

**“A BIZARRE DOMESTIC METAMORPHOSIS¹”: GENDER ROLES,
POWER RELATIONS AND THREATENED HOMES IN SHIRLEY
JACKSON’S *LIKE MOTHER USED TO MAKE***

**“UMA METAMORFOSE DOMÉSTICA BIZARRA”: PAPÉIS DE
GÊNERO, RELAÇÕES DE PODER E LARES AMEAÇADOS EM *LIKE
MOTHER USED TO MAKE* DE SHIRLEY JACKSON**

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ABSTRACT: American writer Shirley Jackson (1916-1965) inserted cryptic thematic-elements in her stories, thus creating a mythology inherent to her literary cosmos. The present concern is to analyze how these inconspicuous elements contribute to a better understanding of the short story *Like Mother Used to Make* (featured in the 1948 collection *The Lottery and Other Stories*). The intention is to decode some of these recondite elements and discuss their contribution to the interpretation of this tale. To aid in the analysis, an informal methodological approach was devised taking into consideration two *hypothetical* readers, namely a “novice Jackson reader” and an “experienced Jackson reader”. This system intends to service as an example of how pervasive these cryptic elements can be. In the study of *Like Mother Used to Make*, special attention was devoted to the (frustrated) expectations regarding gender roles and power relations between the three main characters: the meek David Turner, his loud neighbor Marcia (for whom he is romantically attracted to) and an ill-timed visitor (who will offer unexpected danger, considering that David’s home will be threatened by the presence of this mysterious third party, a figure who inhabits the depths of Shirley Jackson’s Lore, the malignant demon James Harris).

Keywords: Shirley Jackson; gender roles; power relations.

RESUMO: A escritora norte-americana Shirley Jackson (1916-1965) criptografou elementos temáticos em suas estórias, criando, portanto, uma mitologia inerente ao seu cosmo literário. O presente objetivo é analisar como estes elementos inconspícuos contribuem para uma melhor compreensão do conto *Like Mother Used to Make* (integrante da coleção de 1948 *The Lottery and Other Stories*). A intenção é decodificar alguns destes elementos recônditos e discutir suas contribuições para a interpretação deste conto. Para auxiliar na análise, uma abordagem metodológica informal foi desenvolvida levando em consideração dois leitores *hipotéticos*, respectivamente um leitor experiente e um inexperiente em relação à obra de Jackson. Esse sistema pretende exemplificar o quão difusivos esses elementos podem ser. No estudo de *Like Mother Used to Make*, atenção especial foi dedicada às expectativas (principalmente as frustradas) concernentes a papéis de gênero e a relações de poder que se dão entre os três personagens principais: o dócil David Turner, sua vizinha ruidosa Marcia (por quem ele é romanticamente atraído) e um visitante inoportuno (que oferecerá perigo imprevisto, considerando que o lar de David será ameaçado pela presença desta misteriosa companhia, uma figura que habita as profundezas da mitologia de Shirley Jackson, o maligno demônio James Harris).

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Palavras-chave: Shirley Jackson; papéis de gênero; relações de poder.

INTRODUCTION: SHIRLEY JACKSON'S ARCHITECTURE OF CHARACTER(S)

American writer Shirley Jackson (1916-1965) saw the bulk of her works published in the period that roughly expands from the 1940s to the 1960s. Her first novel, *The Road through the Wall*, came out in 1948 to lukewarm reception. That same year *New Yorker* magazine published her most celebrated short story, *The Lottery*. At the wake of the huge success of this eerie tale, a short fiction collection appropriately entitled *The Lottery and Other Stories*² appeared, published by Farrar, Strauss and Giroux. This collection was important for several reasons. It brought some of Jackson's best pieces, such as *Charles* and *The Tooth* and, naturally, the title story. It also paved the way to the foundation of the author's mythological universe, referred to here as the Shirley Jackson Lore³ (henceforth SJJ). Furthermore, practically all the individual stories that were scattered in serial publications such as *Mademoiselle*, *Woman's Home Companion*, *The Hudson Review*, *New Republic*, *New Yorker*, among others, were together for the first time in a single handsome printed edition (for the contentment and convenience of fans).

This group of stories established many of the noteworthy thematic elements that comprise the SJJ. Interestingly their interrelatedness renders most of them invisible to the reader of one single story. By reading more than one story is that these otherwise cryptic elements appear. Their presence is so relevant that the knowledge of their existence can radically alter the reader's interpretation of *one* given story.

The present concern is to analyze how these inconspicuous elements contribute to a better understanding of *Like Mother Used to Make*, the third short story of *The Lottery and Other Stories*. The intention is to surface and decode some of these recondite elements and study their contribution to the interpretation of the tale. To aid in this analysis, an informal method was devised taking into consideration perceptually varying insights from two *hypothetical* readers, namely a "novice⁴ Jackson reader" and an "experienced Jackson reader". This system intends to service as an example of how pervasive and coalescing these cryptic elements can be when viewed by means of different theoretical readers.

Like Mother Used to Make has been chosen for unique reasons, especially those regarding the architecture of its characters, more specifically their (failed) gender expectations

and their (unexpected) power relations. These factors ultimately threaten the conventional notions of familial homes in mid-twentieth century America and beyond.

Historically, literary critics have had much to say concerning the cardinal role of women in Gothic fiction (as Jackson's literature is often categorized), but "have sometimes neglected both the figurative nature of the feminine and the presence of feminized and suffering male characters" (SCHMITT, 1997, p. 11). Schmitt's assertion finds resonance in Jackson's *Like Mother Used to Make*, which features as main character the male young-adult David Turner.

The protagonist of this story is exceptional for the simple fact that it is a man. This is not an isolated incident in Jackson's literature, though. Other stories, such as *Charles* and *The Witch* (both featured in *The Lottery and Other Stories*), also display male characters in main roles. In the specific case of *Charles*, the story's protagonist is a child, a little boy entering kindergarten called Laurie. In *The Witch*, four-year-old Johnny performs a central function in the plot. It is safe to uphold, however, that the vast majority of Jackson's protagonists are indeed women, and consequently her plots are weaved around female characters and issues traditionally (yet retrogradely) associated with women, such as family and domesticity. More importantly, her stories foster a variety of themes of social, cultural, political, and psychological – in sum – of human nature.

BEYOND GENDER AND POWER IN *LIKE MOTHER USED TO MAKE*

At the beginning of the story David is returning home by bus and, as he gets off, he remembers he must do something; to buy butter. He enters a grocery store on the way home and, despite being a familiar face to the clerk, is treated *unkindly*. Baffled by the prices, as well as by the treatment he receives, he buys a quarter of a pound of butter and half-dozen rolls. This seemingly unpretentious and domestic introduction of the character in the storyline is supposedly meant to garner the reader's *sympathy*, for he does not seem to be a necessarily well-to-do person – he is certainly not successful or wealthy – considering that he comes home by bus and still has to walk a little. Besides, he complains about the price of the butter *and* is treated carelessly even by a person who knows him (though not very well), that is the grocery clerk. This unpretentious introduction sets the tone and fulfills its role in eliciting the reader's affinity to David.

More details as such are provided in order to strengthen the rapport between reader and character. When David arrives at his building there is a letter from his mother at the mailbox, possibly establishing an existent rapport between mother and son, endearing even further David's connection to the reader. He lives on the third floor and, upon coming up, he sees no light in Marcia's apartment, the only other neighbor on that floor.

The description of the interior of David's apartment is rather meaningful:

Tonight, as every other night when he came home, the apartment looked warm and friendly and good; the little foyer, with the neat small table and four *careful* chairs, and the bowl of little marigolds against the pale green walls David had painted himself (p. 30, my italics).

It is as if the narrator is saying softly that the dear poor man, resigned with his routine and with his small furniture (in a narration most likely and non-obtrusively meant to invigorate the bonds with the reader), is taking care of his plants (imparting upon him a sense of responsibility to other life forms other than himself) and of all his little things *and* all alone. The reader learns more about who David really is while learning about his dedication to his possessions. The narrator describes a man who takes such good care of his personal belongings that even the very objects themselves seem to repay his respect by being *careful* to him in return.

A series of elements of this description are invisible to the eye of the novice Jackson reader. The experienced Jackson reader is able to see the setting of twin apartments as reminiscent of a kindred setting from the story *The Daemon Lover* (the second story featured in *The Lottery and Other Stories*). As Jackson scholar Daryl Hattenhauer points out: "the setting of twin apartments trope the doubles who occupy them" (2003, p. 29). The double and the disunified subjects are to be recurrent themes in the SJL. More details concerning David's apartment deserve attention. In the big room where David reads and sometimes sleeps: "the *plaster* was falling in one corner and no power on earth could make it less noticeable" (p. 30, my italics).

The confluence of details in these last descriptions make it hard to ignore the fact that one of the twin apartments mentioned by Hattenhauer and the narrator (in accordance to the SJL) belonged, even if temporarily, to a mysterious character from *The Daemon Lover* called James Harris. Harris's apartment was also curiously filled with bags of *plaster* and had piles of old newspapers in it. In *The Daemon Lover*, the landlady explains that: "there was a fellow

(...) he wore a blue suit a lot, lived on the third floor for a while (...) he stayed there about a month” (p. 16). Unknowingly, she is referring to the demonic figure that inhabits the depths of Jackson’s mythology, the daemon lover himself, James Harris (a.k.a. the tall man in the blue suit in the SJL).

To the experienced Jackson reader, this information is enough cause for concern and apprehension. If David or his neighbor Marcia should be living in the apartment that was once to James Harris’s than, invariably, one may begin to expect something harmful to come to any one of them. Though the James Harris figure is known in the SJL to scourge women, meek David also seems a perfect prey. Since the plaster is in David’s apartment and not in Marcia’s, the experienced Jackson reader may expect harm to come to him rather than to her. Then again, the newspapers may be there solely to protect the floor from the paint and/or from the plaster. This ambiguity displays Jackson at her best.

The continuation of the story illuminates this foreboding warning:

David consoled himself for the plaster constantly with the thought that perhaps if he had taken an apartment in an old brownstone the plaster would not be falling, but then, too, for the money he paid he could not have a foyer and a big room and a kitchenette, anywhere else (p. 30).

The apartment *had* been cheap, and suspiciously so. The owners might have wanted to get rid of that apartment for a reason. The experienced Jackson reader, bearing the intelligence garnered from *The Daemon Lover* and from elsewhere in the SJL, is endowed with the knowledge to understand what these reasons might have been. The fact that David was powerless to make the falling plaster less apparent further indicates the impotence that permeated his character.

David considers his living room, which he calls the big room, charming. He thinks that it is the most comfortable room he has ever had and so much so that from time to time he lets his eyes move slowly around the big room and then sighs with satisfaction at the end. He takes a neat notepaper that is infallibly sitting in the appropriate desk cubbyhole and writes Marcia a message that reads: “Dear Marcia, don’t forget you’re coming for dinner tonight. I’ll expect you about six” (p. 31). This invitation translates a man that is not all soft but who is also able of showing some initiative. His relationship to Marcia helps establish his identity.

He has a key to Marcia’s apartment in case the laundryman comes, or the man who fixes the refrigerator or the telephone or the windows since she is never at home. She,

however, does not hold a key to his apartment and he has never offered – certainly not out of suspicion or distrust, it is just that it reassures him to know that the only key to enter his apartment is his, and so he keeps it safely in his pant pocket.

Critics have justifiably asserted that David's relationship to Marcia is deeper than that:

as in much of Jackson's fiction this story uses architecture as a metaphor of the subject, and it uses doubles to disrupt notions of a unified subject. In the case of these doubles, the similarities of the apartments contrast with the differences between the two characters. Each subject is a mirror opposite of the other, but is also the mirror opposite of traditional gendering (HATTENHAUER, 2003, p. 29).

Just as the architecture of David's apartment mirrors who he is (and the same goes to Marcia's), their architecture mirror their relationship. David goes to Marcia's apartment and finds it empty. Her apartment is not very agreeable. Though its rooms are set in the same position as his, hers are oddly bare and look arbitrary. The objects are crooked and the rooms cluttered. Marcia has left her bed unmade and her dirty laundry on the floor. The window has been left open so there are papers scattered on the floor. On the piano keys he leaves the note he wrote reminding her of their rendezvous and goes back to the harmony of his own place in order to begin preparations for dinner. The night before he had prepared pot roast so that his only work then was to slice it and place it on a plate with a touch of parsley. Very fittingly:

his plates were orange, almost the same color as the couch *cover*, and it was *pleasant* to him to *arrange* a salad, with lettuce on the orange plate, and *thin slices* of cucumber. He put *coffee* on to cook, and sliced potatoes to fry, and then, with his dinner cooking *agreeably* and the window open to lose the odor (...) he set *lovingly* to *arranging* his table (p. 32, my italics).

One should notice the abundance of congenial qualifiers associated to actions related to neatness and organization: *pleasant* and *lovingly* and *arranging*. Other words denote David's marked dedication to detail, such as having a *cover* over his couch and cutting *thin slices*. Interestingly, David's relationship to coffee seems parsimonious when compared to that of other characters in the SJL (see the unnamed protagonist in *The Daemon Lover* and, for all intents and purposes, her *addiction* to the substance – vice is to be another recurrent element in the SJL).

As previously mentioned, by observing the trends set in the SJL the experienced Jackson reader can almost foretell that this orderly balance is bound to be upset by some

dreadful event. The novice Jackson reader does not hold the necessary intelligence garnered from her other works to realize the subtle harbingers which operate in the narration are forerunners of the presence of the demon James Harris. Importantly, his name has not been mentioned so far in the story, though, as argued, meager yet sufficient data has been cryptically announced to warn the experienced Jackson reader of his coming.

Evidence to support such claims can be found extra-textually, more specifically within the missing title of the short story collection which this short piece originally integrates. *The Lottery and Other Stories*, first published in 1949 (in the wake of *The Lottery*'s success), was originally subtitled *The Adventures of James Harris*. This piece of information provides the attentive reader with a hint James Harris's appearance is to be expected; even if anywhere in the tales that comprise the collection. Due to marketing reasons the illuminating subtitle has been completely omitted in the following editions leaving the readers with one less token of intelligence to rely upon for interpretive purposes.

After setting the table with the utmost care and methodical planning David admired it, shining and clean. Marcia suddenly bursts the door open and comes in: "with a shout and fresh air and disorder" (p. 33). She is described as a tall attractive young woman with a loud voice; she is wearing a dirty raincoat. Hattenhauer properly describes her as "a stereotypical bachelor [who] leaves her bed unmade and her laundry on the floor [and who] is oblivious to the place setting and correct silverware" (2003, p. 30).

Their ties seem to strengthen. David announces that dinner is ready and pulls a chair for Marcia. They eat and she compliments him for the wonderful meal and for such a nice house and says she wishes she were more like him. Despite the obvious differences they seem to get along pretty well. Everything seems perfect. He had made cherry pie for her – David confesses he had made pie only twice before but that that one was better than the others; what he does not say, though it is implied, is that the reason is he had made that one especially for *her*. Critical as always with his things, the perfectionist David comments that the pie is too sour for him, that he had run out of sugar. Marcia says she appreciates a sour cherry pie and that is the way she likes it – all small but very significant details.

David is pouring her coffee when, out of a sudden, she hears her bell ringing from inside her apartment. Using the buzzer in David's apartment she opens the downstairs door. They can both hear *heavy footsteps* climbing up the stairs and neither of them knows who it is. Marcia yells hello and, leaning back on her chair to see through the open door to the hall, she utters surprised: "why Mr. Harris (...) Come in" (p. 35). Before his name is mentioned the

heavy footsteps, one could argue, may be faintly reminiscent of the sound of hooves on the stairs (James Harris has historically⁵ been described as having cloven-feet). At the instant his name is mentioned a series of otherwise innocuous minutia suddenly spring to sight (to the experienced Jackson reader). Some of these details are discussed in the following paragraphs.

The moment Harris comes in the apartment his eyes rest curiously on the coffee cups and empty plates on the table: “I just thought I’d stop by” (p. 38) he says. His gaze at the cups is significant. For one, in the SJL, coffee is nearly a synonym of obsession and of vice; bad things come out from too much coffee drinking, too often with unexpected (in the negative sense) outcomes (see *The Daemon Lover*). In the SJL, Harris smells vice, chases it, encourages it, and ultimately causes it. His detrimental influence is, to a great extent, undesirably pervasive.

Harris’s gaze at the coffee cups and especially at the empty seats around the table can indicate his yearning to occupy that space. Marcia welcomes him and introduces him to David as a man who works in the same office as hers (see *A Fine Old Firm*, another story featured in *The Lottery and Other Stories*). She asks Harris to sit down and asks David to pour him a cup of coffee and offers him a piece of the cherry pie David had prepared for her. Since Harris’s arrival Marcia has changed her behavior towards her host, she has been calling him *Davie*. The difference in treatment suggests the new order she establishes among the males, yielding the authority to the demon, whom she calls *Mr. Harris*, and the subordinate role to David, now demoted to *Davie*.

According to the narrator, David’s plans for the evening had not been anything too extravagant; a movie perhaps if it were not too cold out or at least a talk with Marcia about the condition of her apartment (which all but supplements David’s humble and unpretentious nature). David puts the pie in front of Harris, who stares at it admiringly before he tastes it. Interestingly but not by all means unexpectedly, Harris has so far been nothing but amiable and polite, though admittedly ill-timed.

Since the novice Jackson reader does not have access to Harris’s real nature (as gathered from Jackson’s other stories), it is difficult at this point to see anything that may raise suspicion (outside the untimely appearance) about this stranger. The reader knows so far (at this point in the narrative) that Harris is a friend of Marcia’s from work and that he apparently involuntarily interrupted his colleague’s dinner with a neighbor.

Though the experienced Jackson reader may wish that Harris sees his welcome at that place backlash, nothing of the sort happens, on the contrary, his presence becomes more and more influential (and unfortunately far too invasive):

“say, (...) this is certainly some pie (...) this is really good pie” [Harris] said. “You like it?” Marcia asked modestly. She looked up at David and smiled at him over Mr. Harris’ head. “I haven’t made but two, three pies before,” she said (p. 36).

Marcia’s innocent lie may seem to the novice Jackson reader quite innocent, certainly unprovoked, bearing no more than the intentional touch of soft mischievousness that lies in the heart of all white lies. The experienced Jackson reader is aware of Harris’s pervasive influence when it comes to lying (see *The Villager*, another story from *The Lottery and Other Stories* that also feature James Harris as character). In *The Villager*, Harris asks the protagonist, an unmarried failed dancer, if she is an artist: “‘no,’ Miss Clarence said. She took a deep breath. ‘dancer,’ she said” (55). At that moment (and thanks to Harris) Miss Clarence sees an opportunity to *live* the life she has dreamed but could not achieve. Even if fictionally and temporarily, her acting may be viewed as something positive *because* it is cathartic. It may, however, also be viewed as something negative. The experienced Jackson reader – without any intention of being a moralist – can perceive this scene with darker, more detrimental undertones, in other words, as the constitution and achievement of a *lie*, recognizably so mainly due to the demonic presence and influence of James Harris himself. Certainly, if it were not for his attendance on that locale, Miss Clarence would not have had the opportunity of exercising this untruth – harmless as it admittedly was, but a lie nevertheless. The mere creation of the opportunity from Harris’s part fits his profile consummately in the SJL in the sense that, wherever he goes, he brings along lies and deceit which are seldom devoid of deleterious harm. In the case of *The Villager*, Miss Clarence escapes fairly free from harm. She goes home with nothing but an uncomely reminder, unsuspectingly rubbed on her face, that she did not succeed in life. In *Like Mother Used to Make*, David’s fate seems to be bound to Miss Clarence’s. So far the experienced Jackson reader has had enough warnings that David’s life (or part of it), is bound to be vandalized (with any luck, only psychologically) by this demon too.

Marcia’s character has not been described as a bad person; according to the narrator she is just *loud*. The tale brings the reader no explicit reason to believe that she told that lie to hurt David’s feeling – though one might think her careless with his feelings alright. This is,

however, the first hefty piece of evidence of Harris's malicious and venomous powers in this story.

When Marcia offered Harris a piece of pie: "David raised a hand to protest, but Mr. Harris turned to him and demanded, 'Did you ever eat any better pie in your life?'" (p. 36). What may seem as an inadvertent interruption is, to the experienced Jackson reader, the demon's attempt at keeping the truth from surfacing. It is not enough to motivate and stimulate lies, Harris's task seems to be also to withhold the truth from emerging (thus indicated the SJL); as the narration puts it: "'I don't think Davie liked it much,' Marcia said wickedly, 'I think it was too sour for him.' 'I like a sour pie,' Mr. Harris said. He looked suspiciously at David. 'A cherry pie's *got* to be sour.'" (p. 36). Harris has already contaminated Marcia. Through her actions she seems to like that playful wickedness that accompanies role-playing. She evinces outwardly what Mr. Harris is inwardly. With that, the belligerence that legitimizes the choice and origin of her name is thus validated⁶.

The hapless David begins to wish to be rid of them both. He thinks: "his clean house, his nice silver, were not meant as vehicles for the kind of fatuous banter Marcia and Mr. Harris were playing together" (p. 37). As David is taking the empty cups of coffee to the kitchen to clean them up Marcia says: "Don't bother, Davie, honestly, (...) I'll do them tomorrow, honey" (p. 37). Marcia speaks to him smiling as if she and he were now conspirators against Mr. Harris. Once again, what may look to the novice reader as an unfortunate and unpleasant move from her part is precisely what the SJL authorizes as Harris's influence at sowing discordance and dissension: "'sure,' Mr. Harris said. He stood up. 'Let [the dirty coffee cups] wait. Let's go in and sit down where we can be comfortable'" (p. 37), he invites Marcia. She gets up and leads Mr. Harris to the living room couch and calls David, who is looking at the dirty dishes getting crusty on his nice clean table. David puts on an apron and begins to wash the dishes carefully and slowly. Meanwhile, Marcia and Harris's conversation on the couch is interrupted a number of times by Marcia's calling out for David and asking him to stop doing the dishes and to come over to sit with them: "Davie, won't you stop all that and come sit down? (...) Davie, I don't want you to wash all those dishes,' and Mr. Harris said, 'let him work, he's happy'" (p. 37); Harris lets this little comment slip, a comment that reveals what is really in his devilish mind; and that overall helps create more distress in the lenient David.

David has his own (emotional) defense mechanisms. The following passage does not only portray David's anguish to be rid of those people but also the psychological transfer of his woe to the obsessive tidiness and orderliness of his china and silverware:

First the forks all went together into the little grooves which held two forks each – later, when the set was complete, each groove would hold four forks – and then the spoons, stacked up neatly one on top of another in their own grooves, and the knives in even order, all facing the same way, in the special tape in the lid of the box (p. 38).

In turn, the passage also reflects the author's ambiguous obsession with domestic work (see *Life Among the Savages*⁷). It is as if David is using his organization as a defense mechanism to block the reality of what is going on in his cherished apartment.

By the time David is finished with the dishes Marcia and Mr. Harris are still talking, sitting close together on the couch when she says: "Davie, you were so nice to do all those dishes yourself" (p. 38). David replies it is alright, ungracefully, having Mr. Harris staring at him impatiently. Marcia asks David to sit down the same way hostesses do when they do not know what else to say to a guest or when a guest arrives too early or overstays his or her welcome. In fact, it was the kind of tone David was expecting to use on Mr. Harris. After an awkward moment in which they realized they had nothing to talk about now that David was there, Mr. Harris picks up an ashtray and puts it on the treasured couch between Marcia and himself and casually asks if Marcia (not David), if she does not mind him smoking a cigar there; Harris kiddingly announces that "cigar smoke's good for plants" (p. 39). Marcia laughs. The cigar is also referenced in *The Witch* (another story from *The Lottery and Other Stories*) where one learns more about Harris's personality.

In *The Witch*, which also features a James Harris character, he is described as "an elderly man, with a pleasant face under white hair; his blue suit was only faintly touched by the disarray that comes from a long train trip" (p. 64). He is carrying a cigar as he approaches a little boy, one of the protagonists of the story, who is in a train trip with his mother and sister. Harris asks the boy what he is looking out the window of the train. The boy gladly replies:

"Witches," the little boy said promptly. "Bad old mean witches."
 "I see," the man said. "Find many?"
 "My father smokes cigars," the little boy said.
 "All men smoke cigars," the man said. "Someday you'll smoke a cigar, too." (p. 64)

With this, the reader learns more about the distinctive qualities that make up Harris's character and the crypto-thematic concurrent elements from the SJL. His blue suit is reminiscent of *The Daemon Lover* and his pleasant face of *The Villager* (both stories from *The Lottery and Other Stories*). This is the real contribution of the SJL to a fuller and better understanding of one individual tale.

In one of the final crucial moments in the narrative of *Like Mother Used to Make*, David stands up expecting to dismissively thank Mr. Harris for the visit. What he says instead is that he (David) is better be getting along, to what Mr. Harris quickly replies just as dismissively that he had enjoyed meeting him. They shake hands. Marcia's reaction was saying that she was sorry that he (David) had to leave so soon. David retorts that he has a lot of work to do and Marcia, really incarnating her role, tells him not to forget his key. Both Marcia and David surprised themselves as to what great actors they were being. David also surprised himself when he grabbed the keys to her apartment from her hands and said good night to Mr. Harris: "Good night, Davie honey, 'Marcia called out, and David said 'Thanks for a simply *wonderful* dinner, Marcia,' and closed the door behind him" (p. 39). He goes down the hall and passively withdraws into Marcia's apartment. It is still messy and things are still awry: "the papers were still on the floor, the laundry still scattered, the bed unmade" (p. 40). The epicene David sits down on the bed and looks around the cold and dirty apartment and, at the same time, hears faint conversation and laughter from inside his cozy, cherished, warm apartment – faint voices and laughter much similar to what the unnamed protagonist of *The Daemon Lover* encounters in Harris's alleged apartment in that story.

In *The Daemon Lover*, the unnamed protagonist, at the end of her quest to find her runaway-groom, goes to what is supposed to be his apartment (coincidentally or not, Jamie's apartment – *Jamie* as in James Harris), and:

She knocked, and thought she heard voices inside, and she thought, suddenly with terror, What shall I say if Jamie is there, if he comes to the door? The voices seemed suddenly still. She knocked again and there was silence, except for something that might have been laughter far away (p. 27).

Her concern was certainly justified (after all, what *do* you say to the person who has run from you at your wedding day?) The fact that there were voices and, upon knocking, the voices disappeared is in accordance to the behavior of one who wishes to hide. Hearing voices is also ultimately a sign of schizophrenia or, in more lay terms, of being crazy – one of the images that the author may wish the reader to come to question as the story progresses. The

laughter not only reinforces the theory that questions the protagonist's sanity but also reiterates the mischievousness and the devilry associated to the James Harris character, and to his circle of influence.

At the end of *Like Mother Used to Make*, David, inside Marcia's apartment, leans over to the floor and picks up a piece of paper, and then another, and then another, and when he realizes, he is picking them up one by one. The story ends with this authoritative display of human nature: "David's obsession with domesticity has led to a bizarre role reversal, a transformation (...) having had his own domesticity interrupted, he begins to create it again in a different location, a fantastic reversal of stereotypical male and female familial roles" (EGAN, 1989, p. 17). Egan's words comprehensively summarize the character's final demise.

CRITICISM AND FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

Jackson Scholar Joan Wylie Hall, commenting the end of *Like Mother Used to Make*, states that: "the situation is humorous but almost as incredible as the plight of the jilted fiancée in *The Daemon Lover*, and finally almost as disturbing (1993, p. 15). Hall is referring to the incident previously mentioned in that the unnamed woman is locked outside the apartment where she wanted to get in to be with her fleeting-fiancé: "in both stories James Harris precipitates the protagonists exclusion, not only from a physical place but also from emotional sustenance" (1993, p. 15). Whereas the nameless bride-to-be from *The Daemon Lover* insistently returns to the door where she thinks her escaped-groom is, David tries to restore what he thinks of as order by organizing Marcia's apartment. Each one of the characters tries to cope with their losses the best way they can, thus, they remain true to their nature (or better, to the description of their fictional selves in both short stories).

David's own name says something about him. To Hattenhauer, David "lives up to his biblical namesake only by being dwarfed by his counterpart. Rather than slay a giant, David Turner continues his role of turning into a diminished, feminized victim", on the other hand, Harris "fits the era's prototype of the masculine male. He is big and smokes a cigar. He is empowered in the workplace [and] his assumption that the woman made the dinner leads him to the deduction that the apartment he has entered is hers" (2003, p. 30). Hattenhauer's discussion about *Like Mother Used to Make* moves from a feminist perusal into a Marxist reading. After stating that Harris is further masculinized in the story and Marcia is further feminized in relation to Harris and masculinized in relation to David, the conclusion is that

David is further feminized in relation to both; Hattenhauer goes on to say that Marcia is both exploited and an exploiter, since: “the gender reversal shows Jackson’s Marxist notion that the central factor in this social formation is not sex but class” (2003, p. 31). This indeed establishes a new order, in which Harris is more powerful at work (and probably holds a position of authority at the office and consequently earns a higher income) than Marcia. She, however, is more powerful economically than David (the reader does not see Marcia complaining over the price of butter or counting rolls to buy at the grocer). Hattenhauer ends his discussion claiming that “Jackson does not gloat over the empowerment of a woman or the feminization of a man” (2003, p. 31) – and he is right; her motivation *was* different, as one can observe in Jackson’s own biography.

Through *Private Demons: The Life of Shirley Jackson* (1988), one learns that Jackson inserted in her stories (often imbuing with evil) events that occurred to people she knew in real life. Jackson’s biographer Judy Oppenheimer explains that “Ben Zimmerman and Taissa Kellman, who lived in apartments next to each other became the subjects of (...) a tale, *Like Mother Used to Make*” (1988, p. 102). Ben Zimmerman was Stanley Edgar Hyman’s (Jackson’s husband) colleague at Syracuse University. It was Ben who showed Stanley Shirley’s first published short story, *Janice*. Ben explained that *Like Mother Used to Make* grew out of an incident in which “Stanley and Taissa were sitting in his apartment and refused to leave even though he was expecting a guest” (In: OPPENHEIMER, 1988, p. 102). Ben never minded his fictional portrayal at that story whereas Taissa was not pleased. Ms. Kellman thought that Shirley was jealous that she [Taissa] was quite good-looking and Stanley, even after marriage, had a weakness for female beauty (Jackson was never beautiful): “maybe this is what Shirley felt resentment about”, declared Taissa (In: OPPENHEIMER, 1988, p. 102).

As one can notice, a story as simple as *Like Mother Used to Make*, is packed with nuances that render it quite complex. Originally, in its early drafts⁸, the story had another ending. David was then named Jamie Turner, Marcia was called Billie and Harris was simply and innocently called Harold Lang. The most radical change involves Jamie Turner’s attitude when he leaves his apartment at the end of the story. This Turner is amused that he and Billie had made a fool out of the *big guy*. He whistles while he picks up Billie’s papers from the floor, confident he can get everything organized in little over an hour while the couple (Billie and Harold) is chattering away in his apartment. Interestingly, the names were more

androgynous than in the revised version (both Jamie and Billie are names that can be easily used for both sexes).

Arguably, this is a much more complex story than the textual surface allows a novice Jackson reader to perceive. It involves, love, hate, desire, passion, self-determination, self-reliance (which touches a cornerstone of American mythology); it also deals with classic and medieval themes, as well as with universal human conflicts involving psychology, work relations, exploitation, class struggle, gender roles, domesticity, and ultimately, reality and fantasy. The convergence of such numerous themes into such a short story makes it even more fascinating. Nevertheless, if the majority of these themes go unnoted during the reading (and they will to the novice Jackson reader), than just “for its insight into two different personalities, the story is a gem” (CHRIST, 1996, p. 125).

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Notes:

¹ James Egan, professor of English at the University of Akron once called Shirley Jackson’s short story *Like Mother Used to Make* a “bizarre domestic metamorphosis” (1989, p. 17).

² Citations made from Shirley Jackson’s texts from *The Lottery and Other Stories* (2005) will be referred to in this text simply by the page number. All other citations are referenced conventionally.

³ Elements from the author's personal mythology were to recur not only in her short fiction but also in her novels, e.g., *The Haunting of Hill House* (1959) and *We Have Always Lived in the Castle* (1962).

⁴ The expression *novice* here does not refer to an unskilled reader but rather to one who has no (or scarce) prior familiarity with Jackson's work. The distinction was systematized pursuant to the assumption that there are layers of meaning that even the most proficient of readers may fail to access. This *hypothetical* novice reader is a conjecture to exemplify the individual who is the first-time recipient of the knowledge contained in a given Jackson story. The *hypothetical* experienced reader has supposedly been in contact with more than one Jackson story and is therefore in a position to negotiate meaning and possibly see the interrelated webs that connect the thematic elements in Shirley Jackson's Lore. They are not *real* readers and data dispensed through them was not collected quantitatively but rather qualitatively in a speculative basis.

⁵ In literary/academic circles it is traditionally held that the saga of the medieval myth of James Harris is registered within the monumental work by folk scholar Francis James Child entitled *The English and Scottish Popular Ballads*, originally published between 1882 and 1898. Child ballad number 243 tells the story of a sailor (Harris) who, after a period of absence, returns to Ireland to see his betrothed married to another man, generally a house carpenter, and with two children. Harris persuades her to leave her new family and come with him. When at sea, he sinks the ship and the story ends in tragedy. In the SJL Harris, much like the devil in traditional Christian mythology, mixes truths with lies and reality with pretence to confound his victims (see *The Witch*). The outcome is often unpredictable. He usually has the power of piercing through the characters' minds (both male and female) and reading their thoughts (see *Seven Types of Ambiguity* and *The Renegade*): "Jackson will use Harris to figure women's illusions (HATTENHAUER, 2003, p. 35). Jackson will also use Harris to figure people's fears and anxieties, *and* to act upon them. Harris is cunning to the point of manipulating dreams, desires and expectations. He enters and destroys, generally with vile aftereffects.

⁶ Traditionally said to be related to *Mars*, the Roman god of war.

⁷ *Life Among the Savages* is a 1953 memoir in which Shirley Jackson presents a fictionalized version of her marriage and the dizzying experience of raising four children.

⁸ This unpublished original version can currently be found in box 16 of the *Shirley Jackson Papers*, the writer's register at the Manuscript Division of the Library of Congress in Washington, D.C.. The register is safeguarded in a repository initially organized by Grover Batts in 1993. There are, in total, 7,500 items distributed in 52 containers amounting to 20.6 linear feet. The documents therein span the dates of 1932 to 1970, containing mainly correspondence, diaries, journals, notes, and outlines relating chiefly to the development of Jackson's short stories. Many of the documents were donated to the Library of Congress by Hyman in 1967.

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