

Shirley Jackson's Literary Discourse and the Allegation of Feminism as Socio-Cultural Subversion in Mid-Twentieth Century America

O discurso literário de Shirley Jackson e a alegação do feminismo como subversão cultural na América de meados do século XX

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ABSTRACT: Shirley Jackson (1916-1965) managed to combine the dual role of being a woman and a writer in mid-twentieth century American society. This article seeks to unravel some of the intricacies behind this brittle balance. Despite and/or because of her condition as mother and professional her literary achievements as a chronicler of the "Age of Anxiety" were laudable and therefore worthy of further investigation. To better understand the historical experience of professional women in that context, a review of post-war US, especially regarding gender roles, ensues not only as historical background but as methodological hotbed for literary analysis. Ms. Jackson's literary practice helped raise the charges of feminism against her under the allegation of cultural subversion and social sedition. Finally, the question of whether she was indeed a feminist is debated taking into consideration her literary discourse, particularly the representations of female characters as discerningly portrayed in her fictional works, correlated to her social and historical *milieu*.

Keywords: Shirley Jackson; gender roles; literary historiography.

RESUMO: Shirley Jackson (1916-1965) foi bem sucedida ao combinar o duplo papel de mulher e escritora na sociedade norte-americana de meados do século vinte. Este artigo busca desvelar alguns dos detalhes por detrás deste frágil equilíbrio. Apesar e/ou por causa de sua condição enquanto mãe e profissional suas conquistas literárias como cronista da "Era da Ansiedade" foram laudáveis e, portanto, dignas de um aprofundamento investigativo. Para melhor compreender a experiência histórica das mulheres naquele contexto, uma revisão do *status quo* dos Estados Unidos do pós-guerra, especialmente no tocante a papéis de gênero, se segue não apenas trazendo um fundo histórico, mas também servindo de foco metodológico para análise literária. A prática literária de Jackson ajudou a levantar acusações de feminismo contra ela sob a alegação de subversão cultural e insubordinação social. Finalmente, a questão de se ela era, de fato, uma feminista é debatida levando em consideração seu discurso literário, em particular as representações de personagens femininos como perspicazmente retratadas em suas obras ficcionais, correlacionado ao *milieu* social e histórico.

Palavras-chave: Shirley Jackson; papéis de gênero; historiografia literária.

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INTRODUCTION: ON BEING A WRITER AMID MILK BOTTLES AND DIRTY DIAPERS

Shirley Jackson (1916-1965) wrote at least a thousand words a day in a house full of children and of toys on the floor. She was a mother of four, who cooked and cleaned, and still was responsible for writing some of the greatest pieces of twentieth-century American - and world - literature. In this context, the domestic woman's word and power unfold. Furthermore, she was said to have been a feminist, which is not only debatable, but a matter for careful scrutiny. All things considered, Ms. Jackson did manage to combine the dual role, that of a housewife and a writer, in a bold unique way. This article seeks to unravel some of the intricacies behind this brittle balance.

Even though things have changed a great deal since Ms. Jackson's time, women are still writing and being women, and being mothers, and being successful. How many women writers - particularly American women writers in the postwar era, the 'era without servants' - have both profited and suffered from the confusion of their dual role? Writer Alice Munro once said that she wrote short stories instead of novels because she was a young mother who had no time to write novels:

When you are responsible for running a house and taking care of small children, particularly in the days before disposable diapers or ubiquitous automatic washing machines, it's hard to arrange for large chunks of time (In: FRANKLIN, 2010, p.1).

Journalist Ruth Franklin unequivocally understood this predicament when she subtitled her 2010 piece in *The New Republic*: "On Shirley Jackson and the challenge of being both a mother and a writer" (p.1). She goes on to say that, in the 1950s, just as much as now, women can only write when the baby naps, or while the children are at school, or after the dishes are done and the lunches are packed and the house is, at last, quiet. This sort of logistics has always worked with efficiency, once the woman understands that no matter how smoothly the thoughts are flowing, they will have to stop when the school bus comes. It works as a resignation to frustration (FRANKLIN, 2010).

Amid milk bottles and dirty diapers, Ms. Jackson wrote approximately six full-length novels, two humorous family *memoirs*, four books for children, a juvenile stage play, some thirty non-fiction articles, numerous book reviews and four short story collections that, along with her uncollected pieces, yield *circa* one hundred individual short stories; the latter, the literary form which she proved more prolific.

She was also responsible for one of the greatest haunted house stories of American literature, *The Haunting of Hill House*, published in 1959. The novel was adapted to the big screen and made into long feature motion pictures, the most famous being the 1963 version entitled *The Haunting* directed by legendary Robert Wise, and the homonymous 1999 version directed by Jan de Bont, featuring Liam Neeson, Catherine Zeta-Jones, Owen Wilson and Lili Taylor.

To boot, Ms. Jackson wrote what is likely the most controversial piece of fiction ever published in the history of *New Yorker* magazine, the 1948 short story *The Lottery*. Its reception resulted in hundreds of canceled subscriptions; it was later adapted for television, theater, radio and, in a mystifying transformation, even 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's *The Lottery* is one of three short stories which are most anthologized in American literary history.

She was a chronicler, and an eloquent voice of the Age of Anxiety. She is considered a quintessential writer of women's experiences in the 1950s (HAGUE, 2005). Quite fortunately, the message of what it meant to be a woman in mid-twentieth century America was changing rapidly as Ms. Jackson was tending to babies and typing at the same time.

HISTORICAL MILIEU: THE ROLE OF WOMEN IN POST-WAR AMERICA

Concerning women's roles, the events that surrounded the Second World War may be described in the geometrical shape of a *parabola*, drawing itself in the United States as a whole. The women who, prior to the inception of the war were encouraged to stay home and tend to their husbands and children were, during the war, called to work outside their homes in order to support the war effort. The very work they were called to do before 1939, and that was traditionally recognizable as *men's* work then, had changed, for during the war it was

considered patriotic to take over where the men had left off. And that was just the starting point of the *parabola*.

In a February 1942 edition of the magazine *Good Housekeeping*, an article was published that represented – in their usual domestic, normative, prescriptive nature – what the ideal female attitude was towards this interesting shift in laboring expectations. In it, women purportedly said about themselves: “Cheerfully we set aside our routine duties to undertake such emergency tasks as are assigned to us” (In: ZUCKERMAN, 1998, p. 193).

The *parabola* found its other extreme-end in the words of American researcher Heather Strempe-Durgin, who wrote that:

Once the war ended (...) and men returned, ready to resume the jobs they had left in the hands of American women, these women were displaced. Notions of acceptable femininity, which had expanded during the war, appeared to be contracting (DURGIN, 2009, p. 10).

That *parabola* had reached its final destination. Shirley Jackson was caught in the middle of this curve, amidst a bidirectional divergence of ideas, in this rapid outburst of displacement. While standing in this crossfire, she captured with her literature the sound of those anthropological and sociological explosions. Their echoes still live on in the pens of women writers who still need to cry for justice even today, for their success never came without a price.

The functions traditionally assigned, required and expected of gender roles were in frank turmoil. The popular notion of women’s roles swiftly became unclear. One of the reasons is actually quite human; in fact, of a methodological standpoint. Durgin (2009) contends that it is quite difficult for critics and historians today to talk about women from the 1950s when what lies in their subconscious are “the great, iconic women of that time: TV matrons.... such as June Cleaver and Harriet Nelson” (p. 10) - especially when compared to how post-war era women really lived. If one is to think about those women through the most impartial viewpoint he or she can afford to try, then it is imperative, as much as possible, to willfully try to set aside the preconceptions that come with TV women “smiling while cooking, cleaning, and mothering (...) dreaming up the night’s menu while vacuuming” (DURGIN, 2009, p. 10-11). The messages conveyed on television, in magazine articles, in

politics and in advertising were, admittedly, that married, white, middle-class women who were exclusively homemakers were the norm. Shirley Jackson acknowledged that; after all, she had firsthand experience in being a housewife as well as a producer of magazine articles such as that from *Good Housekeeping*, and – inadvertently or not – of women-targeted literature.

As mentioned previously, she was a chronicler of the age that – though not at all exclusively – epitomized women's last forcible deferral to men's opinions, wishes and judgments, the age in which submission and the demand for an involuntary expression of esteem or regard were last met without a fight, without a dispute, without questioning. Soon the next decades would welcome the movements for equal rights between sexes, and the protests, and the once – and for too long - dumb voices began the struggles to be heard that still go on today.

Those were the last days in which women were not treated all that well by their husbands or by any man *and* there were no consequences – that is not to surmise that women have not suffered any kind of abuse ever since but this should read as an expectation more than a description of reality. At any rate, the appearance of deference and of courteous yielding to man is seen over and over, in slight different guises, in Ms. Jackson's stories. It is exactly in these stories, within the creation and representation of her characters, especially the female ones, that evidence is drawn to back up the present analysis. It is in the search for an understanding of how they were created that hints are found. These are the hints that carry the evidence that entertains the possibility of considering Shirley Jackson a feminist in the sense of the word as described in the following section.

A FEMINIST IN AMERICAN SOCIETY AND LITERATURE: A CRITICAL RUMBLE FOR FEMALE CHARACTERS

Here, feminist criticism is understood as a varied field of debate that spawns several voices - not necessarily in full agreement – and not a consensually agreed position. The quest that nurtures the idea of conceiving Ms. Jackson as a feminist also seeks to question the modern traditions of literary commentary that are polemically devoted to the defense of women's writing. Regardless of attempting to determine if Ms. Jackson is indeed a part of this

enterprise against the condescension of what is a predominantly male literary establishment, this investigation is also part of that larger endeavor that seeks the re-admission of temporarily forgotten women authors to the literary canon.

Ms. Jackson undoubtedly mirrors the affirmation of a distinctly female experience reflected in her writing and, through her works, she argues for an improvement of the female condition, metamorphosing her own voice into a fictionally embodied contestation. This fictional embodiment is represented by her female characters, whom Middle Tennessee State University Professor Angela Hague describes as “lacking a core of identity [which] forces them to seek meaning and direction in the world outside themselves” (2005, p. 76). In a sense, this is also true, as well as prophetic, if said of the contribution of the bulk of Ms. Jackson’s fiction, which may lack an overall unifying identity and which, therefore, accepts illumination via critical commentary from worlds other than fiction, namely, in the theoretical-literary opportunities that are currently offered.

To University of Mississippi Professor Joan Wylie Hall (1993), Ms. Jackson’s characters “walk the same slippery plank Emily Dickinson described at the start of the modern era” (p.90). She is referring to the female characters – generally young women in their twenties or thirties – who lead lives circumscribed by walls, in both connotative and denotative senses, and who are quite often susceptible to facing painstaking losses, especially of love, of identity and, worst of all, of existence.

These are truly meaningful pieces of evidence – gathered from criticism rather than from the fictional sources themselves – but significant nevertheless. What is even more significant is that, with her writing, Ms. Jackson touched issues concerning women of diverse social-economic conditions. According to Scottish historian Norman MacDougall: “(...) women outside the ruling classes have been of little interest to historiographers, there has until recently been scant research into the lives and achievements of a wide social range of one half of the historical population” (2002, p. 1110). Giving credit where credit is due, Ms. Jackson did portray women in laboring, ascending and questionable social positions; examples can be found, respectively, in the short stories *My Life with R. H. Macy*, *Trial by Combat* and *The Tooth* – published in *The Lottery and Other Stories* (2005). Questionable means of living are also subject of inquiry, at least by the attentive and critical reader’s part, in the novel *We Have Always Lived in the Castle* (2006b) – originally published in 1962 –,

where, in the end, the two protagonist sisters, Constance and Mary Katherine, end up living their lives in a damaged country-house severely ruined by fire – and readers are left to wonder how they will survive.

Not so much by virtue of money, the majority of her female characters can be said to be marginalized, though. Marginalized women become the focus of attention in pieces of short works such as *The Summer People* and *The Daemon Lover* – also published in *The Lottery and Other Stories* (2005) –, whose characters suffer with prejudice, scorn, contempt and disdain; in the latter, the female protagonist, who goes unnamed throughout the story: “(...) is marginalized because of her inability to live up to the patriarchal standard of femininity which, at this time, entailed marriage” (DURGIN, 2009, p.12). Similar representations can be seen even in the full-length novels, such as the character of Eleanor Vance, the protagonist in *The Haunting of Hill House* (2006a) – originally published in 1959 –, who is evicted from her rightful home and abandoned by her own family, or the Blackwood sisters, from *We Have Always Lived in the Castle*, who live as outcasts – with the acquiescence of their townsfolk - in their own village.

The afore-mentioned unnamed character from the short story *The Daemon Lover*, who apparently lives in the 1940s in America, is depicted in the day of her marriage, which is when, according to researcher Heather Strempeke Durgin, she is to be validated and normalized through this long-expected ritual ceremony, since:

(...) her single status obviously causes her distress and she feels devalued; marriage, she believes, will establish her as a whole person who matters (...), though this female character is attempting to reconcile herself to the patriarchal definition of the perfect, or at least acceptable, woman, she is nonetheless tormented (...) for being an outsider. As her dreams of normalization fall apart, she begins to panic, realizing that she might never attain acceptance in her hegemonic culture (2009, p.12).

The hegemonic culture represented in *The Daemon Lover* is sufficiently organic and complex to have its innards exposed by the author, who shows the insidious nature of the hierarchical structure that controls the female character, devoid of power and destitute of influence. This oppressive invisible structure not only determines the woman character's thoughts and behavior, but also makes her reliant upon its power for both survival and acceptance. This short story spares no efforts in building itself as a “demonstration of the

extent to which oppressive systems can be internalized and an investigation into the psychological damage that such internalized hegemony does” (DURGIN, 2009, p. 13).

As of 2011, this particular short story, originally published in the magazine *Woman's Home Companion* in February 1949, later reprinted in the collection entitled *The Lottery and Other Stories*, has been addressed in depth mainly by three critics: Joan Wylie Hall (1993), who has done important critical work in her exploration of *The Daemon Lover*; by Heather Strempeke Durgin, who has dedicated more than one third of her master's dissertation to the assessment of the story; and by Lenemaja Friedman (1975), who cuts all bonds with reality by accepting the possibility that the strange man who oppresses the protagonist is in fact a demonic creature, i.e. she tackles with the supernatural components present in the story – she also acknowledges the elements of mystery and ambiguity.

Whereas Hall (1993) finds this story to be one of psychological terror, Durgin (2009) believes that the truly frightening elements in it are the political implications of gendered power structures such as they were explored by its author. Friedman's points of view will not be approached in this text at this moment:

In this story, Jackson examines the effects of living as a subjugated woman in a patriarchal culture by allowing the lead female character's world to be disrupted by patriarchal expectations (...); Jackson weaves (...) elements (...) with contemporary gender politics, represented by a spurned woman panicked because she is on the verge of becoming a “spinster.” In addition to her unmarried status, this character challenges the accepted housewife role, she supports herself by working. (...) This combination (..) allows Jackson to explore the tenuous role of women (...) and the ways in which [their] behavior was regulated (DURGIN, 2009, p.20-21).

The political implications pointed out by Hall may lead readers to question Ms. Jackson's female representations in the order of Ecofeminism. Judging by Noel Sturgeon's definition of the term Ecofeminism as depicted in *Ecofeminist Natures* (1997), Ms. Jackson is not exactly an ecofeminist writer *ipsis literis*; leastways because one of the main strengths of Ecofeminism is the fact that it is a theory, primarily political in nature, that seeks to concomitantly deploy a series of radical analyses of injustice and exploitation focused on racism, classism, sexism, heterosexism, imperialism, speciesism and environmental degradation (STURGEON, 1997).

Even though Ms. Jackson's stories heavily tap into some of these notions, especially those of injustice and exploitation stemming from racism or other kinds of bigotry, hers is not

a political struggle, at least not in the sense described above, which consequently disqualifies her from the category of *ecofeminist*. One must remember that it is not necessarily the foremost role of the writer to deploy analyses on social interactions of this nature, though writers often do that more effectively and with more accomplishment, authority and quality than those who are purportedly responsible for this very kind of social commentary.

Her female characters are generally framed in a way that does not necessarily suggest a gendered powered creation, or even gender as a central conceptual problem to be explored throughout the narrative, albeit there are sex-related issues in her stories that even a gender role theory would be unable to assess, or to properly address, and that would happen exactly due to the apparent lack of feminist-critical investment that went on during the characters' creative processes. Ms. Jackson's works, thus, provide an alternative, or perhaps simply a fresher critical way of thinking about gender relations, unlike traditional feminist analyses. And that by no means mean that traditional feminist criticism is unable to provide the conceptual tools with which to analyze these stories and their entrenched connections between female character representation and its impact in the surrounding community.

As it must happen with every writer, her depictions of women have not exclusively triggered positive responses. Despite displeasing to some, it is unquestionable that they opened a lot of room for discussion. Ms. Jackson did not directly tap into black women's or lesbian issues *per se* either. She does not tap into misogynistic or belittling attitudes towards male writers and/or critics, nor does she subject them to ironic scrutiny:

Concentration upon the offences of male writers tended to give way in the later 1970s to woman-centred literary histories seeking to trace an autonomous tradition of women's literature and to redeem neglected female authors (DRABBLE & STRINGER, 2003, p. 1054).

Shirley Jackson's efforts can be said to have had a more woman-centered quality to them, especially considering the fact that there was indeed a significant amount of characters which were women in her works, but who were involuntarily engaged in creating a tradition in general fictional literature – and not necessarily in women's literature or in the female gothic, for instance. Furthermore, this investigation would not be complete if the 1948 short story *The Lottery* were not tackled to content regarding the possibility of a feminist labeled attribution to its author. It is not coincidental that it remains, to the present, not only the most

reputedly analyzed and downright criticized piece of short fiction in Ms. Jackson's fecund inventory, but also the one text that carries more of the substance that helps drive ideological approaches, whether they are feminist or not.

Though the story plot takes place in a contemporary setting, the societal values of the community portrayed are inherently and manifestedly patriarchal in nature. Gender roles are firmly set (BREITSPRECHER, 2000). The author first introduces the male characters in instances of mid-conversation regarding tractors and taxes, creating the images of men likely to be solid farmers. Significantly, the women characters are presented only after the men. The first information the reader receives concerning the characteristics of the latter refers to their appearance, to the fact that they are all wearing faded house dresses and sweaters, and are, behaviour-wise, following shortly after their menfolk: "their jokes were quiet and they smiled rather than laughed (...), they greeted one another and exchanged bits of gossip as they went to join their husbands (JACKSON, 2005, p.292). One character, however, stood out:

When Mrs. Hutchinson comes running late all the men are sure to mention her to her husband before conversing with her. This is suggestive of how males might be respectful in not treading in the fellow male's domain. There seems to be no chance for a change either (BREITSPRECHER, 2000, p.8).

The children display their own parent-rooted gender roles. The narrative is explicitly built to demonstrate first the boys, playing and gathering piles of stones, and then the girls, standing out of their way and watching. With clearly defined roles, these boys and girls show their own distinguishing principles of upbringing. They mirror Simone de Beauvoir's children from the *Second Sex*. Ms. Jackson's children mirror the French existentialist's formulations of the defining roles for boys and girls:

The little girl (...) is allowed to cling to her mother's skirts, (...) she wears sweet little dresses, her tears and caprices are viewed indulgently, her hair is done up carefully, older people are amused at her expressions and coquetries (...) the little boy, in contrast, will be denied even coquetry; his efforts at enticement, his play-acting, are irritating. He is told that "a man doesn't ask to be kissed ... A man doesn't cry." He is urged to be "a little man" (BEAUVOIR, 1989, p.270).

In that village, not even age seems to make a boy respect a female: "Bobby Martin ducked under his mother's grasping hand and ran, laughing, back to the pile of stones. His

father spoke up sharply, and Bobby came quickly and took his place between his father and his oldest brother" (JACKSON, 2005, p.292). In view of that:

In a certain perspective, one could say that the stones symbolize money that the boys will need to gather, hoard, and fight for when they are grown up. Girls have to stay out of the way since their role cannot be soiled with working among an economic world (KOSENKO, 1985, p. 28).

Kosenko's approach is set to be marxist-feminist. His analysis reveals a complex social structure deliberately and carefully developed throughout the story. He notes that "[the] most powerful men who control the town, economically as well as politically, also happen to administer the lottery" (1985, p. 26). Subtle details and persistent occurrences within the narrative frame continuously hint to samples of gender pattern creation, consolidation and maintenance since: "even the rules of the lottery itself favor a woman who knows her place and has borne several children; in a large family, each person has less of a chance of being chosen (OEHLSHLAEGGER, 1988, p. 265). More examples are provided by Kosenko in his description of Tessie Hutchinson's defiance:

Tessie's rebellion begins with her late arrival at the lottery, a faux that raises suspicions of her resistance to everything the lottery stands for. [...] When Mr. Summers calls her family's name, Tessie goads her husband 'Get up there, Bill.' In doing so, she inverts the power relation (...) between husbands and wives (...). Her final faux pas is to question the rules of the lottery which relegate women to inferior status as the property of their husbands" (KOSENKO, 1985, p.26).

This last example is particularly meaningful mainly for two reasons. First, it concomitantly explains and asserts the role of Tessie as the town's scapegoat. Second, it elucidatively discloses her stoning as much more than just the fulfillment of a ritual tradition, revealing her fate as a punishment for heresy and sedition; an event not so much more unlike the Salem witch trials.

FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

In conclusion, Ms. Jackson does not overtly seek to question and transform what feminist scholars call "androcentric systems" (McMANUS, 1997, p.58) – understood here as the systems which posit the male as the norm – however, she does naturally reveal and

subliminally critique androcentric biases, and does so attempting to examine the beliefs and practices from the viewpoint of the “other”, of the wife, perhaps exactly by showing the wife being treated as object that she promotes and elevates to the category of subject. Ms. Jackson does not overtly differentiate *sex* from *gender* – the latter understood here as a socially/culturally constructed category that involves a myriad of often normative precepts, generally learned, and subject to differences among various cultures – the former viewed here simply as a biologically based category. In this regard, it is convenient to recall Beauvoir’s opinion that:

One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman. No biological, psychological, or economic fate determines the figure that the human female presents in society; it is civilization as a whole that produces this creature (...) which is described as feminine (BEAUVOIR, 1989, p. 267).

It seems that the central idea held dear by feminist theoreticians that gender norms *can* be changed is rather ubiquitous, though often disguised, in Ms. Jackson’s texts. She does not, however, actively advocate that the existing inequalities between the dominant and the oppressed can and should be removed, which does not really render her work with an acknowledged political dimension; which, as previously discussed, rules out Ms. Jackson as an ecofeminist. The fact is that she makes no open claims as to being neutral or committed.

If one is to understand that the goal of political feminism is much more than simply a stronger emphasis on women – though that is accepted as an important part of it - the actual goal would then be to revise the ways of considering history, society, literature, and culture so that “neither male nor female is taken as normative, but both are seen as equally conditioned by the gender constructions of their culture” (McMANUS, 1997, p.60). Hopefully, current scholars will be ready to acquiesce that Ms. Jackson’s feminism – if it exists as such at all – is plural and dialogic, rather than monolithic and unengaged.

Judging by the scholarly premises discussed above, her texts *can* be regarded even as nonfeminist – though with an overarching concern for feminist-related issues – which naturally does not imply that they are not valid or valuable. As far as radical hardcore feminist scholarship is concerned, her texts may as well be fairly assessed as preliminary or incomplete.

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