

The daemon lover: shirley jackson and the articulation of ambiguity

[Literature](#), [American Literature](#)



Shirley Jackson's short story "The Daemon Lover" is nowhere near as omnipresent in the American zeitgeist as her cautionary tale about conformity taken to its ridiculous extreme, "The Lottery." Nevertheless, in its own modest fashion, "The Daemon Lover" is the equal of its more famous sister story in terms of revealing how Shirley Jackson remains one of the foremost—and most prescient—critics of patriarchal victimization of the female in American society through her singularly impressive talent for articulating the potential for multiple truths to exist in the shadows of ambiguity.

The central female figure in "The Daemon Lover" is one instantly recognizable from a lifetime worth of watching American television; and not just watching the Lifetime Channel. She is in her early 30s, is not particularly beautiful or particularly unattractive and lives a life coincident with her looks: ordinary. Perfectly ordinary. Her nervous preparations for the day ahead in which a young man of interest is at the center is almost worn brittle with its very ordinariness: "Anxiously she pulled through the dress in the closet, and hesitated over a print she had worn the summer before; it was too young for her and it had a ruffled neck, and it was very early in the year for a print dress, but still..." This prosaic description of a woman defined by her mundane existence serves to intensify the unexpected quality of her tale when this typical American woman finds that a tall and handsome man has taken note of whatever extraordinary attributes she possesses that has gone unnoticed by the rest of the world. What does sound like a story that may be the first act of a Lifetime Channel movie appears to go according to a stock template even this young man's shocking entry into her commonplace little

life results in an equally surprising sudden exit. Even the woman's reaction seems almost quaintly predictable as she sits in self-imposed solitary confinement wearing that questionably inappropriate print dress while " she was sitting by the window drinking another cup of coffee" while internal debates rages inside over the final fashion decision: " I could have taken more time over my dressing after all, she thought; but by now he was so late he might come any minute, and she did not dare try to repair anything without starting all over." Eventually, rumination gives way to hysteria at the idea that with the loss of this dream man also comes the loss of all her most image-driven dreams of happily ever after.

And yet, Shirley Jackson is no hack TV writer and " The Daemon Lover" has much bigger fish to fry than what can be easily digested in a soap opera presentation. Keep in mind that this man whom the heroine does admittedly go mental over is basically a phantom. Precious little information is known about him even by the end of the story other than the most elemental of essentials: " He's rather tall, and fair. He wears a blue suit very often. He's a writer." The narrative constituent that allows " The Daemon Lover" to transcend its seeming mundane melodramatic narrative is the reaction from those she turns toward for answers and the universal emotional response they display toward her predicament which sows the seeds of ambiguity rather than any absolute truth.

" You got the wrong house, lady, or the wrong guy,"

“ Now how many men in blue suits go past here every day, lady? You think I got nothing to do but—“

“ Madam. Really, you must realize that unless I have something to go on. I simply can't.”

And that's how it goes with each person she reaches out to for help in tracking down the elusive tall writer in the blue suit. “ Going on up the street she thought, Everyone thinks it's so funny: and she pulled her coat tighter around her, so that only the ruffle around the bottom of the print dress was showing.” Yes, truly, everyone's reaction is slightly off so that not it is not just a question of thinking the whole situation is funny funny, but also funny sad or funny tragic or funny crazy. She must be crazy somehow and, more likely than not, this Jamie Harris she is desperately looking for never existed except in her imagination.

The levels at which Jackson is working her literary magic goes deep. On one level, she has created a very strange and maddening version of Frankenstein: Jamie Harris is very much a creature fashioned from the mind of her protagonist since she appears to be the only one whose description of Jamie fits her description of Jamie. On another level, Jackson has created a sublime and acutely subtle portrayal of repressed sexuality breaking from its chains in the woman's subconscious and clawing its way into not only her own consciousness, but the consciousness of those around her. Still another way of interpreting what Jackson might be after here takes the idea of repression into another dimension entirely: on the verge of actually getting

to live out the happily ever after, it is the bride who has taken a powder, not the groom. Only in her case, her disappearance is from reality, not the physical manifestations of reality one refers to as their life.

The real mystery awaiting the reader at the conclusion of “ The Daemon Lover” is not just whether Jamie Harris is the one making noises inside that apartment, but whether Jamie Harris ever existed at all. What elevates Jackson’s story to the sphere of art is that answering the questions it leaves open is utterly beside the point. Is the woman insane? Is Jamie Harris a demonically cruel lover? Is he in the apartment or has she gone bats in the belfry? Any and all of these things may be true or not, but Jackson clearly had no interest in providing any tangible clues to guide the reader one way or the other.

The bigger fish that Jackson has to fry deal with the nature of ambiguity in fiction and in life. If a reader chooses to close the story on the firm belief that the woman has been made totally bonkers by a real man without much more character than his description, that is a perfectly reasonable interpretation. If a reader wants to assume that this woman was nuts from the start and this is the reason she can offer no better description of him than tall, handsome and wearing a blue suit, well, that seems perfectly reasonable as well.

Both are potentially cogent truths. Neither are absolute truths. The ambiguous nature of the tale is central to its form, structure and narrative. Jackson provides only enough information about the woman’s hysterical reaction to being jilted on her wedding day to make multiple interpretations

logical and coherent. "The Daemon Lover" thus becomes a lesson in the art of articulating truth in fiction through ambiguity. The low voices and laughter that the woman swears she hears in the apartment as the story draws to a close suggests that Jackson's interest in creating a masterpiece of ambiguity may have more than a little to do with her own corrosive critique of a society too eager to view women as hysterical simply for demanding a reasonable explanation.