CASTING OUT DEMONS: HOMAGE TO SHIRLEY JACKSON

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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 – Recepção crítica – Shirley Jackson

ABSTRACT: Intense and lively activity regarding North American writer Shirley Jackson has been noted in the last decades of the twentieth century and in the beginning of the twenty-first. 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. The present text wishes to pay homage to this supposedly underappreciated and forsaken woman who influences many achieved authors and canonical works to this day and who changed and continues to change American and world literary history indelibly.

KEYWORDS: Critical response – 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, from 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 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.

Despite all of that, she is now practically forgotten, something which literary scholar Kyla Ward describes as - and I agree - “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, namely during the period of her short, though prolific, working life.

Nowadays she lives on mainly in North American (including Canadian) subconscious. Still widely read and studied in elementary and high schools all over North America, few readers, if any, ever return to her in their later readings in later life. With the exception of her last two novels *The Haunting of Hill House*, from 1959, and *We Have Always Lived in the Castle*, from 1962, that were mild bestsellers, few, if any, of her other works have ever been reprinted.

The decades that followed her death (Ms. Jackson passed away on August 8th, 1965) continuously marginalized her from literary history. It is my intention with this text to aid on the recuperation of this brilliant woman writer to visibility.

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, which was mainly to label her solely as a horror fiction writer, celebrated because of one polemic and controversial short story - *The Lottery* - and nothing else. I wish, in no way, to demerit horror or gothic literature by any means, but rather to humbly relocate Ms. Jackson from its grounds positing that the bulk of her work does not fit into what is currently considered horror fiction, nor should have been in her own time to begin with.

It is my wish to see Ms. Jackson being read, analyzed and divulged 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 a society as complex and many-layered such as was hers, and such as it is ours. It is my contention that writers like of Ms. Jackson make us more alert to understand the contradictions between official values and everyday social practices. What can be overtly seen as an example in her outrageous short story *The Lottery*. Other short stories such as the ones that will be explored here can help us see even the most complex societies as 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*, Ms. Jackson has probably inadvertently 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*, but that we all are, and so were the critics who helped defile and debase her reputation.

This homage envisions such a task, i.e., to attempt a rather simple demystification of this important twentieth century woman. Hopefully this 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 by literary critics in specific and 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, namely her reception, it is important to understand the turmoil caused by her own fictional and non-fictional production on literary critics of her own time and on literary scholars then and since. So as to accomplish that I shall briefly describe (rather than explain here in depth) how and why she held the reputation she held.

It is important to remember that during and after her lifetime Ms. 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 more so with specialized critics than with the general public. I shall attempt to aid in answering, then, the disquieting question of how she was acclaimed by the likes of the previously mentioned group and at the same time 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 long ten years after her death, in 1975. It is Lenemaja Friedman’s *Shirley Jackson*, a still important and useful work despite the fact it does not mention witchcraft nor anything related to the subject. Her only biography was published in 1988, i.e., 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.

Sensationalistic or not, Ms. Jackson was said, by some, to be a witch. Rumors of supernatural events circulated about her. According to American journalist and novelist
David Gates (In: SULLIVAN, 1994), Ms. Jackson was "widely believed to have broken the leg of publisher Alfred Knopf by sticking pins into a voodoo doll" (ibid, p.71). Bennington College student Elizabeth Frank recalls "a rumor that . . . [Ms. Jackson] had turned a certain male faculty member into a pumpkin" (ibid, p.71).

In the flood of mail that followed the publication of the short story The Lottery in 1948 in The New Yorker, Ms. Jackson was labeled - for better or for worse: "un-American, perverted, and modern" (ibid, p.73). Ms. Jackson’s reputation was further bewitched by commentaries such as the one made by 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 with their characters for many distinct reasons. Even though Ms. Jackson mainly wrote of prejudice, neurosis and identity, for some reasons – this research also seeks to elucidate – 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).

The truth is 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. Very few of her short fiction pieces, indeed, and possibly just one of her novels, i.e., The Haunting of Hill House from 1959, as a matter of fact, explicitly produce otherworldly or supernatural aspects.

It seems to be indisputable that the supernatural was, indeed, important to her. She, herself, purposefully “undermined” her reputation by stating that she wrote about a not very rational 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”

Ms. Jackson’s strong suit was, in fact, people; in other words, psychology and society were explored revealing the evils the 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 mythologist 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
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 the story behind *The Lottery* and all its repercussions.

**THE LOTTERY PHENOMENON**

It was only in the 28th of June, 1948, that her name would garner strikingly wide spread bad reputation. The famous as well as infamous *The Lottery* had been published. A great part of her short fiction, was, in fact, 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, which will be further analyzed in depth later on.

June 28th 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*. In it, its author Peter Kosenko, who first and foremost acknowledges that no one has ever had any reason to call Ms. Jackson a Marxist, 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, no doubt, 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 and corroborate his claims. In the story, the wife, Tessie, who has the slip with the black dot on it, is forced to open it by her husband, Bill Hutchinson; Ms. 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), at least at one level, the evil present in the lottery 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” (ibid, 2009, p. 1).

Following the success of The Lottery, a mythical image was created around town – she lived in North Bennington, Vermont that time - one that said that Ms. Jackson herself had been pelted with stones when she was a child and had, thus, 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 Ms. 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” (ibid, 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 to Ms. 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 yet 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 elucidative. 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.

**ON LABELS AND DOMESTIC LITERATURE**

With the above mentioned data, one can begin to understand the depths of these positions and the seriousness of such accusations, as well as the internal reasons that have prompted such rave criticisms; for mind you, they were neither concerning the quality of her works nor her personal talent, but the contents of her stories and the underlying ideology that often times 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’s main aim is, as we can see, twofold, since 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. 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 Ms. Jackson’s writings do not so much fit on gothic or horror literature *per se* but 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.

There is, naturally, 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 luminous 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, VT.

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 by attempting to briefly 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 it, to transform it. Ms. Jackson existed before her stories; she exists in them as well as after them, because there is a sociology of her readership, of her public, because they also promote her literature, for good or for bad, through their reception.

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