

Occult Influences in Shirley Jackson's *The Lottery*

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Demons, ghosts, and witches seem synonymous with the name Shirley Jackson (1916-1965), a New England author popularly known for her interest in the occult. However, Jackson's connection to the supernatural is perhaps one of the most misunderstood aspects of her oeuvre. It is notable that her only novel directly addressing ghosts is *The Haunting of Hill House* (1959). Most of her works that contain references to the paranormal or the magical do it in a way that Emily Dickinson would call "telling it slant." That is, there are hints and implications of the supernatural at work in the background of her stories, creating a common thread of the supernatural and the occult throughout, but these references remain ambiguous; it is never clear if the ghosts, witches, or demons are real. This is especially true of her first book of short stories, *The Lottery, or The Adventures of James Harris* (1949). Each story in the collection makes a "slant" reference to British and American occult phenomena in the form of witchcraft and the devil.

Jackson's use of an ambiguous supernatural connects what modern society views as deeper anthropological and psychological drives behind belief in occult phenomena to situations and events that have repeated and continue to repeat themselves throughout human history, making the New England setting where her stories take place into a microcosm of supernatural possibilities. In these stories, lack of superstition and inability to attach deep meaning to traditions cause the modern mind to interpret demonic and magical presences through logic. These attempts ultimately fail—for Jackson, superstition and belief in the supernatural are powerful and irreplaceable.

Early Influences

Shirley Jackson's interest in the occult and the supernatural spans a period from earliest works to material she was working on at the time of her death. Numerous scholars, from Joan Wylie Hall to Bernice Murphy and Dara Downey have remarked upon the connections between Jackson's interest in demons and witchcraft and her use of paranoia, group hysteria, and the uncanny in her fiction. In fact, both current scholarship and booksellers alike mainly categorize her works as Gothic, horror, or weird fiction.¹

Ruth Franklin, Jackson's biographer, writes that Jackson's interests were played upon by her agents and publishers in order to sell more books. For example, the publicity director responsible for *The Lottery*, Pyke Johnson, made morbid suggestions such as a campaign of

gifting stone paperweights or papers with a black dot on them (Franklin 252).² He also proposed gifting witches' brooms, or cauldrons to readers who bought the book. The publisher did not agree with Jackson on the book's subtitle; Farrar suggested it be called *Notes from a Modern Book of Witchcraft*. These recommendations began a trend of associating *The Lottery* with the occult and the supernatural that extends even to the present.

Several reviews of *The Lottery* from its first publication in 1949 echoed the publishers' sentiments about the relationship between the occult and Jackson's works. The *News-Chronicle* comments upon the darkness of the title story "The Lottery" and states that "the other twenty stories in the book are less grim but equally skilful [*sic*] and even the lightest of them is flavoured with tragedy and a little witchcraft" (Jackson, Reviews 1949). In *Modern Woman*, Jackson's stories were called "very good—witty, well-observed, sometimes rather bloodcurdling in a witchcraft way." *Punch* quotes the publishers' blurb with an enigmatic conclusion that Jackson should keep her work "small": "'Miss Jackson, it is said, is an amateur witch, specializing in black magic on a small scale.' I hope she will succeed in keeping the scale small." *The Lady* review remarked that the characters are "New England people of to-day" who remind us that New Englanders "made witch-hunting a Salem sport long ago." *The Lady* also remarked that Jackson, as an author, possessed a duality "devilish or angelic with equal truth." These reviews clearly show the influence of the publisher's blurb on the reviewers. They also demonstrate that Jackson's use of New England as a universal setting evokes the occult because of its history of as a locus of superstition and persecution.

Some of the magical buzz around Jackson was clearly manufactured by publishers and reviewers, but some of it stemmed from the author's genuine interest. Archival research reveals that her cataloguing of the occult and its connection to abnormal psychology began as an undergraduate at Syracuse University, where she first read Joseph Glanvill's *Saducismus Triumphatus* (1681), the seminal work on witchcraft by Joseph Glanvill that strongly influenced both Cotton Mather's *Discourse on Witchcraft* (1689) and the Salem Witch Trials (1692-3). Not only would she later use epigraphs from Glanvill's work to start each section of *The Lottery*, his work on demonology and witchcraft would inspire her to examine other works on dark magic such as the *Grimorium Verum*, a mystical text that claims to be an authority on contacting demons. Her notebooks and scrapbooks reveal a long-term fascination with the occult from psychological, anthropological, literary, and popular angles. College notebooks begin the collection, and it continues with newspaper and magazine articles on hauntings, ghosts, strange houses, and spooky religious figures as well as interiors and furniture.

Subjective experience (influenced by gender, race, and culture) is significant to occult phenomena, as it is to *The Lottery* and to a great many of Jackson's stories. She used subjectivity not only to cast doubt on the veracity of her narrators/heroines, but on the actions of others in her stories. Subjective experience is one of the concepts that buttresses all works of the supernatural—we cannot be sure what we have witnessed, even if others have also seen the

same thing. There are few scientific measures of supernatural phenomena that cannot be otherwise explained. Despite hundreds of years of attempts to make studying supernatural phenomena into a type of science with clear conditions to experiments, and concrete conditions that must be met, no clarity has been achieved. We are no closer to determining whether ghosts do or do not exist, that demons are or are not real, than we were in the 17th century. We do, however, have a much better understanding of what psychology contributes to our *imagining* we have experienced something otherworldly. Jackson, born at the height of the spiritualist movement but well-versed in human psychology, utilized the inherent ambiguity of supernatural experiences to her advantage.

Jackson preserved and seems to have used copious notes on English literary studies, criminology, and psychology from courses taken at Syracuse University to inform her early interpretations of the supernatural conflated with the mundane.³ She focused on the subjectivity of human experience and how our senses/brains/experiences lead us to interpret occurrences, both supernatural and mundane. Among the notes for one of her college English classes, she wrote down an entire lecture on the importance of experience's influence on our interpretation of events and texts, and their meanings. She noted that "our experience gives a 'sense of the meanings of words'" in her notebooks (Jackson, College Notebooks Folder 1, Item 3). The significance of words and their interpretations (or misinterpretations) would become an important theme in her works: her heroines are constantly challenged by communication and connection with others and are confounded by the expectations placed on them from society at large. The theme of misinterpreted intentions therefore began early in her works and is deeply connected to the supernatural.

Her notes on abnormal psychology begin with psychical research and the interpretation of ghosts, apparitions, and superstitions.⁴ She mentions the case of a Mrs. Paquet whose dead brother appeared in a time of crisis (Jackson, College Notebooks Folder 3, Item 2). Even here Jackson mentions how this experience has no single meaning and may just be coincidence. Further, she writes "confusion of chronological sequence with causal sequence" indicating that eyewitness testimony of supernatural events may be strongly influenced by personal beliefs and/or individual perceptions.

Jackson also considered subjectivity in the forms of dreams and hallucinations. In one of her notes on abnormal psychology, she wrote: "How common are hallucinations? (dreams always) 1 person in 10 has waking hallucinations at least once" (Jackson, College Notebooks Folder 3, Item 2). Hallucinations, like spectral evidence, are impossible to prove. Only the person seeing them can experience them. Further, the frequency that Jackson cites here, "1 person in 10," also implies that hallucinations are fairly common. Although today we view hallucinations in terms of psychology/psychiatry, many societies have treated visions as part of myth or ritual.⁵ Conflating hallucinations with a real possibility of the supernatural would become important for Jackson's work on *The Lottery*, as most of the heroines lose their sense of reality,

time, or space.

Notes from Jackson's later life, especially on inexplicable paranormal incidents and drawings of demons and witches' familiars, also occupy space in the collection. For example, at some point after *The Lottery*'s publication, Jackson developed a series of humorous drawings depicting herself, her husband, and the creatures she claimed as her "familiars" (Jackson, Pencil Drawings). These familiars are almost always smiling and portly and sport uncanny grins. Her husband is depicted cowering in fear before them. In the illustrations without the demons, her husband bullies her with demands such as childcare and child-bearing, making his and their children's meals, or even lighting his cigarette while he reads the New York Times (Jackson, Pencil Drawings). Unlike the intrusion of the demonic of *The Lottery*, these familiar spirits seem to make women more powerful, or at least more powerful than the husband figure. The occult in Jackson's works thus takes on the function of asserting a power structure — through belief.

James Harris and the Devil

The most important reference to the occult in *The Lottery* lies in its original alternative title, "The Adventures of James Harris." James Harris is a reference to Child Ballad no. 243, about a jilted fiancé presumed dead who returns to spirit away his former betrothed from her family. In Scottish versions of the ballad, like the one that Jackson used, James Harris appears as the Devil. For some reason, *The Lottery* subtitle was nixed by the publisher in recent years for the less cohesive "And Other Stories."⁶ Most publications also include a reprinted version of the ballad. But without the reprinted ballad and/or the subtitle, the strongest hints at the occult disappear, hints that magical phenomena, aided by the Devil, are behind the psychological unraveling of the characters. The phantasm-like James Harris's presence in the stories signals a turning point after which the dark side of human nature shows itself, through abandonment, betrayal, or hallucinations.

Current scholarship asserts that Child Ballad 243 is an affirmation that women should follow social mores. With its subtitle "a warning to married women," appeals the ballad to women that they should not to abandon their families for a lover, or they will meet an evil end. According to John Burrison, themes indicated in the ballad's variants are usually a dead lover haunting his sweetheart after her marriage to another man, or punishment for breaking a betrothal (271-2). David Atkinson explains that most versions of this ballad focus on the regrets of the wife and the forlorn husband, not on the Daemon Lover himself (596-7). The ballad may have been brought stateside by English, Irish, or Scottish immigrants. Ruth Franklin claims that these Child Ballads, among others, are folk songs Jackson likely learned from her mother (253). But on her mother's side, Jackson's lineage dates back to prior to the Revolutionary War. Thus, it is likely these songs were not only brought over to the Americas (alongside the superstitions that came with them), they evolved into their own American interpretations of the

legends they described.

Perhaps because of the separate evolutionary paths of the ballad that immigrated and the ballad that remained, Jackson does not focus on the marriage/retribution aspect of Child Ballad 243. She purposefully chose a version that elucidates the relationship between James Harris and his former fiancée through dialogue and concrete imagery of the demonic. Further, it is not the common North American version, which lacks supernatural elements, nor the English version of the ballad that insinuates the supernatural (Burrison 273). It is the Scottish version that focuses on James Harris as the Devil himself. Included as an epilogue to *The Lottery*, an excerpt from the ballad describes a married woman spirited away by her former sailor-fiancé, James Harris. While on the boat, she realizes there is no crew and the sails are made of gold. She sees “his cloven foot” and weeps, but James Harris promises her he will take her to Italy (Jackson 305). They pass hills, and he tells her they are the hills of heaven, where she will never go—for their destination is “the mountain of hell” (305). The excerpt ends with Harris splitting the mast and wrecking the boat. This version of the ballad, then, is non-specific warning to women that they should not trust men, one of the major themes of *The Lottery*. The Devil in the ballad and the book thus should be interpreted as using his role as the King of Lies to manipulate and victimize the women in the story.

This distrust of men on the subject of marriage is made clear in the story “The Daemon Lover,” which also reflects the name of the ballad. The main character is abandoned by her fiancé, Jamie (short for James Harris). He disappears on the day of their wedding; she searches all over the city for him, a man in a blue suit with a bunch of flowers. No one is particularly helpful, but she manages to find an apartment building he might have gone into. She hears voices and laughter from the inside, but no one comes to the door:

“She knocked, and thought she heard voices inside . . . She knocked again, and there was silence, except for something that might have been laughter far away” (Jackson 27).

She visits the apartment everyday thereafter and still hears the same laughter when she knocks, but no one ever comes to the door.

The title “The Daemon Lover” is the same as the ballad and shares similar elements: the vanished fiancé named James Harris, a female victim, and a marriage plot. But it reframes the story in a different light: instead of a married mother abandoning her family, it is a young, anxious, unmarried woman who is duped. Jackson’s shift of focus reminds the reader of that at the heart of the Daemon Lover ballad was the accusation that women were more susceptible to the Devil’s lies. Many of the books that Jackson referenced on the occult, such as Joseph Glanvill’s *Saducismus Triumphatus* (1681) and Cotton Mather’s *Discourse on Witchcraft* (1689), regarded women as the weaker sex. As James Sharpe explains, they were more susceptible to the Devil’s charms:

. . . the convention wisdom was that women were morally and intellectually weaker, and thus more prone to the devil's snares, that this point was demonstrated at a very early stage in human history by Eve, and that in any case, the objective reality of witch accusations . . . constantly demonstrated the connection between witchcraft and women (43).

Thus, the Devil in Jackson's works may symbolize the tyranny that men long held over women. Marriage was an aspiration; attractive men who broke their troth could not in any way be forced to keep their promises. Women, conditioned to believe these men despite the risks, maintained a socially weak position. The Daemon Lover never appears; the main character continues day after day to visit a nearby apartment, hoping he will appear. Instead of moving on, she clings to false hope.

Besides "The Daemon Lover," many other stories in *The Lottery* mention James Harris, either as a tall man in a blue suit, or directly, as a Mr. Harris, a Jim, or a James. In "The Renegade," the bullying family that makes Mrs. Walpole imagine her dog is killing chickens is called Harris. Eventually Mrs. Walpole envisions even her children are alienated from her, and that the deadly punishments meant for the dog will come upon her head. Another example of the dreams and hallucinations caused by James Harris is in "The Tooth." Clara Spencer, a young married woman, goes to New York City to have a tooth out. On the bus ride there, she meets a man in a blue suit, who, after she has downed a combination of painkillers, seems to entice her to leave her family: "Even farther than Samarkand . . . and the waves ringing on the shore like bells . . . The flutes play all night . . . and the stars are as big as the moon and the moon is as big as a lake" (Jackson 270-1).⁷ His name is Jim, and she follows him as if in a trance. After she has had her tooth out, she cannot remember her own name, and there is nothing to indicate it in her personal effects. She leaves the doctor's office to find Jim, with whom she disappears to a far-away beach. Like the Daemon Lover ballad that Jackson references, Clara does leave her family for James Harris. But it is unclear whether she does it willingly, as she was drugged (with codeine and Tylenol and sleeping gas) during, before, and after her tooth extraction. Thus, the Devil seems to indicate the intrusion of the demonic as a force that breaks the bonds of matrimony, family, and the socially acceptable dreams of women, replacing them with madness, dreams of adventure, or loneliness.

Witchcraft in "The Lottery"?

"The Lottery" is Jackson's most famous story, first printed in 1948 and garnering the most response of any story ever published in *The New Yorker's* history. Responses run the gambit from entire high school English classes writing to her to ask why she wrote the story to many letters asking where the ritual still takes place. The figure of the persecuted woman in the story has caused many to wonder whether it has its origins in Jackson's interest in The Salem Witch Trials. In fact, "The Lottery" is often taught alongside Arthur Miller's *The Crucible* and

misinterpreted through the lens of McCarthyism.⁸ But “The Lottery” requires no spectral evidence, dreams, or hallucinations, unlike the other stories in *The Lottery*. It contains no evidence of James Harris, the Daemon Lover; his name is not even mentioned. The lottery itself is a ritual of human sacrifice, whose meaning and origin is long-forgotten. The families assemble on June 27th, draw lots, and choose one person to die. It is implied that the chosen person usually submits to their fate quietly, but Tessie Hutchinson, when chosen, proclaims the lottery’s unfairness and tries to make the villagers draw lots again from the beginning. Her pleas are to no avail; they stone her anyway. Thus, “The Lottery” is not so much about the court of public opinion as it is about blind belief in the continuation of rituals and traditions whose meanings and origins have been forgotten. This aligns with Jackson’s idea that witchcraft and the devil are not tied to locations or time periods, but to human psychology.

Tessie and other female characters who are beset by the Devil in mundane manifestations in *The Lottery* assert emotions such as anger, envy, and disbelief in long-held traditions. For example, Tessie claims the lottery is “unfair,” and tries to assert her personal belief on the group that the lottery should be redone. This sort of selfish, willful anger is a key point in interpreting the religious writings of ministers on witchcraft from the 17th century, who assign this emotion to people under the influence of the demonic. John Putnam Demos claims that the Devil “appears . . . as a creature of consummate anger” (177). As such, his influence can induce anger-related emotions such as “discontent,” “malice,” and “envy.” Tessie’s discontent resembles those accused of heresy and witchcraft, in that she covets the position of those who did not draw the paper with the black dot on it. Accused witches were considered demanding and insatiable, determined to obtain their desires. But in reality, like most accused of heresy, Tessie’s demands are a mundane “assertion of the self” called inappropriate by the community (179).

The assertion of the self was more often considered inappropriate if it came from an unmarried or widowed woman. According to Sharpe, elderly and middle-aged women were more likely to be accused of being witches because they had a higher rate of economic and social marginalization (43-4). Yet Tessie is a married mother. Her victimization does not fit the pattern of witchcraft accusations from prior time periods. However, it does fit into the trend of women’s changing role in society as victimization—women were increasingly hampered by social mores, even as they gained more freedoms in society. No situation was more precarious than that of mother or housewife who wished to define herself by her creativity. This fits into the pattern of Jackson’s works, in which housewives and mothers fall victim to societal expectations and traditions.

The witchcraft-heresy interpretation is also supported by the names of the characters and the death of Tessie. Tessie’s last name, Hutchinson, might be a reference to Anne Hutchinson (1591-1643), a Puritan from Massachusetts Bay Colony whose beliefs that women should actively participate in religious life branded her a heretic. She was considered seditious, and her testimony in court that she had a direct and personal connection with God caused her to be

convicted of contempt. Further, the man who holds the lottery box in “The Lottery” is named Mr. Summers. Rev. Montague Summers, who claimed that witchcraft has a very close relationship with heresy and that witch trials exploded during the Reformation because of religious persecution (Summers 25). Summers was one of the important authors who wrote on the occult whom Jackson had read.

Finally, stoning is a biblical punishment for those possessed by demonic forces (which is translated to wizard in the King James Version), found in Leviticus 20:27:

“A man also or woman that hath a familiar spirit, or that is a wizard, shall surely be put to death: they shall stone them with stones: their blood shall be upon them.” (King James Version)

In the Torah, it is interpreted as giving offspring to a demon (here, translated as Molech):

“Any man of the children of Israel or of the strangers who sojourn among Israel, who gives any of his offspring to Molech, shall surely be put to death; the people of the land shall pelt him with stones.” (Pentateuch)

There have been many interpretations of this passage from both the King James Version and the Pentateuch. Of the former, Tyson reminds us that in Christian tradition, both prayer and the death of the accused were necessary to atone for the sins of witchcraft or consorting with the Devil: “Only by earnest prayer to God, by amendment of their lives, and by sharply pursuing every one, according to his calling, of these instructments of Satan, whose punishment to the death will be a salutary sacrifice to the patient” (132). In other words, death was a sure end to any trial related to supernatural or occult suspicions, and guilt was always assumed.⁹ Of the latter, Rashi, the Jewish philosopher, commented that if the court is not strong enough to condemn the demon-possessed person to death, then the people must assist in the execution. Yet the definition of “demon-possessed person” remains unclear in the Midrash. Did it describe a person who refused to follow tradition, or a person who had succumbed to mental illness? Did it indicate a person who had strayed from community religious beliefs and into idolatry? In any case, since Jackson’s interpretation of the stoning involves no magic, it may be that Rashi’s commentary influenced Jackson’s writing; her use of the motif of the demonic is more apparent than that of witchcraft. And yet, in “The Lottery,” witchcraft is still slantly referenced through the characters’ defiance of tradition, heresy, and willful anger. As in “The Tooth” and “The Daemon Lover,” occult symbolism appears subdued. It takes a backseat to Jackson’s social criticism: that people often blindly follow tradition, but they should not.

Conclusion

Jackson’s references to occult and supernatural phenomena in *The Lottery* are clearly connected to social issues such as defiance of tradition, mental disease, and the persecution of women. The role of James Harris the Daemon Lover as well as the motif of witchcraft found

throughout *The Lottery* strongly indicates that each story was influenced by Jackson's research on the occult, the supernatural, human psychology, and history. By including references to witch-hunting, old English folk songs, and the Devil in *The Lottery*, Jackson insinuates a history of persecution of women and minorities or outcasts via accusations of occult activities. These stories consider topics such as the paranoid imagination, discrimination against outsiders and racism, and blind adherence to deadly traditions. They make use of occult symbolism or reference 17th century witchcraft in order to cast doubt on both the integrity of rural inhabitants and the incorruptibility of morals and principles informed by religion or convention. Further research on this subject should go beyond Jackson's juvenilia and archival miscellany to include both the writings and letters contained both in her husband Stanley Edgar Hyman's collection and in her vast collection of books on the supernatural and the occult. In particular, the role of ritual and folklore in the persecution of women and minorities should be considered to further understand Jackson's use of rural New England as a microcosm for social issues.

Notes

- 1 While these genres are clear influences in Jackson's fiction, it would also be useful to explore the influences of psychoanalysis, feminism, and anthropological studies of myth in her works more deeply. The latter is just as important, perhaps more important, to her works as the supernatural. This is especially true for *The Lottery*, as the uncanny elements of many of the stories are based in the interpretation of human behavior and ritual.
- 2 As those who have read "The Lottery" will note, these suggestions are morbid because the story ends in the stoning of a young mother. She was chosen by lottery, during which she drew a paper with a black dot on it.
- 3 She also made notes concerning the way in which history, personal choice, and environment (both behavioral and geographical) influence our response to stimuli.
- 4 Although Jackson took a full load of courses at Syracuse, few of her notebooks remain. Of those remaining, the books with notes on psychology, criminology, and English courses are most numerous. The other notebooks in the collection are for subjects such as Spanish and geology and likely have been preserved because she wrote notes for stories or plays in them.
- 5 Recognizing that we can delude ourselves has been written about as one of the foundations of rationalization of witchcraft (Bever 31-32). Bever asserts that this is one of the bases for the Enlightenment's approach to magic and witchcraft. He further asserts that modern society tends to romanticize the occult while trying to explain it through science.
- 6 This may be a decision by the publisher, Farrar, Straus and Giroux. It would be an understatement to say that Jackson and this publisher did not always see eye-to-eye. She had complaints about everything from the jacket copy to the advertising budget. On top of that, they were very heavy-handed with her work. These issues are well-documented by Ruth Franklin. In particular see, pp. 323-24 about the trouble with *Life Among the Savages*, p. 345 for *The Bird's Nest*, and pp. 390-93 for information on Jackson's move to Viking Press.
- 7 For another interpretation of the use of this phrasing, see Leavy, 78-9.
- 8 President Truman signed an executive order to investigate Communist Party membership in 1947, and

some of Jackson's and her husband Stanley Hyman's close friends, such as Walter Bernstein, were suspected. But convictions only began in 1949, after the publication of *The Lottery*, and the infamous McCarthy list of Communist Party members was not given to Congress until 1950. Thus, the similarities between *The Lottery* and other works critical of McCarthyism, especially on the topic of the occult and witchcraft, end at neighbors persecuting each other and possible allusions to The Salem Witchcraft Trials.

- 9 Tyson also makes note of King James's interpretation of this Bible passage in *Demonology*. He states: "He [King James] is saying that the best way to cure illnesses and misfortunes caused by witchcraft is to locate, arrest, and execute the witch who caused them. As a result, anyone believing in witchcraft who had the misfortune to fall sick from some lingering disease or infirmity would begin to look with suspicion at his neighbors, in the expectation that the death of one of them would cure the sickness. This attitude would increase the hysteria surrounding anyone accused of witchcraft, and multiply the accusations. Notice the use by James of the word 'sacrifice.' He seems to be suggesting that the execution of a witch is a kind of offering to God that will be compensated for by the lifting of the curses placed on the witch's victims" (137, n.7). This may be one of the forgotten origins of "The Lottery." That the villagers have forgotten why they kill each other conflates the history of witch-hunting with the history of human sacrifice.

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