

A CRITICAL EXPEDITION INTO THE DELUSIVENESS AND THE  
UNRELIABILITY OF SHIRLEY JACKSON'S *THE DAEMON LOVER*

UMA EXPEDIÇÃO CRÍTICA ÀS QUALIDADES ILUSIVAS E ELUSIVAS EM *THE  
DAEMON LOVER* DE SHIRLEY JACKSON

---

Gustavo Vargas Cohen\*

**Resumo:** A literatura da escritora americana Shirley Jackson (1916-1965) compõe uma rede de mitos altamente equilibrada e sofisticada. O objetivo do presente é demonstrar alguns dos elementos que fornecem profundidade para seu mundo ficcional. A hipótese é que nele há mensagens-significados latentes que são tão importantes que, uma vez revelados, podem alterar a apreciação da estória pelo leitor. Na leitura de apenas uma única estória, estes elementos encontram-se dormentes e codificados, no entanto, na leitura de mais de um texto da autora, eles, outrora criptografados, podem vir à tona e interagir com os mais evidentes do texto sob escrutínio e, assim, revelar uma variedade de mensagens escondidas. Dois dos mais importantes elementos crípticos são os traços de embuste e de falta de confiabilidade que são investigados em relação ao conto de Jackson de 1949 *The Daemon Lover*, publicado na coletânea de contos *The Lottery and Other Stories*.

**Palavras-chave:** Shirley Jackson; *The Lottery and Other Stories*; Intertextualidade restrita; Co-ocorrência temática.

**Abstract:** The literary works of American writer Shirley Jackson (1916-1965) compose a highly balanced and sophisticated net of myths. The present objective is to demonstrate some of the elements that provide depth to her fictional lore. The hypothesis is that there are latent message-meanings in her lore which are so important that, once revealed, they may alter the reader's appreciation of her stories. In the reading of *one* individual story these elements are dormant and coded, however, when reading more than one text by the author, these once cryptic elements can surface and interact with the most evident thematic elements of the *one* text under scrutiny, thus revealing a plethora of hidden heralds. Two of the most important cryptic elements are the traces of delusiveness and unreliability that will be investigated and discussed regarding Jackson's 1949 short story *The Daemon Lover*, published in the short fiction collection *The Lottery and Other Stories*.

**Keywords:** Shirley Jackson; *The Lottery and Other Stories*; Restricted intertextuality; Thematic concurrence.

## Introduction

American writer Shirley Jackson (1916-1965) had her own private mythology<sup>1</sup> (henceforth referred to as the Shirley Jackson Lore, SJL for short). In her first writings as a

---

\* Doutorando do Programa de Pós-Graduação em Letras da Universidade Federal do Rio Grande do Sul na especialidade de Literaturas de Língua Inglesa, com bolsa da CAPES/PAG/REUNI. E-mail: [gustavocohen.ufrgs@yahoo.com](mailto:gustavocohen.ufrgs@yahoo.com)

young girl she alluded to a character in specific that inhabits this mythology of hers, who is a shadowy figure that intermittently appears to her, sometimes in a dream, others in what could be described as a vision: “a figure that would eventually take form in her mind as the demon lover” (OPPENHEIMER, 1988, p. 48). Thus the title of the short story presently under investigation is generated (using the spelling *daemon* as originally appears in the medieval Anglo-Scottish ballad<sup>1</sup> that fitfully inspires it).

*The Daemon Lover* was first published in the February 1949 edition of *Woman's Home Companion* magazine (originally under the title *The Phantom Lover*). That same year, it appeared in the short fiction collection of twenty five – equally eerie tales – entitled *The Lottery and Other Stories*<sup>2</sup>. The tales in this collection are particularly important for several reasons. Originally published by Farrar, Strauss and Giroux in 1949, one year after her first novel *The Road through the Wall* came out, stories that had only appeared scattered in magazines such as the *New Yorker*, *Mademoiselle*, *Woman's Home Companion*, *The Hudson Review*, *New Republic*, among others, were for the first time, for the contentment and convenience of readers, compiled into a single issue. Furthermore, they introduced many of the noteworthy thematic elements that have ultimately comprised the author's fictional cosmos.

This lore is composed of several elements, some more plain and obvious, others not so clearly visible, from disquieted mothers to nervously uneasy wives, including even legendary demonic figures. They earn mythological status in the sense that they almost preternaturally inhabit the depths of the many layers of the stories contained not only in *The Lottery and Other Stories* itself, but also spread elsewhere in the author's fiction. The present concern is to study how these more inconspicuous elements, namely the *delusive* and the *unreliable* traits on Jackson's fictional narrative, contribute to the understanding of her stories, more specifically *The Daemon Lover*, since they are not only recurrent, but in a complex way, cryptically interrelated in the whole of Jackson's literature. Awareness of these recondite elements – which mostly stand as coded messages – is so crucial that frequently when they are retrieved, decoded and consequently surfaced, they can alter, in essentially different levels, the conventional interpretations of her stories, and that is why: “it is useful (...) to read Jackson's work as a 20<sup>th</sup> century Gothic tale which addresses the darker side of human nature and politics” (STREMPKE-DURGIN, 2009, p. 14). Both the human and the political elements are no strangers to delusiveness and unreliability. Jackson's fiction feeds on these

---

<sup>1</sup> Citations made from Shirley Jackson's texts from *The Lottery and Other Stories* (2005) will be referred to in this text simply by the page number. All other citations are referenced conventionally.

characteristics to give rise to a creative reality which truthfully represents the *status quo* of her time and beyond.

To aid in the analysis of the short story *The Daemon Lover* under the proposed light, an informal method that contrives two hypothetical readers was devised. This system is intended to service as an example of how pervasive and coalescing these cryptic elements can be when viewed by means of perceptually varying insights as potentially attainable by different hypothetical readers, namely a “novice Jackson reader” and an “experienced Jackson reader”. The expression *novice* here does not refer to an unskilled reader but rather to one who has no (or scarce) prior familiarity with the author’s work. The distinction was systematized pursuant to the assumption that there are layers of meaning that even the most proficient of readers may fail to access. The rationale is that these latent meaning-messages can only be retrieved – when analyzing *one* particular story – through intelligence garnered from *other* works by the same author. The *other texts* – that make up the totality of Jackson’s *oeuvre* – hold valuable information in that they serve as sources, or keys, to breaking the dormant codes that ordinarily lie in a Jackson story individually. This means, in other words, that there is a self-contained kind of intertextuality that allows for these connections to exist and, at the same time, renders her stories much more complex and multi-layered than otherwise alleged (as in BLOOM, 2001).

Many theories of intertextuality reference the rapport between the text under scrutiny and the texts of writers of generations past, however, no intertextual theory (to my knowledge) mentions the affairs between texts of the same author, thus, in this sense, they fail to establish the restrictions which are necessary to theoretically support the present enterprise. Furthermore, one theory could account for a limited set of themes and would inevitably leave others unattended. Using one method would “miss Jackson’s multivocality” (HATTENHAUER, 2003, 12), ergo, it would take several theories to address the thematic diversity of the author’s lore, which is not viable at the present set up.

### **Shirley’s Flickering Phantoms**

Awareness of the elements that constitute the Shirley Jackson Lore does not provide essentially a *better* understanding of the author’s stories, but a different one, in that it allows insight into layers of meaning otherwise imperceptible to the novice Jackson reader.

One of the dominant traits of the SJL is the presence of a character, in any of the stories that comprise it, that represents the *dazed woman*, i.e., generally a female young adult

who either begins the narrative at a dazed state of mind and maintains it throughout the narrative or, more commonly, who gets ever more benumbed as the story progresses. These female characters present a disorganized state-of-mind as they “lack a core of identity [which] forces them to seek meaning and direction in the world outside themselves” (HAGUE, 2005, p. 76). A representative example of the former is Clara Spencer, the protagonist of *The Tooth* (also featured in *The Lottery and Other Stories*), who spends the whole tale under the effect of codeine tablets (with varying degrees of result) to ease her toothache. Clara’s first line of dialogue to her husband is: “I feel so funny” (p. 265). She soon adds: “light-headed, and sort of dizzy” (p. 266). At the end of the story, when she leaves the dentist’s building in New York City she is still “oblivious of the people who stepped sharp along the sidewalk (...) [as she] she ran barefoot through hot sand (p. 286), clearly still sedated and dreamy.

Instances of the latter kind are Margaret, from *The Beautiful Stranger* (a short story that appears in the 1968 collection *Come Along with Me*), a lucid woman who goes to the railroad station to pick up her husband who had been to Boston in a business travel and to take him home. She, however, starts slowly and gradually to get suspicious of the man who has returned thinking that he might not be her husband. At the end, she does not know even who she is any longer, nor where she lives: “the evening was very dark and she could see only the houses going in rows, with more rows beyond them and more rows beyond that, and somewhere a house which was hers, with the beautiful stranger inside, and she lost out [t]here” (JACKSON, 1995, p. 65). There is another Margaret, this time from *Pillar of Salt* (another story featured in *The Lottery and Other Stories*) who sees her mental state coming apart through the tale which culminates with her becoming momentarily paralyzed, like the biblical wife of Lot, amidst a crowd in the busy bustling modern America. And, most importantly for the present purposes, the unnamed protagonist of *The Daemon Lover*, who will be investigated in more detail over the next paragraph. The first Margaret and the nameless bride-to-be in *The Daemon Lover* fit Jackson scholar’s Joan Wylie Hall’s profile for them, the: “unmarried urban woman (...) subject to anxiety and crisis” (1993, p. xiii). Jackson scholar Heather Strempe-Durgin’s critical commentary is true for all three characters; she explains that “as the stor[ies] progress, readers sense [the character’s] ever-increasing nervousness (2009, p. 15).

In *The Daemon Lover*, the main character, “presumably living in the United States in the late 1940s” (STREMPKE-DURGIN, 2009, p. 6), begins the story leaving a doubt in the reader’s mind. She wakes up alone – that much is sufficiently established –, but possibly she had gone to sleep with her fiancé. Casting this assumption aside and returning to the extent of

the certainties provided by the narrator, the reader learns that the woman assuredly had not slept well, for she had woken up and gotten back to sleep a number of times during the night: “remembering over and over” (p. 9) the narrator does not say what. One can assume it is the engagement circumstances, however, this inference can only be drawn further down the story, ergo, at this point, the reader cannot possibly know. What is interesting is that she is intermittently “slipping again into a feverish dream” (p. 9) – a remark which is not only the trigger for a sufficiently ambiguous understanding of the events that are to come, but also that securely places the protagonist in the *dazed women* category of the SJJ, fed by “the fantasy that arises from the gentle crumbling of reality” (HALSBAND, 1949, p. 19).

According to scholar Jerry Wadden, the frustrations and individual rages of Jackson’s characters led them to seek refuge in imaginary worlds. He contends that: “people are forced to search for love and happiness in fantasy when these goals are impossible in the real world” (1970, p. 1). Curiously, many of Jackson's worlds of fiction were not exactly pleasant; and that is curious but not surprising, since the message she was probably trying to convey was that life in that moment of the twentieth century she lived in was not exactly pleasant for a woman: “*The Daemon Lover* in particular (...) critique[s] a society that fails to protect women from becoming victims of strangers or neighbors” (WERLOCK, 2010, p. 162). Her works painted a sensitive and accurate picture of those times: “Man's inhumanity to man--the apathy of parents, the cruelty of society, the perversion of human values--screams that her view of the world in the twentieth century was distressingly realistic (WADDEN, 1970, p. 71).

To Jackson, the woman’s escape is not permanent, and insanity *is* a way out; though admittedly counterfeit. She questions the quality of life that remains after the battles are fought; which is true for the characters Eleanor Vance, Merricat and Aunt Fanny, the respective protagonists of the novels *The Haunting of Hill House* (1959), *We Have Always Lived in the Castle* (1962) and *The Sundial* (1958).

Jackson produced an assortment of texts that explore the relationship between women and their society and how that relationship may or may not lead to madness. In her plots, several of her female characters seek to come to terms with society and with the patriarchal system that so often subdues them and, when all else fails, they sort of seek mental illness as a means of escape. By internalizing the oppression they cannot overcome, they try to find a way of dealing with it. In their struggles, these characters sometimes not only lose their sanity, but often their identities and themselves (as Margaret did in *The Beautiful Stranger*). To Noack: “the frustrations and individual rages of the characters [Jackson] creates are both horrifying

and frighteningly familiar to those who have experienced the kinds of domination and problems described in her books (1994, p. 61).

Back in *The daemon Lover*, the protagonist, after getting up, spends almost an hour over coffee. The reader learns that the original intention was to have “a real breakfast *on the way*” (p. 9, my italics) – though the destination is not revealed. She then decides to use the spare time to write a letter to her sister to inform her about the upcoming wedding. She tells the sisters that she herself is not yet accustomed to the idea of being married and that the circumstances that led to this are even stranger – the reader again does not know what she meant by *stranger* but can only assume that is nothing fundamentally out of the ordinary but rather involving some uncanny coincidence or something of the sort. To Jackson Scholar Heather Strempe-Durgin: “In a letter written to her sister, the fiancée expresses disbelief that anyone would want to marry her” and “is surprised, and even expects her sister to be surprised, by the strange notion that anyone would want to marry her.” (2009, p. 15-16).

Interestingly the sister is an off-stage character who would be in the receiving-end of a message and therefore not in a position to attest or verify information in this story. As a matter of fact, the third-person narrator is so subordinate and trustful of the insights and discernment of the point-of-view character to the point of being dependent, almost unsustainable – which is not unusual for the author’s narrators, who have a sort of tradition of being unreliable. Jackson scholar Daryl Hattenhauer described this narrative trace stating that: “the third person narration looks so thoroughly through the protagonist’s perception that the narrator reports on the protagonist’s delusions as if they are verifiable” (2003, p. 35). Still according to him, the consequence of this is that the narration ends up fashioning a tantamount illusion in both the protagonist’s mind and the reader’s mind. Rosemary Jackson explains that “the uncertain vision of the protagonist of the fantastic is spread to the reader through a conflation of narrator and hero” (1981, p. 30), which is quite adequate to this case, with the exception that the author does not overtly use any other feature of the fantastic in this story.

The protagonist, apparently for no apparent reason, decides against sending the letter and tears it. She then spends a considerable amount of time choosing a dress to wear when, in the meantime, she comments “I’ll have a headache if I don’t get some solid food soon (...) all this coffee, smoking too much, no real breakfast” (p. 10). The headache is a potential precursor to the stupor that befalls women in the *dazed* category of the SJL.

As *The Daemon Lover* continues, the dowdy woman goes into the bathroom closet and gets an aspirin from a tin box – an action that may also go unnoticed to the novice reader but

that may be symptomatic of some greater pathological state considering the characters' history of chemical abuse. Out of a sudden, in horror she realizes that she had forgotten to put clean sheets on the bed – another obsession similar to that of Clara Spencer from *The Tooth*, i.e, the domestic theme of compulsive tidiness and cleanliness.

In the tale under scrutiny, the reader learns that the protagonist saw “the laundry was freshly back and she took clean sheets and pillow cases from the top shelf of the closet and stripped the bed, working quickly to avoid thinking consciously of why she was changing the sheets” (p. 10) – the theme of female subservience may be approached there as well, as her action may be construed (as it has been before in NOACK, 1994) as a reaction to the male dominance, in this case, the obsession with order and extreme organization in the house with the purpose of servicing and pleasing the husband (whether or not upon his request or forced by his imperious order). This idea of pathological spruceness is also found in character David Turner from *Like Mother Used to Make* (yet another story that features in *The Lottery and Other Stories*). The following passage does not only portraits David's anguish to be rid of the people who are in his apartment but also the psychological transfer of his woe to the obsessive tidiness and orderliness of his china and silverware:

First the forks all went together into the little grooves which held two forks each – later, when the set was complete, each groove would hold four forks – and then the spoons, stacked up neatly one on top of another in their own grooves, and the knives in even order, all facing the same way, in the special tape in the lid of the box (p. 38).

In turn, the passage reflects the author's confessed obsession with domestic work (OPPENHEIMER, 1988). It is as if David is using his organization as a mechanism of defense to block the reality of what is going on in his cherished apartment. In the SJL, when physical organization reflects the character's mental organization, a tidy room mirrors a sane character, and the opposite is also true, i.e., a messy apartment is an echo of a character with a disturbed mind. Upset peoples and places yield unreliable and delusive stories, which, in turn, dangerously play with the reader's potential interpretations of them.

Back in *The Daemon Lover*, when the woman looks at the clock and ascertains that it is already past nine o'clock, she begins to hurry: “she took a bath, and used one of the clean towels, which she put into the hamper and replaced with a clean one” (p. 10-11) – one more instance to corroborate the cleanliness element of the SJL and one more example of the male subservience element can be found in the following passage:

The blue dress was certainly decent, and clean, and fairly becoming, but she had worn it several times with Jamie, and there was nothing about it which made it

special for a wedding day. The print dress was overly pretty, and new to Jamie, and yet wearing such a print this early in the year was certainly rushing the season (p. 11).

Still undecided about what to wear she thinks about going shopping for something suitable when she realizes it is close to ten o'clock and she will only have time to hair and make-up. It is remarkable how much of herself the author transfers to her characters, thus the pervasiveness of the author's self-figure in the SJL. The narrator comments about the character's pallor and the lines around the eyes. It is known that in real life Shirley herself looked much older than she really was in the later life some years before she died at age 48. Jackson has pictures of her in her forties of what looks like an elderly woman; she had alcohol and tobacco to thank for that. The protagonist in *The Daemon Lover* is thirty-four years old, though it says thirty on her driving license – and even that is a reflection of Shirley's issues with real age, for though she was born in 1916, she often produced her date of birth as 1919, so as not to seem older than her husband Stanley who was indeed born in 1919.

She heated the coffee for the third time now – harbingers of compulsive behavior – and still unsatisfied she accepted her impotence at improvement. Reconciled with the way she were, she tried to think of her fiancé but failed to picture his face on her mind: “she cannot remember his physical features, his face, etc. (...) but the sense that he loves her is still there (NØRJORDET, 2005, p. 52); something very significant as one of the first most important clues in weighing the reality of his existence:

Settled, she tried to think of Jamie and could not see his face clearly, or hear his voice. It is always that way with someone you love, she thought, and let her mind slip past today and tomorrow, into the farther future, when Jamie was established with his writing and she had given up her job, the golden house-in-the-country future (p. 12).

It should not be a coincidence that Stanley Edgar Hyman, Jackson's actual husband, was a literary critic – as close to the writer in the passage as it can get – and that Shirley dreamt of living this American dream described in the passage above (OPPENHEIMER, 1988).

The fiancé that goes by the name of Jamie in the story is the cornerstone for one of the most important connections to be made concerning the SJL. The ultimate thematic concurrence, that which binds (and feeds) almost all stories in the collection *The Lottery and Other Stories* (2005) which, by the way, was originally subtitled *The Adventures of James Harris*, alluding to the delusive and untrustworthy role played by the demon James Harris – a.k.a. Jamie – in several of the stories of that collection.

In the SJJ, Harris, much like the devil in traditional Christian mythology, mixes truths with lies and reality with pretence to confound his victims (see *The Witch*). He is the epitome of the trickster figure, the soul of delusiveness and unreliability. To an extent, the outcome is often unpredictable – though the experienced Jackson reader knows that something bad, no matter how small, will necessarily ensue as a result of his mere presence. In many instances he has the power of piercing through the characters' minds (both male and female) and reading their thoughts (see *Seven Types of Ambiguity* and *The Renegade* – both featured in *The Lottery and Other Stories*): “Jackson will use Harris to figure women's illusions (HATTENHAUER, 2003, p. 35). He is cunning to the point of manipulating dreams, desires and expectations. He enters and destroys, generally with vile and detestable aftereffects.

This is the fiancé the protagonist is preparing to see in the story presently under scrutiny, where it is ten thirty in the morning. The woman dials for the time delivered over the phone and hears the operator's metallic voice saying ten-twenty-nine, however: “half-consciously she set her clock back a minute” (p. 12) the night before, a piece of information which provides the reader with potentially misguiding information. The events that take place the previous day with her fiancé must have been real, since the *present* telephone call corroborates the disparate time between her clock and the *real* time of the story, nonetheless, her doing the changing happened half-consciously, which brings doubt as to whether those events really happened or the time given over the phone was simply different from the time displayed in her watch – which should not be considered uncommon – and, in this case, *yesterday*, as she recalls, may not have happened at all. The drowsy state she finds herself in brings incongruities and raises questions in the best delusive and unreliable Jackson style.

It is eleven o'clock already and Jamie had not showed up. There is nothing to eat in the apartment and the woman is having coffee again – the effects of the lack of food are serious candidates for the dazed feeling that seem to hover over the character and the excessive ingestion of caffeine is liable of increasing the foggy state she finds herself in. Yet, one cannot help but question the potential ambiguity in ingesting high amounts of a stimulant such as coffee and, at the same time, being in a state of languor and lethargy. This supports the previously mentioned unreliability of the narrator which, according Hattenhauer, “begins to emerge with the report that the protagonist drinks a lot of coffee and yet falls asleep” and he adds that “while it is possible to drink coffee and fall asleep, the ambiguity of that report seems to be a result of the narrator's immersion in the protagonist's mind” (2003, p.35).

She expects him home at any minute now. All the food that there actually is in the house is unopened and she wants to keep it that way for she is saving for the honeymoon-

breakfast the following day, however: “by eleven-thirty she was so dizzy and weak that she had to go downstairs” (p. 13). A few minutes before she had thought about going downstairs to a drugstore to find something to eat and leaving a note on the door in case he arrived. She feared he would find the apartment alone and not know where she had gone. The thought was rejected. She also considered calling him but Jamie – importantly – had no phone, so she finally decides to go with the recently rejected decision. The fact that he has no phone is in itself another substantial clue in the weighing of the decision for or against his existence in this story.

By eleven-thirty she is so weak that she has no other choice but to go downstairs to buy food, which strengthens her unreliability. While leaving the note she stains her fingers with ink from the pen that leads her to wash her hands and to dry them in a clean towel she then replaces – bolstering the obsession with cleanliness of the SJL. In the drugstore she cannot find anything to eat that pleases her so she asks for more coffee, in turn reinforcing the addictive substance abuse of the SJL – a harbinger of unreliable manners of conduct. Upon finding no one at the apartment, the message untouched and all, she sits down and falls asleep only to wake up startled at twenty to one – once again alternating between lethargic-sleep and waking-stupor – augmenting the unreliable behavior.

She leaves the apartment and takes a taxi to Jamie’s address. During the ride she “suddenly realized how imprudent it would be to drive brazenly up to Jamie’s door, demanding him” (p. 14). Because of that thought she asks the taxi driver to let her off on the corner of the target destination. Though she knows where the place is, the reader learns from the narrator that she had never been there before and that: “the building was pleasant and old, and Jamie’s name was not on any of the mailboxes in the vestibule, nor on the door bells” (P. 14) – which clearly argues against his existence and is not atypical of the James Harris persona in the SJL. Whatsmore, the fact that the bride-to-be has never been to her fiancé’s apartment is also evidence to help question his existence.

Upon confirming that she is in the correct address, she rings the superintendent’s number and is let in. In the corridor, a door opens at a distance and a voice offers assistance without much enthusiasm. It is a man on his shirtsleeves. The protagonist explains she is looking for a person who lived there, one James Harris – and here is where the reader has access for the first time to Jamie’s full name. The man does not know who this Harris person is and asks a woman inside his apartment who also claims there is no one under that name living in the building and that the enquirer might have the wrong address: “sorry”, the man said “you got the wrong house, lady (...) or the wrong man”. He and the woman laugh; a little

pun Jackson's plays on the reader, but even though comical in effect, it is no less relevant than the others as a hints of the fiancé's (non)existence. Furthermore, their laughter is also quite significant for it would not be the last time people will laugh at her – laughing at women (especially when done by men) is another recurring element from the SJL: "*The Daemon Lover* is a demonstration of the extent to which oppressive systems can be internalized and an investigation into the psychological damage that such internalized hegemony does" (STREMPKE-DURGIN, 2009, p. 7).

As the couple was about to close the door, the protagonist insisted and the woman still inside the apartment asked for a description of this Harris person, to which it was replied: "he's rather tall, and fair. He wears a blue suit very often. He's a writer" (p. 15). This description confirms Jamie as the James Harris of the SJL with all common characteristics attributed to him since the first moment of his appearance in the short story *The Intoxicated* (also from *The Lottery and Other Stories*). In it, Harris is described as: "a tall, graceful man in a blue suit" (p. 8).

In *The Daemon Lover*, after having heard Harris's description, the woman from the apartment hypothesizes that they *could* be talking about a man who lived on the third floor: "there was a fellow (...) he wore a blue suit a lot, lived on the third floor for a while (...) he stayed there about a month" (p. 16), whatsmore, she sends the inquirer to talk to the Roysters, the couple who rented the room to the elusive tenant. The protagonist goes to the third floor without knowing what apartment number to look for when she hears music coming from inside apartment door 3B; she also hears voices. She knocks on the door and Dottie Royster opens. The questing woman explains she is looking for Mr. Harris, the person who had previously occupied her apartment. "O Lord" Mrs. Royster exclaims twice and calls for her husband, Ralph, who is of no assistance. In an altercating manner, Mr. Royster ends the conversation. His wife informs the woman that the tenant had left that very morning and that: "everything was fine, though, perfectly fine (...) not a thing out of place (...) everything just the way we left it" (p. 18). Through Mrs. Royster's assertion that nothing had been altered, the narrator increases the idea of Jamie's nonexistence.

The failing bride-to-be leaves the building not knowing what to do. She thinks about reconstructing Jamie's footsteps from his apartment to hers and inquires to herself what choices had he possibly made. With that, the reader learns that the woman does not know the man she is looking for all that well, what stresses the idea that perhaps it is all in her mind. Attempting to retrace Jamie's steps, she asks a man behind a counter in a delicatessen on the way between his house and hers but finds no help. She asks yet another man at a newsstand

but once more is met with no assistance. Both men treat her with disdain and insolence and laugh at her when she leaves; as previously mentioned, a characteristic of men in the streets, or rather from anywhere in the SJL. She asks a third time to a (male) florist whom she hopes have seen a tall man in a blue suit; she hoped Jamie had bought her flowers that morning. The florist is positive that a man with the description she provided bought chrysanthemums around ten o'clock. She thinks the buyer the florist is referring to might not be her fiancé because a wedding is not an occasion where chrysanthemums are brought to. Be that as it may, the florist does not escape the fresh male profile from the SJL; his last words to the hopeful young woman are: "I hope you find your young man" (p. 23), but he delivers it with a *nasty sound*, according to the narrator. Her next thought is to resort to the police and this is how the author puts it:

There was a policeman on the corner, and she thought, Why don't I go to the police—you go to the police for a missing person. And then thought, What a fool I'd look like. She had a quick picture of herself standing in a police station, saying, 'Yes, we were going to be married today, but he didn't come,' and the policemen, three or four of them standing around listening, looking at her, at the print dress (...) smiling at one another." (p. 23).

This smile certainly does not imply sympathy nor compassion, but rather mockery and derision. In her mind she imagined telling the policemen she acknowledged how silly that was, after all she was all dressed up trying to find the man who had run away from her on her wedding day.

The protagonist finally discards the *police idea*. On the way back to her own apartment (there was a distance of about six blocks between his building and hers) she stops at a shoeshine stand and enquires to an old man that worked there about the tall man in a blue suit; now adding that he was carrying flowers. To her surprise, his answer was affirmative, that is, he had seen a fellow with that description and he did stop by around ten o'clock that morning. The old man said: "I remember I thought, You're going to see your girl, young fellow. They all go to see their girls" (p. 24). The reader ought to realize that although this is good news for the enquirer, the old man involuntarily lets out (emphasizing) that this is a quite common affair. This means that chances are that it was not the man she was looking for, even though the morning customer *did* fit the description the woman provided. The narrator does not highlight this tricky probability, though. Jackson's ambiguity is ingenious, however:

the tantalizing possibility remains – that the incident of the courtship of the character of Harris are a product of the lady's anxious imagination; for the reader has never met him; no one seems to know him or – considering the many young men who might be wearing blue suits – has never seen him (FRIEDMAN, 1975, p. 51).

With the information provided by the old man at the shoeshine stand, the protagonist is now certain in her mind that when she arrives home Jamie will be there waiting for her, so she rushes home almost running in the last three blocks. She runs upstairs to find nothing but an empty apartment. Frustrated and back on the street, she asks the shoeshine man once again, and he points to the last direction he had seen the man. She follows his direction to the street where there is a house with a woman at the window rocking a baby to sleep. The protagonist enquires, already proficient at the question by this point, if the lady had not seen this man carrying flowers. A twelve year old boy who had been listening to the conversation answers affirmatively. The boy says that the man gave him a quarter and said it was a big day for him. This boy had followed the man in order to receive the promised quarter so he knew where the man had gone to. The protagonist gives him a dollar and asks him to point in that direction. The boy says: “top floor (...) I followed him till he give me the quarter. Way to the top (...) You gonna divorce him? (...) You gonna divorce him, missus? You got something on him?” (p. 26). The boy asks this same question repeatedly. Leaving the boy screaming about the divorce and the mother laughing at her, the narrator goes to the said building and finds the outer door unlocked. As it can be observed, the laughter directed to potentially delusional characters is a recurrent image stemming not only from male characters. Minor characters laugh at the protagonist as if to mock her, to ridicule her, to call her crazy, and perhaps that last one is the most powerful image the author wishes to impinge upon the reader: “everywhere she searches she encounters couples who mock her with not-so-subtle insinuations that she is crazy” (GOLD, 2010, p. 162).

There were no bells on the building and no list of names at the vestibule. The protagonist goes upstairs and sees two doors. There was a crumpled florist’s paper in front of one of the doors and a knotted paper ribbon – as if the final clues in a mad treasure hunt.

She knocked, and thought she heard voices inside, and she thought, suddenly with terror, What shall I say if Jamie is there, if he comes to the door? The voices seemed suddenly still. She knocked again and there was silence, except for something that might have been laughter far away (p. 27).

Her concern was certainly justified – What *do* you say to the person who has run from you at your wedding day? The fact that there were voices and, upon knocking, the voices disappeared is in accordance to the behavior of one who wishes to hide. Hearing voices is also ultimately a sign of schizophrenia or, in more lay terms, of being crazy – one of the images that the author may wish the reader to come to question as the story progresses. The laughter

not only enhances the theory that questions the protagonist's sanity but also reiterates the mischievousness and the devilry associated to the James Harris character.

The protagonist is sane enough to reason in her mind that Jamie could have seen her as she was approaching the building since the window of that apartment faces the front of the structure, and the little boy made sufficient a scandal raising his voice and asking her those ominous questions about divorce.

She waited a little longer in silence and knocked again. There was just silence. She then decides to go to the other, the remaining door and knock on it. It swings open to reveal an empty attic, filled with nothing but bags of plaster, piles of old newspapers, a broken trunk: “there was a noise which she suddenly realized as a rat, and then she saw it, sitting very close to her, near the wall, its evil face alert, bright eyes watching her” (p. 27). The appearance of the rat is reminiscent of that in Bram Stoker's 1891 short story *The Judges's House* which displayed a “great rat with baleful eyes” (1992, p. 42) that would “disappear through a hole (...) on the wall” (1992, p. 39). To Jackson scholar Lenemaja Friedman, Harris is “indeed a demonic creature” who “pursues thirtyish females (...) *appearing and disappearing at will*” (1975, p. 51, my italics).

The story ends with the protagonist certain that there is someone inside that apartment because she knew she could hear low voices and sometimes laughter. The following days and weeks she returns but: “no matter how often or how firmly she knocked, no one ever came to the door” (p. 28). The reader is left without a definitive answer as to the fiancé's existence and perhaps still questioning the poor woman's sanity – and this is Shirley at her best: “Jackson has cleverly built suspense through the complicated search so that the reader is almost as anxious as the unfortunate lady to discover what is behind the closed door” (FRIEDMAN, 1975, p. 51) even though Harris “seems (...) unwilling to form an alliance with [the] desperate woman” and leaves her “dreaming about her future (...) and looking forward to meeting him” (NØRJORDET, 2005, p. 52).

The SJL itself offers some possibilities: “indeed at the end of the story she may well have become insane; the narrative is ambiguous on this point. Critics at the time the story was published were fairly certain of her diagnosis: As she grows more desperate and searches more frantically, we realize that she is suffering from a delusion” (HALSBAND, 1949, p. 19). Approximately sixty years later, critical opinions have changed: “significantly (...) if the nameless woman has indeed lost her mind, it is James who is responsible” (GOLD, 2010, p. 162). The dichotomies sane-insane for the distraught lady and real-unreal for her evasive groom are not necessarily applicable as such:

The protagonist of “The Daemon Lover” is not mad, nor does James Harris seem to exist like every other human being: he is both and neither, since he is physical enough to (probably) have made love to her, and metaphysical enough to never leave a trace and evade the senses. He clearly exists very much in the protagonist’s mind, but that does not necessarily mean that she is mad. Neither natural nor supernatural, then, he is a being somewhere “between here and there” (NØRJORDET, 2005, p. 44).

Quite open-ended, *The Daemon Lover* “deal[s] with the demon lover motif (...) without providing the closure one might expect” (NØRJORDET, 2005, p. 69). On the other hand, the mythical narrative of James Harris suggests that the fiancé will later return to claim his betrothed (as it happens in Child’s Ballad No. 243 and in Irish writer Elizabeth Bowen’s short story *The Demon Lover*). Along with Katherine Anne Porter, Elizabeth Bowen has been ranked by Jackson as one of the best contemporary short story writers (GOLD, 2010).

### **Final considerations**

The story that can be simply summed up as the misadventures of a “single woman (...) who sets off in search of the fiancé who abandoned her on the morning they were to be married (and may not, in fact, ever have existed)” (ARMITAGE & SCHWARZMAN, 2009, p. 1) is far from being simple, as a matter of fact: “[*The Daemon Lover*] is actually quite sophisticated (...) one of Jackson’s most haunting pieces” (STREMPKE-DURGIN, 2009, p. 6).

A significant number of thematic elements that constitute the Shirley Jackson Lore manifest through barely tangible means. In this sense, the novice Jackson reader cannot have access to them if not for the careful harvesting of elements that should take place during the reading of the author’s other stories.

Within the SJL, the unnamed lady in *The Daemon Lover* “is one of many Jackson characters who have failed in their youthful aspirations (...) and now face a mundane, repetitive, *entropic* life” (HATTENHAUER, 2003, p. 32, my italics). The other observation, on a more gentle and inspiring note, is that women like her in the SJL also “adjust to a life that has become a series of disappointments, [and] they are not yet ready to recognize themselves as failures” (FRIEDMAN, 1975, p. 63). To the former observation one can accept that the life of the protagonist does demonstrate signs of entropy, of decay, of collapse, of deterioration. As for the latter, the idea of not recognizing oneself as a failure might account for the woman’s persistence, regardless of being possibly misguided, in trying to find her betrothed. Even the namelessness of the character is consistent with the SJL because, “just as

she remains unknown to the reader, she is unable to know her fiancé” (REISCH, 2001, p. 22). Sadly but truly, her quest has been referred to elsewhere as a journey “into darkness” (HALL, 1993, p. 18), and this seems to be the only faith one can expect to when searching for a dishonest, devious, crafty demon who is able to “figure women’s illusions” (HATTENHAUER, 2003, p. 35).

The meanings and the messages are *there*, like Poe’s purloined letter, hidden in plain sight, on the surface of the texts, nonetheless, not even the most proficient of readers can access them without being familiar with Jackson’s other texts. It is also important to realize that these are not simply recurring thematic elements, more than that, they may radically alter one’s perception of a story. Jackson’s texts have been accused of simple, of having no depths, and therefore, would not bear rereading (BLOOM, 2001). Arguably, the very lack of accuracy and the deception that ensues are the very elements that lay the foundations that provide depth and stability to Jackson’s fiction and balance and cohesion to her lore.

## References

- ARMITAGE, Robert & SCHWARZMAN, Stephen A.. Some Thoughts on Shirley Jackson. Biblio File. *New York Public Library*. Dec 1, 2009. Available at: <<http://www.nypl.org/blog/2009/12/01/some-thoughts-shirley-jackson>>. Accessed on: 28 Dec 2011.
- BLOOM, Harold. *Shirley Jackson: Bloom's Major Short Story Writers*. Broomall, PA: Chelsea House Publishers, 2001.
- FRIEDMAN, Lenemaja. *Shirley Jackson*. New York: Twayne Publishers, 1975.
- GOLD, Harriet P. The Daemon Lover. In: WERLOCK, Abby H. P. *The Facts on File Companion to the American Short Story*. New York: Infobase Publishing, 2010.
- HAGUE, Angela. A Faithful Anatomy of Our Times: Reassessing Shirley Jackson. *Frontiers: A Journal of Women Studies*, No. 26, Issue 2, pp. 73-96, 2005.
- HALL, Joan Wylie. *Shirley Jackson: A Study of the Short Fiction*. New York: Twayne Publishers, 1993.
- HATTENHAUER, Darryl. *Shirley Jackson's American Gothic*. Albany: State University of New York Press, 2003.
- JACKSON, Rosemary. *Fantasy: The literature of Subversion*. London: Methuen, 1981.
- JACKSON, Shirley. *The Lottery and Other Stories*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2005.
- NOACK, Jennifer. *Shirley Jackson: escaping the patriarchy through insanity*. Unpublished master's dissertation (American literature). Charleston, IL: Eastern Illinois University, 1994, 78p.
- NØRJORDET, Håvard. *The tall man in the blue suit: witchcraft, folklore and reality in Shirley Jackson's "The Lottery, or the Adventures of James Harris"*. Unpublished master's thesis (American literature). Oslo, Norway: The University of Oslo, 2005, 144p.
- OPPENHEIMER, Judy. *Private Demons: The Life of Shirley Jackson*. New York: Putnam, 1988.
- REINSCH, Paul N. *A Critical Bibliography of Shirley Jackson, American Writer (1919-1965): Reviews, Criticism, Adaptations*. Studies in American Literature. Vol. 45. Lewiston: Edwin Mellen Publishing, 2001.
- STOKER, Bram. The Judge's House. In: GRAFTON, John (ed.). *Great Ghost Stories*. New York: Dover Thrift Editions, 1992.

STREMPKE-DURGIN, Heather D. *Patriarchal Power and Punishment: The Trickster Figure in the Short Fiction of Shirley Jackson, Flannery O'Connor, and Joyce Carol Oates*  
Unpublished master's thesis (American literature). Corvallis: Oregon State University, 2009,  
75p.

Recebido em março de 2012.

Aceito em abril de 2012.