



MEANING, KNOWLEDGE AND EXPERIENCE IN THE SELF-CONTAINED INTERTEXTUALITY OF SHIRLEY JACKSON'S *THE INTOXICATED*

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RESUMO – Antes de entender a contribuição de Shirley Jackson para a literatura americana e mundial, é necessário entender certos aspectos da vida e da obra da escritora. O presente texto deseja apresentar esta importante escritora do século vinte a luz de sua literatura e, em sequência, comentar o que ainda está por ser considerado um dos traços mais marcantes de seu legado artístico, i.e., a intertextualidade auto-contida presente em seus textos. Esta pode apenas ser percebida por intermédio do conhecimento adquirido através da leitura do coletivo de suas obras. O objetivo do presente texto é ajudar na desmitificação da noção de superficialidade que paira sobre as obras da escritora. A intenção é auxiliar na determinação de que diversas camadas de significados latentes podem ser acessadas por meio da experiência adquirida via o conhecimento fornecido pelo ciclo que seus textos individuais formam. Para atingir esta meta, o presente empreendimento intenciona, em primeiro lugar, selecionar a apresentar aspectos relevantes da vida da escritora que serão importantes para a compreensão de sua dimensão literária. Em Segundo lugar, a ideia de interpretação através do reconhecimento intertextual será abordada e discutida, juntamente com outros aspectos relevantes e, em terceiro lugar, um exemplo da rede cíclica da obra da escritora será aludido brevemente utilizando-se o conto *The Intoxicated*, oriundo da coleção de 1949 chamada *The Lottery and Other Stories* (2005).

PALAVRAS-CHAVE – Shirley Jackson; intertextualidade; crítica literária; crítica historiográfica.

ABSTRACT – Before understanding Shirley Jackson's contribution to American and to world literature, one must understand certain aspects of this author's life and works. The present text wishes to present this important twentieth-century woman writer in light of her literary achievements and, in sequence, to comment on what is still to be considered one of the most marked features of her artistic legacy, i.e., the self-contained intertextuality that can be noticed

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exclusively through the knowledge acquired via the reading of a collection of her works. The objective of the present text is to aid in the demystification of the notion of superficiality that hovers over the author's stories. The intention is to help in the determination that several latent layers of meaning can be accessed through the experience gained by the knowledge of the cycle formed by her individual texts. So as to attain this goal, the present enterprise intends, firstly, to sort and present relevant aspects of the author's life that are important to the comprehension of her literary endeavor. Secondly, the idea of interpretation through intertextual recognizance will be approached and discussed, along with other relevant aspects and thirdly, and finally, an example of the cyclical web of her *oeuvre* will be briefly alluded to using the short story *The Intoxicated*, from the 1949 collection *The Lottery and Other Stories* (2005).

KEYWORDS – Shirley Jackson; intertextuality; literary criticism; historiographic criticism.

Introduction

Before understanding Shirley Jackson's contribution to American and to world literature, one must understand certain relevant aspects of this author's life and works. The present text wishes to present this important twentieth-century woman writer in light of her literary achievements and, in sequence, to comment on what is still to be considered one of the most marked features of her artistic legacy, i.e., the self-contained intertextuality that can be noticed exclusively through the knowledge acquired via the reading of a collection of her works. In other words, besides the conventional application of intertextual concepts from literary theories during criticism, there is an idiosyncratic kind of intertext within the collective of her *oeuvre* that often escapes even the most proficient and specialized critics. North American critic, Yale university professor Harold Bloom once wrote that Ms. Jackson's works could never achieve the status of classics – actually he was talking about canonical texts – because they did not possess the quality that allows literary works to survive the test of time, which is the fact that they do not bear rereading (2001). What he meant was that few, if anything, could be learned from a second reading of a certain Jackson text. The objective of the present text is to aid in the demystification of this notion of superficiality that hovers over the author's stories. The intention is to help in the determination that several latent layers of meaning can be accessed through the experience gained the knowledge of the cycle formed by her individual texts. So as to attain this goal, the present enterprise intends, firstly, to sort and present relevant aspects of the author's life that are important to the comprehension of her later literary endeavors. Secondly, the idea of interpretation through intertextual recognizance will be approached and discussed, along with other separate theoretical and historically-related congruous aspects and thirdly, and finally, an



example of the cyclical web of her *oeuvre* will be briefly alluded to using the short story *The Intoxicated*, the first from the collection entitled *The Lottery and Other Stories* (2005), originally published in 1949.

Understanding the Author

In the highlights of Ms. Jackson's literary life one notices that certain aspects stand out, more precisely the ones that should be noted here are those directly or indirectly responsible for the ascent of her prolific fictional production and the progressive debility and eventual deterioration of her health. Be that as it may, Ms. Jackson was born Shirley Hardie Jackson on December 14, 1916, in San Francisco, California. Her date of birth, at times, appears as 1919. The misleading information was explained by her biographer Judy Oppenheimer (1988), that Ms. Jackson did not wish to show others that she was older than her husband - who was born in 1919. Her father, Leslie Jackson, was an executive at a lithography company, and her mother, Geraldine, was a housewife.

Her literary life began early; in fact, Ms. Jackson began to compose poems and short stories almost as soon as she could write. In 1923, her family moved to the affluent San Francisco suburb of Burlingame, where she attended Burlingame High School. In 1928, at the age of twelve, she received her first literary prize for the poem *The Pine Tree*, which won a contest sponsored by *Junior Home* magazine. In 1930, at the age of fourteen, her family, which by this time included younger brother Barry, moved from Burlingame, California, to Rochester, New York. In 1931, at age fifteen, she graduated from Brighton High School in the top quarter of her class. In 1933 the family moved again, this time to Rochester, New York. In 1934, at age eighteen, she enrolled in the liberal arts program at the University of Rochester in September. In 1936, she withdrew from college because of depression (BELLMAN, 1994), a condition that was to recur in later years. At home, she established strict work habits, a so-called self-imposed apprenticeship in writing. She concentrated on writing at least one thousand words per day, a regimen she attempted to maintain throughout her life. In 1937, at age twenty-one, she entered Syracuse University in September and, although she began her studies as a journalism major, she eventually transferred to the English Department. During her time at the university, she wrote at least fifteen pieces for the campus magazine. There, she met her future husband, Stanley Edgar Hyman. They both joined the campus magazine's staff. An important fact is that she used her position and influence as an editor to fight for civil rights. She wrote editorials questioning the lack of black students at Syracuse and the poor conditions of student living quarters. Surely



enough she did not have an exactly friendly relationship with the administration at Syracuse, especially due to her desire to raise awareness to what she considered excessive control over the campus. In 1940, at age twenty-four, she graduated in English with her B.A. from Syracuse University. That year she married her classmate Stanley Edgar Hyman, who was later to become a respectable author and critic. The couple then moved to New York City. In 1941, her pathological condition affected her work just as it was heralded by the distant warnings that appeared surreptitiously in her earlier work. Jackson's first nationally published short story *My Life With R. H. Macy*, appeared in the magazine *New Republic* in 1941. Over the next few years she continued to publish short stories. Her first child, Laurence, was born in 1942, and her daughter, Joanne, followed in 1945. In that same year the family moved to North Bennington, Vermont, where Jackson lived for the rest of her life. She and her husband had two more children, Sarah in 1948 and Barry in 1951.

One of the consolidated facts about Jackson's life, which reflected on her reputation, was that her vision of the evil inherent in human nature was present even in the most innocent aspects of everyday life, and this view was evident even in her humorous stories, of which *Charles* is an example. This particular short story first appeared in the July 1948 issue of *Mademoiselle* magazine.

She wrote a few novels influenced by the gothic genre, combining horror and romance. Ms. Jackson's gothic-influenced novel-length tales included *The Sundial* (1958), *The Haunting of Hill House* (1959), and *We Have Always Lived in the Castle* (1962). Much of her fiction demonstrated her life-long interest in the supernatural, an interest that was also reflected in her nonfiction book *The Witchcraft of Salem Village*, published in 1956.

Ms. Jackson also published humorous memoirs based on her family life. The titles reflected her wit and good humor: *Life among the Savages* (1953), and *Raising Demons* (1957). They are collections of short sketches originally published in women's magazines. In 1963, she published a children's book, *9 Magic Wishes*. Her reputation as primarily a horror writer does not make justice to her skills as a master of adult gothic fiction and of psychological thrillers. She received the Edgar Allan Poe Award in 1961 for her story *Louisa, Please Come Home* and the Arents Pioneer Medal for Outstanding Achievement from Syracuse University in 1965, just after her death.

After hard years of panic attacks and breakdowns, she dies at age 48, on August 8, 1965. A sudden heart failure interrupted her afternoon sleep in her home in North Bennington, Vermont. Her body simply could not take anymore. At the time of her death she was working on



a novel, which was published posthumously along with other stories and writings and was entitled *Come along with Me* (1968).

Understanding and Interpreting the Text-Collective

It is fairly commonsensical to try to find meaning behind the words of a text, that procedure can be simply referred to as *reading* or, adding a little panache to it, *interpretation*. It is the role of the writer, willingly or not, to inject *meaning* into his words on the text. It is the role of the reader, just as voluntarily, to extract that *meaning*. The extraction process goes by the aforementioned name: *interpretation*. Although seemingly quite simple when put like this, this two-way collaborative process has been the object of debate in literary studies in Academia for as long as the discipline in itself exists. In that enormous space of time its names, definitions, concepts and functions have come in and out of complexity and received an extremely wide range of disparate philosophical opinions.

One of the elements that has lavishly helped this process to entertain such far-ranging magnet of disparaging critical viewpoints is the fact that the literary text under analysis is constructed, among other things – such as the author’s (un)equivocally authentic imagination – by other literary texts. This implies that the *knowledge* of these other texts is not merely important as a tool to aid interpretation but (too) often crucial to the understanding of the literary text.

Some critics (HARAWAY, 1988; FRIEDMAN, 1991; ALLEN, 2000) go as far as saying that without this *experience* that stem from the *knowledge* of other art works there is no (valid) interpretation.

The Debut of Ms. Jackson’s Intertextuality: Definition(s), History and Implications

The presence of the other artist’s touch in the literary text under scrutiny is called *intertextuality*. Supporters of this academic viewpoint defend that finding the *intertextual* relations sealed in a text is doing *interpretation*. *Meaning* is, therefore, a combination of the author’s words, and his own ideas, with the ideas of others. Different from *interpretation*, the term *intertextuality* has a relatively short history. Its origins date back to 1969, more precisely to Julia Kristeva’s essay *Word, Dialogue and Novel* (1986). The dissemination that took place after this publication has been astounding and so have the “inevitable fraying at the edges which comes with popularity” (STONEMAN, 2005, p. 17). Due to its crucial role as well as its outspread currency in literary interpretation, the term *intertextuality* has been frequently misconstrued and misused and



sometimes, as haphazardly as inadvertently, in place of what was originally meant as *allusion*, *influence* or *source material*.

Kristeva chooses to focus on the sophisticated modernist texts, such as those of Joyce and Kafka, which she sees as examples of poetic revolution. A much larger body of criticism, however, relates to postmodernist texts, with their self-consciously allusive techniques, including sequels, parodies and other reworkings of explicit precursors, and for many readers this is the only meaning of 'intertextuality' (STONEMAN, 2005, p. 20).

According to US critic Harold Bloom, in contemporary critical vocabulary, the term has received so many definitions that it is akin to such terms as 'the imagination', 'history', or 'postmodernism' "terms which are undetermined in meaning and overdetermined in figuration" (In: ALLEN, 2000, p.2). Allen also acknowledges that despite being one of the central ideas in contemporary literary theory, *intertextuality* is not a transparent term and should not be evoked in an uncomplicated manner, despite the possible (over)confident usage by many theorists and critics (2000). Although the theory of *intertextuality* has the potential for dealing with all kinds of texts, its usage has made it prone to certain areas of literary production more than others:

Interpretation is not a process whereby some meaning "underlying" or "behind" the text/event is made evident, but a process in which meaning is manufactured and accomplished in light of the constraints of tradition, the stock of knowledge at hand. "Meaning" itself is not prior to social interaction, but is achieved in the course of social interaction. (STEWART, 1979, p. 14)

Even though Susan Stewart (1979) was referring to the work of Alfred Schutz, the above quotation may be adapted to serve the present purpose simply by considering the role exchanged by reader and writer (the latter represented by his or her text) as the aforementioned social interaction. "The "stock of knowledge at hand" should also, in the present case, be constrained by the works that integrate the Shirley Jackson (henceforth SJ) Cycle.

While analyzing the metaphors in the poem *Enuma Elis* Michalowski (1987) wrote: "the metaphor outlined (...) make little sense when seen separately. But when we trace these tropes within the tradition there begins to appear a common set of values which are encoded, so to speak, in the spaces between the texts" p. 389). Here one would not go as far as saying that instances of a given SJ story do not make sense when seen separately - it is much more likely that



it does – the case is that once the latent message-meanings are traced within the Shirley Jackson *tradition* (the SJ Cycle), they do begin to appear as a common set of *values*, or in this case, of features which are encoded and inert and ready to be accessed and activated.

Bloom, however, also admits that if *reading* is the study of *intertextual* relations, then there is an inevitably ‘arbitrary’ element in all *reading*. If we are not dealing with intended *intertextual* relations between texts, then where do we begin in our search for the text’s significant inter-text? For Bloom the answer is always, ‘in the poetry of the precursor’. (In: ALLEN, 2000, p. 139-140, my italics)

This research purports to suggest a change in the answer, or rather, reroute it towards another path, which shies away from the poetry of the precursor and into the *poetry* of the very author, therefore creating the previously alluded intertextual cycle. Two further questions are raised by Allen (2000): “How do we know who the poet’s precursor is? And how do we know that in certain texts other inter-texts are not also significant?” (p. 140). Taking the current proposal into consideration, the first question is automatically answered, i.e., the author him or herself. The second question remains not only unanswered, but unanswerable. It must be acknowledged that other texts, that is, texts from other authors may, and many times will, play an important role as source of declarative knowledge.

According to Kristeva “Bakhtin was one of the first to replace the static hewing out of texts with a model where literary structure does not simply exist but is generated in relation to another structure” (1980, p. 64-65). That conception fits the present purpose, for it implies that some of the meanings contained in the fabric of one narrative may be generated from the fabric of other text, even though it does not specify which – perhaps, nor should it. Hence it would be unfair to argue that they are all incomplete in the sense that they all fail to establish a source.

Considering that a poststructuralist view of intertextuality can imply a connection between text and an entire cultural *milieu* (along with all its other non-textual creations), and between text and the entire artistic production known as literature, the present focus is to restrict the possibilities of intertextuality to the collective works of one author, and therefore contrive and control the possibilities of dissemination and rearrangement of the perimeters of literary sources for comparison and consequent interrelation.

At stake here is a distinction between the poststructuralist recognition of the text’s relation to the entirety of cultural signification and a more restricted,



structuralist-inspired focus on the supposedly closed, or at least semi-autonomous, field of literature (ALLEN, 2000, p. 102).

The purpose here is to create restrictions to the number of source materials that can normally be considered at play in many literary critic accounts... to create an intertextual network with *The Lottery and Other Stories* and to name it the Shirley Jackson's Intertextual Archipelago.

Bloom defends that all texts are inter-texts and adds that "a single text has only part of a meaning; it is itself a synecdoche for a larger whole including *other texts*. A text is a relational event, and not a substance to be analyzed" (2005, p. 106). This assertion goes against other critical approaches that posit (or misguidedly presume) that a literary text possesses a unity in itself, which consequently implies that they carry determinable *meaning*.

The problem with this definition, if there is one, is the fact that it does not make explicit what *other texts* are responsible for the influencing. Explaining what *texts* he meant may as well be counterproductive in a short definition – granted – but what makes it a platform to start from is the fact that it leaves the discourse open to intervention, which in this case means to add that the other texts in the intertextuality under scrutiny here belong to the same author.

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Even though Ms. Jackson's texts can naturally be, as much as any other literary text, approached and analyzed by practically any critical and/or theoretical frame, it is the particular *intertextuality* that yields from her texts themselves that invites this treatment, despite falling outside Kristeva's categories. The objective here is not to rectify definitions of *intertextuality* but to find one which adequately reconstructs the specific interrelation that connects Jackson's short stories in *The Lottery and Other Stories* (and perhaps even beyond to her other texts). Even though the task may seem to imply in too ambitious a theoretical intervention, it actually seeks to invite a debate, at introductory level, concerning the subtle contribution of this author to literary studies as a whole.

Michalowski has raised an interesting question when referring to something similar: "Would this not be a circular enterprise, building up a tradition from our own readings, only to appropriate it as the privileged basis for new readings?" (1987, p. 382). All things considered, this is precisely the cornerstone of the present proposal, once again with the condition that the sources be finite, i.e. the Lottery Cycle.

Hopefully this account of *intertextuality* will help readers to see how it can reflect historically informed visions of society and of human relations. This implies that Jackson's technique has the potential of employing *intertextuality* to generate social commentary and perhaps



capture the characteristics of a portion of American society, in a finite historical place and time-frame; which ultimately reflects on general human behavior.

Within this specific theoretical viewpoint, Jackson does not echo or play with stories by different authors, nor does she make use of classic texts or long-established genres, but rather she uses intertextuality as a concept with which to critically discuss her contemporary society and beyond. In this sense, her intertextuality foregrounds notions of human interrelations, socially and culturally.

The long held debate over the originality of a text falls outside the scope of the present endeavor precisely because the author under study (cryptically) *rewrites* in a very special way her own production. It is acknowledged, naturally, that no writer is above the influence of other(s), since “it is not possible any longer to speak of originality or the uniqueness of the artistic object, be it a painting or a novel, since every artistic object is so clearly assembled from bits and pieces of already existent art” (ALLEN, 2000, p. 5) . The only difference in this specific Jackson case is that the existent art from which she gathers objects is her own.

This research works under the assumption that an understanding of this intertextuality provides not only a contribution to the understanding of literature but also of culture, society and human behavior.

Gilbert and Gubar, as well as other gynocritics that have been writing since the 1970s (such as Elaine Showalter and Mary Poovey), pointed out that women writers from the nineteenth century, with among other things the intention of avoiding censure, took up their pens and adopted “various strategies in which the gendered images of patriarchal culture are accommodated on the *surface level* of the work” (In: ALLEN, 2000, p. 146). In other words, their real messages are hidden beneath the surface, in the depths of their texts.

There lies one of the main reasons that may have impelled Jackson – even though a mid-twentieth century figure - to write the way she did. These so called *strategies*, somehow encrypted in her work, may in fact validate the feminist/subversive charges all-too-often pressed against her. As a way of outwitting censors, whatever their provenience, many writers (and artist in general) have historically used of cryptic messages to carry their messages across to their receiving audience. Though the keys to the decodification of these messages are varied in nature, the keys to Jackson’s (latent) messages have been distributed throughout her *oeuvre* (- not exclusively). Gilbert and Gubar also note that some recurrent themes, images and figures, eminently that of madness “mark an attempt to articulate distinctly female experience and a resistance to the dominant constructions of femininity” (In: ALLEN, 2000, p. 146). In order to



avoid confusion with terms such as *female*, *feminine* and *feminist* in this research, *female* will be understood as a biological state, *feminine* refers to a cultural ideology of womanhood and *feminist* to a mode of social and political thought and action – in accordance to Toril Moi (1982).

Her mother wanted her to be a beauty and a fool. Jackson was never either.

To employ images, figures and plots concerned with madness and other states of psychical disturbance to locate a distinctly female literary tradition is not the same thing as analyzing the cultural codes which express dominant ideological constructions of masculine and feminine identity. The cultural codes out of which female identity and female texts are constructed might foster images of otherness, madness, psychical disturbance. However, it seems problematic to perceive such intertextual codes as both repressive when placed in the context of dominant culture and liberating when placed in the context of a developing female literary tradition (ALLEN, 2000, 148).

This passage problematizes the issue of madness as a means of escape, and madness as a subterfuge to the insertion of intertextual instances in a latent state. Furthermore, this fleeting *madness* function to question, to criticize and definitely to invite re-evaluation of the social context in which the writer is inserted just as much as where the reader is inserted. The exchange between the textual domain (literary text) and the contextual domain (social and cultural reality) is what impels these domains of meaning to produce intertextual discourse. This *mad* discourse is of the same type as Susan Stewart (1979) referred to in her book about the role and implications of nonsense in art as the type of discourse upon which nonsense relies. She claims that by opening holes in the fabric of convention, nonsense creates a bridge between art and life (1979). In the present context, the mad-nonsensical discourse actually helps to bridge the gap between art and reality, between reader and writer.

As a woman writing mainly about women (i.e. about a variety of themes that nonetheless have women as protagonists), Ms. Jackson has suffered with the (hopefully) old-fashioned practice of being excluded from what is considered (by men) as serious literature. Allen (2000), discussing the statements that (sadly) endorse this traditional practice towards women writers, writes that:

It might be objected that such statements merely collude in the patriarchal symbolic association between pen and phallus, and that *women writers should define their writing in symbolic ways suitable to women's bodies* (...) [and] the notion of intertextuality, with its connotations of webs and weaving, constitutes an



opportunity for such a feminization of the symbolics of the act of writing” (p.145-146, my italics).

Taking this advice further, one might go as far as suggesting that what Ms. Jackson did was to impregnate her text with embryos of messages that will only come into being, mature and fully grow in the minds of the readers when the process of interpretation is taking place. The webs and weaving metaphor is hereby dismissed.

The Intoxicated

The first hermeneutic step towards the criticism of the following text, i.e., *The Intoxicated*, that features in the short story collection *The Lottery and Other Stories*, one of the many works that comprise the aforementioned Shirley Jackson Cycle, requires an interpretation of the story as conscious aesthetic construct. This involves reflecting on the author’s design from the point of view of the writing process and of the reading process so as to reveal the target semiotic structures and relationships, all within the proposed intertextual framework. A brief summary is offered along with what purports to be illuminating stances of the intertextual threads that connect the totality of her *oeuvre*.

As defended by Derrida and by other (post)structuralists, authorial intention is a necessary element in the text’s machinery. However, due to the virtual impossibility of determining the author’s intention, conceivably unintentional meanings shall also receive due attention.

Often (...) the intertextual signals, however deliberate, are not overt. And deliberate signals do not exhaust the work’s intertextuality, since many potential intertextual connections are possible – potential not in the sense of being intentionally buried for the benefit of the critic, but rather as a result of the fact that the significance of a text is not limited and calculable a priori. (LANDA, 1996, p.43).

Common failures in accessing the many layers of SJ’s stories beyond the surface level may account for the preternatural neglect and, though rare, the rather low critical estimates of such stories. Many of these negative criticisms must be questioned because of their arguable short-sightedness towards the stories they scrutinize, which ultimately renders their readings unsatisfactory, or at least symptomatic of the limits of their reading. For one, they fail to acknowledge that different truths often coexist at different planes in any given story and that they



generally depend on the reader's level of critical engagement with it. Most importantly, SJ's writing has a tendency to forestall critical reading in that it articulates translucent planes of (dormant) message-meanings, hidden in plain sight. Many of these latent elements are not perceived by the inexperienced Jackson reader, regardless of them being consciously intended by the author or not.

The present research intends to tangentially point to the multiplicity of dimensions inscribed, if ever so subtly, in this specific text, *The Intoxicated*, and thus tentatively help remedy the injustices that other critics have dispensed due to their failure to approach the artistic complexity of this and of other of her stories.

Thanks to biographer Judy Oppenheimer, we now know that basically everything that happened to Shirley during her day – or night – brew in her mind to become stories. She used to begin writing them *ad interim*.

One night the Fosters were over at the house playing Monopoly, when suddenly Shirley began to sell off her property, highly unusual for her, since she was an avid, competitive player. She excused herself, went into Stanley's study, and sat down at the typewriter. A short time later, she emerged with a story and read it aloud. (OPPENHEIMER, 1988, p. 121)

That moment *The Intoxicated* was in the process of being born. Oppenheimer (1988) tells the reader that that night during the game Shirley was listening to the conversations and thinking about something, scantily brooding in the midst of the game when she left. She ran from the living room, sat down and wrote a story – the first draft, at any rate – after which she went back to the living room and read it aloud so that the guests, her audience, could express their opinions, but especially her husband Stanley, whose assessment she accredited with sanctioned appreciation. After listening carefully to their appraisal, she made a few revisions and came back with a sufficiently improved version: “The manuscript was in an envelope and ready to go out by midnight” (OPPENHEIMER, 1988, p. 121).

The story line of *The Intoxicated* tells of a conversation that takes place in a kitchen in the course of a cocktail party between a drunken man and a young girl. In an ordinary house party in an unnamed American suburb, one of the guests escapes to the kitchen pretending to get more ice but with the real intention of sobering up a bit. The idea of a house party in itself is to be a recurrent theme in Jackson's stories just as they were recurrent in her real life. They were partly



the motivators of much of the alcohol that she ingested indiscriminately and that would later affect her health and, for good or for bad the health of her characters.

In the kitchen the unnamed guest encounters the daughter of the party hosts, a young girl named Eileen, who is drinking coffee and doing homework. She is seventeen. As can be noticed via other stories, the character of the young girl that makes dire predictions is also recurrent, as we can see in the short story *All She Said Was Yes*, published in the collection *Just an Ordinary Day* (1996).

One of the first pieces of information that the seventeen-year-old girl, a senior in high school, volunteers regarding herself is the fact that she stayed back one year out of school due to pneumonia. Diseases of this kind that keep people from work or from study is another major theme that pervades Jackson's *oeuvre*. Eileen offers the guest black coffee, exactly what he was looking for in the hope of clearing his head. Something that also deserves attention is the indiscriminate use of some mind altering substance, even if mild, such as coffee, or potentially more aggressive, such as painkillers - Jackson was no stranger to the abusive use of medical drugs.

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The girl comfortably remarks how lively and entertaining the party must be, connoting no attraction or aspiration to be in it. She is just downstairs because of the heat that is upstairs where she was doing her homework. The guest experiences a sort of quagmire that the reader cannot at this point tell if it is actual or perceived in relating to Eileen. He is having a hard time estimating what to talk about with the girl, wondering whether boys or basketball are the appropriate topic of conversation – he unsuccessfully chose the latter - but what he finds more aggravating is his struggle to talk to her. He finally asks Eileen about her homework, to which she replies “I’m writing a paper on the future of the world” (JACKSON, 2005, p. 5 – unless noted otherwise, the following page numbers refer to this same publication), and confesses she finds it silly. Interestingly, his reply was: “your party out front is talking about it. That’s one reason I came out here” (p. 5). Jackson writes that he could see her thinking that that was not at all the reason he came out there to the kitchen, which implies that she somehow has access to the guys thoughts quicker or better than himself and, in this particular moment, as in few others – acknowledging his alcoholic state -, she sort of outwits him. It is not unlike this character to have an acute sensitivity towards other people or future events. As if discovered in his harmless - and careless – untruth and to quickly bring the subject about, he quickly enquires: “what are you saying about the end of the world?” (p. 5). The girl reveals her prophetic - and pessimistic – conjecture by saying that she does not think the girl has got much of a future and “well, after all,



it isn't as though we didn't know about it in advance" (p. 5). The man seems to see the words blurring out of his mouth significantly before he thinks about them: "It's an interesting time to be alive" (p.5) he says as if he is still in a party-mode. His sentence may be viewed as a consequence of his being intimidated by the girl's precociousness allied to her unhesitating earnestness to speak her mind; and as an attempt at condescendingly dismissing her opinion, something that happens more and more as the conversation progresses. The guest becomes a little restless and slightly more irritable with Eileen and starts giving her rather snappy retorts, only this time, he ponders before he speaks: "In my day," he said, overemphasizing, "girls thought of nothing but cocktails and necking" (p. 5). She retaliates with resolution that that is partly the problem: "if people had been really, honestly scared when you were young we wouldn't be so badly off today" (p. 6). "When I was young" he exploded thinking that his voice had come out with more of an edge than he would have liked it to. His reaction was to step away from her to indicate the half-interest of an adult towards a child, amused as though he was being graceful towards her childish ways. He tries to be mature about it saying that it is normal for kids this age, around sixteen, seventeen to be scared and that probably his generation was also scared, after all, this was part of a phase youngsters go through: "like being boy-crazy" (p. 6).

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Eileen remains unperturbed by his mocking attitude. She softly and clearly describes her vision of the end of the world. And that is yet another recurrent theme that can be found in many stories and in many levels, as in the apocalyptic end of *The Road through the Wall*, her first novel, to the end of the world of a family, as in her last finished novel, the 1962 *We Have Always Lived in the castle*.

The girl explains:

Somehow I think of the churches as going first, before even the Empire State Building. And then all the big apartment houses by the river, slipping down slowly into the water with the people inside. And the schools in the middle of Latin class maybe, while we're reading Caesar. (...) Each time we begin a chapter in Caesar, I wonder if this won't be the one we never finish. Maybe we in our Latin class will be the last people who ever read Caesar (p. 6).

The guest responds rudely and playfully to these predictions. He thinks it silly for a girl like her to fill her mind with what he calls *morbid trash*, and advises her to buy a movie magazine and to settle down or something like that. Running out of patience, he stood up and felt like saying something adult and scathing but he realized that that would only reveal that he has been paying attention and he would not want that to happen. He thought that when he was young,



though it had not been that long ago, people did not think like that. “If you have any trouble with your Latin, he says finally, “I’ll be glad to give you a hand” (p. 7). To his surprise, she giggles. Back in the living room he sees his hostess: “deep in an earnest conversation with a tall, graceful man in a blue suit” (p. 8).

Though outside the scope of the vast majority of criticism regarding Ms. Jackson’s works, this is an epic moment. This seemingly trivial occasion is the unprecedented introduction of one of the most pervasive and memorable characters of all her oeuvre. It is the first time ever in the history of Shirley Jackson’s literary career that the reader learns of the participation of this elegant tall gentleman in a blue suit, a.k.a. James Harris, a.k.a. the Daemon Lover, from the Anglo-Scottish Child Ballad No. 243.

His mere presence is an omen of unfortunate deeds and pernicious circumstances. His mere presence is a synonym of harm, in the widest and more far-reaching possible sense of the word (though his absence – when announced – may as well commend similar fortune, as can be found in stories such as *The Daemon Lover*, *The Witch*, *Like Mother Used to Make*, *The Villager*, *A Fine Old Firm*, *Elizabeth*, *Seven Types of Ambiguity*, and *The Tooth*, all present in the collection *The Lottery and Other Stories*, which had originally the not-accidental subtitle, *The Adventures of James Harris*).

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The guest returns to the party and finds Eileen’s father and comments that he had been just having an interesting conversation with his daughter, who was doing her Latin homework. The father speaks in a contrite manner: “kids nowadays”. Jackson writes that the father shakes his head *ruefully* while he commiserates with the guest, implying his disappointment with contemporary youth and, at the same time, setting the tone for future characters who are also disapproving parents – or who are simply oblivious to their children.

They will also serve as examples among a myriad of other themes and issues that populate Jackson’s fictional universe and that are essential parts to the reader who wishes to have an integral view of the author’s *oeuvre*, and ultimately a more eventful reading experience than those who come in contact with but one of her texts.

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