate that even though she was not a witch of any kind, she held an extensive library on the subject of witchcraft in her home. Her agoraphobic tendencies immensely contributed to accentuate the growing mystique around and about her. It was said that her house was her cave, her small social circle, her coven, and her (many) cats, her "familiar".

American literary scholar, essayist and short story writer Jack Sullivan sensibly concludes that "Jackson's real witchcraft is her fiction" (1994, p. 71). I agree. Now, to better understand her world, the imaginary and the real, we must understand what made her such a "witch", and that is mainly what the story behind *The Lottery* tells and all of its repercussions.

### ***The Lottery* phenomenon**

It was only on June 28<sup>th</sup>, 1948 that her name would strikingly spread wide bad reputation. The famous as well as infamous *The Lottery* had been published. In fact, a great part of her short fiction was published in *The New Yorker* magazine (contemporary to 'Chas' Addams cartoons) not holding much enthusiastic response. Her association with *The New Yorker* started as early as 1943, with the publication of *After you, my dear Alphonse*, an elucidating tale of prejudice and human nature, that will be further analyzed later on.

June 28<sup>th</sup> marked the beginning. After that day nothing remained the same. Still today, serious and heated discussions still take place in classrooms and Internet forums—

in a somewhat endless debate over what the story's ultimate interpretation should be. For example, rows still rage over whether the "stool beneath the box, which is described as 'three-legged,' may or may not be significant as a symbol" (FRIEDMAN, 1975, p. 66).

Interpretation attempts took– and still take– the most intriguing shapes. An article published in *The New Orleans Review* in 1985 brings a Marxist-feminist reading of *The Lottery*. The author– Peter Kosenko,– was the one who has first and foremost acknowledged that no one has ever had any reason to call Ms. Jackson a Marxist. He explains that the lottery in the story represents an attack on the "essentially capitalist (...) social order and ideology" of the town in which it is set. He claims that the story clearly possesses Marxist undertones. His most poignant yet undoubtedly questionable argument lies in the black dot present in the lottery slip. What I believe to be a disputable association was made between the 'blackness' of the black dot and the coal business led by Mr. Summers, the "perpetrator" of the dot. To Kosenko, blackness is associated to evil which is associated to business which ultimately leads to an association with Capitalism. To him, "(The) most powerful men who control the town, economically as well as politically, also happen to administer the lottery" (1985, p. 26).

In the same fashion as many other critics before him, Kosenko dwells on the smallest of details of the story to help further corroborate his claims. In the story Tessie is the wife who has the slip with the black dot on it. She is forced by her husband– Bill Hutchinson– to open it. Jackson writes: "It had a black spot on it, the black spot Mr. Summers had made the night before with a heavy pencil in his coal–company office" (1998, p. 293). To Kosenko (1985) the evil present in the lottery– at least at one level– is linked to a disorder, promoted by capitalism, in the material organization of modern society. Sort of anticipating a defense to his arguments Kosenko writes that Ms. Jackson said it was 'difficult' rather than 'impossible' for her to explain the story, rendering it, more or less open to his, or anyone's interpretation. These are her actual words: "I suppose, I hoped, by setting a particularly brutal ancient rite in the present and in my own village to shock the story's readers with a graphic dramatization of the pointless violence and general inhumanity in their own lives" (In: FRIEDMAN, 1975, p. 64).

As for feminist statements in *The Lottery*, Darryl Hattenhauer (2003) claims that the story primarily deals with the subjugation of women in an oppressive patriarchal society. Mr. Hattenhauer adds that “a married woman minimizes her chances of being selected by delivering babies early and often” (p. 44). Within the story, the boys’ role is to (apparently leisurely) collect stones, the men’s is to discuss politics and farming and other “important” matters, the girls’ is to stand aside, looking over their shoulders, and finally the women’s is to engage in gossip.

Perhaps one of the most widely agreed interpretations is that of the scapegoat. To Lainhoff (In: ZOGAS, 2009), *The Lottery* is Ms. Jackson’s “modern representation of the primitive annual scapegoat rite” (p. 1). According to him there is a double purpose to the rite: “to exorcise the evils of the old year by transferring them to some inanimate or animate objects, and with that (. . .) to appease the forces of the new year, to insure fertility” (In: ZOGAS, 2009, p. 1).

Following the success of *The Lottery*, a mythical image was created around town—she lived in North Bennington, Vermont that time. There Jackson herself had been pelted with stones when she was a child and had then has gone home and written the story. Probably not true, but anyway it helped with the construction of the myth surrounding her, the “Legend of Shirley Jackson”.

Finally when Jackson herself was inquired as to what the story really meant she is reported to have said: “well, really it’s just a story” (In: KUNITZ, 1967). In a quite brief personal sketch produced for *Twentieth Century Authors* (edited by Stanley J. Kunitz and Howard Harcraft in 1967), she states that: “I very much dislike writing about myself or my work, and when pressed for autobiographical material can only give a bare chronological outline which contains, naturally, no pertinent facts” (KUNITZ, 1967).

Besides ideological power, literature holds other attributes, e.g., the aforementioned “healing” power. Literature allows the reader to resignify his or her own obscure feelings, the ones we have hard access to. Through reading, those feelings are relived and purged in a safe manner. Besides achieving aesthetic pleasure, reading literature helps us control our utmost hostile impulses, leading us to a better intellectual



and emotional comprehension of ourselves and of the world we live in (Bastos, 2003). This psychoanalytical view finds support in Freudian scholars and theoreticians, namely psychoanalysts Ernst Kris and Norman Holland.

Now, let us study the public's response Jackson a little further. The torrent of mail that she received on the *New Yorker* offices after the publication of *The Lottery* was broadly divided into three categories: some wanted an explanation for the story, some were plain abusive while others just inquired where these lotteries were held and whether they could go there and watch.

Psychoanalyst Ernst Kris (1900-1957), a contemporary of Freud, explains artistic processes of imaginative creation and sheds some light on the public's disturbing and bizarre response. As a matter of fact, his explanation is quite enlightening. He claims that the capacity the adults hold to create a fictional world, or to recreate it through literature, is directly related to childhood, the time of life when one plays make-believe, fantasizing and imagining other worlds. This capacity held as a child is the starting point to, further ahead, accepting fictional realities other than his or her own fantasies (the literary worlds). Kris calls this fictionalizing ability "aesthetic illusion", in other words, "man's need to achieve pleasure leads him to believe in a story created by another person, in this case the writer" (Bastos, 2003, p. 54). Even though the story created by Ms. Jackson was not real—similarly to what happens when we dream – the story was "felt" as it had been real.

### **Labels and the concept of domestic literature**

So far the positions taken help us understand the depths and seriousness of such accusations, as well as the internal reasons that have prompted such rave criticisms about Jackson's work. These were neither concerning the quality of her works nor her personal talent, but the contents of her stories and the underlying ideology that have always surfaced mercilessly in her writings, and poignantly touched many people's sensitive nerves. An in-depth exploration of psychological and sociological proportions is merited.

This article has a twofold aim in so far as it does not wish only to pay homage to Jackson, but also to help at demystifying an image the writer has garnered during her

lifetime and that, by virtue of circumstances, continues up to the present time. The misguided attribution of labels is not an isolated occurrence, nor is Ms. Jackson the first (and certainly not the last) to suffer from such phenomenon.

It is my wish to defend the idea that Jackson's writings do not so much fit in gothic or horror literature *per se* but they also find their concepts intimately connected with the ideology put forward by the Domestic Fiction proposal. It is necessary to bear in mind that I do not wish to detract her *oeuvre* from the horror literature field— for I acknowledge some of them as such— but at the same time I would like to show the enormous sets of features presented by them that at parallel correspond to Domestic Literature traits. For that, it would be interesting to quickly review the whereabouts of Domestic Fiction in the twentieth century, so as to understand the place which I feel Ms. Jackson would be more fairly represented and consequently made to feel more at home (no pun intended).

There was little about domesticity in the twentieth century that was self-evident, especially in its last decades. That century witnessed a decline of the so-called “traditional nuclear family” which theoretically consisted of a male “provider”, his wife and their biological children. According to Desmond F. McCarthy (1998), the number of American households that can be defined as traditional nuclear families “declined from 60 percent in 1955 to 7 percent in 1985” (p.3). It is illogical to expect that traditionally-attributed gender roles can withstand such voracious changes. The decline of the traditional nuclear family has been accompanied by a diversification of household arrangements not only in the United States but in the whole world.

The very existence of these alternative households necessarily challenges traditional attitudes regarding “the proper role and place of women, the regulation of sexuality, the boundaries of families, and appropriate child-rearing environments and philosophies” (McCarthy, 1998, p.2). Considering the traditional nuclear family as an ideal or historically permanent institution, we see that this notion is as imbued with much of the same degree of utopianism as the representations of “alternative” families in contemporary American fiction.

In twentieth century American literature we see illustrative instances of alternative domestic arrangements in novels by prestigious authors such as John Updike, John Irving, Alice Walker and E. L. Doctorow, to name a few. These writers have shown us that they clearly perceive this new world where domestic life has been radically altered, inevitably yielding new sorts of household complexities. However, differently from their antecessors in the previous centuries, each of these writers has achieved both critical and public acclaim. Some of their works are still among the most widely read novels of our times. Alice Walker's *The Color Purple* and two of John Updike's 'rabbit' novels have received the Pulitzer Prize for fiction, one of the most important tokens of artistic talent recognition.

Naturally there is confusion over the future of families and of family life as we know it. Some novelists are imagining compelling alternatives and are dealing with realistic and recognizable conflicts. In their depictions of new domestic arrangements they eliminate most of the traditional gender-based hierarchies. According to poet and feminist critic Adrienne Rich, the intention of the artist is not simply to portray social realities in a realistic and convincing manner, but "to bring a skeptical consciousness and an unfettered imagination to bear upon these conditions— to conceive of alternatives..." (In: McCarthy, 1998, p.3). Shirley Jackson may have been far too modern for some, far too revolutionary for others, but ever scary to all.

### **Final considerations**

Having by now a fairly clear idea of the provocations contained in Ms. Jackson's work and of the factors that led to the failure in fostering amiable relations with literary critics, in specific and conservative readership in general we may conclude that her stories actually address a multiplicity of codes— social, sexual and political— that may be offensive to a more traditional audience. We can now understand why men would feel threatened by the untamed boundaries of her fiction and why women would feel uncomfortable by a mother of four who wrote in a time and place in which moms did not do anything as odd

as write, more specifically in mid-twentieth century countryside small town Rochester, Vermont.

My wish was not to have supported my claims through close readings of her texts, or by analyzing the writer's subconscious mind, but rather to briefly attempt to describe the rapport between her literary works and society. Bearing in mind that society exists prior to the writer, and therefore she is ultimately conditioned to it, inadvertently reflecting it and expressing it, she was also unavoidably trying to change and to transform it. Jackson existed *before* her stories; she exists *in* them as well as *after* them. There is a sociology of her readership and of her public because they also promote her literature, for good or for bad, through their reception.

### EXORCISANDO DEMÔNIOS: UMA HOMENAGEM A SHIRLEY JACKSON

#### RESUMO:

Atividade intensa e efusiva concernente à escritora norte-americana Shirley Jackson tem sido percebida desde as últimas décadas do século XX até o início do XXI. O período que imediatamente sucedeu sua morte em 1965 prenunciava uma resposta que levou uma série de críticos a postularem Jackson como uma escritora esquecida. Frequentemente referindo-se a ela como uma autora de ficção bizarra e de terror. Jackson, por razões estranhas, aceitou o rótulo, embora uma minoria de sua produção literária de fato traga elementos sobrenaturais ou temas góticos. O presente texto deseja prestar uma homenagem a esta escritora supostamente pouco apreciada e relegada ao esquecimento que, no entanto, influencia muitos escritores célebres e obras canônicas até os dias de hoje, e que mudou e continua a mudar a história da literatura americana e mundial de maneira indelével.

**PALAVRAS-CHAVE:** Carreira literária; Homenagem; Recepção crítica; Shirley Jackson.

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