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SHIRLEY JACKSON'S LITERARY HORIZONS AND HISTORICAL RECEPTION

Gustavo Vargas Cohen*

ABSTRACT: *The purpose of the present discussion is to outline American writer Shirley Jackson's scant critical attention, both inside and outside the Academy; to discuss the efforts critics have dedicated to her oeuvre, especially regarding the search for thematic unity and style which resulted in misguided labeling; and finally to present the contemporary scope of her powerful influence in the literary world, mainly concerning the adaptations of her works and her presence in diverse current media.*

KEYWORDS: *Shirley Jackson; reception; style; adaptations.*

1. INTRODUCTION

The literary career of American writer Shirley Jackson (1916-1965) suffered extraordinary highs and lows. Her critical reception is in dire need for attention. Depreciated by scarce critical attention from one side and besieged by a flood of abundant though not necessarily commendable criticism from the other, Ms. Jackson's literary reception was, and still is, fitful and impulsive. Roughly a contemporary of Hemingway, Faulkner and Steinbeck, and holder of a rather significant creative production, her career measured itself against American literature's greatest.

Reasons for this instability in the appraisal of her works are not hard to discern. Darryl Hattenhauer, in his book *Shirley Jackson's American Gothic*, poses that "the first error of Jackson criticism is the same as that applied to other protopostmodernists such as Kurt Vonnegut and John Barth: the notion that they write private, apolitical fiction [...]. [for] even the unconscious, of course, is political" (2003, p. 191). Though arguably private and domestic, her literature spoke of largely universal themes, such as family, prejudice, and evil, and was, as it inevitably must be, political – in an energetic sense about a diverse myriad of themes, including social, familial and gender roles, among others.

Attempts at fixing labels onto Ms. Jackson in order to best appreciate her creative production have permeated her career – and also as means of explaining her reception. Though critics heavily disagree as where to place the author under the existing literary niches, they are practically unanimous over the predicate that too little critical attention has been paid to her oeuvre, therefore, "[...] it is important to note that a surprising lack of critical work has been done on Jackson [...] for one would assume she represents an obvious case for scholarship" (MURPHY, 2005, p. 4).

Her short story "The Lottery" (published in 1948) is one of American literature's most anthologized stories; her 1959 novel *The Haunting of Hill House*, arguably one of the most influential. The purpose of the present enterprise is to outline Shirley Jackson's scant critical attention, both inside and outside the Academy, despite her enormous

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importance to American (and world) letters. It is also to discuss the efforts critics have dedicated to her oeuvre, especially regarding the search for thematic unity and style, both subjects they could simply not seem to reach an agreement upon. Finally, it is also the objective to present the contemporary scope of her powerful literary influence, mainly concerning the adaptations of her works and her presence in diverse contemporary media. Partial results of two surveys are also presented and discussed; the first aiming to map the academic dissertations and theses directly related to the analysis of Jackson's works produced from the 1970s to the 1990s and the second aiming to map the universities, the academic disciplines, the professors and the years that Ms. Jackson's works have been used for study in undergraduate and graduate courses in the United States.

2. SCANT CRITICAL APPRAISALS

Since her death in 1965, all but four novel-length books have been exclusively dedicated to the study and investigation of the author and her works. They are: Lenemaja Friedman's *Shirley Jackson*, published in 1975; Judy Oppenheimer's biography of the author, *Private Demons*, published in 1988; Joan Wylie Hall's *Shirley Jackson: A Study of the Short Fiction* that, as the name suggests, is dedicated mainly to short story criticism and was published in 1993; and *Shirley Jackson: American Gothic*, that came out in 2003, written by Daryl Hattenhauer. Naturally, these are not the only works that investigate her life and literary production; however, they are the only ones which are exclusively dedicated to this task. It has been almost half a century since Ms. Jackson passed away and sadly the number of academic treatments and scientific criticism remains relatively small.

By 2012, one of the most common complaints Jackson researchers have issued was that there was too little critical material on her life and works. Drake University's Jerry Wadden, who is, to my knowledge, the first scholar ever to conduct graduate-level research on Jackson (the master's thesis entitled *Come Along with Me into a World of Fantasy: An Analysis of the Illusive World of Shirley Jackson*) wrote in 1970 that:

[...] to date, Shirley Jackson has received little critical acclaim except for "The Lottery", no one has written a book on her; and again, except for "The Lottery", she is only briefly mentioned in a few books of contemporary American literary criticism. Half of her books are now out of print (WADDEN, 1970, p. 2).

That may as well be the first historically-recorded formal complaint on the subject matter. This picture is but moderately different over forty years later. Scholarship on Jackson is still very far from the desirable, this means too many topics and themes have not yet received due scientific attention. There are now, naturally, more critical material than in Wadden's time, but there is still far too much ground to be covered.

In 1993, Ohio State University research Sue Veregge Lappe wrote in her doctoral dissertation that "[...] only four dissertations have been devoted to Shirley Jackson's works" (p.3) up to that point in time. She goes on to cite John Parks's *The Possibility of Evil: The Fiction of Shirley Jackson*, Raymond Miller's *Shirley Jackson's Fiction: An Introduction*, Michael Nardacci's *Theme, Character and Technique in the Novels of Shirley Jackson* and Linda Metcalf's *Shirley Jackson in her Fiction: a*

Rhetorical Search for the Implied Author. Lappe left out other six master's theses that had been equally dedicated to the same topic. Be that as it may, a number of about ten graduate-level researches for such an important author seems pitifully low. Fortunately – if one can call it so – this number has little more than doubled since Lappe's last survey and tripled since Wadden's, but the truth is it still remains shamefully inferior to the number of works dedicated to other major writers of the American literary tradition.

The following paragraphs present partial results of a survey (first survey) that aimed at mapping the academic dissertations and theses directly related to the analysis of Jackson's works produced from the 1970s to the 1990s (for information regarding the 2000s to the present see COHEN, 2011). Academic interest in Shirley Jackson and her works has been recorded since 1968. Graduate level research in the form of theses and dissertations since 1970. Studies spanning the 1970s to the 1990s are presented here and are briefly commented upon with special attention devoted to the diversity of literary features they explore. In order to gather this longitudinal data, an ordinary survey (first survey) was conducted with the objective of constructing, for the first time, an annotated-descriptive plan of the main academic research on topics directly or indirectly related to Shirley Jackson and her works all over the world. The second half of the twentieth century was responsible for the bulk of critical production (academic or otherwise) on the author's literary production and contributed with important exploratory pieces, the extent of material thus spawned was certainly scanty in magnitude.

The research method applied in this first survey consisted of an ordinary online query using the main web-search mechanisms presently available to collect data remotely from more than two-hundred individual sources, among selected university library databases, higher learning institutional websites and websites exclusively specialized in the storage of academic theses and dissertations (and/or their abstracts). The procedure of data collection involved the remote gathering of information concerning the number of graduate level researches conducted on the subject; their year of defense (and/or publication when available); their advising personnel; their extent (through number of pages); their corpus (of one or more of Jackson's literary works); their theoretical affiliation; their thematic affiliation; their status regarding general public availability (if researchers outside their institutions of origin can gain access to the full text or to restricted portions of it, or even to solely its abstract); their institutional source and place (department, library, university, city, state, country), and the actual site where they are stored (physically and/or online).

The table below shows the complete title of the research, its academic level (M stands for Master's thesis and D for Doctoral dissertation) and number of pages (when available), the name of the author and of the advisor (the latter's presented between parenthesis, when available), the date of defense and/or publication (online or otherwise), and the locality and university where the research was conducted.

Table 1 – Graduate-level research on Shirley Jackson from the 1970s to the 1990s

	Title of thesis or dissertation	Level (page)	Author (Advisor)	Date	Locality/University
1	Come Along with Me, Into a World of Fantasy: An Analysis of the Illusive World of Shirley Jackson	M (76)	Jerry M. Wadden	Jan 1970	Des Moines: Drake University
2	The Possibility of Evil: The Fiction of Shirley Jackson	D (222)	John Gordon Parks	1973	Albuquerque:Un. of New Mexico
3	Shirley Jackson's Fiction: An Introduction	D (258)	Raymond Russell Miller (Prof. Ronald Martin)	1974	Newark, DE: University of Delaware
4	Shirley Jackson as a Modern Gothic Writer	M (133)	Jo Lynn Hicks	1974	Texas A & M University
5	Theme, Character and Technique in the Novels of Shirley Jackson	D (246)	Michael Louis Nardacci	1979	New York University
6	Existentialism in Shirley Jackson's Last Novels	M (70)	Guy A. Argenziano	1983	Florida Atlantic University
7	Shirley Jackson in her Fiction: a Rhetorical Search for the Implied Author	D (273)	Linda Trichter Metcalf	1986	New York, NY: University of New York
8	A Feminist Analysis of Shirley Jackson's Hangsamen and We Have Always Lived in the Castle	M (106)	Desirée Varner	1988	Grand Forks: University of North Dakota
9	Feminists Have Always Lived in the Castle: Shirley Jackson and the Feminist Gothic	M (50)	Christine Delea	1991	Huntington, WV: Marshall University
10	The Lesbian Politics of Transgression: Reading Shirley Jackson	M (117)	Karen Jeanne Hall (Debra A. Modelmoq)	1991	Columbus, OH: Ohio State University
11	The Haunted Reader: An Aesthetic Approach to Shirley Jackson's The Haunting of Hill House	M (65)	James J. Clark	1992	Greenville, NC: East Carolina University
12	"The Lottery's" Hostage: The Life and Feminist Fiction of Shirley Jackson	D (233)	Sue Veregge Lape (Prof. Barbara Rigney)	1992	Columbus, OH: Ohio State University
13	An Overview of Recurring Themes and Concerns and Usage of Genre Conventions Within the Fiction of Shirley Jackson	M (91)	Robert Jeff Warren	1992	Columbia, SC: University of South Carolina
14	Shirley Jackson: Contexts, Intertexts, and New Conclusions	M (65)	Donna L. Burrell	1993	Natchitoches: Northwestern State University of Louisiana
15	The Mysteries of the Gothic: Psychoanalysis/Feminism/"The Female Gothic"	D (297)	Lorna Ellen Drew	1993	New Brunswick, Canada: The University of New Brunswick
16	Shirley Jackson's Troubled Women: Agoraphobia and the Fiction of Fear	D (169)	Joyce Jackson Bender	1994	Oklahoma State University
17	Shirley Jackson—Escaping the Patriarchy through Insanity	M (70)	Jennifer Noack	1994	Charleston, IL: Eastern Illinois University
18	Reclaiming Women and Race in World War II Society: Shirley Jackson's Fiction	M (54)	Cara Michelle O'Callaghan	1996	San Franc., CA: San Francisco State University
19	A History of Hauntings: A Critical Bibliography of Shirley Jackson	M (226)	Paul N. Reinsch	1998	George Mason University

It is really surprising how little graduate work has been done on Jackson, especially when one takes into consideration the recent: “[...] revisionist academic climate in which some scholars [devote] entire careers to the rediscovery of marginalized writers – and from which a wealth of valuable feminist criticism has emerged – Jackson seems [...] like a perfect choice for further study” (MURPHY, 2005, p. 4).

Of the nineteen studies found in that date range, all were conducted in the United States. Only after this period, in the 2000s, researchers from other countries dedicated their graduate final papers to Jackson (and yet only five were found: two in Norway at the University of Oslo, one in Sweden at Uppsala University, one in Canada at New Brunswick University, and one in Ireland at Trinity College Dublin). Interestingly, Scandinavian countries seem to have a candid interest in Shirley Jackson's works, especially those related to Gothic themes and supernatural literary elements. Specifically at the University of Oslo, Jackson's *The Lottery* is required reading in the disciplines ENG4365 and ENG2325, both entitled *The Short Story in English*, offered by the Department of Literature, Area Studies and European Languages, on and off since 2004 (confirmed up to Spring 2011). Curiously, it was in the year of 2007 that two of the Scandinavian studies were defended.

Five graduate researches in the 1970s, three in the 1980s, eleven in the 1990s, and fifteen in the first decade of the new century suggest that academic interest in Jackson more than doubled (even tripled if comparing the 1970s with the 2000s) in the last couple of decades all over the world, sustaining the idea that “Jackson's reputation has grown rather than diminished” (MILLER, 2009, p. 1).

The first graduate study recorded here dates back to 1970, however, this is not the earliest academic research on record. In 1967, Kentucky Southern College student William D. Payne defended a 64-page long undergraduate thesis entitled *The Element of Magic in the Works of Shirley Jackson*, thus being the earliest research endeavor ever to be registered on the topic of Shirley Jackson and her works. In Brazil, the first and only academic research (with the exception of the current) to date was defended in June 2001 at PUCRS – Pontifícia Universidade Católica do Rio Grande do Sul (Pontifical Catholic University of Rio Grande do Sul) ; an undergraduate thesis entitled *The Haunted World of Shirley Jackson*, written by Gustavo Vargas Cohen and advised by Prof. Edgar Held. The following paragraphs present commented data (organized chronologically) from a selected number of the theses and dissertations shown in table 1 (sadly, few information could be found digitized from texts prior to the 1990s).

In 1979, Michael Nardacci defended a 246-page long doctoral dissertation entitled *Theme, Character and Technique in the Novels of Shirley Jackson*. His text has been described in the 1980 Bibliography of Gothic Studies compiled by Gary Crawford, Frederick Frank, Benjamin Fisher and Keny Ljungquist as “[...] an attempt at a comprehensive investigation of Shirley Jackson's novels with occasional comments on gothic conventions” (CRAWFORD *et al.*, 1983, p. 15). In his text, he comments that: “[...] one gets the feeling that the subject of Women's liberation would have meant nothing to her” (NARDACCI, 1979, p.15), referring to the absence of the discussion of gender issues in most critical texts on Jackson. Misunderstanding the dialogic style of *The Haunting of Hill House*, Nardacci complains that “[...] the satiric passages seem to grate on the rest of the work” (p. 126). His dissertation can be found at the New York University library in Albany, NY and is not available online at present.

In 1992, Sue Veregge Lape defended a 233-page long doctoral dissertation entitled *“The Lottery's” Hostage: The Life and Feminist Fiction of Shirley Jackson*.

She examines the history behind the short story “The Lottery” and its implications plus three novels, *Hangsamen*, *The Haunting of Hill House* and *We Have Always Lived in the Castle*. The protagonist of the first novel is scrutinized in accordance to the Bildungsroman genre typology in which the focus lies on the psychological and moral growth of the main character from youth to adulthood. The notion of the double and the rhetoric of the House trope are studied against the second novel and the heroines’ dilemmas concerning madness, suicide and murder are the center of attention in the analysis of the third. She concluded that in the three novels investigated “[...] there is a discernable thematic dilemma: how can an intelligent, perhaps even artistically gifted woman reconcile her desire from freedom and independence with the condition of being female in a culture that obstructs their rights?” (LAPPE, 1992, p. 182). Lappe’s dissertation is available online through the OhioLINK ETD Center, the Ohio State University’s library catalog.

In 1993, Lorna Ellen Drew defended a 297-page long doctoral dissertation entitled *The Mysteries of the Gothic: Psychoanalysis/Feminism/“The Female Gothic”*. In it, she provides critical strategies for examining the gothic novel. She studies the maternal space demarcated Jackson’s *The Haunting of Hill House*. According to her: “Shirley Jackson’s disturbing text documents more unambiguously than any gothic novel of my reading acquaintance the terrible mother as devouring monster” (DREW, 1993, p. 54). The Haunting’s protagonist, Eleanor Vance, is seen as “[...] linked to the textually dead mother through that most feminized of functions, nursing” (p. 54). The House trope, in gothic tradition, is seen “[...] as much a conveyor of meaning as any of the characters, [it] comes equipped with a covering veil of darkness beneath which gender relations are never normalized” (p. 194). Besides these themes, the researcher investigates six other novels from six other woman writers of gothic fiction. Drew dissertation can be found at the Memorial University Library in the Digital Archives Initiative of the New Brunswick University library division of Electronic Theses and Dissertations online.

In 1994, Joyce Jackson Bender defended a 169-page long doctoral dissertation entitled *Shirley Jackson’s troubled women: Agoraphobia and the fiction of fear*. Her research reviewed Shirley Jackson’s published fiction and the unpublished material found at the author’s papers in the Library of Congress. According to her, it was Jackson’s agoraphobic tendencies that led her to make use of gothic conventions and consequently to subvert the contemporary modernist attitudes, especially the ones regarding alienation. The writer’s woes are investigated and the dissertation argues that these real-life sufferings are passed onto the fictional characters. The writer’s mental health’s highs and lows are perceived in the changing behaviors of the protagonists of Jackson’s gothic stories mainly. The depiction of this fitful illness ends up by painting an accurate picture of the troubled times in mid-twentieth century America. Bender’s dissertation can be found at the Oklahoma State University library in Stillwater, OK and is not available online at present for researchers from outside the institution.

Also in 1994, Jennifer Noack defended a 70-page long master’s thesis entitled *Shirley Jackson—Escaping the Patriarchy through Insanity*, in which she analyzes Shirley Jackson’s description of insanity as a means of eloping patriarchal society. Characters Eleanor Vance, from *The Haunting of Hill House*, Mary Katherine Blackwood, from *We Have Always Lived in the Castle*, and Aunt Fanny, from *The Sundial*, are studied as different representations of the same core character. To her, Jackson shows through her works that (patriarchal) dominance and oppression can be fought. The author, however, is not naïve to believe that when oppression is defeated, life automatically becomes perfect or peaceful. To Jackson, escape is not permanent,

and insanity is a way out, though admittedly counterfeit. She questions the quality of life that remains after the battles are fought; and that is true for Eleanor Vance, Merricat and Aunt Fanny. Her argument is based upon feminist archetypal theory. After establishing the personality disorders displayed by each character, she uses Joseph Campbell's mythical quest theory to explore each of the three aforementioned novels and elucidates the struggles of each protagonist accordingly. She concludes by pointing out that the three fictional women may win their individual battles but are incapacitated by reality of winning the war against society's deep-rooted patriarchal structure. Noack's thesis is available at The Keep, Eastern Illinois University's library program at the Student and Theses & Publications section in Charleston, Illinois. It is also available online through The Keep's webpage.

The collection of theses and dissertations presented here is but a small sample of the totality of graduate level research conducted about Jackson and her works. Other than what has been previously mentioned, the intention of this first survey was to help in the visualization of the variety of themes and approaches the subject of Shirley Jackson can reach. Its purpose is also to allow future researchers to find the scientific contribution that dedicated scholars have to offer to Shirley Jackson's scholarship more easily. It will hopefully aid in the view of what subjects have already been explored and what elements still need more investigation. Unfortunately, few of the researches shown here allow free access to their full texts. Others are simply not yet digitized and therefore unavailable for researchers who are not in their physical places of storage, namely their institution's libraries.

3. THE LOTTERY, LABELS, STYLE AND THEMATIC UNITY

The set of critical works presented and discussed in the previous section, academic or otherwise, represents a relatively accurate picture of the totality of the leading critical enterprises concerning the totality of Jackson's works (some critical texts presumably stand unacknowledged). As can be clearly noted when compared to the critical output dedicated to other writers considered her peers, they represent a very small critical contribution to such fecund and sterling author. One exception, however, stands out.

Despite Jackson's prolific writing, most critical discussions of her work focus solely on the chilling short story "The Lottery", as highlighted by many critics (KENNEY, 1999, MURPHY, 2005). In sum, "[...] a great deal of Jackson's critical obscurity is the result of the readers' single-minded identification of Jackson with her short story, *The Lottery*" (LAPPE, 1992, p. 3). In the introduction to the novel *The Bird's Nest*, Peter S. Prescott points out that nothing "[...] irritates a productive writer more than to be identified with only one of his or her works, and that one inevitably written early in life" (1986, p. xi) and he considers "The Lottery" "[...] the most famous short story published by an American since World War II" (1986, p. xi).

It was in June 28, 1948 that the celebrated American literary magazine *New Yorker* published the story that would cause the most widespread public outrage in its history, i.e. "The Lottery". Astonished by its reception, its publishers remarked that it prompted more mail than anything the magazine had ever published and "[...] readers responded to the story with an unexpected degree of anger, outrage, disgust, and confusion" (MICHELSON, 2006, p. 34). This uncomely response provided its author with a lasting reputation that would outlive her in many years (for a small history of this phenomenon, see COHEN, 2009).

For what it is worth, “The Lottery” was responsible for Jackson’s everlasting fame, as well as for her infamous reputation. The horror inflicted by it became impregnated in the imaginary that surrounded its author, and that rendered her the label of a one-story writer – a horror writer at that. The more traditional criticism still celebrates Jackson as a writer of horror fiction only (BRANSON, 2003).

American author Shirley Jackson is, perhaps, best known for her short story “The Lottery” and her novel *The Haunting of Hill House*. While much is written about these two pieces, she wrote much more which has not yet attained the same level of popularity or critical attention (DURGIN, 2009, p. 19).

Few seem to be the ones who realized that much more than half of her works have absolutely no ghosts on them, no liaisons with the devil, no paranormal activities of any kind. Horror and witchcraft often have nothing but mere supporting roles in the core of her literature. If anything, Jackson played a key role in “[...] reconfiguring the tropes and conventions of existing gothic and horror literature in order to skillfully dissect the mores and anxieties of the modern age” (MURPHY, 2009, p. 17).

Few are the ones who consider her independent of genre, simply as part of the list of America’s foremost writers in literary history (THOMAS, 1982; KELLMAN, 2003), without niche affiliations or literary-school labeling. It is known by now that, despite her thematic diversity, her stories which did contain supernatural or gothic elements somehow greeted the media more easily.

Alison Flood, writing about American literature’s hidden gems, lists Shirley Jackson as the fourth most underrated author, who to her is:

[...] honestly, the scariest author I think I’ve ever read, making the likes of James Herbert and Dean Koontz look like a cozy evening in front of the fire, while also – unlike many (most?) horror authors – managing to write beautifully (FLOOD, 2010, p. 1).

Peter Straub, one of the most acclaimed living writers of the horror genre has selected Ms. Jackson to integrate his collection of 42 short stories by top-name writers called *American Fantastic Tales: From the 1940s to Now* from Library of America. Should it be the case, perhaps it is best to tag Ms. Jackson as *sui generis* (instead of sustaining that she fits no category, or has no distinctive individual style): “[...] critics [...] recognized that Jackson had a haunting, eerie style all of her own” (WADEN, 1970, p. 2), hence “Shirley Jackson is one of those highly idiosyncratic, inimitable writers” (LOA, 2010, p. 1). Actually, her writing style has often been tagged “deceptively simple” and she has been called a “master of perfectly skewed narratives” (REYNOLDS, 2010, p. 1). About the disarming power of her narrative style, critics have said that Jackson: “[...] in her calm pacing and detached, humorous tone, one hears the admirer of Richardson and Austen. As serious as she is unpretentious, Jackson seeks to disarm her audience. And she often succeeds” (LOOTENS, 1994, p. 162).

With incredibly disparate opinions (bordering erratic, at times), critics could never seem to agree as to where to best place Jackson, and they “[...] never have known quite what to do with Jackson. They often resist canonizing writers who dabble in genre categories and enjoy mass appeal” (MILLER, 2009, p. 1). Author Victor LaValle (2010) lists Shirley Jackson side by side with Stephen King, Herman Melville and the

book of Esther. For that, she has become even a metonym. Los Angeles Times reporter David C. Nichols (2010) creates an opposition between what he calls the Shirley Jackson-flavored overview as compared to the Wes Craven-tinged plot when correlating psychological horror versus gory horror respectively. This correlation has been further explored by Stephen King, who argues that Jackson changes the familiar Gothic Bad Place (the haunted castle or house) from a womb (which symbolizes sexual interest and fear of sex) to a mirror (which symbolizes interest in and fear of the self (KING, 2001). On the other hand, Haggerty (2006) argues persuasively that same-sex desire is the prohibited specter that haunts the pages of Gothic writing and cites Ms. Jackson as example. Still in a metonymical guise, works by distinct authors have been branded under the “slow-moving magic realism-cum-Shirley Jackson” (STARR, 2010) type, further corroborating King’s view.

Many critics contend that Ms. Jackson heavily influenced Stephen King (NORDEN, 1983; ZEITCHIK, 2009). Needless to say, the two authors take very different, at times, diametrically opposed approaches to the horror motif; especially that of the haunted house as a personified and actively malignant entity. According to Downey (2006), the points of contact between the two authors constitute a dialogue on the nature and source of evil. This makes perfect sense since what can be seen in Jackson’s houses often is the presence of a pre-existing evil regardless of human interaction, whereas in King, in many of his stories, evil is created as a result of human actions. In a 1983 interview for Playboy magazine, King said that the movie *The Shining* “was influenced by Shirley Jackson's marvelous novel *The Haunting of Hill House*” (NORDEN, 1983, p. 2).

She has been compared to Henry James. During an interview for Library of America, American writer, critic and Professor Joyce Carol Oates, while discussing whether the motifs in *The Haunting of Hill House* were psychological or supernatural, Oates describes Jackson’s point of tangency with Henry James:

Shirley Jackson was much influenced by Henry James—you can register the Jamesian rhythms in her sentences—and so it is doubtful that she would have been drawn to write about the supernatural as an end in itself—only its psychological manifestations would be of interest to her. In brief, this is the distinction between the “literary” Gothicism and the more popular Gothicism—in the latter, the ghosts are real (LOA, 2010, p. 3).

Haggerty (2006) describes how Henry James and Shirley Jackson carry on a dialogue both with psycho-sexological and earlier gothic traditions in their novels *The Turn of the Screw* and *The Haunting of Hill House*. He understands James's and Jackson's heroines as characters who embrace the death drive as the only figure of their desire.

Another critic, S. T. Joshi, the author of *The Modern Weird Tale*, claimed that “Shirley Jackson and Ramsey Campbell are the two leading writers of weird fiction since Lovecraft” (2001, p. 13). In making this assertion, Joshi faces two distinct potentially problematic issues. The first is that one could claim he is bypassing other important writers who also have a claim – or aspire – to that title, namely Stephen King, Peter Straub, Clive Barker and Anne Rice. The second and perhaps the most interesting problem is the assertion that Ms. Jackson is a writer of weird fiction. Joshi acknowledges that, of her six full-length complete fictional novels, only one, *The Haunting of Hill House* is “[...] avowedly supernatural [...] while others are weird only

slightly or not at all" (2001, p. 13). Fortunately Joshi also acknowledges that something quite similar may be said of her short fiction; according to him, "[...] only perhaps 15 or 20 of her 100-odd short stories can be said to belong to the weird tale or to the mystery story or to science fiction".

Conscientious critics see how much she distances herself from horror:

Shirley Jackson's fiction continues to be placed within the gothic horror genre because of its supernatural and horror images. I contend the major focus of her work is her critique of the social norms constructed for women by an archaic and inauthentic patriarchal system of rules and domestic expectation for women that result in madness for the resisting female (PEARSON, 2008, p. 1).

About being considered a horror writer, it has been suggested that "[...] such positioning is ironic, for if the roots of Jackson's domestic demonism lie in the Child ballads or the gothic novels of Ann Radcliffe, they draw just as deeply (and as explicitly) upon the satires of Austen and Thackeray" (LOOTENS, 1994, p. 160). Horror, much like fantasy in general and science fiction in specific, is, in the hands of Shirley Jackson, a hotbed for social criticism with satiric concerns.

Conscientious critics also recognize her humor, especially of the domestic kind. They also see how horror and comedy are close relatives, hence: "[...] terror likes to warm its feet at the domestic hearth" (DISCH, 2005, p. 46). Critic Nancy Walker, of Stephens College, stated that Jackson's style is a sample of popular humorous prose and light verse of the late 1940s and 1950s and that: "[...] writers such as Phyllis McGinley, Jean Kerr, Margaret Halsey, Betty MacDonald, and Shirley Jackson made comic material of ordinary domestic life" (WALKER, 1985, p. 98). Horror and comedy do have much in common after all. According to Yuschik (2008), both are about danger. In addition, at the heart of gothic horror, in the genre's biological core and in its psychological elements, lies a more transhistorical conception of the gothic, one related to comedy (MORGAN, 2002). Because of that or in spite of all that, Jackson was never really acknowledged as a serious writer by canonical standards. And American literature does have examples of so-called serious writers who also happen to write with humor:

Some American humorists are avowedly that: Marietta Holley, whose work sold as well as Mark Twain's; Dorothy Parker; Erma Bombeck. Others are humorous in addition to being "serious" writers Edna St. Vincent Millay as "Nancy Boyd"; Emily Dickinson and Anne Bradstreet in wry moments (CARPENTER, 1994, p. 68).

Carpenter adds that: "[Jackson] wrote happy housewife humor to earn a living, [and] she was a careful craftsperson who gave all of her writing an edge that distinguished it from that of her ladies' magazine neighbors. Shirley Jackson deserves our consideration" (1994, p. 68). Furthermore, Jackson's comic strain has been constantly received as feminist in nature, in the wake of Betty Friedan's statement that the housewife writer and domestic-humor literature reinforced domestic gender norms. Lynette Carpenter called Jackson's comedy "housewife humor" (LOOTENS, 1994, p. 160). Housewife comedy is "[...] a genre haunted by mother figures and rooted in a female body coded as an abject body" and "[...] housewife humor can be theorized through looking at the genre's haunted/haunting spaces that provide its powerful and

sustaining aspects as well as protest the entropic, liminal nature of work required of women (DIAMOND, 2005, p. 1). In that same fashion, Jackson's comedy (just as Anita Loos's and Alice Childress's) works as a way of countering the stereotypes that a male-identified culture has created (WALKER, 1988).

What lies in the heart of that confusion is the incessant search for theme (and/or thematic unity). Theme is understood here as the meaning provided by a piece of work when one takes all of its aspects in their entirety into account, or more simply, it is the meaning of the story or its central or dominating idea. A description that fits this definition is that theme is:

[...] a common thread or repeated idea that is incorporated throughout a literary work [...] a thought or idea the author presents to the reader that may be deep, difficult to understand, or even moralistic. Generally, a theme has to be extracted as the reader explores the passages of a work. The author utilizes the characters, plot, and other literary devices to assist the reader in this endeavor" (SEVERSON, 2009, p. 1).

Severson adds that the importance of recognizing theme lies in the opportunity that it allows the reader to understand part of the author's purpose in writing the fictional piece. Its relevance is historically free of questioning, for along with plot, character, setting, and style, theme is recognizably considered as one of the fundamental components of fiction.

One example which looms large in Jackson's fiction is the house theme; especially in her novels. Of the six complete novels, three are situated in distinctively gothic mansions which are as significant as any other (human) character of hers (MURPHY, 2009). In these three, the important is not the historic-mythic concept of the gothic castle per se, with all its accoutrements, but that of a house and the idea of insulation that comes along with it. Its walls are, importantly, its confines, where inhabitants are "[...] barricaded against the intrusion of the outside word" (CARPENTER, 1984, p. 32). More than that, the walls of Jackson's house form their own world. Jackson's house reflects the insanity of its occupants. To Ms. Jackson, her houses were like her people (her fictional characters, that is): "[...] they not only reflected the egos and foibles of their original owners, who often had unusual tastes, but they also exerted a mysterious force of their own" (MURPHY, 2009, p. 18). These mysterious forces can be understood as the causal agents of the attitudes and choices of its dwellers and guests; the same walls that affected them and sequestered them from the world enticed Jackson and her creative drives. Nevertheless, the same house that fascinated her and captured her attention so enthrallingly also enslaved her and made her sick. Historically, the presence of houses in horror fiction grows as women start to view across time the home as the source of their oppression. In conclusion, the presence of the house in horror fiction grows in relation to women's envisioning of the home as the source of their oppression. Jackson's critical insights regarding mid-twentieth century American society has spawned unexpected offspring, as explored in the following section.

4. JACKSON TODAY

As suggested in the previous sections, there has been a crescent interest in the literature of Shirley Jackson (not only in the Academy but elsewhere) in the last decades. Her influence can be felt in the beginning of the twentieth first century much stronger than in the second half of the twentieth, in the years that followed her death: “Shirley Jackson is only recently gaining recognition as an important figure in American women’s literature” (DURGIN, 2009, p. 7). In life, she managed to garner substantial acclaim, a success which was both bittersweet and fitful.

In recent years, there has been an intense and lively activity surrounding Jackson’s works. An ordinary web-based query using “Shirley Jackson” on the major search tools revealed notable results (second survey). Among the most prominent findings (mostly freely derived from Ms. Jackson’s writings) are theatrical productions (both amateur and professional); filmic adaptations for cinema and television (in short and long features, as well as other experimental forms); appearances (that go beyond mere citation) in fiction and non-fiction books (including children’s literature and literature for all ages); didactic books for school level, for university level, and for specific purposes (such as creative writing courses or with extra-academic educational aims); the realization of dramatic readings (with or without adaptations) for university or general public; dance number adaptations (such as ballet, jazz dance, among others); the creation of websites, blogs, posts, communities in social networks and other internet-based virtual environments; and appearances in news, journalistic articles, and criticism, in specialized venues or otherwise (circulating only in American domestic territory and/or overseas).

In the Academy, it was not possible to ascertain when Shirley Jackson’s works have been used for the first time for study in undergraduate and/or graduate level disciplines. The earliest record found was Professor Jessie O. Sizemore’s use of selected short stories and/or novels by Jackson in the discipline Interpreting Ideas in American Literature at Yale University. The following is an excerpt of professor Sizemore’s curriculum description:

Short stories and novels will be compiled from such authors as Hawthorne, Melville, Faulkner, James, Wright, Ellison, Jesse Stuart, James Baldwin, Toomer, Shirley Jackson, and others if time will permit. These stories will be taught not only as examples of art, but in order to increase student’s awareness of the variety of human experience. All aspects of the short story and the novel will be taught (SIZEMORE, 1978, p. 1).

That same year at the same institution Professor Bernice Thompson used the short story “Charles” (from *The Lottery and Other Stories*) in the discipline Woman Emerging in the Twentieth Century in which she asked the following questions to her Yale student’s:

1. Why did Laurie behave as he did at school? Why did he say that it was Charles who was guilty of all this unacceptable behavior? Have you ever seen this sort of thing happen to people, not only little people like Laurie or Charles but people of high-school age? What is the cure for this sort of behavior?

2. Did you suspect the outcome of the story? Look for the clue given you very early in the story.
3. Notice that Laurie describes Charles as being bigger than he, as wearing no rubbers or jacket. What does this tell you about Laurie?
4. Did you like the way the story ended or would you rather have had the whole thing spelled out to you?
5. What do you think was going on in the kindergarten teacher's mind as she was talking to Laurie's mother? What do you think was going on in the mind of Laurie's mother as she spoke with the teacher? (THOMPSON, 1978, p. 1)

Yale University would continue to use Jackson's fiction periodically ever since. Many other professors from other institutions and from other countries would have the same idea. This section presents partial results from a survey (second survey) which sought to reveal the universities, the academic disciplines, the professors and the years that Ms. Jackson's works have been used for study in undergraduate and graduate courses in the United States only. In order to gather this data an ordinary query was conducted with the objective of constructing (also for the first time) a descriptive plan of the specific subjects and/or topics under which Shirley Jackson is used in higher learning curricula. The research method applied in this second survey consisted of an online query using ordinary web-search mechanisms to collect data remotely in selected university curriculum databases, syllabus databases, course descriptions, course plans, unit plan and in faculty (personal and professional) webpages.

The findings point out that Ms. Jackson's texts are currently being, and/or have recently been, used in American universities traditionally by professors of English and of literary studies (among these, typically in gothic, horror, fiction or fantasy literature; as well as women's literature; lesbian and queer studies; and, of course, twentieth-century American and world literature). Besides these, she is also required (or suggested) reading in various and diverse university courses. In the United States, Jackson is also required (or suggested) reading in courses other than English or literature, such as in Medical School; Political Sciences courses; Musical Theatre and Drama; Anthropology; Psychoanalysis, Sociology, Bible and Folklore; Nursing Sciences; Logic and Rhetoric; Architecture, Planning and Preservation; Accountancy; Law; Community Studies, Public Health; History; and Youth and Society. In sum, all this wide-ranging scope has permitted Jackson to be explored in other media as well, and that is the subject of the next section.

5. ADAPTATIONS AND FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

Many adaptations of Jackson's works have existed since their original publications; special mention should go to the ones that celebrate the short story "The Lottery", and the novels *The Haunting of Hill House* and *We Have Always Lived in the Castle* (published in 1959 and 1962 respectively), which are presented in the next paragraphs correspondingly (the objective of this section is to be informative rather than critical).

The 1969 Larry Yust adaptation of "The Lottery" in video format, shot on location in Fellows, California, was cited by The Academic Film Archive as one of the two bestselling educational films ever. When it was made, it had an accompanying ten-minute commentary film, Discussion of "The Lottery" by University of Southern California professor Dr. James Durbin. It starred Olive Dunbar as Tessie Hutchinson.

Twenty seven years later, in 1996, American television network NBC mounted a new adaptation of “The Lottery” for the small screen directed by Daniel Sackheim. It was said that the project lost something in the translation from paper to TV format. It aired on a Sunday, September 29th, at 9 o’clock pm, starring Joe Cortese (of MTV and of the remake of Route 66) and Keri Russell (from Malibu Shores) in the central roles. Critics have called it “unwatchable” and “a big mistake” and advised viewers to read the short story because it would take less time and linger much longer in the reader’s mind (BIANCULLI, 1996). The episode reappeared as a text being studied by ‘problem students’ on the TV series *Dangerous Minds* (DISCH, 1997). On March 2000, there was a reading of her short stories, including “The Lottery”, on Broadway in a session of Selected Shorts called *All in the Timing in New York City* (KING, 2000). That same March, in Chicago, Harrison McEldowney headed the darkly comic ballet *The Lottery*, drawn from the macabre short story. It was the main feature of Hubbard Street Dance Chicago's three-week session at the 2,000-seat arena Chicago's Shubert Theater (BARZEL, 2000). On September 2008, Colorado University students Alex Hughes and Patrick Cooney directed the theatrical production of *The Lottery*, adapted from and homonymous to Ms. Jackson’s story. The play was presented at the University Theatre Loft, in Boulder, CO. On October 2008, the theatre department at West Virginia University at Parkersburg included in the 2008-2009 Theater Fest adaptations from “The Lottery”, *The Haunting of Hill House* and *The Summer people*. In 2009, a jazz dance choreography inspired by “The Lottery” was produced by Joanna Brooks at Stone Mountain Academy of Performing Arts in Georgia (BROOKS, 2009). “The Lottery” is still (up to 2010) being adapted to theatrical plays and in performances at high schools, universities and theaters in the United States (OSTER, 2009).

On October 2008, the theatre department at West Virginia University at Parkersburg organized a production of Hugh Wheeler’s adaptation of *We Have Always Lived in the Castle*, as part of their continual celebration of Ms. Jackson’s works. In 2009, Ms. Jackson's 1962 novel was being developed into a film by Michael Douglas' production company, Further Films. The project would be carried out along with Literal Media, the firm that represented, at the time, Ms. Jackson's work, and Laurence Hyman, Ms. Jackson's son and literary executor, would have a role in production. Mark Kruger was to be responsible for the screenplay and, as of August 2009, he had a first draft in hands (ZEITCHIK, 2009). Kruger was the screenwriter for the supernatural series *The 4400*, that aired from 2004 to 2007 on the USA Network and for the sequel *Candyman II: Farewell to the Flesh*. As of August 2010, the Internet Movie Database (IMDb) lists *We Have Always Lived in the Castle* as “in development” and to be released in 2011. In 2010 a project was commissioned, a new musical by Adam Bock and Todd Almond based on the novel *We Have Always Lived in the Castle* was scheduled to begin its rehearsals and to have its premiere on The Yale Center for New Theater in September (COHEN, 2010). Still in 2010 a musical play based on the novel premiered in September at Yale University Theatre. Directed by Anne Kauffman, written by Adam Bock with music and lyrics by Todd Almond, the play is a darkly humorous musical highly praised by *Time Magazine*.

In 2009, a stage adaptation of *The Haunting of Hill House* was produced by The Old Schoolhouse Players from Pittsburgh and was performed at Bud Allison Memorial Auditorium (OSTER, 2009). As it can be observed, Jackson is still very much alive and in the news.

On September 19 of 2008, Syracuse University selected Ms. Jackson to be the (posthumous) recipient of The George Arents Pioneer Medal, the highest alumni honor the University bestows. The Alumni Association Board of Directors annually selects

(former) students based on excellence in their field of endeavor. The award exists since 1939, this means it took 69 years for this recognition to come.

She is still, directly or indirectly, remembered. In the case of Ms. Ashtiani, the Iranian woman convicted of adultery that, as of August 2010, was to be stoned, *New York Times* reporter Robert Worth mentions that “[...] in the West, death by stoning is so remote from experience that it is best known through Monty Python skits and lurid fiction like Shirley Jackson’s short story *The Lottery*” (WORTH, 2010, p. 1).

Currently, there is a prestigious literary award named after her. The Shirley Jackson Awards (henceforth SJA) are presented annually to writers for outstanding achievement in the literature of psychological suspense, horror, and dark fantasy. They are voted upon by a jury of professional writers, editors, critics, and academics, with input from a Board of Advisors. The awards are offered to the best works, appearing for the first time in English, published in the preceding calendar year in the following categories: Novel, Novella, Novelette, Short Story, Single-Author Collection, and Edited Anthology. The SJAs were originally conceived in recognition of the legacy of Shirley Jackson’s writing, and established with permission of the author’s estate. According to the official website, the last awards were presented on July 12th 2009, at Readercon 20, Conference on Imaginative Literature, in Burlington, Massachusetts. The award comes with a trophy that includes an engraved stone; homage to the stones from “*The Lottery*”.

Judging by these data, the end of the twentieth century served almost as a prelude to a possible Shirley Jackson revival – to be potentially triggered in the twenty-first; perhaps one similar to (though not as intense as) the Austenmania that has started approximately at the same time and has made of Jane Austen an astounding public success worldwide. Now, more than ever, Jackson’s works are being criticized, adapted, and read by a growing number of people. This favorable situation distances her destiny from the impending doom the first decades after her death relegated her to, and move it towards a well-deserved Shirley Jackson renaissance.

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RESUMO: *O propósito da presente discussão é esboçar a escassa atenção crítica recebida pela escritora norte-americana Shirley Jackson, tanto dentro quanto fora da Academia; discutir os esforços que críticos dedicaram à sua obra, especialmente no tocante à busca por unidade temática e estilo que resultaram na atribuição equivocada de rótulos; e, finalmente, apresentar o escopo contemporâneo de sua poderosa influência no mundo literário, principalmente no que concerne às adaptações de seus trabalhos e a sua presença em mídias correntes diversas.*

PALAVRAS-CHAVE: *Shirley Jackson; recepção; estilo; adaptações.*