

THE DEMON BEHIND THE ANGEL IN THE HOUSE.
AN ANALYTICAL COMPARISON BETWEEN SHIRLEY JACKSON'S
DOMESTIC WRITINGS AND HER GOTHIC/HORROR FICTION

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Abstract. As pointed out by Ellen Moers (1976), women-authored Gothic works are often the expression of anxieties over the domestic sphere. Although Moers' approach embraced especially eighteenth- and nineteenth-century texts, it might still hold true for twentieth-century women-authored Gothic works: a crucial trope of this type of literature is, for instance, the haunted house, which permeates Shirley Jackson's production. Her narratives often revolve around anti-heroines trapped in gloomy mansions, trying to escape the aggressive demands of a patriarchal society: suffice it to think of some of her most famous works, such as *The Haunting of Hill House* and *We Have Always Lived in the Castle*. Therefore, it is particularly significant how Jackson also wrote plenty of humoristic sketches based on her own domestic daily life as a wife and mother: despite their cheerful tone, these anecdotal recollections feature some of the themes explored in her more disturbing fiction. In this paper, I will try and account for these two narratological trends, by discussing excerpts of Jackson's domestic writings and comparing them with pieces of her fiction. My hope is to show how these apparently irreconcilable tendencies are actually a perfect example of the painful duality inherent to "Female Gothic".

Keywords: gothic, female gothic, Shirley Jackson, domesticity, domestic writings, housewife, family life, 1950s, America, Betty Friedan

1.

In her groundbreaking study *Literary Women*, first published in 1976, Ellen Moers defined what she called "Female Gothic": that is,

(...) the work that women writers have done in the literary mode that, since the eighteenth century, we have called the Gothic. But what I mean – or

anyone else means – by ‘the Gothic’ is not so easily stated except that it has to do with fear. (Moers 1976, 90)

As the careful reader will soon find out, most of Female Gothic heroines must usually flee from a threatening figure (be it real or imaginary) and are nonetheless trapped in a dark, mysterious castle or gloomy mansion. One could argue, therefore, that the perils the heroine has to confront in Female Gothic narratives do not come from the external world, but from an inner and supposedly safe space; a notion that subverts, in a way, the traditional definition of femininity. In this paper, I will build upon these initial insights on Female Gothic to discuss the still relevant significance of haunted-house narratives as paradigmatic of women writers’ experience and struggles in their own socio-cultural context, since, as Norman N. Holland and Leona F. Sherman pointed out, “The image of woman-plus-habitation [...] has changed little since the eighteenth century” (Holland and Sherman 1977, 279). To this aim, I will present as a case study the work and life of Shirley Jackson, by comparing the author’s Gothic fiction set in a domestic environment to her autobiographical “family writings”, while highlighting their reciprocal influence.

2.

As pointed out by Eugenia DeLamotte,

The heyday of Gothic romance was also a time during which woman’s place in society was becoming a matter of increasing debate, and a number of writers sought to clarify the issue. With some notable exceptions, [...] most of these attempts to define woman were also attempts to confine her to a separate “sphere” bounded by the duties of home... (DeLamotte 1990, 150-151)

Therefore, it is not surprising how haunted-house narratives became of increasing importance in female-authored Gothic works. From a very early stage, the Gothic form constituted the narrative space in which women authors were free to express their own feelings of

inadequacy, displacement and terror when facing their social condition of domestic entrapment. However, it soon became clear how the anxieties formulated by the Gothic genre could still hold true well into the twentieth century, especially regarding women's role in 1950s America. Activist Betty Friedan, author of the pioneering study *The Feminine Mystique* (1963), defined the condition that affected women during this era as “the problem that has no name”:

It was a strange stirring, a sense of dissatisfaction, a yearning that women suffered in the middle of the twentieth century in the United States. Each suburban wife struggled with it alone. As she made the beds, shopped for groceries, matched slipcover material, ate peanut butter sandwiches with her children, chauffeured Cub Scouts and Brownies, lay beside her husband at night – she was afraid to ask even of herself the silent question – “Is this all?” (Friedan 1974, 11)

“The problem” was, of course, women's overall dissatisfaction with what society was willing to give them: an unfulfilled life as daughters, mothers and wives, unable to have a career or take advantage of their college education. In the Baby Boom era, as GIs had returned home from World War II to reunite with their families, media and commercials seemed to join forces to ultimately convince women that doing housework was the most incredible experience any woman could ever ask for. As predictable, women soon started to feel burdened by this ready-made lifestyle; many began to rely heavily on antidepressants, sleeping pills and, in some cases, alcohol.

2.1

All of a sudden, women were thought of as incapable of understanding politics, science, or the general world of ideas. A manifest consequence of this was the increasing shallowness of women's magazines which, during the 1950s, came to revolve exclusively around the “housewife formula”: that is, articles on how to be the perfect wife and mother paired with romance fiction

(Friedan 1974, 48). These magazines also gave rise to the phenomenon of the so-called “Housewife Writers”: a group of talented women writers who conceived of themselves as mere housewives and wrote humorously about their family life. In Friedan’s words, “Laugh, the Housewife Writers tell the real housewife, if you are feeling desperate, empty, bored, trapped in the bedmaking, chauffeuring and dishwashing details. Isn’t it funny? We’re all in the same trap” (Friedan 1974, 50).

3.

While Friedan’s remarks are certainly correct, Andrea Krafft noticed how she possibly underestimated the opportunity for empowerment inherent to many “housewife stories”. In fact, “To reject writing directed toward housewives overlooks how even apparently optimistic domestic narratives can speak to a broader interest in renegotiating domesticity and motherhood” (Krafft 2016, 106). This very concept also concerns the works of Shirley Jackson. Throughout her life, she peculiarly combined psychological horror narratives with humorous accounts of day-to-day domesticity, which were, indeed, published in popular women’s magazines of the time such as *Woman’s Home Companion* and *Ladies’ Home Journal*.

3.1

Jackson was born in 1916 in the suburban area surrounding San Francisco. In the late 1930s, she met and fell in love with Stanley Edgar Hyman, a future prominent literary critic. They married in 1940 despite their families’ objections and led a “mad bohemian” life (Franklin 2016, 128) in New York City until Shirley’s first pregnancy. Ruth Franklin reports that “For many years, Shirley maintained a running joke that she was conducting a contest between the number of children she produced and the number of books she wrote” (Franklin 2016, 159); in fact, she gave birth to a total of four children. Following the custom of his era, Stanley was

a “hands-off parent” (Franklin 2016, 159), so most of the household and the parenting chores fell on Shirley’s shoulders. He also made very clear that he did not believe in monogamy, and never failed to provide detailed accounts of his infidelities to his wife, who had reluctantly agreed to an open relationship. The couple’s nonconformist lifestyle notwithstanding, Shirley is remembered by her children as a loving and imaginative mother. Despite the struggle of taking care of four kids practically alone, a task which left her barely no time to herself, she delighted in their thoughts and mischiefs, which “provided Shirley with a deep well of material that she would draw on many times for the comic essays she published in women’s magazines” (Franklin 2016, 163), her main income source for many years. A number of these humorous accounts were collected in the volumes *Life Among the Savages* (1953) and *Raising Demons* (1957). Significantly, these titles combine the familial experience with “the ‘savage’ and ‘demonic’ elements” that were going to permeate all of Jackson’s fiction and that, perhaps, as Roberta Rubenstein suggested, “laced Jackson’s vision of family” (Rubenstein 1996, 311). In fact, during the last years of her life, Shirley started suffering from agoraphobia and severe depression, which she tried to soothe with psychiatric drugs, alcohol, and unhealthy eating habits. She died from a heart attack in her sleep in 1965, aged forty-eight. The “strange stirring” described by Betty Friedan in her book had finally taken its toll.

4.

According to Rubenstein, Jackson’s fiction always demonstrated a preoccupation with narratives on “ambiguous houses” (Rubenstein 1996, 311); a tendency that can also be traced in her 1959 Gothic novel *The Haunting of Hill House*. The novel sees thirty-two-year-old Eleanor having spent all of her life taking care of a disabled and abusive mother, now dead. When Dr Montague, an investigator of supernatural phenomena, invites her and other two people to spend the summer at Hill House, a supposedly haunted mansion, she steals

her sister's car and embarks on what she perceives to be a joyous adventure. Yet, Eleanor's quest for love and independence will be crushed by Hill House's consuming will, to the point of committing suicide after being rejected by the other occupants at the end of the novel. Jackson does not give the reader many clues on whether the strange events occurring at Hill House are a product of real supernatural phenomena or, perhaps, of Eleanor's disturbed mind; however, Eleanor does not actually seem to feel imprisoned by Hill House (Akçil 2019, 140). On the contrary, she sees her time there as her only chance for self-affirmation. Her ambivalent feelings towards the house can be traced in one of Jackson's domestic writings, titled "Here I Am, Washing Dishes Again". The story opens with Jackson's mockery of the classic "housewife formula": "If I were any sort of a proper housewife at all I'd start my dishwashing at a specific hour in the morning, duly aproned, trim and competent..." (Jackson 2015, 317). Despite her longing to be outside with "the rest of the world" (Jackson 2015, 317), the story continues with what seems to be a more content tone:

I don't really hate these brass faucets and the complete perfect circle of the dishpan, though; I love these things, I own them, they are so essential a part of me that I like to be near them, and when I am away from home, next to the children the thing I miss most is the sight of my own dear sink. When I wash dishes, I stare into the dishpan and at my own hands, which are the only alien things in the dishwasher, the only things that don't rattle. (Jackson 2015, 317)

This passage might remind one of Eleanor's descriptions of her imaginary home when asked where she lives. She fondly lists small material possessions, which she sees as means of self-fulfilment, such as white curtains, "little stone lions", and "My books and records and pictures" (Jackson 2019, 95).

4.1

As the careful reader might notice, some of *The Haunting's* most disquieting passages have to do with hearing. During one of her first

nights at Hill House, Eleanor awakens to a banging on the wall, just like the one her mother did to wake her up the night she died:

Now, she thought, now. It is only a noise, and terribly cold, terribly, terribly cold. It is a noise down the hall, far down at the end, near the nursery door, and terribly cold, *not* my mother knocking on the wall. (Jackson 2019, 140)

Noise is also a central element in many of Jackson's domestic writings. See, for instance, the first story of *Life Among the Savages*, where she states that "Our house is old, and noisy, and full" (Jackson 1953, 1), and also that her daughter "spoke for a long time about a faraway voice in the house which sang to her at night" (Jackson 1953, 21). As noted by Krafft, Jackson's description of her house in Gothic terms "transforms the dream of housewifery and motherhood into the stuff of nightmares"; in fact, "the language of horror" probably "signals her domestic frustrations" (Krafft 2016, 107).

4.2

As the novel unfolds, it becomes increasingly clear Hill House has chosen Eleanor as its victim. In the end, Eleanor will indeed become the very spirit haunting Hill House with its presence:

And here I am, she thought. Here I am inside. It was not cold at all, but deliciously, fondly warm. It was light enough for her to see the iron stairway curving around and around up to the tower, and the little door at the top. Under her feet the stone floor moved caressingly, rubbing itself against the soles of her feet, and all around the soft air touched her, stirring her hair, drifting against her fingers, coming in a light breath across her mouth, and she danced in circles. No stone lions for me, she thought, no oleanders; I have broken the spell of Hill House and somehow come inside. I am home, she thought, and stopped in wonder at the thought. I am home, I am home, she thought... (Jackson 2019, 256)

Eleanor's haunting is almost mirrored in yet another autobiographical sketch, "Good Old House":

When we came to occupy our present house, we were not at first accepted, although the neighbours welcomed us and took us in with the deep New England courtesy that is half tolerance and half humour. We shortly accustomed ourselves to trading at certain stores, and we bought our coal locally, and we found a doctor and a dentist and a dog, and we went to the local movie theatre and enrolled Laurie in the local nursery school – still, the old house had grave reservations about us and would allow us to feel only provisionally at home. Twice, the first week we were there, I awoke with nightmares of the old house shaking over me, malevolent and cruel, and after that, during our first few months, I frequently found myself awake after having walked in my sleep toward the front door, and once I found myself out between the pillars, as if running away. (Jackson 2015, 223)

Unlike Eleanor, Jackson depicts her own ambivalent feelings towards her home through the sleepwalking act of “running away”, the exact opposite of Eleanor’s choice. Ultimately, however, both stances reveal a fundamental uneasiness with the domestic confinement to which women were still destined in 1950s America.

5.

In Jackson’s last complete novel, *We Have Always Lived in the Castle*, published in 1962, sisters Constance and Merricat Blackwood live secluded with their Uncle Julian in their mansion, after the death by poisoning of the rest of the family. This “ironic nuclear family” (Rubenstein 1996, 319) leads nonetheless a somewhat peaceful and serene life made of small domestic rituals, especially concerning food and meal preparation. Their precarious balance is disrupted by the arrival of cousin Charles, who seeks to marry Constance and inherit the family fortune. Merricat, the feral and witch-like narrator, burns the Blackwood house down not to submit to Charles’ male authority. In the end, it will turn out it was her who killed the family, despite her older sister Constance having always taken the blame. The conclusion of the novel fully transforms a common trope of Female Gothic: while eighteenth-century Gothic romances usually ended with the heroine’s happy marriage and, often, her return to the domesticity she had tried to escape, the Blackwood sisters end

up establishing an even stronger bond with each other, inhabiting what remains of their house as haunting figures.

5.1

The sisters' isolation might stem from Jackson's own feelings of loneliness following her move to Vermont, where the family had to relocate after Stanley was offered an academic position. As one reads in "Good Old House", "Our neighbours would stand and talk interminably at the front door or the back door, but they would never come inside, and the attempts I made to invite them in for tea met with faint, but polite, incredulity" (Jackson 2015, 224-225). This passage resembles Constance and Merricat's relationship with the town-dwellers, most of which are too afraid to talk to them; only two ladies still dare to keep in touch:

They came dutifully, although we never returned their calls, and stayed a proper few minutes and sometimes brought flowers from their gardens, or books, or a song that Constance might care to try over on her harp; they spoke politely and with little runs of laughter, and never failed to invite us to their houses although they knew we would never come. (Jackson 2009, 21)

Jackson's allusion to inviting her neighbours for tea, moreover, echoes the recurring refrain sang by the town children whenever they meet Merricat: "Merricat, said Connie, would you like a cup of tea? / Oh, no, said Merricat, you'll poison me" (Jackson 2009, 17).

On another note, the authorial obsession for food and its preparation is mirrored in Jackson's "Here I Am, Washing Dishes Again", which describes the author's relationship with the space of the kitchen:

My husband and son, who are gadget-happy, set up for me to use in my kitchen a magnetic metal bar, about four inches long, that takes, and keeps, a violent hold on any metal objects near it, so that I have had to pry my can openers away from it and occasionally, working too near, have had fear for the fillings in my teeth, or my wedding ring, or the tips of my shoelaces. [...]

Sometimes, wandering as I do around my kitchen, I feel the magnetic pull myself, the urge to flatten myself against the wall and, until I am taken down for some practical purpose, lie there quiet, stilled, at rest.

Perhaps it's the magnet that holds me to my kitchen. (Jackson 2015, 321-322)

Once again, Jackson mocks the “housewife formula” by making her resignation evident and conceiving of herself as a mere kitchen tool; which speaks both of her alienation and her affection regarding this room (see, for instance, the usage of the possessive adjective “my” when referring to the kitchen, as if it were her main defining space).

6.

I hope this brief series of literary examples served the purpose of showing how Jackson “negotiates the global and political through the domestic”, by conveying women’s struggle for “a room of their own” both in her domestic writings and in her Gothic fiction, “with each sphere equally configured as a space of terror” (Ingram and Mullins 2018, 342). However, as already underlined by Krafft, it is important to acknowledge how all of Jackson’s writings function not only as symbols of patriarchal oppression but as tools of female empowerment, too: as observed by Gizem Akçil, both “Eleanor Vance and Merricat Blackwood take part in subversive acts of resistance to turn the Gothic mansions they inhabit into sanctuaries” (Akçil 2019, 178), which holds true for Jackson’s life as well, since she always tried, despite her impending duties as a stay-at-home mom and writer, to maintain a balance between these two sides of her personality. Indeed, as stated by Franklin, “Jackson’s two authorial personas, though often in tension, were equally authentic” (Franklin 2016, 15).

Perhaps as authentic as this sardonic piece of non-fiction, only a few paragraphs long, titled “The Real Me” and published posthumously in 2015:

I am tired of writing dainty little biographical things that pretend that I am a trim little housewife in a Mother Hubbard stirring up appetizing messes over a wood stove.

I live in a dank old place with a ghost that stomps around in the attic room we've never gone into (I *think* it's walled up), and the first thing I did when we moved in was to make charms in black crayon on all the door sills and window ledges to keep out demons, and was successful in the main. There are mushrooms growing in the cellar, and a number of marble mantels that have an unexplained habit of falling down onto the heads of the neighbors' children.

At the full of the moon I can be seen out in the backyard digging for mandrakes, of which we have a little patch, along with our rhubarb and blackberries. I do not usually care for those herbal or bat wing recipes, because you can never be sure how they will turn out. I rely almost entirely on image and number magic. My most interesting experience was with a young woman who offended me and who subsequently fell down an elevator shaft and broke all the bones in her body except one, and I didn't know that one was there. (Jackson 2015, 357)

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