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SHIRLEY JACKSON

Born: San Francisco, California; December 14, 1916

Died: North Bennington, Vermont; August 8, 1965

Through her novels and short stories, Jackson shed light on disturbing supernatural, psychological, and societal themes with an elegant style and a touch of humor.

BIOGRAPHY

On December 14, 1916, Shirley Hardie Jackson was born to an affluent family in San Francisco. As soon as she learned to write, she began to pen poems, eventually winning a poetry contest at age twelve. In 1933, her family moved east to Rochester, New York, where Shirley went to high school and then on to the University of Rochester. She withdrew after two years, in part because of the tendency to depression which would haunt her for the rest of her life. During this hiatus from college, she developed a discipline of writing at least one thousand words every day.

In 1937, she enrolled in Syracuse University. She initially majored in journalism but then switched to an English major with a minor in speech. She published numerous pieces in school magazines over the following two years. A vehicle for her unconventional outlook was developed when she and two classmates started the literary campus magazine *The Spectre*. One of these classmates was Stanley Edgar Hyman, who would eventually become her husband.

Jackson and Hyman married after graduation in 1940, and moved to New York City, where Hyman got a job with *The New Republic*. Jackson worked at Macy's department store for a short time. This experience formed the basis of her first nationally published short story "My Life with R. H. Macy." Between 1942 and 1951, Jackson published almost twenty stories and two novels, gave birth to four children, and moved twice. Her famous story "The Lottery" was published in *The New Yorker* on June 26, 1948. The Hymans finally settled in Bennington, Vermont, which would be Jackson's last home.

With four young children and a household to run, Jackson still wrote at a furious pace. During the 1950's, she wrote four novels, more than forty short stories, a children's book, two family chronicles about life in the Hyman household, and several articles. The family chronicles, *Life Among the Savages* (1953) and *Raising Demons* (1957), were humorous accounts, most of which were originally published as short stories in women's magazines. Although not held in as high esteem as Jackson's other works (in fact, her husband referred to them as "potboilers"), they brought in money and delighted her audiences, who could relate to the good-natured chaos of motherhood.

In 1959, Jackson's most popular novel was published: *The Haunting of Hill House*. The book received high praise, went through several printings, and was made into a successful film four years later. By the early 1960's, Jackson's health had begun to seriously decline. She had gained an enormous amount of weight over the years, smoked two to three packs of cigarettes a day, and had entered a deep depression that only writing seemed to ameliorate. Her short story "Louisa, Please" won the Edgar Allan Poe Award in 1961. The next year, she completed *We Have Always Lived in the Castle*, a novel that became a best seller.

She was working on a humorous novel about the supernatural titled *Come Along with Me* in 1965. That year, she was also named recipient of Syracuse University's Arents Pioneer Medal for Outstanding Achievement. She was, however, too ill to attend the ceremony. On August 8, Jackson died in her bed of heart failure.

ANALYSIS

Jackson's works do not fit easily into any single category. On one hand, her horror stories and gothic novels are chilling ventures into the worlds of tormented minds and supernatural evil. On the other hand, she became popular in the 1950's for her "domestic" works, humorous stories about family life in a small New England village. Jackson's writing melds horror and humor in a unique way: Her most frightful tales are shot through with wry jests, while her household stories contain elements of darkness.

In one of Jackson's essays about the art of storywriting, she emphasizes that every character, no matter how seemingly minor, must play some role in setting atmosphere or moving the plot forward. Each character should be well drawn, never sketched. In her major characters, she reveals the psychological depths of disturbed, if not downright psychotic, minds. For example, Natalie Waite, the seventeen-year-old undergraduate of the novel *Hangsamen* (1951), gradually descends into madness. Elizabeth Richmond of *The Bird's Nest* (1954) develops multiple personality disorder. Eleanor Vance in *The Haunting of Hill House* becomes one with the ghosts that live there. Mary Catherine (Merricat) Blackwood of *We Have Always Lived in the Castle* is a rather charming psychotic. These women protagonists serve not only to illustrate psychological themes but also social ones. There is always a hint in Jackson's writings that society lends a decisive hand in destroying the mental lives of these women.

Interestingly, houses can be actual characters in some of Jackson's works. Coming from a line of architects (both her great-great-grandfather and grandfather were respected architects) may have influenced Jackson's depiction of houses as prominent narrative features. Her opening description of Hill House as "not sane" immediately lends psychological characteristics to a structure of wood and stone. The Blackwood home is Merricat's castle, a target for village hatred, and a prison all at the same time. In *The Sundial* (1958), Jackson's love of eighteenth century gothic novels informed the structure, decorations, and formal gardens of the mansion, wherein an entire family waits for the end of the world.

Social evil is another major theme in Jackson's books and stories. She was sensitive to prejudice,

bias, and snobbishness. Early on in her writing career, Jackson championed the cause of disenfranchised African Americans in the college magazine *The Spectre*. In the short story "After You, My Dear Alphonse," she wryly exposes prejudices and ignorance about African Americans. Beyond bigotry, Jackson probed the blind injustices wielded by social groups. The most famous of her short stories, "The Lottery," depicts the thoughtless perpetuation of evil traditions.

In Jackson's first novel, *The Road Through the Wall* (1948), suburban snobbishness and self-absorption leads to cruelty which is accepted mindlessly. In *We Have Always Lived in the Castle*, the shunned Blackwood sisters have their house torn apart by a mob of villagers. Jackson was sensitive to society's power, the forces that can uplift individuals through community belonging but can also destroy people who do not follow the norm.

Jackson's choice of supernatural subject matter placed her outside the literary mainstream. She called herself a witch, and the media dubbed her the "queen of the macabre." She owned hundreds of volumes of books on witchcraft and was known to make little voodoo dolls of people who offended her. While the extent of Jackson's beliefs in the supernatural may never be fully known, her fascination with the subject is apparent. *The Haunting of Hill House* is an obvious example, a haunted house story of classic proportions.

In *We Have Always Lived in the Castle*, Merricat practices her own eclectic version of witchcraft by nailing an old book to a tree and burying marbles and coins to protect the Blackwood home. In a sense, the villagers of "The Lottery" are paying homage to sympathetic magic: One human sacrifice equals another good year of crops. The novel *The Sundial* begins with a warning from a dead patriarch that the world is coming to an end. The spirit world easily impinges on ordinary reality in many of Jackson's stories.

Themes of anxiety, psychosis, and horror made Jackson famous, but her bread and butter throughout the 1950's were the "domestic" tales published in magazines such as *Mademoiselle* and *Good Housekeeping*. Collected into two books called *Life Among the Savages* and *Raising Demons*, the stories relate humorous episodes from the Hymans' family life. Jackson's dry wit keeps the stories from becoming saccharine.

Whether her theme is dark or light, Jackson mastered the technique of presenting the ordinary in an extraordinary way. Her tone and language are low-key; her style is elegant and trim. She presents a voice of normalcy, at first. Then, as if by magic, she introduces the twist: a divided mind, a warped suburban enclave, a human sacrifice, a child's imaginary classmate. Jackson slowly leads the reader down into a tangled labyrinth where human psychology meets the supernatural, and the lines between them blur.

"THE LOTTERY"

First published: 1948 (collected in *The Lottery: Or, The Adventures of James Harris*, 1949)

Type of work: Short story

Modern villagers practice an ancient rite of sacrifice.

Jackson once indicated that if she had never published any other work, she would be remembered for "The Lottery." After the story came out in *The New Yorker* in 1948, Jackson received hundreds of letters, most of which were overwhelmingly negative.

The letter writers were shocked, bemused, and, in some cases, frankly abusive. Many people wanted to know where and when the lottery was held so that they could witness it. Set in modern times in what some readers assumed was Jackson's home of Bennington, Vermont, "The Lottery" caused a nationwide stir and made the author famous in her own time.

Jackson begins the story with typical understatement. The sun is shining on a summer's day. Children are not in school, and they are the first to gather in the village square. Their parents join them as the hour for the lottery approaches. Soon everyone in the village is present (with the exception of Clyde Dunbar, who has a broken leg). Mr. Summers, who runs a coal business, is the master of ceremonies. He and the postmaster, Mr. Graves, set a black box on a stool in the middle of the square. There is an air of anticipation as Mr. Summers stirs the slips of paper in the black box and begins the drawing.

The villagers have done this many times before. For Old Man Warner, this is his seventy-seventh lottery. The event does not take long. It starts at ten o'clock in the morning and is over in a couple of hours. Everyone will be back home in time for the midday meal. There is even an air of frivolity that Old Man Warner deplores ("Bad enough to see young Joe Summers up there joking with everybody.").

Finally, all the names are called, all the slips are drawn, and the women begin to ask anxiously, "Who is it? Who's got it?" It turns out that the Hutchinson family has the fateful slip. Tessie Hutchinson begins to complain that the drawing was not fair, that her husband Bill did not have enough time. Another, briefer drawing is held with only the Hutchinson family involved. The suspense is merciless, but at last the holder of the slip with the black dot is revealed: Tessie herself. Without pause, and in a business-like way, all the villagers, including Tessie's own family, pick up the stones and descend upon the victim.

Jackson has Old Man Warner explain that the lottery is an ancient rite to ensure a good harvest each year. In times past, the rite was conducted with more ceremony, more seriousness. Now, however, the villagers have forgotten the liturgy. They even seem to have forgotten why they stone one individual to death every June 27. Like automata, they follow tradition unthinkingly, simply doing what has always been done.

The scapegoating and mob frenzy that takes place in "The Lottery" seem to clash violently with the contemporary New England village setting. This graphic juxtaposition makes a strong statement about senseless violence and mindless social evil in modern times. As literature, "The Lottery" is a fine example of "sunlit horror," a nightmare story that takes place in broad daylight. "The Lottery" begins with sunlight and child's play, and ends in ritualized murder.

THE HAUNTING OF HILL HOUSE

First published: 1959

Type of work: Novel

Psychic investigators explore a haunted house.

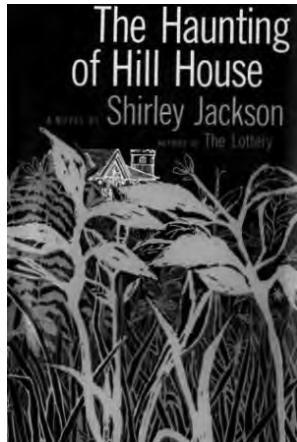
In *The Haunting of Hill House*, a house not only sets the stage but also plays a major role in the book. Hill House stands overlooking the rural town of Hillsdale. It has stood so for eighty years. While the house appears well built and sturdy, it is “not sane.”

Something walks its floors, something non-human, something malignant. In one elegant opening paragraph, Jackson lets her readers know that Hill House is a central character in the book. Its supernatural powers overwhelm the vulnerable human characters, especially Eleanor Vance.

When Eleanor Vance is invited to join a group of psychic investigators who propose to “go and live in Hill House and see what happened there,” she feels for the first time in her life that she will be part of something special. Like Natalie Waite of *Hangsamen* and Elizabeth Richmond of *The Bird's Nest*, Eleanor is introverted and introspective to a morbid degree. She lives a fantasy life that is far richer than her real life, in which she spent most of her years nursing and hating her invalid mother.

The rest of the group that meets at Hill House consists of Dr. Montague, the only professional scientist; Theodora, a sophisticated New Yorker with proven extrasensory perception; and Luke Sanderson, the ne’er-do-well nephew of the owner of Hill House. Joining the cast of characters are Mr. and Mrs. Dudley, the grotesque grounds- and housekeepers, and Mrs. Montague and her friend Arthur, who provide comic relief.

The Haunting of Hill House unfolds with horrible inevitability. There is something evil about the house itself. Floors and walls do not meet squarely; the angles are off-kilter. Perspective is skewed. The layout is a fantastic maze. Doors will not stay open, even when propped. Eleanor’s first reaction is to run away from Hill House. Instead, she tells herself romantically that she has come so far to find this and that she cannot go back now. The novel takes on a strong psychological tenor as



Eleanor’s mental state runs parallel to the supernatural manifestations in the house. From this point on, the reader becomes enmeshed in the question: Is Eleanor driving herself into the arms of Hill House, or is Hill House relentlessly pulling her in?

Jackson wastes little time introducing the horrible manifestations in Hill House. There is an icy cold spot in the doorway to the nursery. Something tries to get into Theodora’s room, pounding and patting around the door. The doctor and Luke see something like a dog running through the halls. Writing appears on the paneling that says HELP ELEANOR COME HOME. Theodora’s room is splashed with blood. In a trance, Eleanor ascends the treacherous tower stairway and nearly falls to her death.

Soon, the group is beginning to realize that the manifestations are focusing on Eleanor. They wonder if Eleanor is causing the disturbances or is simply a human lightning rod for the evil in residence. In any case, Eleanor becomes completely enamored with Hill House (“Journeys end in lovers meeting”), and declares that she never wants to leave. *The Haunting of Hill House* is a kind of morbid love story.

At the end of the book, Dr. Montague decides that Eleanor is too vulnerable, too involved with Hill House, and must be sent away. As if possessed, Eleanor gets into her car and starts down the driveway. Suddenly, she speeds up and heads straight for a tree. Just before she hits it, she thinks “I am really really really doing it by myself.” Then, “Why am I doing this? Why don’t they stop me?” To the end, Eleanor is childlike and dependent. At the end, Hill House will not let her go.

WE HAVE ALWAYS LIVED IN THE CASTLE

First published: 1962

Type of work: Novel

*Two sisters entangled in murder and madness
face society's curses.*

We Have Always Lived in the Castle was Jackson’s only novel written in the first-person voice. She

uses this viewpoint to introduce one of the most charming psychopaths in literature. Mary Catherine (Merricat) Blackwood tells the reader important things about herself in the first few sentences: She is eighteen years old, she lives with her sister, she dislikes washing herself, but likes her sister Constance. She then states bluntly, "Everyone else in my family is dead."

Merricat and her sister, Constance, live with their invalid Uncle Julian on the fine old Blackwood estate. The property is completely enclosed, padlocked and isolated. Twice a week, Merricat goes into the village to get groceries and library books. Twice a week, she endures jibes and unfriendly glances as she performs her errands. It becomes clear that the Blackwoods and the villagers despise each other.

Throughout the book, Jackson portrays Mary Catherine as a sympathetic character—with a few bizarre traits. Merricat is incredibly rigid. She schedules every activity, determined to maintain the status quo. She fantasizes about being on the Moon, far from Earth, in a sterile, changeless place. To ensure that her home and life stay intact, she places magical "safeguards" around the property and checks them weekly as she walks the grounds with her cat, Jonah. Her life is perfectly foursquare, measured and determined; one routine follows another, day after day.

Constance, Merricat's older sister, appears perfectly normal, except for the fact that she is a complete recluse who never leaves the house. As the story unfolds, the reader learns that the Blackwood house was the site of a massacre which only Uncle Julian, Constance, and Merricat survived. One evening, six years before the novel opens, when Merricat was punished by being sent to bed without dinner, most members of her family—her mother, father, brother, uncle and aunt—were poisoned by arsenic in the sugared berries. Constance always prepared the meals, but she did not eat the berries. She was arrested, tried, and acquitted, but from then on the people of the village shunned the Blackwoods.

A catalyst for change occurs when Cousin Charles comes to live in the mansion. Charles quickly becomes Merricat's nemesis. He hints that her odd behavior could lead to her being confined in an institution. He follows her around and discovers her cache of silver coins. He tries

to convince Constance to leave the Blackwood house, to show him the combination to the safe, and to get rid of Merricat.

Merricat decides that he is an evil demon that must be exorcised. Her method of ridding the house of him is to knock his still-burning pipe into a wastebasket. Within a short time, the fine old Blackwood mansion is in flames. The villagers gather to watch the house burn, and then, in a mob frenzy, begin throwing rocks through the windows. After the fire is extinguished, the mob rushes inside the house. They crush and scatter the sisters' belongings. Uncle Julian dies of a heart attack. To a normal mind, all of this would be a catastrophe. For Merricat, it is the beginning of a wonderful life of perfect isolation, just herself and Constance. She remarks that the house, with its roof partially destroyed from the fire, now resembles a castle with turrets.

We Have Always Lived in the Castle was a best seller and named one of *Time* magazine's Ten Best Novels of 1962. It could be considered Jackson's most complete book. She intertwines several themes in this novel. The supernatural makes its appearance in Merricat, who believes in spells, magic talismans, and witchcraft. She even has a familiar, her cat Jonah. Jackson depicts Merricat's damaged mind so casually that the girl's psychosis seems perfectly ordinary. Through the relationship between the Blackwoods and the villagers, she illuminates social evil and mob violence. The isolated family home is a character in the book, a kind of mausoleum; all of the dead parents' belongings are kept in exactly the same places and cleaned weekly. The house, or "castle," is an eternal shrine. Jackson weaves together madness, magic, and social isolation, elements that fascinated her and continue to intrigue her readers.

SUMMARY

Because Jackson chose to handle unusual topics, such as psychosis and ghostly apparitions, some literary critics relegated her to a minor status. Both horror and humor are sometimes considered to be slightly disreputable genres, and many of Jackson's works are categorized as these types. Jackson's complete mastery of the writing craft, however, enabled her to achieve well-deserved commercial and critical success.

Janet M. Ball

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DISCUSSION TOPICS

- How do minor characters in Shirley Jackson's books create atmosphere and move the plot forward?
- What are some examples of social evil in Jackson's work?
- How do houses help develop the themes in Jackson's fiction?
- Many of Jackson's characters are considered psychologically disturbed. How do they demonstrate mental imbalance or even insanity?
- What are some of the humorous elements in Jackson's short stories and novels?

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