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19 February 2018

Hauntings and Homemakers:

An Examination of the Success of Shirley Jackson

Underneath the guise of an unstable mother, overweight housewife, drug user, and amateur witch, Shirley Jackson was a superb writer and novelist. Unfortunately, she has been reduced to a two-dimensional caricature of a woman, occupying only a small footnote of history through her short story "The Lottery." In reality Shirley Jackson was an incredibly sophisticated woman having balanced her career, family, and writing, on top of her overwhelming desire to escape the constraints of a conventional society. Jackson remains, debatably, the most egregiously overlooked and "most underrated writer of the 20th century" (Franklin). Despite her accomplished literary repertoire, Jackson's inspired insights on the nature of people and society warrant her little recognition from the predominantly male literary critic of her generation. Jackson produced a shockingly original genre of gothic horror that has flourished with age, inexplicably resounding with a modern audience. Following the end of World War II and the beginning of the age of McCarthyism, the deep-rooted suspicions of society were reflected into Jackson's works in a wildly different fashion than other authors of the era such as Steinbeck, Bradbury, and Orwell had done. However, despite Jackson's pioneering techniques and contemplative criticisms of society, she resides in a dark pocket of American literature, lacking the extent of success of which she is clearly deserving.

“underrated and excluded from the [American] literary canon” (Showalter). Jackson’s unique writing style granted her literary merit, albeit only after her death.

While Jackson was successful in creating a style that was entirely unique, the deep-rooted suspicions of society she incorporated into many of her stories were not. Authors such as Ray Bradbury and George Orwell utilize many of the same societal critiques in their works as that of Jackson. These parallel sentiments are especially prominent between Orwell’s *1984* and Jackson’s *The Haunting of Hill House*. Despite each being a distinctly individual story, both the journeys of the protagonists and the themes presented have a surprisingly similar foundation. A central idea to the direction of both of these novels is that of the nature of truth. Both Winston of *1984* and Eleanor of *The Haunting of Hill House* are confronted with a distorted semblance of truth. Winston struggles against a comprehensive government censorship of the truth while Eleanor is tasked with uncovering the truth behind the “supernatural manifestations” disturbing the house (Jackson, *The Haunting of Hill House*). In both of these novels, the reality of these truths is never revealed to the audience, and both leave an ending open to speculation. Both of these novels also discuss the isolation of people by society and the detrimental effects of such. In *1984*, Winston begins his journey toward the truth as an unassuming government worker and gradually develops his individuality, which ultimately becomes his downfall, culminating in his admittance that “[he] had won the victory over himself. He loved Big Brother” (Orwell). In a similar way, Eleanor begins her stay at the Hill House as an equal in her group, but as the novel progresses, she becomes singled out by the force in the house and is systematically ostracized by her peers, eventually likening herself to “a small creature swallowed whole by a monster” (Jackson, *The Haunting of Hill House*). Eleanor decides that rather than face the house and

Jackson to both stay at home and take care of their four children as well as financially support the family through her writing. Trapped by her overbearing family, Jackson was pressured to write “women’s-magazine essays... about housekeeping and child-rearing” (McGrath). Her “profoundly uncomfortable” (Franklin) and “difficult truths about modern life” (Franklin) were pushed aside in favor of her silly and shallow tales on the trials of motherhood. These stories were written with little thought or substance, reflecting the thought that women “were expected to express all their creative energies in housewifery” (Showalter). In order to achieve any success at all and to support her family, Jackson was forced to betray her own convictions and write instead to appeal to others. Compared to her novels such as *The Haunting of Hill House* and *We Have Always Lived In the Castle*, Jackson’s editorials share very little of the thematic depth and character development so prominent in these novels. On occasion, however, Jackson’s affinity for the supernatural surfaces in these writings. One of her more popular pieces, “Charles,” is a prime example of this kind of bleeding-through of styles. “Charles” depicts a child’s account of the troublesome ‘Charles’ of his class and his day to day antics. The mother finally has had enough and calls the teacher of the class only to learn that “[the school] doesn’t have any Charles in the kindergarten” (Jackson, “Charles”). On the surface this story is simply about a mischievous boy, yet an ambiguous ending lends to the possibility of something far darker. Was ‘Charles’ simply a scapegoat for the child’s misbehaviors or could ‘Charles’ be the face of something sinister? As Jackson began to establish herself as an artist, a shift toward this type of pseudo-horror became increasingly prevalent in her work. Jackson’s career was made lame by the expectations and pressures of a society preoccupied by conventions.

unquestioningly orthodox nature of society and the growing suburban-dream lifestyle. Jackson, however, was never able to match the level of success achieved by this single work through the rest of her career. Ultimately Jackson becomes Tessie, a woman whose cries for change are snuffed out by societies unfaltering faith in outdated custom.

Jackson's distinct style and recurring themes give her work a profoundly timeless feeling allowing for her to successfully connect with a contemporary audience. A prominent theme across Jackson's works is that of feminism. Before contemporary feminism became popularized by Friedan's "The Feminine Mystique," Jackson was expressing undoubtedly feminist concepts through her stories. In Jackson's works, the central character is nearly always that of a woman, acting as "a social misfit, not beautiful enough, charming enough, or articulate enough" (Carpenter) to get along with other people. Her character's "frustrations of the female role in a sexist society" (Carpenter) are surprisingly parallel to the ideas expressed by many modern feminists. Throughout both her childhood and marriage, Jackson felt trapped by the expectations of both her overbearing mother and husband and "[dreamt] of divorce and flight to a place where she could be alone and write" (Showalter). An escape was impossible for her in her own life, so she wrote this escape into her stories. Jackson writes echoes of her own story into those of Katherine Blackwood, rebelling against a despotic family by poisoning their blackberries (Jackson, *We Have Always Lived in the Castle*), and Catharine Vincent, rebelling against haunting memories her father who simply "regarded [her] as an unnecessary expense" (Jackson, "I Know Who I Love"). The ideas of radical feminism that underlie many of Jackson's stories are still contested even today, which allows for a modern audience to relate to Jackson's writing. A second important theme that permeates many of Jackson's works is that of tradition. Each

authentic depiction of a society consumed by convention. Although deeply unsettling for many, it is entirely enlightening for those willing to accept those same faults within themselves.

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