

RESEARCH TITLE

Violence and the Female Gothic in Shirley Jackson Short Stories

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Abstract

Shirley Jackson is known for her associations with the Female Gothic, a genre that explores psychological and societal fears and anxieties and the entrapment of women. Violence in Jackson's stories is shown in deeply unsettling and sinister ways where women are often confined, isolated and exposed to violence. This paper will show that Jackson's stories offer the nexus between female Gothic and violence by blurring the lines between fantasy and reality, self and the world. This paper argues that by exploring female entrapment and violence and using Gothic tropes like psychological horror in "The Lottery," Jackson exposes patriarchal oppression and the anxieties surrounding women's roles and simultaneously providing a subversive Female Gothic narrative that offers a sociocultural critique of gender roles in the US in the postwar period.

Key Words: The Female Gothic, Shirley Jackson, violence, psychological horror, "The Lottery".

العنف والقوطية الأنثوية في قصص شيرلي جاكسون القصيرة

المستخلص

تعرف شيرلي جاكسون بارتباطاتها بالأسلوب القوطي النسائي، وهو نوع أدبي يستكشف المخاوف والقلق النفسي والاجتماعي وشعور النساء بالقهر والخضوع. ويظهر العنف في قصص جاكسون في القصص حيث تُحتجز النساء غالباً، ويُغزلن، ويتعرضن للعنف. وسيظهر هذا البحث أن قصص جاكسون تقدم الرابط بين القوطية النسائية والعنف من خلال طمس الحدود بين الخيال والواقع، والذات والعالم. ويجادل هذا البحث بأنه من خلال واسطة القوطية النسائية والعنف واستخدام العناصر القوطية مثل الرعب النفسي في *The Lottery (1948)* تكشف جاكسون عن القمع الأوي والقلق المحيط بأنوار النساء ، وفي الوقت نفسه يقدم سودا قوطياً نسائياً ثورياً يوفر نقدًا اجتماعيًا ثقافياً لأنوار الجنسين في الولايات المتحدة في

الكلمات المفتاحية: القوطية الأنثوية، شيرلي جاكسون، العنف ، الرعب النفسي.

Introduction

While Shirley Jackson is best known for her widely recognized short story “The Lottery,” her body of work—six novels and more than a hundred short stories—also deserves acknowledgment for its poignant literary depictions of the Gothic especially in relation to her representations of her female characters. In this paper, I examine the ways in which Shirley Jackson's fiction reveals her Gothic representations of the connections between female characters and violence. I place this reading of Jackson's female characters in the contexts of Shirley Jackson's life, feminist politics, and Gothic tropes, in particular, the set of traits that have been classified as the Female Gothic.

Since its inception during the Eighteenth century, the Gothic is associated with the uncanny, the supernatural, excess, violence, and obscurity. The Gothic is connected to the Romantic Movement, and as a genre it is situated opposite to the Enlightenment with its focus on concepts such as peace, harmony and reason. Relying on myths and folklore, the Gothic shows that “imagination and emotional effects exceed reason. Passion, excitement, sensation transgress social proprieties and moral laws.” It refers to “an over-abundance of imaginative frenzy, untamed by reason and unrestrained by conventional eighteenth-century demands for simplicity, realism or probability” (Botting, 1996, p.2). The setting in Gothic narratives has a unique significance. Hogle defines the Gothic story as a narrative that occurs

in an antiquated or seemingly antiquated space — be it a castle, a foreign palace, an abbey, a vast prison, a subterranean crypt, a graveyard, a primeval frontier or island, a large old house or theatre, an aging city or urban underworld, a decaying storehouse, factory, laboratory, public building, or some new recreation of an older venue (2002, p.2)

The Gothic explores the dark, undefined and unrefined territory of human nature; it focuses on the bizarre and the irrational. As such, Rosemary Jackson sums up the Gothic as “literature of unreason and terror,” and adds that it should be seen as a “reaction to historical events” especially “industrialism and urbanism” (Jackson, 2008, p.96).

As far as the Female Gothic is concerned, Ellen Moers was one of the first to write about the “Female Gothic” in *Literary Women* in 1976. She, in fact, coined the term and established a new lane for the examination of women in the Gothic genre. Moers defines the “Female Gothic” as “the work that women writers have done in the literary mode that, since the eighteenth century, we have called the Gothic” (Moers, 1976, p.90). As a sub-genre, scholarship on the Female Gothic flourished as a result of the women's liberation movement around the mid-twentieth century with women articulating their protests and fears. Commenting on Moere's definition, Ellen Ledoux examines how “eighteenth- and nineteenth- century women novelists employ certain coded expressions to describe anxieties over domestic entrapment and female sexuality” (2017, p. 1). In its core, the Female Gothic is a form of gothic by women that aims to show the urge to liberate women from the constrains and limits imposed on them. As Punter and Byron stipulate, the Female Gothic is characterized by tropes that focus on confinement and escape:

the female protagonist [...] is usually depicted enjoying an idyllic and secluded life; this is followed by a period of imprisonment when she is confined to a great

house or castle [...] under the authority of a powerful male figure or his female surrogate. Within this labyrinthine space she is trapped and pursued, and the threat may variously be to her virtue or to her life (2004, p. 279)

The Female Gothic is thus concerned with women's experiences highlighting/questioning gender norms and expectations and extends an invitation to interrogate the concepts around women's roles and experiences. The very attempt to define the female gothic, as Smith and Wallace argue "not only engendered a body of critical work which focused on the ways in which the Female Gothic articulated women's dissatisfactions with patriarchal society and addressed the problematic position of the maternal within that society, but placed the Gothic at the centre of the female tradition" (2004, p.1). In the same vein, Becker uses the term "feminine gothic" to refer to "women-centered novels" (2012, p.16) and explains that this type of gothic "foreground[s] the gothic emphasis on body" through "the metaphor of the house," linking "the women's sphere to her body" (19-20). Kate Ferguson Ellis also argues that the Female Gothic mirrors the "typological conception of 'domestic happiness' [...] became a 'separate sphere' from the 'fallen' world of work," which challenges the idea of "the ideal home" by "focusing on crumbling castles and sites of terror" (Ellis 1989, p. ix). This fear of the domestic place as a "prison," the fear of entrapment and the anxieties surrounding the female body are all common themes of the Female Gothic, which are manifested in Shirley Jackson's fiction, as this paper will illustrate.

Within the American context in particular, the Gothic has been used especially in horror fiction. The supernatural, ghosts, haunted places are all motifs that filled the pages of American fiction of writers such as that of Stephen King and Anne Rice. Themes like madness, the grotesque in its myriad representations are explored by Gothic fiction. By fusing societal anxieties and fears with the distinctively eerie ambiance of Gothic landscapes, the American Gothic has its own unique characteristics and is linked to the social and cultural histories of the US. It includes themes of sin and guilt, rationality versus irrationality, and puritanism as situated against the supernatural. These themes along with the representations of the Female Gothic in particular are evident of Jackson's fiction, as the following section will explain.

Jackson and the Female Gothic

Jackson's fiction highlights the representations of women especially in a domestic space. Using Gothic tropes such as psychological horror, the grotesque and eerie settings, Jackson's stories focus on critiquing societal constraints and patriarchal attempts at containment and control. Jackson portrays female characters who are entrapped, confined and are exposed to violence in their relationships with male characters as well as in the world at large. Her work reveals various types of violence; ritualistic, psychological, social and physical, and by delving into the motifs of everyday horror and death, Jackson employs the Gothic mode to furnish readers with an unparalleled perspective on female life and experience during her era.

Through her investigation and reinterpretation of the Gothic, Jackson facilitates a deeper addressing of fears and aspirations within the American cultural milieu. That is, Jackson's employment of Gothic motifs and imagery encapsulates the anxieties and apprehensions regarding gender roles prevalent in the cultural and historical contexts of suburban life after the Second World War. As such, Jackson's American female Gothic showcases identity in crisis and reveals female protagonists whose identities fragment

when they navigate their social roles. One of the ways that Jackson provides sociocultural critique is the incorporation of the ‘mad woman,’ and the “woman in crisis” in her stories, which situates the female experience at the forefront of her Gothic project. For example, stories such as “The Beautiful Stranger”, “The Daemon Lover”, and “The Tooth” feature women who are threatened by male characters and who face the ordeal of redefining themselves in a patriarchal society. Jackson’s portrayals of women elucidate the complexities of the gender dynamics especially after the War by subverting the domestic social order, as well as the conventional patriarchal framework—an issue that Shirley Jackson investigates through her interpretation of the Female Gothic (Sanko 2023, p.10).

Thus, questions around identity, especially female identity are relevant to the examination of Jackson’s work and the life experience of the author herself. As both an emerging author and a mother, Shirley Jackson's identity was fragmented across the multitude of roles she embraced throughout her experience. Thus, Jackson used the female voice in her stories as a pathway to achieving freedom and independence in her personal life. A significant aspect of Shirley Jackson's life is her 'dual identity'—that of a thriving writer and that of a mother. It is noteworthy to mention that Jackson is not just known for her gothic horror tales, but also for her amusing reflections on her daily life as the mother of four, which she contributed to women’s magazines and later compiled into collections titled *Raising Demons* and *Life Among the Savages*. However, not everyone appreciated her two different styles of writing. In her renowned book *The Feminine Mystique* (1963), Betty Friedan explored the complex position of women in the 1950s, which prescribed that women should be housewives, a role that left many feeling unfulfilled—a situation Friedan describes as “the problem that has no name.” Friedan also references Shirley Jackson in her work, criticizing her work:

Shirley Jackson, who all her adult life has been an extremely capable writer, pursuing a craft far more demanding than bedmaking, and Jean Kerr, who is a playwright, and Phyllis McGinley, who is a poet, picture themselves as housewives, they may or may not overlook the housekeeper or maid who really makes the beds. But they implicitly deny the vision, and the satisfying hard work involved in their stories, poems, and plays. They deny the lives they lead, not as housewives, but as individuals (2013, p.52).

Among her array of short stories, Shirley Jackson's biographical domestic horror comedies, specifically “Life Among the Savages” (1953) and “Raising Demons” (1957), have garnered relatively scant attention, notwithstanding their profoundly pertinent portrayals of American family. The titles of these narratives, imbued with irony, indicate an engagement with the dramas inherent in domestic and familial life. Nonetheless, a distinguishing feature of these works is their composition as a series of interrelated short stories, as opposed to a singular narrative with a cohesive plotline. The autobiographical core of Jackson’s oeuvre encapsulates her subjective experiences as a housewife and mother, which she intricately navigated through the conventions of the Gothic genre. By examining the circumstances surrounding the housewife, Jackson accentuates the cultural and societal constructs that delineate and constrain the notion of the ‘self’ that she investigates within her stories. Through her narratives, Jackson endeavors to represent the pressures of the housewife role, thereby

obstructing her journey toward self-discovery. Classified as both a work of fiction and a memoir, her domestic horror comedies present episodic depictions of suburban familial life. In her subsequent fictional short stories and novels, she expands upon the themes established in her domestic horror stories—specifically, the mechanisms through which femininity is exploited (Sanko 2023, p. 10-11)

In exploring Shirley Jackson's perspective on female roles and gender politics in American milieu in the postwar period, I intend to emphasize her use of Gothic elements to delve into the psychological complexities faced by the 'new' American woman. I propose that Jackson utilizes everyday psychological horror and brutal acts of violence to reflect the struggles and immense pressures confronting American women in the postwar era. Her stories portray domestic space as a psychological menace, highlighting her main characters as they confront their fears and past traumas. Additionally, I contend that Jackson investigates the Female Gothic by leaning on aspects of the nuclear family and home life, illuminating the significance of the domestic as opposed to and/or as it conflates with the violent world her stories depict.

Jackson, therefore, employs the Gothic genre as a means to navigate the adversities she faced with her identity as a female author, which facilitates the presentation of the conflict between the private and public domains. As Rubenstein states, Jackson's stories "demonstrate a preoccupation with family relationships, if not also with problematic mother-daughter relationships, ambiguous houses, and eating or incorporation" (Rubenstein, 1996, p.311) The Female Gothic is shown through the character's "imprisonment in a house that, mirroring her disturbed imaginings, expresses her ambivalent experience of entrapment and longing for protection" (Rubenstein, 1996, p.312). In contrast to alternative literary forms, the Female Gothic provides Jackson with a platform to delve into the more sinister elements of human psychology and the anxieties and fears that reside beneath the veneer of quotidian existence, especially the question of violence, as the discussion of "The Lottery" will show in the following section.

"The lottery": A Gothic Spectacle of Violence

"The Lottery" is considered a quintessential example of twentieth century American Gothic literature and is recognized as one of the "most anthologized works in American literary history" (Cohen, 2011, p.50). By depicting a singular day in the existence of an unnamed village, Jackson explores numerous themes: conformity versus individuality particularly as it related to women and their roles in the community, as well as irrationality as it stands against unjustified violence. The story commences with an account of an unremarkable morning on June 27th, when "the flowers were blossoming profusely and the grass was richly green" (Jackson, 2005, 217) in a community comprising approximately three hundred people. This tranquility is momentarily disrupted by the ritual conducted in the main square – the lottery. The ritual encompasses two phases: initially, the patriarch of each household extracts a slip of paper from a black box, which contains all blank slips except for one marked with a black dot. One of the villagers – Mr. Hutchinson – draws the marked slip. At this juncture, it is his wife, Tessie, who acquires the marked paper. She implores for a reevaluation of the results, but her pleas are in vain. The villagers, having gathered stones, prepare to execute her, as it is disclosed that she was selected to be stoned to death.

This short story, in conjunction with her novels solidified Shirley Jackson's status as a preeminent figure in the Gothic genre and established her as “one of the most popular writers working in America from the 1940s to the 1960s” (Smith 2009, p.152). The story was harshly criticized especially when it was first published—the shocking ending and the ruthless and futile violence against women were pointed out, and this reaction caused Jackson’s work to be overlooked. It is “only since the 1990s that critical interest in her work has flourished” (Smith, 2009, p.152). The resurgence of interest has engendered a plethora of analyses concerning Jackson’s life and career, particularly focusing on “The Lottery” as her most shocking and contentious piece.

“The Lottery” was published on 28 June 1948 through *The New Yorker*. It captures the state of American society wherein individuals are compelled to exist under the strain of conventional norms, which are designed to ensure compliance that serves the interests of patriarchy. Violence seems to be the means to ensure this compliance of women in particular. Indeed, the story illustrates the circumstances of women's lives and the anxieties surrounding gender roles at a pivotal moment in American history after the War. In the story, this is presented through ritualistic violence as captured in the barbaric lottery ceremony that renders the cruel and meaningless death of the female protagonist. Hence, Jackson infuses violence with ignorance, superstition, rituals, and pervasive fear in a small community representative of American society— all wrapped in an astute presentation of the Female Gothic. Children, too, exhibit a notable emotional distance from their mothers, perceiving the helplessness of women as a normative condition to which they have become accustomed to. Mothers are required to summon their offspring “four or five times” (Jackson, 2005, p.218)—only fathers possess the authority to enforce discipline. When Bobby defied his mother, his “father spoke up sharply, and Bobby came quickly and took his place between his father and his oldest brother” (Jackson, 2005, p.218).

Female children similarly find themselves with limited roles compared to their mothers and grandmothers. For example, on the day of the lottery, the boys “made a great pile of stones in one corner of the square and guarded it” while the girls stood aside being engaged in a conversation amongst themselves and occasionally glancing at the boys (Jackson, 2005, p.217). There is a divide between males and females, and their roles are established through violence and dominance of boys/men over girls/women. The story shows that from a tender age, females are indoctrinated in the virtues of self-restraint and subservience to male authority— women occupy the lowest position in the social and economic hierarchy within the community, and their status is relegated to being subjected to exploitation by men. Denied their freedom, women in the community the story depicts cannot enjoy clothing as they are only wear “faded house dresses and sweaters” (Jackson, 2005, p.217). Their roles are limited to the domestic space, cooking and cleaning and other chores at the house, while the husbands enjoy conversations about “planting and rain, tractors and taxes” (Jackson,2005, p.217).

The ritualistic practice of the lottery is fundamentally patriarchal in nature and it is a symbol of violence. Indeed, the symbolism of the lottery is associated with a tradition based on violence— a ruthless spectacle of a person selected to be stoned. There is no goal or purpose to this tradition apart from enforcing dominance and establishing a hierarchy that somewhat excludes women. Male figures — specifically Mr. Summers and Mr. Graves — oversee the proceedings; a patriarch, conventionally male, initiates the selection of the first ballot, with the exception of instances where age supersedes

gender, permitting the wife to draw prior to her husband, thereby positioning him as “first and last” within this framework. Males possess agency; females are granted the opportunity to choose solely when they find themselves in jeopardy within the lottery's schema. Ultimately, the formalized nature of the lottery and its inherited protocols, serve to exacerbate the established order maintained by men in opposition to women.

The selection of victims in the lottery unfolds in a systematic manner, that is, according to the patronymic lineage, denoted by (male) surnames. In contrast, two women, Mrs. Delacroix and Mrs. Graves, engage in a banter, illustrating the limited role assigned to women within the ceremony, functioning as commentators rather than as fully-fledged participants in the ceremony (Whittier, 1991, p.355). As Whittier suggests, to consider the lottery patriarchal refers to “its ancient purpose of human sacrifice in the name of crop fertility [which] remains associated with the matriarchal worship of earth goddesses in an archaic time” (Whittier, 1991, p.356). Men seem to delight the brutal act of stoning and the bloodshed that results:

Bobby Martin had already stuffed his pockets full of stones, and the other boys soon followed his example, selecting the smoothest and roundest stones; Bobby and Harry Jones and Dickie Delacroix — the villagers pronounced this name "Dellacroy" — eventually made a great pile of stones in one corner of the square and guarded it against the raids of other boys. The girls stood aside, talking. (Jackson, 2005, p. 217)

The story shows in detail the eagerness, even thirst for violence considering the victim of the stoning is a woman. There is also a divide between boys and girls—“the boys' territorial protectiveness and the girls' exclusion, begin. But the boys' eager and childish cruelty will turn into the sober reluctance of their fathers, whereas the childish apartness of the girls will become the grown women's blood lust” (Whittier 1991, p.357). For example, when Mrs. Delacroix tries to begin to cast a stone, Mrs. Dunbar tries to encourage her: “Mrs. Delacroix selected a stone so large she had to pick it up with both hands, and turned to Mrs. Dunbar. “Come on,' she said. "Hurry up." (Jackson, 2005, p.225).

The story showcases the weakness and compliance of women in the spectacle of violence—the lottery. It reveals women’s “fear which they internalize of being excluded by society (Haque 2018, p.149). The story also exposes that women demonstrate no rebellion, and they how they are forced to be part of the patriarchal community portrayed in the story. Tessie, for example, is given no choice and she is made to be a victim of meaningless and barbaric ceremony that renders only violence and dominance. When she protests, her husband tells her, “Shut up, Tessie” (Jackson, 2005 p.223). Even her younger son, Davy Hutchinson is given “ a few pebbles” to stone his own mother. The violence of the stoning is dramatized by adding gothic horror to the scene. As Cleanth Brooks and Robert Penn Warren argue, the “fantastic nature” of the stoning scene means that “everything else in the story must be made plausible, down-to-earth, sensible, commonplace, everyday” (1959, pp.75-76). That is, Jackson uses everyday horror to create a more impactful spectacle for the violence against women:

We must be made to feel that what is happening on this June morning is perfectly credible. Making it seem credible will do two things: it will increase the sense of shock when we suddenly discover what is really going on, but it will ultimately help us to believe that what the story asserts does come to pass (Brooks and

Warren 1959, pp. 75-76).

The story, therefore, critiques the position of the nuclear family in American society where its members are reduced to actors on behalf of a patriarchal society. The lottery is used as a metaphor for a violent power enforcement and social control, especially for women. The story presents a gothic domesticity in which women are trapped and shows the grotesque and the uncanny as part of the violent and savage ceremony of the lottery.

Conclusion

In Shirley Jackson's fiction, the Gothic genre provides an array of thematic and stylistic devices to interrogate power dynamics and issues of control and authority—specifically in relation to women. Jackson employs gothic tropes like the grotesque, horror, fear and eerie settings to explore the darker and hidden aspects of human nature interrogating the question of good versus evil, right versus wrong and fairness versus injustice. Her fiction examines individuals with trauma, who are alienated and struggling with dominant forces in society. Through the unique framework of the Female Gothic, Jackson's work sheds light on female experiences and at the same time offers a sharp critique of women's struggles with confinement, limited roles and the dominant patriarchal cultural milieu in which they are placed.

However, Jackson's fiction subverts the typical female gothic trope of a heroine escaping her confinement through marriage. Her characters often remain trapped, either literally or psychologically, within their domestic spaces, reflecting a more nuanced and often pessimistic view of the world. In "The Lottery" the female protagonist is faced with barbaric violence that points to an insightful critique of social norms and perceptions of women. Jackson's every day and psychological horror offers a lens to examine the deep-seeded and perverse aspects of society as it related to roles of women . In "The Lottery" Jackson uses the Female Gothic to showcase a ritual that turns into a violent and brutal ceremony— one that exposes the social anxieties surrounding women and the urge to exercise control, conformity and dominance.

Recommendations:

The author recommended the following:

1. Further Research: There is a need for more academic exploration of Shirley Jackson's works, particularly in relation to feminist psychoanalysis and the Female Gothic genre.
2. Expand Themes of Gender and Identity: Future studies should delve deeper into the complex portrayal of gender roles and identity in Jackson's works, especially concerning mother-daughter dynamics.
3. Contextual Understanding: Researchers should explore the societal and psychological contexts within which Jackson's stories were written to better understand their significance.
4. Focus on Psychological Elements: Studies could benefit from analyzing the psychological depth in Jackson's characters, particularly in relation to themes of entrapment and identity confusion.

5. Cultural and Historical Analysis: A deeper look at the cultural and historical influences on Jackson's portrayal of women's experiences and trauma in the mid-20th century would be valuable.
6. Interdisciplinary Approaches: Future research could adopt interdisciplinary approaches, integrating literature, psychology, and gender studies, to enhance understanding of Jackson's narrative techniques and thematic concerns.

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