

Topic Page: [Jackson, Shirley, 1916–1965](https://search.credoreference.com/content/topic/jackson_shirley_1916_1965)

Definition: **Jackson, Shirley** from *The Hutchinson Unabridged Encyclopedia with Atlas and Weather Guide*

US writer whose work includes novels, short stories, and radio and television scripts. She became known for her haunting fiction after the publication of her disturbing short story *The Lottery* 1948. She wrote humorous domestic works as well as horror novels, such as *The Haunting of Hill House* 1959.

Born in San Francisco, Vermont, she studied at the University of Rochester 1934–36, and Syracuse University (BA 1940).

Summary Article: **Jackson, Shirley**

From *Wiley-Blackwell Encyclopedia of Literature: The Encyclopedia of the Gothic*

An unsparing, even fierce, social critic; a densely allusive satirist; and a writer whose fictions draw on thorough study, both of English literature and of the Gothic tradition in all its historical manifestations, Shirley Jackson (1916–65) is perhaps best known for her short story "The Lottery." Published in *The New Yorker* on June 26, 1948, this spare account of an annual New England village gathering, with its stunningly matter-of-fact culmination in ritual murder, unleashed what the author herself termed "bewilderment, speculation, and plain old-fashioned abuse" (Jackson 1993: 128). "Anthologized, dramatized, televised, ... made into a ballet," and banned in South Africa, "The Lottery" also won immediate critical success (Jackson 1993: 128; Hyman 1966: viii). By the time Jackson's story was republished toward the close of her 1949 *The Lottery; or, The Adventures of James Harris*, it seemed primed to take its part within what was, in its own time, perceived as an ambitious and largely successful literary career (Hattenhauer 2003: 1–2).

By the end of that career, Shirley Jackson had written six novels, two family chronicles, several works for children, a large body of short stories, and numerous lectures and essays. A descendent of architects, she claims her position in the Gothic canon in part through intense engagements with the terrors of built space. Although such terrors are most famously associated with her late novels of ghost-hunting and witch-making, *The Haunting of Hill House* (1959) and *We Have Always Lived in the Castle* (1962), Jackson's capacity to make agoraphobia and claustrophobia alternate, converge, and even fuse, traces back to earlier works. The breaching of suburban Pepper Street in *The Road Through the Wall* (1948); the assignment of an already disturbed college student to a grimly sterile institutional bedroom in *Hangsaman* (1951); these stand in unclear, if troubling, juxtaposition to Jackson's novels of child murder and apparent descent into schizophrenia. In *The Bird's Nest* (1954), however, Jackson opens a narrative of personality disintegration by tipping a museum over; while in the comic apocalyptic *The Sundial* (1958), millenarian viciousness springs directly from the character's obsession with a New England imitation of Horace Walpole's Strawberry Hill.

What relation might such spaces bear to Jackson's actual home? The question is one she herself raised. Married to distinguished critic Stanley Edgar Hyman (with whom, not incidentally, she shared a library reportedly containing some 100 000 volumes), and the mother of four, Jackson staked out a cultural terrain of startling boundary crossings. She wrote not only for *Harper's* or the *New Yorker*, for example, but also for *The Ladies' Home Journal*, *Mademoiselle*, and *Good Housekeeping*; and she devoted two volumes to stories of a comic domestic life shaped in part by the "swift, accurate

conviction" that one "is going to step on a broken doll in the dark" (Jackson 1953: 1). Here, as the titles of *Raising Demons* (1953) and *Life Among the Savages* (1957) suggest, she could turn "housewife humor" even on Gothicism itself. Suggestively, Sylvia Plath seems to have approved (Murphy 2005: 3). Still, Jackson's self-positioning also opened the author and her work up to critically dangerous marketing strategies. Simultaneously sensationalized and domesticated, the figure of Jackson as happy household witch may, over time, have done her reputation no good (Carpenter 1988: 143–4; Reinsch 2001: 4–5, 11–13). Certainly by 1975, Lenemaja Friedman could close her groundbreaking monograph by suggesting that Jackson had seen "herself primarily as an entertainer, as an expert storyteller and craftsman": a writer, that is, perfectly suited to a satisfied audience of "sensitive, imaginative, and fun-loving" readers (Friedman 1975: 161). To be sure, writers including Stephen King, Neil Gaiman, and Sarah Waters leave no doubt as to Jackson's ongoing creative influence. Nor has "The Lottery" ceased to be a pedagogical standard. Still, in many quarters, (including, perhaps, the 2010 Library of America *Shirley Jackson* collection selected by Joyce Carol Oates), Jackson's association with the "easy read" seems to linger. Her more dedicated students might find this ironic: for as bibliographer Paul N. Reinsch suggests, to devote oneself to serious criticism of Jackson's writing is, in effect, to commit oneself to a Gothic process. "These texts haunt me," Reinsch testifies (Reinsch 2001: 5); and he is not alone.

Some of the grounds for Jackson's current status may emerge through a brief look at *The Lottery* volume itself. For that book, as many readers have purchased it (e.g., Jackson 1972, 1982), is a radically diminished work, shorn of its subtitle and deprived, at the very least, of its first major epigraph (Hall 1993: 3–4). Restore the subtitle, however (as, to be fair, Oates does), and Jackson's short story cycle takes on a far more challenging form. The book's very cover now invokes sexual betrayal, supernatural vengeance, and damnation, while its "Epilogue," in which Jackson reprints the seven final stanzas of "James Harris, The Daemon Lover," now frames (and in some sense trumps) even the culminating brutality of the closing story, "The Lottery" itself. James Harris, smashing his lover's ship and aimed straight for hell, has the volume's penultimate word. Jackson, insisting on her own scholarly presence, reserves the last words for herself: "(Child Ballad No. 243)."

The volume's laconic, enigmatic, and often satiric invocations of sexual anxiety, snobbishness, economic victimization, racial and religious bigotry, corrosive loneliness, and, perhaps above all, self-loathing deferrals to conformist cruelty, are already bad enough in their own right. These are, as Joan Wylie Hall writes, aptly reversing Flannery O'Connor's famous phrase, "moments of gracelessness" (Hall 1993: 42). If O'Connor's "moments of grace" register the unexpected workings of a divinity, however, what can we say of Jackson's? (Do these people – do we – need a devil?) A teenager regales a party guest with her school essay on the exhilarating inevitability of nuclear annihilation; a woman primps anxiously, ready to wed a man who will never appear, and may not exist; a neighbor calls, pleased at charging the family dog with killing chickens; two mothers watch as one's child, echoing the other's, mouths racist language; a tourist, struggling against the crowd, finds she cannot cross the street: already sinister enough to begin with, these and other scenarios shift, once peopled, in unpredictable and often elusive fashion, by figures who may or may not be James Harris (Hall 1993: 4–7). "Jamie," "Mr. Harris," "Jimmy" – the series of unnamed men who seem to be wearing Harris' trademark blue suit – can all these possibly be demon lovers? And if so, of whom – or what? Moreover, to add to the effect, four ambiguous section breaks stage their own form of critical challenge. Each includes a paragraph-long epigraph; and here, as with the ballad, labeling is clear. "Joseph Glanvill: *Sadducismus Triumphatis*": what might supernatural evil, as "documented" by Glanvill's seventeenth-century treatise on witches and apparitions, have to do with Jackson's accounts of everyday life – accounts that even name her own

son? ("Charles" was to appear again, later, as part of *Life Among the Savages*.) The man who watches helplessly as his neighbor entertains a Mr. Harris in his apartment, pretending it is her own; the young wife who realizes she somehow cannot prevent her man-hating domestic servant from moving into the house: are we to read such figures as witches? As bewitched? Such questions have to do with Jackson and her characters, but they are also about us.

In order to read Jackson seriously must we look for James Harris figures and take Glanvill as gloss? To address this question may be to find oneself acceding to a disorienting, more or less literally maddening, immersion in ambiguity. The urgent, and perhaps ultimately impossible, drive to distinguish the potential workings of supernatural evil from those of personal madness or cultural and political brutality moves as a central, Gothic force, not only through *The Lottery*, but also through Jackson's writing as a whole. ("Housewife humor" is no exception: *Raising Demons* opens with a paragraph of "Conjuration from the Grimoire of Honourous.") Yet so, too, does an aggressive engagement with the fears involved in critical analysis itself. "One of the most terrifying aspects of publishing stories and books," Jackson wrote, referring to "The Lottery," is the realization that they are going to be read, and read by strangers" (Jackson 1993: 127). One of the most terrifying aspects of reading Jackson may be the realization that one can never quite tell how many critical questions one dare pose, without feeling either credulous, crazed, or both. Another, surely, is the sense that Jackson's works, read seriously, gesture well beyond the text. Like two of the authors she most admired, Austen and Thackeray, Jackson is capable of creating fictional worlds that can incite, while refusing to enact, intimate political soul-searching. In this, as in other ways, her work may position vulnerable readers to understand themselves, not merely as the haunted, but as the haunting.

In recent years, students of Jackson, many of them feminists, have begun to return to the author as Stanley Edgar Hyman himself once characterized her: that is, as an author whose "fierce visions of dissociation and madness, of alienation and withdrawal, of cruelty and terror" represent neither frivolous fun-loving entertainment nor "personal, even neurotic, fantasies," but rather "a sensitive and faithful anatomy of our times, fitting symbols for our distressing world of the concentration camp and the Bomb" (Hyman 1966: viii). Drawing, in part, on Reinsch's indispensable critical bibliography, Bernice M. Murphy's valuable edited essay collection, *Shirley Jackson: Essays on the Literary Legacy* (2005) gathers a number of key essays in this vein. Joan Wylie Hall's useful *Shirley Jackson: A Study of the Short Fiction* (1993) offers readings, notes, essays, letters, an interview with Jackson, and brief critical excerpts. (A selection of unpublished and uncollected stories edited by two of the author's children, *Just an Ordinary Day*, appeared in 1996.) Darryl Hattenhauer's persuasive 2003 *Shirley Jackson's American Gothic* argues for revalorizing her oeuvre as proto-postmodernism; more recently, Colin Haines' "*Frightened by a Word*" (2007) sets forth compelling arguments for reading her work in terms of queer theory (see american gothic; queer gothic).

SEE ALSO: American Gothic; Queer Gothic.

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