

## THE VIGIL BETWEEN LITERARY LIFE AND DEATH: THE CASE OF SHIRLEY JACKSON

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### ABSTRACT

The objective of the present text is to help elucidate questions regarding the alleged lack of recognition and the consequent oblivion of North American writer Shirley Jackson by the critics, the media, the Academy, and the reading public, considering the events that took place since her death in 1965. In order to do so, carefully selected information is presented in order to aid in the proposed goal. These data reflect the main activities, in diverse arenas, that involve the writer and her works in recent times. These pieces of evidence are approached through an argumentative analysis and an informed commentary is made in light of new discoveries.

**Keywords:** *Shirley Jackson; media; literary criticism; literary historiography.*

### RESUMO

O objetivo do presente trabalho é ajudar a elucidar questões que cercam a suposta falta de reconhecimento e o consequente esquecimento pela crítica, pela mídia, pela Academia, e pelo público leitor da escritora norte-americana Shirley Jackson, levando em consideração os eventos que sucederam desde sua morte em 1965. Para tanto, são apresentadas informações cuidadosamente coletadas que se propõe a auxiliar nesta meta. Estes dados refletem as principais atividades, em diferentes âmbitos, que envolvem a escritora e suas obras na atualidade. Essas evidências são abordadas por meio de uma análise argumentativa e uma discussão informada à luz de novas descobertas.

**Palavras-chave:** *Shirley Jackson; mídias; crítica literária; historiografia literária.*

### 1. INTRODUCTION

Shirley Jackson (1916-1965) was a North American who is, today, mostly remembered – if, at all – for having once shocked readers in her country with an unforgettable and gruesome short story and as the author of quite influential haunted house novels. In the present text, she is briefly presented in light of her literary accomplishments as the reader is introduced to the importance and significance of the author's *oeuvre*, and is invited to try and understand her continuing contribution not only to American but to world literature, culture and art. Ms. Jackson is the author of 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 separate short stories, the literary form which she proved more prolific. She is 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 and featuring Liam Neeson, Catherine Zeta-Jones, Owen Wilson and Lili Taylor. Ms. Jackson

wrote what is likely the most controversial piece of fiction ever published in the magazine *New Yorker*, the 1948 short story *The Lottery*. It 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 twentieth-century history. Notwithstanding all that, Ms. Jackson is considered a forgotten author (DIRDA, 1988; PASCAL, 2000; FLOOD, 2010).

## 2. INTENSE AND LIVELY ACTIVITY

Historically, the Academy, the media, and readers and critics, have allegedly relegated Ms. Jackson to an unjust forsaken status. This supposed lack of recognition is worthy of investigation, since new light has been shed regarding the activities that, directly or indirectly, involve the author and her works in the present and in the recent past. To the moment, data has been obtained and analyzed so as to reveal an intense activity regarding the author and her writings in diverse arenas since the time of her death in 1965; these have been proven as diverse as can be, ranging from intellectual to cultural production and from educative to journalistic output.

Among the most prominent findings – mostly freely derived from Ms. Jackson's writings – are theatrical productions (both amateur and professional); filmic adaptations for cinema and television (in short and long features, as well as other experimental forms); appearances (that go beyond mere citation) in fiction and non-fiction books (including children's literature and literature for all ages); didactic books for school level, for university level, and for specific purposes (such as creative writing courses or with extra-academic educational aims); the realization of dramatic readings (with or without adaptations) for university or general public; dance number adaptations (such as *ballet*, *jazz dance*, among others); the creation of websites, blogs, posts, communities in social networks and other internet-based environments; and appearances in news, journalistic articles, and criticism, in specialized venues or otherwise (circulating only in American domestic territory and/or overseas); and translations to various languages (including Brazilian and European-Portuguese).

Distinction should be made, however, between primary and secondary findings due to the elevated number of productions that simply mention her name or the title of one or more of her short or full length stories – generally for comparative or illustrative ends, or as parts of lists of writers, or books, of a certain *genre* or time period. Such pieces of information strengthen the idea that Ms. Jackson is not all that forgotten as critics Dirda (1988), Pascal (2000), Flood (2010), among others, have stated.

In the Academy – to the present – approximately thirty graduate researches (among master's theses and doctoral dissertations) all over the world (approximately 85% in the United States) were – or are being – conducted having Shirley Jackson, and/or her works, as main objects of investigation (about one third uses the author, and/or her works, as secondary research object).

Among curiosities and unexpected facts found so far is the utilization of some of her stories in accountancy offices and labor unions (both using the short story *My Life with H. R. Macy* as example for debates concerning the massification of human resources and the banalization of the human being by great corporations). Another interesting case is the use of the short story *The Lottery* as an exercise of 'bibliotherapy' in a correctional incarceration facility in the U. S. (the activity refers to the comparison of the printed *versus* the filmic version of cited story as an educational *medium*).

More findings point out that Ms. Jackson's texts are currently being, and/or have recently been, used in American universities traditionally by professors of English and of literary studies (among these, typically in gothic, horror, fiction or fantasy literature; as well as women's literature; lesbian and queer studies; and, of course, twentieth-century American and world literature). Besides these, she is also required (or suggested) reading in various and diverse university courses, both in America and internationally. Even though the evidence here gathered is quite far from representing the totality of Ms. Jackson's range, there is currently an intense life that is beyond debate.

### 3. UNDERAPPRECIATED AND FORGOTTEN?

Academics never have known quite what to do with Jackson. They often resist canonizing writers who dabble in genre categories and enjoy mass appeal. Yet Jackson's reputation has grown rather than diminished (MILLER, 2009, p.1).

The end of the twentieth century served almost as a prelude to the possible Shirley Jackson revival that is starting to build up in the twenty-first. Now, more than ever, her works are being adapted to television, to the theater and several other media.

In 1996, American television network NBC mounted a new adaptation of *The Lottery* for the small screen directed by Daniel Sackheim. It was said that the project lost something in the translation from paper to tv format. It aired on a Sunday, September 29<sup>th</sup>, at 9 o'clock pm, starring Joe Cortese (of MTV and of the remake of *Route 66*) and Keri Russell (from *Malibu Shores*) in the central roles. Critics have called it 'unwatchable' and 'a big mistake' and advised viewers to read the short story because it would take less time and stick much longer (BIANCULLI, 1996). The episode reappeared as a text being studied by problem students on the TV series *Dangerous Minds* (DISCH, 1997). *The Lottery* is still at present being adapted to theatrical play and in performance at high schools, universities and theaters (ROSENSTEIN, 2005; DOYRON, 2008; OSTER, 2009).

*The Lottery*, in paper form and in video format, was even used in a United States incarceration facility as *corpus* for a ‘bibliotherapy’ research, a comparison between print and video as educational media:

(...) an informal experiment with two groups each of eight incarcerated men who were already involved in a bibliotherapy program. One week, the first group read the short story version of Shirley Jackson’s “The Lottery”; the second group viewed a film version which is remarkably faithful to the original both in concept and in dialogue. The group which watched the film reacted immediately and emotionally (...) The reading group, however, reacted slowly (...) A month later, the readers were still talking about the story, while the film group had lost interest (RUBIN, 1978, p. 77).

The 1969 Larry Yust adaptation of *The Lottery* - shot on the location site in Fellows or Taft, California – was cited by The Academic Film Archive as one of the two bestselling educational films ever. When it was made, it had an accompanying ten-minute commentary film, *Discussion of The Lottery* by University of Southern California professor Dr. James Durbin, of the Department of English.

According to Miller (1997) it is almost impossible to graduate from an American high school without having been assigned *The Lottery* to read. But not only in America. Atlantic Bilingual School in Puerto Cortés, Honduras, teaches Shirley Jackson for 7<sup>th</sup>, 8<sup>th</sup>, and 9<sup>th</sup> graders (WIGFALL, 2007).

In 1999, Ms. Jackson was featured in a book that provides biographical profiles of authors of interest to readers ages nine and above created to appeal to young readers (HARRIS & ABBEY, 1999). For this and other reasons, she seems to hover over our heads as an ever-constant presence.

In March, 2000, there was a reading of her short stories on Broadway in a session of *Selected Shorts* called *All in the Timing* in New York City (KING, 2000). Wherever we turn our attentions, she seems, however parsimoniously, to be there. That same March, in Chicago, Harrison McElDowney headed the darkly comic ballet *The Lottery*, drawn from the macabre short story. It was the main feature of Hubbard Street Dance Chicago's three-week session at the 2,000-seat arena Chicago's Shubert Theater (BARZEL, 2000). On June 1, 2004 a community called *preconceived notions of ghosts. . . the works of Shirley Jackson* was created in the internet, hosted by *Livejournal*.

On September 2008, Colorado University students Alex Hughes and Patrick Cooney directed the theatrical production of *The Lottery*, adapted from and homonymous to Ms. Jackson’s short story. The play was presented at the University Theatre Loft, in Boulder, CO. On September 19 of the same year, Syracuse University selected Ms. Jackson to be the (posthumous) recipient of *The George Arents Pioneer Medal*, the highest alumni honor the University bestows. The Alumni Association Board of Directors annually selects (former) students based on excellence in their field of endeavor (HAILEY, 2008). The award exists since 1939, which means, it took 69 years for this

recognition to be ensued. On October 2008, the theatre department at West Virginia University at Parkersburg organized a production of Hugh Wheeler's adaptation of *We Have Always Lived in the Castle*, as part of their continual celebration of Ms. Jackson's works (CLOVIS, 2008). Other adaptations included in the 2008-2009 Theater Fest were *The Haunting of Hill House*, *The Lottery* and *The Summer people*.

In 2009, a stage adaptation of *The Haunting of Hill House* was produced by The Old Schoolhouse Players from Pittsburgh and was performed at Bud Allison Memorial Auditorium (OSTER, 2009). The same year, a jazz dance choreography inspired by *The Lottery* was produced by Joanna Brooks at Stone Mountain Academy of Performing Arts in Georgia (BROOKS, 2009). On September 30, a community called *Shirley Jackson*<sup>9</sup> was created in Brazil in the social network *Orkut*.

In 2010, *We Have Always Lived in the Castle* was translated into European Portuguese, meant for use in all Portuguese territories, for the first time since its release in 1962 (LAGARTINHO, 2010). Portuguese-speaking communities had to wait for forty-eight years to have access to Ms. Jackson's sixth novel.

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

*Ms. Jackson's novels and stories feature in Harvard University's Spring 2010 Reading List* (SINGLETON, 2010). As of 2010, in the site YouTube, there are several reviews<sup>6</sup>, adaptations<sup>7</sup> and parodies<sup>8</sup>.

These pieces of evidence certainly do not represent a total picture of the activities that currently involve Ms. Jackson, however a serious epistemological issue is raised concerning what it means to be forgotten, unrecognized or underappreciated in the literary world. Hopefully, these data will aid in the understanding of this rather complex phenomenon.

#### 4. CONCLUSION

Considering all that, to state that Shirley Jackson is a forgotten writer is at least a potentially problematic issue; as it is possible to note in Dirda (1988) who, while reviewing *Private Demons*, Ms. Jackson's only biography, to the *Washington Post*, rightfully asked two sensible questions: "Is there any story in modern American fiction more widely known than *The Lottery*? And is there any author, so nearly a major figure, who is so underappreciated and half-forgotten as Shirley Jackson?" (p.1).

Another critic, S. T. Joshi (2001), the author of *The Modern Weird Tale*, claimed that “Shirley Jackson and Ramsey Campbell are the two leading writers of weird fiction since Lovecraft” (p.13). In making this assertion, Joshi faces two distinct potentially problematic issues. The first is that one could claim he is bypassing other important writers who also have a claim – or aspire – to that title, namely Stephen King, Peter Straub, Clive Barker and Anne Rice. The second and perhaps the most interesting problem is the assertion that Ms. Jackson is a writer of weird fiction all. Joshi acknowledges that, of her six full-length complete fictional novels, only one, *The Haunting of Hill House* is “avowedly supernatural (...) while others are weird only slightly or not at all” (2001, p.13). Fortunately Joshi also acknowledges that something quite similar may be said of her short fiction; according to him, “only perhaps 15 or 20 of her 100-odd short stories can be said to belong to the weird tale or to the mystery story or to science fiction”.

Trinity College Dublin professor Bernice Murphy (2004) says Ms. Jackson was a consistent bestseller; in fact, she was one of the most commercially successful female writers of the period. Her short fiction and essays were much sought after by many of the most famous magazines and journals of the day.

To base an argument on the claim that Ms. Jackson has not been widely read or recognized due to her belonging to a specific reading *niche*, such as that of horror fans or science-fiction fans or even domestic-prone housewives is really to ignore the far-ranging scope of her literary creation. All the data presented strongly suggests that an entrance to the coveted literary canon implies in much more than satisfying reading audiences and specialized critics, and that the meandering ways towards that path may be so crooked as to lead one to really question if admittance is really positive or even desirable.

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