

Shirley Jackson: The Queen of the Gothic

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“The very nicest thing about being a writer is that you can afford to indulge yourself endlessly with oddness, and nobody can really do anything about it, as long as you keep writing and kind of using it up, as it were.”

-Shirley Jackson

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Introduction

One of the central genres of literature thoroughly analyzed and explored within this course was that of Gothic fiction. Its disturbing, uncensored, and direct themes capture humanity's attention in a way that no other genre can as it works to simultaneously frighten and engage its audience. An exemplary model of Gothic fiction can be found in Shirley Jackson's literary oeuvre. Without her contributions and trademark themes of the occult and supernatural, the genre would never have evolved into what it is today. The following analyses of Jackson's "The Lottery" and *We Have Always Lived in the Castle* work to prove a certain necessity in studying her works to fully grasp the complex lessons and values that contemporary Gothic has to offer humanity. Even further, these findings expand on the importance of Gothic studies as a whole to reflect fundamental aspects of humanity's cultural values, beliefs, and fears.

The Gothic and Shirley Jackson

Throughout this section, historical perceptions of Gothic fiction are explored to highlight the paradoxical relationship humanity holds with macabre fascination. In the process, the exigence in studying the genre is identified and expanded upon through various lenses of Gothic criticism that have become of recent interest to literary scholars. Each of these criticisms is then put into conversation with Shirley Jackson's contributions to Gothic literature, further solidifying not only the importance of studying the genre but Jackson's works as well.

Contemporary Criticisms of Gothic Fiction

Historically, Gothic fiction has been viewed as an unspeakable "other" in contrast with other genres of literature. From its creation in the late seventeenth century to the latest resurgence of the genre in the mid-twentieth century, Gothic fiction stood as a source of discomfort and disdain in the eyes of many. This can be accredited to the perpetuation of the idea that Gothic literature was contemptible and held no substantial importance in being studied. Critics of the past often felt ashamed of their macabre fascinations with the themes Gothic literature engages in. Emotions of fear, traditionally speaking, have been viewed as those to avoid whenever possible. In spite of this, individuals have sought out and continued to find a sense of pleasure in works of Gothic fiction—a genre with the explicit goal of producing fear and unease.

This paradoxical relationship that humanity holds with the Gothic prompts the question of what about the genre is so fascinating to us, and even further, what does this macabre fascination reflect about the world in which we live? In determining the answers to these

questions, it is helpful to first establish the foundational aspects of Gothic fiction, starting with the morally complex and psychologically stimulating themes addressed within the genre.

Primary themes of the Gothic include, but are not limited to, the following:

mystery and intrigue, fear and dread, justice and revenge, good and evil, death and decay, the occult, as well as the supernatural.

As we grapple with the Gothic's philosophical, unnerving, and/or unnatural concepts, we delve into areas of our psyche that are often difficult to admit exist. The conscious feelings of dread and anxiety we experience as we engage with the Gothic are closely connected with our unconscious cultural values, beliefs, and fears. Together, these areas of our psyche play into how we respond to the genre, and as a result, offer a reflection of our darkest, innermost selves.

As stated by Anne Williams in her article about recent studies of Gothic fiction, what the genre ultimately offers us is "...a geography of the human subject, a mirror that more honestly than most reflects ourselves in all their dimensions" (799). Elements of mystery and intrigue, fear and dread, the supernatural, or the occult are certainly disturbing features of Gothic fiction, but as previously stated, these macabre features are simultaneously pleasurable to engage with. This is on account of how cathartic it is to vicariously experience fear or engage with our disturbing impulses in a controlled situation—such as within a work of Gothic fiction—because it releases our deepest anxieties or darkest desires. On the other hand, perhaps the most unsettling themes of the genre are those dealing with the concept of verisimilitude—or the ability of the plot to relate to elements of real life. As we explore the boundaries between good and evil, the dynamics of justice and revenge, or the tragedy of death and decay, we are forced to face some of humankind's deepest fears, anxieties, and moral quandaries. These characteristics of the

genre make us uncomfortable in an entirely different way than its other psychologically disturbing aspects, as they force us to confront some of the most difficult philosophical and moral issues that have troubled mankind since the beginning of time.

Considering this notion, it is easier to understand the sense of unease that has been historically associated with the Gothic genre. Its disturbingly interesting and taboo content provides us not only an opportunity to purge the darkest parts of our psyche by living vicariously through its macabre themes but also presents a situation in which we can explore important moral and societal concerns that would otherwise go unaddressed. Therefore, it is unsurprising that the Gothic was shunned for centuries; these links to our psyche are disturbing. They force us to confront not only aspects of ourselves but humanity as a whole, which are fundamentally unpleasurable and often negatively reflect upon us.

Contemporary criticisms reveal that this historical perception is rapidly transforming, however, which is mostly due to social and cultural movements that have revolutionized the way humans perceive the state of society. Williams' proposed that feminisms of various kinds, revisionist psychoanalysis, and cultural studies have provided a new lens through which we read the Gothic (790). This confirms the notion that Gothic fiction reflects something deeper about humanity, as it works to establish a legion of tropes through which our cultural anxieties, beliefs, and fears can manifest. This is where the exigence in studying this genre lies.

Jackson and Gothic Resurgence

Similar to the genre of Gothic fiction, the works of Shirley Jackson have also only recently gained critical attention. The last couple of decades has seen significant growth in criticisms of Jackson's fiction, which has resulted in a renewed interest in her works. Following her death in 1965, Jackson was virtually forgotten for several decades. Despite this injustice, she has indubitably maintained her status of reverence amongst writers for her unique contributions to the Gothic genre and American literature as a whole. While she is still relatively obscure today, she was undoubtedly a respected writer in her own time for the various themes she explored that plagued the country's collective consciousness.

Within Jackson's expansive literary oeuvre, we find shocking stories such as "The Lottery" and *We Have Always Lived in the Castle* that are littered with Gothic paraphernalia. With a mastery of style that one rarely encounters within Gothic fiction, Jackson was capable of seamlessly blending the fantastic with the mundane—the comfortable with the misanthropic and horrifying. Her twist on the genre pushed the boundaries of ambiguity to the fullest extent, as she wrote simultaneously some of the most perplexing and satisfying stories within the realm of Gothic literature during its resurgence in the mid-twentieth century. With their dark, mysterious, and psychologically disorienting themes, Jackson's works arose as revenant modes of conceptualization during intense socio-cultural crises in the United States. The Gothic themes Jackson employed throughout her fiction worked to chronicle the universal evils underlying human nature, explore various psychological struggles, delve into social issues (e.g. sexism and war), and most characteristically, expand on elements of the occult and supernatural.

Jackson's most substantial contributions to Gothic fiction can be attributed to her frequent references to the occult and supernatural throughout her writing career. The reason behind her

fascination with this aspect of the Gothic can best be observed from a 1948 remark made by Jackson, in which she stated:

I think this is because I find there so convenient a shorthand statement of the possibilities of human adjustment to what seems to be at best an inhuman world. [. . .] Everything I write [involves] the sense I feel, of a human and not very rational order struggling inadequately to keep in check forces of great destruction, which may be the devil and may be intellectual enlightenment. (Murphy 185)

Reflecting on this quote, Jackson's exploration of the contemporary world through the lens of the supernatural can be considered one of the most effective ways of exploring important moral and societal issues. It presents her readers with opportunities to perform deep philosophical and moral introspection, which is one of the unique capabilities that the Gothic genre holds over all other modes of literary creation. The Gothic captures humanity's attention in a way that no other genre can through its distinct ability to simultaneously frighten, and engage its audience through its disturbing, uncensored, and direct themes. Jackson brought the most controversial issues of the twentieth century to the surface by using her trademark themes to explore the darkest depths of the human condition.

Surprisingly, Jackson's exploration of the occult and supernatural themes has not been investigated as much as other aspects of her Gothic fiction. Although critics address that she employs these supernatural elements throughout her writing—most commonly in relation to witchcraft, haunted houses, or other folklore—they tend to focus on the other Gothic themes at work within her narratives. This is an interesting trend amongst critics of her work, although it is not totally uncommon when taken into consideration with other criticisms of Gothic fiction.

Although horror is a concrete element across the genre, the supernatural is not always present. When it is present, it is typically implied rather than being outrightly identified as such. This is a result of questions that arise when mysterious phenomena are noted by characters within a Gothic narrative regarding whether it is actually paranormal or if it is a product of insanity. Considering biographies written about Jackson, as well as her novel *We Have Always Lived in the Castle*, this notion is worthy of consideration and will be further explored in later portions of this piece.

To further expand on what types of criticisms are most often used to analyze Jackson's works, the most notable mentions are those encompassed by feminist, sociological, and psychoanalytical theories. All of these lenses, in some manner, work to reveal the complex, often contradictory, functions within our social imaginary and collective consciousness. Of these functions, one of the most relevant in relation to Jackson's works involves trends of alterity, or "otherness" within society. Gothic fiction reflects not only the darkest parts of humanity, but also has a lot to say about our unconscious urge to identify an "other", whether it be of the past, the foreign, the supernatural, or the alien (Williams 799). Other elements of Jackson's writing that the genre is centered around include the preoccupation with houses as well as female characters whose psyches are just as mysterious and intriguing as the places in which they reside.

While early analyses of Gothic texts mostly favored identifying hallmark features of the genre in a "shopping list" approach, scholars have increasingly come to recognize the complexity of Gothic texts, which warrants further examination through various theoretical models than ever before. Likewise, the two Jackson stories that are the subjects of this critical analysis work to exemplify the intricate nature of the Gothic genre (Baker 1). On account of this, there is a certain

necessity in studying her creative space and contributions within this genre to fully grasp the complex lessons and values that contemporary Gothic has to offer humanity.

Shirley Jackson: Writing to Escape Domesticity

Despite what her career as a writer may suggest, Shirley Jackson's life was far from being witchlike or mysterious. In contrast, it was one of stifling domesticity and untiring devotion to her craft. To fully understand the intense sense of terror, uneasiness, and dread that permeates throughout her writing, there is a need to take a deep dive into her life story. Upon exploring her unfortunate upbringing and experiences throughout adulthood, we not only get a firm grasp on what inspired her fascination and success within the realm of Gothic fiction but also come to discover that she is more than well-equipped to talk about the various themes addressed within her literary oeuvre.

Jackson's Haunted Life

Jackson's upbringing and overall life experience is one of tragic irony, as upon close analysis, it can be seen as a sort of textbook representation of many of the themes linked to feminist Gothic criticism, especially in the psychological sense. In 1919, Jackson was born as an unwanted child to Geraldine and Leslie Jackson. Her mother was one of the chief antagonists of her life, once telling a young Shirley that she tried to abort her. Geraldine never understood the weird, bookish child that Shirley became; she wished her to become a debutante, criticized her for being overweight throughout her life, and continued to hold reins over Shirley's life well into her adulthood. Their troubled relationship is aptly explained within the following quote:

Geraldine Jackson's attitude toward her daughter was a deeply disconfirming one from the very beginning: Shirley was not the daughter her mother wanted; that much was clear from the start. Throughout her life, Shirley was distressed by her mother's profound insensitivity to her actual personality, combined with persistent attempts to control her unconventionality. By contrast, Shirley's father seems to have been a figure on the margins of her life who corroborated his wife's conventional expectations for their daughter. (Rubenstein 310)

In her ultimate rebellion, Shirley decided to pursue a career as a writer. During a period of her life in which she worked for a literary magazine, she met her husband—Stanley Hyman—whom she married in 1940 and moved to New England. Their marriage was certainly not the happiest, as Stanley was known for having flings and insisting upon an open relationship with Shirley. Despite this, together they had four children whom she saw not only “as individuals, but...as mirrors...reflecting her various parts” (Oppenheimer 199). Shirley was a deeply devoted mother, although she was subject to intense mood swings that colored the children's days. She was not only in charge of raising their children, but also responsible for all domestic duties; being a housewife at that time was truly a full-time job, and the fact that she found the time to churn out the works she did amongst all of the work and hardships she experienced is absolutely amazing.

Reflecting on the intense familial and romantic relationship issues that she experienced throughout her lifetime, it comes as no surprise that as a significant amount of her works are centered around complex familial relationships, falling under the umbrella of mother-daughter troubles, ambiguous houses, and even eating (Rubenstein 311). Jackson's choice to engage with

the Gothic genre is undoubtedly fitting given the psychological issues that dominated her life. Still, in spite of her clear contributions to Gothic fiction, Jackson's connection to the occult and supernatural is one of the most misunderstood aspects of her writing, and this must be addressed before delving into criticisms of her works.

The Witch of New England

While there are some seriously disturbing and severe themes addressed within her writing, the blow is softened when one reflects on Jackson's striking personality traits. She was well-known for her offbeat charm, quirky sense of humor, and her overall oddness as a person. Therefore, no matter how jarring or bizarre her stories and characters are, her compassion and empathy manages to shine through and alters the reader's perception of the text. In the evolution of Gothic fiction, Jackson's distinctly original voice was so personal and idiosyncratic that no other writer has come close to imitating her, and any who have tried have been accused of barrel scraping (Sullivan 479).

Jokingly, Jackson referred to herself as the only practicing witch in New England. This had an undertone of truth to it, as she held a consuming interest in magic in the supernatural, having owned an extensive library of occult books as well as dabbled in magic (e.g. Ouija boards and tarot cards). While it is unquestionable that in order to fully understand an author's works, one should look into their personal background and life experiences, it is tricky to do so when observing someone as distinctively unique as Jackson. Published in 1988, Judy Oppenheimer's *Private Demons: The Life of Shirley Jackson* stands as the most renowned biography of Jackson to this day. She has been widely criticized for favoring the sensational over the factual and, more

generally, speculating too much within this piece. These criticisms can be accredited to Oppenheimer taking the supernatural and occult themes within Jackson's oeuvre too literally in effort to explain her life.

Oppenheimer psychoanalyzed Jackson in some ways that resonated with critics, but the aspects that many speculate over are in regards to her interest in the occult—more specifically, witchcraft. One can only speculate whether or not Jackson truly believed in the occult, although she has been reported to have had amulets and charms with supposed magical powers scattered around her house, as well as being good with Tarot cards and fortune telling. This certainly indicates that Jackson may have truly believed in these practices; however, her engagement with the supernatural may also be a reflection of a general understanding of how people have reasoned in the past and how thoughts of the occult manifested themselves throughout the history of humanity.

The following is what Oppenheimer stated on this subject:

Perhaps the real truth was that magic, to Shirley, was not an arcane, exotic pursuit at all, despite her collection of learned books on the subject. It was something she had domesticated, reinterpreted, and integrated into her home; it was part of her very nature.
(189)

The employment of witchcraft and other occult themes in Jackson's fiction does not, contrary to Oppenheimer's opinion, necessitate that she had absolute faith or belief in it. Rather, it necessitates that Jackson had an openness and suspension of disbelief that readers who engage with her type of fiction should also utilize. For this reason, as I delve into the following criticisms of Jackson's "The Lottery" and *We Have Always Lived in the Castle* related to this

subject, it is most important to identify what the occult and supernatural elements—like witchcraft or ritualistic behavior—mean to the stories rather than tying Jackson into such beliefs.

Shirley Jackson's Works and Criticisms

In Jackson's eulogy to her college English teacher, she wrote that his invaluable gift to her was the insight that "the aim of writing was to get down what you wanted to say, not to gesticulate or impress" (Sullivan 479). Jackson followed this credo throughout her lifetime as a writer. As previously stated, Jackson's masterful skill within her craft facilitated the creation of some of her most renowned pieces of literature during a time of intense socio-cultural crisis in the United States. From the year 1948— when "The Lottery" was originally published—to the release of *We Have Always Lived in the Castle* in 1962, Jackson employed themes of the occult and supernatural throughout her works that delved into the social issues of sexism and war that were plaguing the country's collective consciousness. Throughout this section, these trademark themes will be analyzed in the context of both "The Lottery" and *We Have Always Lived in the Castle* in order to find what Jackson aimed to convey during this trying time in human history, and even deeper, to reveal the impact each narrative held over the Gothic genre as a whole.

"The Lottery"

"The Lottery" is one of Jackson's most widely anthologized works and stands as a pillar of American literature to this day. Throughout this piece, her primary aim was to explore the precarious and cruel nature of life, expressing that these are the only certainties in our enigmatic human existence. While this seems a harsh perspective, the plot of this story got down to her

point honestly and effectively. As opposed to taking a psychological approach to composing this story, Jackson took a more generalized social approach to examine the treachery of human behavior. Characteristic of Jackson, she employed the theme of the occult by revolving the plot around an annual ritual that a village of people participated in.

“The Lottery” first debuted in *The New Yorker* in 1948, and quickly after its release, distraught readers were swarming Jackson with questions regarding her intentions in creating such a story. Within the narrative, she used the archetype of sacrificing a scapegoat to build on man’s inherent need for such a ritual. Considering that Jackson was appealing to a modern audience, many took issue with and were made uncomfortable by her implication that a community of civilized people could engage in such a primitive ritual. To make matters worse, the characters in the short story all blindly follow tradition within their village.

Considering that America’s collective consciousness was, at the time, still extremely clouded by the aftermath of World War II and fears of the Cold War were heightening within its social imaginary, the implications of Jackson’s short story were meant to make readers uncomfortable. They were placed face-to-face with the pointless violence and general inhumanity of mankind (Griffin 46). The meaning behind the villagers clinging to tradition even after they had forgotten the meaning of it lies within the fact that with the simple act of engaging in it, an individual finds meaning and a place in the life of future generations.

Jackson placed a heavy focus on humanity’s inclination toward violence and how it has the potential to overshadow society’s need for civilized civilizations. The villagers not only feel compelled to continue this tradition, but they participate in it on the basis of its gruesomeness over its symbolic nature. This notion is proven within the quote, “Although the villagers had

forgotten the ritual and lost the original black box, they still remembered to use stones” (Jackson 7). In Carl Jung’s interesting research regarding archetypes and the collective unconsciousness, he posited that when a ritual’s symbolism is forgotten, the “mass psyche” becomes the “hypnotic focus of fascination, drawing everyone under its spell” (127). The group experience lowers the “level of consciousness [. . .] like the psyche of an animal” (125). Therefore, the base actions of the ritual are not taking place on the individual level, but rather in groups, which would otherwise be classified as a murderous act.

Although this story is short, there is a plethora of meaning to be derived from Jackson’s clever employment of occultly ritualistic themes within “The Lottery”. Despite the fact that civilized people may no longer hold lotteries, this story illustrates society’s tendency toward violence and its tendency to hold onto tradition, even if it is completely meaningless. This not only reveals our need for both ritual and belonging but in the context of mid-twentieth century America, holds important moral and philosophical implications that encourage its readers to consider the pointless violence and suffering that war wreaks on humanity. This is one of the unique capabilities of Gothic fiction, as it captivates its audience with its disturbingly uncensored themes and forces them to engage with the macabre—witnessing someone being stoned *or* stoning someone, in this case—as well as encourages them to consider the deeper meaning when put in context with the real world. This is an essential element of the genre that was much needed in this troubling time in American history.

We Have Always Lived in the Castle

In 1962, Jackson published *We Have Always Lived in the Castle*, and it remains to this day a foundational text in studies of Gothic fiction, specifically within the subgenre of the female Gothic. There are several theoretical lenses that one could take on the novel and still arrive at the same general conclusion, which is that there are numerous fundamental aspects and characteristics of the novel's plot that, when put in context, are closely associated with gender roles and feminist ideologies. Female Gothic works are typically those that deal with bizarre or exaggerated events that may or may not be explained as manifestations of the (typically) female central character's—Merricat's—troubled imagination. This is a characteristic of Jackson's twist on the Gothic genre, which was previously touched on in reference to the confusion between what is truly paranormal and what is a figment of the character's imagination.

Within the female Gothic, the protagonist is typically a young woman whose mother has died, is compelled to seek out the center of a mystery, and experiences vague threats to her person from some powerful male figure—Charles—that hovers in the periphery of her consciousness. This subgenre also deals with an imprisoning structure, which is most typically a house or a castle on account of their long-standing symbolism of female entrapment within the realm of domesticity and oppressive patriarchy. Within *We Have Always Lived in the Castle*, these themes are paramount, and is most aptly expressed through the quote, “In this village the men stayed young and did the gossiping and the women aged with grey evil and stood silently waiting for the men to get up and come home” (Jackson 3).

This parallels directly with the shift in gender roles from post-World War II and Cold War America, which are reflected by the power struggles reflected by the Blackwood sisters in the novel. During this period in American history, a new set of fears were introduced to the country's

collective consciousness. The rise of the suburban and atomic culture were putting stress on the lifestyle of the domestic. Historically speaking, the Gothic genre has always revolved around this concern. The FCDA also served as a way to encourage women to stay at home, collect food and medical supplies, care for, clean, and cook for their families.

Taking a sociological approach in analyzing Jackson's novel, it is necessary to address the underlying themes relating to the Cold War that is at work within the plot. In 1950, President Harry Truman created the Federal Civil Defense Administration (FCDA), and a fundamental goal of this organization was geared towards training women to prepare their homes for atomic warfare. This caused a shift in gender roles and subsequently stripped away female autonomy in the period of American history. Consequently, with the rise of suburban and atomic culture, a perfect space was offered in which the Gothic resurgence could occur as the life of the domestic was once again a primary interest within society (Lichtman 39).

Tying this notion even further into the novel, it is important to introduce the concept of "Grandma's Pantry". On account of the FCDA promoting the home bomb shelter in the midst of the Cold War, there were many ways in which women were expected to contribute to that shelter by stocking food and other goods, as well as by collecting medical supplies, taking care of their family, cooking, and cleaning. Within *We Have Always Lived in the Castle*, Constance's garden serves as an embodiment of "Grandma's Pantry"—and is reflective of a trademark witchy element on Jackson's behalf. This facet of the Cold War mindset can be put in an even broader context when we consider that the Blackwood family insisted on keeping everything from their deceased relatives.

Another theme that parallels the Cold War within this novel is associated with the theme of isolation. Throughout the entirety of the novel, Constance is terrified to go past her garden, and Merricat absolutely despises going into town for groceries. The sisters are also alienated from the town due to the townspeople who believe that they are rich, murderous snobs. This theme of isolation goes hand-in-hand with fear of the invader, as well. This relates to Constance's love life, Merricat's elaborately witchy rituals and spells to cast away potential harm to her and her family, as well as the demise of the Blackwood estate after Charles' arrival.

The themes within *We Have Always Lived in the Castle* related to the Cold War directly play into the subgenre of the female Gothic. Another theoretical lens that can be used to tie the novel into themes of the subgenre falls under the realm of psychoanalysis, which deals with the "decentering of the subject" within Gothic characterization (Baker 1). This is demonstrated through the many violations of Merricat's psychological boundaries by her family members and other authoritative figures in the novel. The boundaries of her personhood were repeatedly infringed upon in an attempt to control and possess her. In effort to hide away from society, she dwells within her own world of fantasy, leaving her emotionally stunted and even more incapable of functioning normally in society. She retreats to the Blackwood estate, leading to the "Gothic house paradox", in which the escape it offers from traditional expectations leads to her entrapment in domesticity (Baker 2).

On account of Jackson's *We Have Always Lived in the Castle* frequently pivots upon anxieties about selfhood and entrapment between the Blackwood sisters, it serves as a great example of the female Gothic. Even further, this piece is a great representation of Jackson's contributions to the Gothic genre as a whole through its various theoretical lenses, its perplexing

and ambiguous characterization of Merricat's and Constance's characters through the lens of the occult and supernatural, as well as its example of how alterity, or "otherness" functions within the genre through the townspeople's perceptions of the Blackwoods and vice versa. The narrative itself even seems to offer a reflection of Jackson's own personality, as she herself was a sort of outsider that built walls around herself in effort to hide from the world.

Conclusion

The direct, uncensored, and disturbing themes of Gothic fiction capture humanity's attention in a way that no other genre's can through their distinct ability to simultaneously frighten and engage its audience. At the heart of the genre, its themes work to reveal deep-seated cultural issues, moral conundrums, and philosophical quandaries. These are unique aspects that no other mode of literary creation can provide, and therefore we must never forget the exigence that lies within studying the genre. Even further, without the contributions of amazing writers such as Shirley Jackson, Gothic fiction would never have evolved into what it is today. Jackson brought the most controversial issues of the twentieth century to the surface by using her trademark themes to explore the darkest depths of the human condition. There is a certain necessity in studying her contributions within this genre in order to fully grasp the complex lessons and values that contemporary Gothic has to offer humanity.

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