

Shirley Jacksons writing style essay

[Literature](#), [Books](#)



Classic English Literature

Shirley Hardie Jackson, a remarkable and popular American author of the 20th century, was born on December 14th, 1916. Shirley Jackson was the daughter of two professionals Leslie Hardie Jackson and Geraldine Bugbee Jackson. From a very young age she had interest in writing and wrote poems and journals, where her journal writing mostly revealed her interest in superstitions and the supernatural. A statement written in a journal in the 1933 New Year's resolution stated, "seek out the good in others rather than explore for the evil" exposes her interests. At the age of fourteen, she and her family moved to New York, where she studied in the University of Rochester, but due to her dissatisfaction she dropped out and continued to develop her writing career. She developed a routine to write at least a thousand words on a daily basis. After a year she went to Syracuse University, where she was influenced by James G. Frazer's anthropology *The Golden Bough*- this can be seen in her narrations. Both her fiction and nonfiction writings were published in the university's magazines. This is where her career as a writer developed and she wrote a number of stories after graduating from the University in 1940. Her first story that was published nationwide was "My Life With R. H. Macy."

Shirley is considered a skilled writer of stories following the gothic genre. The constituent of horror including paranormal activities are described extremely well with the use of simple characters and backgrounds. For instance her story *The Haunting of Hill House* (1962) is considered fantastic and highlights indefinable allegories, where as in the stories, *Hangsaman*

(1951), *The Road Through the Wall* (1948) and *The Bird's Nest* (1954) you will find events taking place around characters that are young and abnormal. Moreover, *The Witchcraft of Salem Village* (1956); *The Bad Children* (1959) a play, and *Nine Magic Wishes* (1963) are childish.

Shirley in spite of being skilled as a gothic writer, wrote stories which had irony and black hilarity. According to Martha Ragland in "Dictionary of Literary Biography", due to Shirley's dark narrations she became known as 'literary sorceress' an author with a special ability for "the bizarre, a creator of psychological thrillers, an adroit master of effect and suspense." Mary Kittredge explains that she found the book 'The Sundial' showing Jackson's comic style of writing fiction. However it also reflects gothic genre in the setting which is the "mad masquerade party". She wrote more humorous books, such as "Life Among Savages" and "Raising Demons" which portrays the social structure and ups and downs of family lives.

Her writing style is admired by many critics in the present era; nonetheless, many writers are influenced by her work, for instance, Stephen King whose admiration and respect led to improve writing style, Nigel Kneale, writer of many screen plays and novels, and Richard Matheson, an author of masterpieces such as, "I Am a Legend", "Somewhere in Time" and "Winter Dreams May Come". Her husband a literary critic, Stanley Edgar Hyman once described that his wife, "wrote in a variety of forms and styles because she was, like everyone else, a complex human being, confronting the world in many different roles and moods." Furthermore her work includes a variety of short stories, novels and autobiographical books.

The most famous writing of Shirley Jackson was the short story "The Lottery" which was published in 1948. It was a classic of the time and the horror described by her in this story portrayed strange mental behavior. It shows the evil minds of humans and savagery because it discussed an event taking place publicly where a woman was stoned to death by the community, which was otherwise shown as a peaceful place. This event gives the readers a shock and highlights Shirley's dispassionate style of writing narratives. This story, "The Lottery" by Jackson was included in "Prize Stories" in the year 1949. (Ragland)

"The Lottery" has received a variety of comments from the readers, some who read it with an old-fashioned perspective showing disgust towards the ending whereas others considered it as a "modern-day parable" because Shirley has dealt with various issues of modern character, and hence arouses the readers to reflect on the situation and leaves space for arguments. Lenemaja Friedman says, "three main characteristics dominated the letters: bewilderment, speculation, and old-fashioned abuse."

Most of Jackson's works were best sellers and mostly critics appreciated her versatile writing style. Lynette Carpenter, a critic says that Shirley's work got less criticism because of the inability to "reconcile traditional male critics with gender." Another critic Mary Kittrege, emphasized, "Whether in her domestic comedies or her stories and novels of psychological horror, [Jackson] combined acute observation with absolute mastery of tone and clarity of expression."

Shirley's last narrative was a novel, "We Have Always Lived in the Castle", which was selected for a National Book Award, and till now is the most highly praised book. It is a book which shows the mental behavior, seclusion and wickedness- including black magic leading to an uncertain fate of the main characters. The story revolves around two sisters whose family was murdered, and the neighbors believe it was the older sister, Constance, who had committed the murder. However, Constance knew that Mericot, the younger sister had poisoned the family with arsenic due to her superstitions and abnormality. Mericot's plan to kill Charles, their cousin who was infatuated by Constance, results in fire that burnt down the house. The neighbors with hatred wreck the house instead of saving it; however, the two sisters save themselves by taking refuge in the kitchen, with some cups and spoon. Some neighbors who were provoked by their conscience used to leave food for the girls on the doorstep; however, the readers are left to think of their fate not knowing how long will the girls be helped like this. Mericot, as she was not normal was satisfied because she had Constance with her which was her desire and says, "We're on the moon at last". Jackson through her novel described the violence and psychological behavior not only of Mericot but also of the neighbors who instead of saving the girls destroy their house. Jackson however shows that Mericot is a child with psychological problems yet her childish behavior in the story where she shares that she hates cleaning herself up, makes the reader smile. Lynette Carpenter talks about the story in "Frontiers: A Journal of Woman Studies", that it is Jackson's "most radical statement on the causes and consequences

of female victimization and alienation, a theme that runs throughout her work." (Ragland)

Shirley Jackson's Stories have been compiled into a book published by the Library of America under the name " Shirley Jackson: Novels and Stories". This raises questions and Newsweek critic; Malcolm Jones asks Library of America, " Shirley Jackson?" he wrote, " A writer most famous for one short story, " The Lottery." Is Library of America about to jump the shark?" Her writing was mostly informal and " claustrophobic" and she was considered as the writer illustration household nightmare of the inhabitants who were shut in, expelled, seized and pressed in a corner to sag away and were ignored, this was pointed out by Ruth Franklin in his essay for the New Republic.

(Miller)

Ernest Hemingway and Raymond Carver say that Shirley's writing was clear and uncomplicated similar to " Shaker chair", but is nothing like the American writing, because she did not share over-sentimentalism beneath a disguise of patient and uncomplaining practicality. Moreover, according to Patricia Highsmith and Flannery O' Conner, she resembled a British novelist: Murial Spark, and similar to her characters, she never reasonably fitted in.

(Miller)

In order to understand the theme of most of her stories, we need to know that when Jackson was a little girl she used to think that she was " clairvoyant" and had insights into new existences. This is described in most of the stories that she has written. Shirley instead of stating that the world is a strange place, she turns simple situations into horrifying ones without

using supernatural details. However, she discloses the terror of the common world by using a little absurd information, which can be seen in her story "Daemon Lover" in which no supernatural events take place but these are rather illusions of a woman of an apartment. Her skill of converting daily nightmares into stories is worth appreciating.

Shirley died at the age of 48, in 1965 in North Bennington, because of a heart failure in her sleep. She was a heavy smoker and obese and suffered neuroses and psychosomatic diseases throughout her life. The medications that she took for the cure of these illnesses led the way to her early death as their side effects were affecting her health. Due to her writing style and after reading her stories, readers mostly associate her with the story "The Lottery" which got the most responses during her time and up till now. To sum up, readers find her stories quite entertaining because they find the negative image of humanity mainly focusing on the evils of the people, criticism to the social relationships and isolation of people. This leaves the readers uncertain in the end, hence leaving space for debate. Though she wrote these stories many years ago but still they have the modern day relations described in them. Furthermore, her stories have been adapted into other forms such as television films and movies providing evidence of her remarkable and everlasting influence on the readers.

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