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# Life Lessons in Shirley Jackson's Late Fiction: Ethics, Cosmology, Eschatology

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## Life Lessons in Shirley Jackson's Late Fiction: Ethics, Cosmology, Eschatology

DIANE LONG HOEVELER

*...a rather haunted woman. She was a very strange lady and she had all kinds of very strange ideas. She lived with a lot of bad dreams.... She had all kinds of chips on her shoulder about life and about people and about things.*

—Roger Strauss on Shirley Jackson

Not many people who knew her during her lifetime would dispute the editor Roger Strauss's opinion of his client, Shirley Jackson. As a reading of her biography, *Private Demons*, makes painfully evident, this was a woman who suffered all her life from the chill she received from her mother from birth. Never pretty enough, never friendly enough, never appropriately feminine enough, Jackson suffered from depression, and as an adult she self-medicated with a frightening array of drugs, food, alcohol and tobacco, and finally landed herself in a very early grave.<sup>1</sup> But many writers suffer from such personal problems, and their writings reveal very little of them. One can think, for instance, of someone like Jackson's contemporary Flannery O'Connor, whose personal sufferings are transmuted in her fiction into something beyond the self, and in doing so, transcend the personal pain of the author. The same cannot be said of the very visible anguish in Jackson's fiction. This is fiction written by a woman who wore her heart on her sleeve, or rather, whose fiction bore the very strong impress of her angst, her rage, her frustration. That dark

seen that Jackson worked out her ethical scheme, her program for living and dying, in a highly coded fashion in these short works.<sup>4</sup> As she herself noted, her recurrent concern was "an insistence on the uncontrolled, unobserved wickedness of human behavior" (qtd. Oppenheimer 125).

### *Invisibility or Worse: "The Missing Girl"*

Published in *Fantasy and Science Fiction* magazine (1957), *The Missing Girl* is neither science fiction, nor is it fantasy, except in the most perverse use of the terms. The protagonist is an adolescent girl, lonely, ignored, and victimized. Martha Alexander, the story's protagonist, says very few words at the beginning of the story, only that she has "something to do" (339), and then she promptly disappears one evening while on a walk at the Philips Education summer camp for girls. This "something" that she has to do suggests that she was not out on an aimless walk, but was actually going to meet someone, and the suggestion of a sexual tryst that ended in her death is present as a subtext throughout the tale. But rather than dwell on the act of murder, the story reveals a more chilling truth: as the police and various authorities attempt to trace the girl, it becomes obvious that no one seems to know much about her at all. Her roommate Betsy stumbles when identifying her age and group in the camp; the camp director seems to be unable to produce a picture or describe her accurately; while the painting instructor remembers only that Martha did "vague stuff ... no sense of design, no eye" (345). Apparently, no one else had an eye for seeing another human being, a girl who seemed to paint pictures that revealed her own sense of "rejection" (345). When an uncle (and uncles will take on an increasingly sinister status in Jackson's fiction) is called in to help with the search, he is hard pressed to even account for Martha's existence. After consulting with his sister, presumably Martha's mother, he explains that all her children are present and accounted for, and no one really seems to remember a child fitting Martha's description. In fact, the mother does not even remember having Martha, and can recall nothing about sending a child to a summer camp. In conclusion, we are told that "a body that might have been Martha Alexander's was found something over a year later" and was buried with little ceremony and even less grief (349).

We can assume that for Jackson, the horror of the story lies not simply in the random nature of the violence that is, after all, an everyday occurrence for young women. The true evil can be found in the way a young life is thrown away, discarded, snuffed out with absolutely no consequences at all. Clearly, the story is meant to suggest the first phase in Jackson's portrait of the female life cycle, the intense sense of rejection and abandonment by the mother. It is no coincidence, I think, that Jackson

fury is more than evident in the very bleak cosmology that she constructs story by story, about some sort of sadistic deity, in her works. Jackson's fictions create a new and different world, a realm chilly and strange and ugly, and finally we have to conclude that these works have recreated the cosmos as Jackson experienced it and believed it to be. There were, apparently, no ordinary evenings in Bennington.

Setting aside her life and the sort of mythic status that it has assumed in regard to interpreting her fiction, the other issue that requires attention in any discussion of Jackson's works is her style and its connection with her fictional vision. Jackson herself observed, "I have had for many years a consuming interest in magic and the supernatural. I think this is because I find there so convenient a shorthand statement of the possibilities of human adjustment to what seems to be at best an inhuman world." Later she noted that she loved eighteenth century novels because they "preserv[ed] and insist[ed] on a pattern superimposed precariously on the chaos of human development."<sup>2</sup> But in spite of Jackson's insistence on the importance of the gothic for her style and vision, literary critics have been wont to see in her works something very different, very "proto-postmodern" (Hattenhauer 2).

In fact, if one were to recognize a constant refrain in the literary criticism of Shirley Jackson it is that she deserves to be appreciated as something other than a writer of horror tales, or stories about witchcraft, or gothic fiction.<sup>3</sup> One would think, in fact, that these critics are embarrassed by that particular strain in Jackson's work, or that if they could only absolve her of gothic tendencies, they could rehabilitate her reputation as a serious writer of contemporary fiction. This antigothic tendency in the criticism of Jackson's works has been countered most effectively by the recent publication of Darryl Hattenhauer's *Shirley Jackson's American Gothic* (2003), a critical study that places the gothic impulse at center stage in Jackson's life and works. This brief essay will take yet another angle on Jackson's work; it will embrace the gothic quality of her late fiction and argue that it actually informs the quasi-theology that begins to emerge in her late works. Even though she clearly admitted to writing some of her more sensational (or "gothic") short stories for the magazine market, she also held a worldview that was informed by her beliefs in magic, the occult, or could be called "gothic ethics." As she herself observed, everything that she wrote was concerned with the struggle between chaos and pattern: "the sense which I feel, of a human and not very rational order struggling inadequately to keep in check forces of great destruction, which may be the devil and may be intellectual enlightenment." By examining a few of her late short stories—"The Missing Girl," "Nightmare," "My Uncle in the Garden," "The Possibility of Evil," "One Ordinary Day, with Peanuts," and "Home"—it can be

suffered her first complete depressive break during her freshman year at college, a particularly vulnerable age and very close to that of the missing and then murdered Martha Alexander. The female adolescent lives in Jackson's universe in a violent, chaotic world where at any moment she could simply disappear and no one—not even her mother—would know the difference. What is particularly poignant in the story, however, is the conversation with the art instructor at the camp. This instructor's dismissal of Martha's art work is telling, given the young Jackson's own attempts to write, with little if any encouragement from her mother, at a very early age. Not ever truly seen by anyone, the female adolescent as struggling artist—struggling, that is, to express her pain and experience thereby some sort of artistic catharsis—is simply extinguished and left on a deserted trail like so much road-kill.

### *Young Adulthood, or Growing Paranoia*

"Nightmare" is one of Jackson's signature stories, typical in its method of beginning a work in the realm of the ordinary and mundane and then shifting all of us—characters and readers—into a world that is something else altogether. This move into the bizarre is the first, most elemental position in the Jacksonian universe: the child's paranoia of being betrayed by authority figures and then being punished, watched, and exploited. Even though the protagonist is a 20-something woman, "Nightmare" is written from a dependent and frightened child's point of view, a child who is powerless to do anything other than obey commands and follow orders she does not understand. On a pleasant March day, the very "precise" Miss Toni Morgan, presumably in her mid-twenties, dressed in a red, white, and blue outfit, sets out for the office where she has ably assisted Mr. Lang, her boss, for the past six years (37). Asked to deliver a package to a downtown address, Miss Morgan enters the twilight zone, where the entire city's panopticon-like advertising forces appear to be pursuing her as the missing "Miss X." Dressed exactly the way Miss X is described as dressing, carrying the same package, Miss Morgan quickly settles into a posture of paranoia, actually fearing at one point that she will be sued for dressing like Miss X, "impersonating her" (42). Light hearted in a strange way, the style of this story exposes the disjunction between chaos and pattern Jackson suggested in her comments on her fictional vision.

Despite the external illusion of order and pattern (the red, white, and blue suit), despite the precise actions (the determined route to deliver the package), Miss Morgan is a seething, frightened, paranoid child, forced to navigate an urban environment in which she is stalked and yet guiltily sees herself as somehow to blame. After only a few blocks of

being followed, instead of being filled with righteous indignation, Miss Morgan instead has assumed the posture of the victim, musing, "they can't blame me" (43). The dénouement occurs when the haggard Toni Morgan begs for an explanation of the parade that is trailing her and is told cryptically that it is all about "Advertising" (50). Advertising for what? The implication is that the purpose of this sadistic foray has been the spectralization, exhibition, objectification, and victimization of the female body, and more specifically, the female who seeks employment in the public, urban realm. Told that she will have to face the same humiliation tomorrow in Chicago (51), Miss Morgan smiles, takes her orders, and sinks into sleep, having failed to deliver Mr. Lang's package.

To understand this gothic universe we must note that Miss Morgan is a very brief portrait of the young professional woman who takes a beating from Jackson. Inept, gullible, naive, childlike in her trust and simplicity, Miss Morgan should understand that the universe she has slipped into is a world where she will never be anything other than an object or a workhorse for the patriarchy. And as an object she can only expect to be waved by the capitalist machine like a human flag, a symbol of the fruits of a prosperous military-industrial complex and the American public educational system. But clearly she is not intended to have a responsible role or identity apart from the one this consumer-driven world has constructed for her. And certainly it is Jackson's little joke that Miss Morgan is condemned to carry Mr. Lang's "package" (slang for sexual parts) all over town. Allowed for a brief time period to have a supposedly responsible position, the young woman is really nothing other than a womb in waiting, a young woman who will be punished and humiliated for seeking employment outside of the home. Again, the target of anger in the story is not the woman, who has been placed in the position of a beating victim, but the system that has propped her up and then relegated her to meaningless trophy status. And lurking not so slightly below the fictional surface is rage at the realization that any other role apart from decorative display object would never have been permitted by a society that positions women as either consumers or consumed.

### *Consorting with the Devil, or the Fear of Fertility*

In Jackson's universe, the first steps out of the innocence of the garden are fraught with peril and potential disaster. Indeed, Martha Alexander did not make it out alive, and Miss Morgan is left stranded as one of the walking wounded. But other characters do attempt to negotiate their way out of the quagmire of early adulthood, only to find themselves in a sort of limbo of perversion and evil. In Jackson's version of the fall, "My Uncle in the Garden," two bachelor uncles exude eccentricity;

indeed, one of them admits to dancing with the devil in the garden at night. But perhaps this is just one of the strange acts they have committed. Narrated by a naive innocent who in fact is not related by blood to the two men, the story presents Uncle Oliver and Uncle Peter as brothers who have lived together all their lives, except for the one year Oliver spent married to Mrs. Duff. An odor of perversion fills the air as the two old men fuss over Peter's gray cat, Sandra Williamson, in their static, perpetually frozen little rose-covered cottage (209). One evening, over dinner, the brothers lapse into a quarrel over the absence of tomatoes on the table, and Oliver confides to his young visitor that Peter has "been consorting with the devil" in the garden at night (211). But in addition to these nocturnal visits, the devil has also been invited to lunch and over this cozy repast the devil has requested a "tribute," and the tomatoes have been offered. After an absence of several weeks, the tomatoes suddenly reappear, the offering of "a little boy" (214).

Now all this could be read as a harmless and inconsequential matter, a tale about nothing much and certainly nothing very important. But in the last few paragraphs the other shoe drops, and we realize, with a sickening thud, that the men are something other than innocent bachelor uncles. As they turn to each other, reconciled by the reappearance of ripe tomatoes at their table, they wax nostalgic by musing about a trip into the city that they have never made. Talking about making this trip, leaving their sheltered abode for an adventurous foray into the urban unknown, has always been "their favorite mutual whimsey" (214). But now we hear the ominous suggestion, that this "whimsey" is second only to talking about "the death of Mrs. Duff," Oliver's bride for only one year. The implication is that the brothers conspired to kill Mrs. Duff for her inheritance and have been happily living off of it—perhaps even as pedophiles—ever since. In fact, it would appear that the devil had appeared to the insane Peter earlier and had requested a "tribute" then as well, and that the "tribute" offered earlier had been the life of Mrs. Duff. It would appear that Mrs. Duff had been an inconvenient woman who had stood in the way of primal male-bonding and the earlier, intense, perhaps even homoerotic relationship between the brothers. These men, so pleasant and mild that generations of neighbors entrust their children to them for strolls in the park and zoo, appear to be members of some sort of ancient fertility and satanic cult that practices human sacrifice and when humans are not readily available, offers crops.

And what of Mrs. Duff, the next female victim in a long line of female sacrifices in Jackson's world? Mrs. Duff had done nothing other than marry a man who had a somewhat close relationship with his brother. In fact, she is described in the story as "semi-mythical," her only role to have been the "planning and arranging of a rose-covered

bower" for her husband of one year (209). The two men, it would appear, live out their lives in some sort of anti-fairy tale universe. They exist as if they were two male sleeping beauties, held in a cottage in the woods, purchased by the funds of the elderly woman they have murdered. This mild-mannered tale presents a hyperbolic version of the capitalistic and patriarchal logic that operates in so many of Jackson's stories, for this tale presents men as vampiric, homoerotic, murderous, satanic worshippers of an ancient fertility that produces life forms that they do not need or want. And the major female character, this time mature and wealthy, is once again offered up as expendable and consumable by the man she has foolishly admitted into her life.

But, to ask the autobiographical question: why uncles? According to biographer Judy Oppenheimer, Jackson had a peculiar relationship with her own uncle, an eccentric sort to be sure. Although their relationship is murky, Oppenheimer has suggested that Jackson herself was sexually molested when she was a child by her maternal uncle Clifford Bugbee, an eccentric bachelor uncle who spent his time inventing hopelessly impractical and gigantic radios. The only evidence we have for such a claim is the memory of Shirley's childhood friend Dorothy Ayling, who spent time at the Jackson home and particularly remembered Uncle Clifford: "Sometimes he bothered me. He would call me endearing names and kind of touch me sometimes and I didn't know quite how to handle that. It bothered me ... he'd put his arm around you. I got so I realized that I better just keep a distance. I pretty quick figured out I didn't want to be near him—the way he talked to you, and the hands" (Oppenheimer 27). As Oppenheimer notes, a man who will touch one child will touch another, and Shirley would have been within easy and continuous reach of her eccentric uncle. As Oppenheimer queries, "Was Shirley sexually abused as an adolescent?... It is hard not to conclude that something terribly evil happened there, something that cast a long shadow over the rest of her life. The dark current of awareness of evil that runs through her life and work seems too strong to have as its sole root the observance of suburban hypocrisy" (27).

Why would Jackson invent *two* uncles, one murderous and one an accomplice? One possible way of explaining this is to understand that when a psychological trauma occurs, it is very typical for the victim to process the event by "splitting" the perpetrator into two figures, one "good" and one "bad." Again, such a strategy places us in a fairy tale universe. But one way of getting at the coded fairy tale nature of the tale is to query whether or not Jackson was conveying to us a hint about the victimization she suffered at the hands of dear Uncle Cliff. Child sexual assault becomes murder in this version of the story, and the child psyche that would have seen the kind, public face of her uncle would have



seen a devilish, evil face as well; hence the two figures. The literary critic playing psychoanalytical sleuth is perhaps not an attractive figure, but the texts fairly scream to be understood within the context of a lifetime of pain.

*Doing Battle with the Devil Within:  
"The Possibility of Evil"*

When Miss Adela Strangeworth sits down at night to compose her many venomous, slanderous, shocking letters to her neighbors, sent under cover as an anonymous voice of warning to the community, she comes closest to expressing what many believe was Jackson's sense of herself as an artist. Oppenheimer has called this story "the most nakedly revealing" of all of Jackson's works: "Certainly nothing she ever wrote came as close to defining her own conception of herself" (271). Winner of the Edgar Allan Poe Award for 1965, the story is worthy of Poe himself, or perhaps Flannery O'Connor in a very angry mood. If, as John G. Parks has asserted, the story is "a key to much of her fiction" (320), then it is important to position it within the corpus of the short, late work.<sup>5</sup> Parks's analysis, while useful for bringing the story into focus, never explores the deeply autobiographical self-loathing that clearly inscribes itself throughout the text. Miss Adela Strangeworth is a masochistic self-portrait, an indictment of a creative self who does not find any artistic or cathartic redemption, only destruction and rejection. It is an extremely dark tale to leave as a legacy to oneself, and it could only have been written by a woman who understood herself as possessing a "strange" "worth" to her community.

In order to place the story in its autobiographical context, let us consider an issue that has received surprisingly little attention in Jackson's life, namely her curious ancestor Edward Henschall. Edward was Shirley's paternal grandfather, born in England and the very well-to-do school classmate of Prime Minister Herbert Asquith. After a lifetime of prosperity, the man suddenly lost his entire fortune, changed his name to "Jackson" and fled to America, leaving his wife and three children in England for many years. Shirley's father Leslie was himself never able to find out what had caused the family disaster, or at least he never passed the information on to anyone in the family (Oppenheimer 13). This incident, impossible now to unravel, must have sent a chilling message to the sensitive Shirley, who told others that she could see and hear things and people that others could not (Oppenheimer 20-21). The strange family history suggests that disaster—complete financial ruin, desertion, and loss of identity—can occur overnight and can arrive suddenly, with no warning, out of nowhere.

Viewing the Henschall-Jackson family disaster within the context of Jackson's work, it seems reasonable to wonder if Jackson wrote "A Possibility of Evil" as some sort of reenactment of the family's trauma. The letters written by Adela, for instance, all concern either financial malfeasance or sexual misconduct, the only two areas that could have been serious enough to cause a man like Henschall to disappear. In writing her story Jackson may be suggesting that being the bearer of bad tidings is not something she wanted to do as a writer, but something she was compelled to do because of her own personal history. Did someone write a letter, making an accusation, that forced her grandfather to disappear? Or could she be suggesting that even at this late date she wishes someone, anyone, had written such a letter of warning, of suspicion, to her own parents about her uncle Clifford?

In "A Possibility of Evil," the first letter described is addressed to Don Crane, and it mocks his child as "an idiot" and concludes with the kicker, "Some people just shouldn't have children, should they?" (424). Is she not here virtually screaming at her own mother? The second letter, sent to Mrs. Harper, warns her that she is being laughed at behind her back because "the wife really always [is] the last one to know" (424). Surely this must have been painful to write, given Stanley Hyman's flagrant affairs with students, some conducted while Shirley was in the next room, pounding on the walls (Oppenheimer 172-73). The third letter to an elderly Mrs. Harper suggests that she will be "accidentally" killed while on the operating table because her nephew has paid a doctor to get rid of the aunt so that he can inherit her estate. Again, fantasies about outliving her own parents and being relieved of the financial pressure of supporting the family must have played into this one. We learn that other vicious letters have been sent to townsfolk over the years, and Adela has justified such actions by noting that frequently her suspicions have actually been proven true: "Mr. Lewis would never have imagined for a minute that his grandson might be lifting petty cash from the store register if he had not had one of Miss Strangeworth's letters" (424).

But this is where the split occurs. On one hand, the letters that Adela writes are hidden or cryptic and express Jackson's own suspicions, frustrations, and desires. On the other hand, she needs to mock Adela in order to distance herself from what she knows is evil itself. Yes, Adela has an important role to fill. Styling herself as a rear-guard vigilante of Puritan values, she is a one-woman crusader for sexual repression and financial accountability. If she does not warn her neighbors that "possible evil [is] lurking nearby," then evil will triumph unchecked and unabated, and all of us will be powerless to confront and defeat it. Such a system of ethics presupposes a powerful fall from grace into a world of unremitting original and everlasting sin: "as long as evil existed unchecked in the world,

it was Miss Strangeworth's duty to keep her town alert to it.... There were so many wicked people in the world and only one Strangeworth left in town" (424).

Discovered after she accidentally drops one of her poison pen letters at the post office, Adela wakes up to a new day and new era in town. No longer viewed as the respected and kindly maiden lady, she is recognized for who and what she is and the townspeople take out their fury on her beloved roses (428). When she realizes her secret is known, she weeps "silently for the wickedness of the world" (428). The irony is that Adela, even at this point, is incapable of recognizing that a large part of the wickedness she has attributed to others is, of course, within herself. But Jackson might very well say that such evil, and certainly the possibility of evil, is within us all. Jackson clearly suspected the motives of everyone she interacted with, for, from her own bitter experience, she knew well that people are motivated either by greed or sexual drives that verge on the perverse. Jackson's world is a primitive one at best, not one in which highly bred roses, artificial stock, and genetically freak blossoms, deserve to have a special place of prominence.

### *Manicheanism and the Duality of God/s:*

#### *Or, Is There Anything Ordinary About Life?*

Jackson seems to suggest that we live in a world that is Manichean in nature, a roller-coaster ride that brings us into contact with wildly fluctuating forces of good and evil. Manicheanism was founded by Mani in the early second century after Christ's death, and as a form of syncretism, Manicheanism attempted to merge the great religions of the day, Christianity and Zoroastrianism, together. The central theological puzzle of the day was what to do with evil, how to explain the power and persistence of evil in the world. For Manicheans, the universe is a contested battlefield in which the powers of evil materialism struggle constantly against the forces of spiritual good. While Christians accept the evil nature of Satan, they do not believe that Satan has the same power as God, nor that he is an equal or balancing force, the way Manicheans do. This might seem distant to the interests of Jackson were it not for her extensive reading in the history of fertility cults, magic, and the supernatural. She clearly knew that other religions had struggled with the question of evil, its power and nature. Jackson seems to have thought of the abstractions of good and evil as almost distant parent-figures who dole out rewards or punishments randomly.

Consider the strange central character in "An Ordinary Day, with Peanuts," included in *Best American Short Stories*, 1956. In this odd story

Mr. John Philip Johnson wakes up one morning and goes about his business of dispensing one beneficent deed after another to total strangers. But when he comes home that evening he meet his double, his wife, who has spent the whole day doing just the opposite, doling out evil and misery to some of the same total strangers. As in most of Jackson's stories, the kicker comes at the conclusion when the husband hears about all the misery his wife has caused during the day, sometimes to the very same people whom he had been helping, and he calmly asks, "Want to change over tomorrow?" Her response: "I would like to, ... I could do with a change" (338).

Both of these people are each equally uncommitted to the actions they perform, whether doling out good or ill. Neither has any stake in feeding the hungry or persecuting the innocent; each is simply performing a role, a function, that randomly alternates depending on the other's mood. This sort of split personification is very similar to a child's conception of the godhead: kind, rewarding, or vengeful and punishing. Enhancing cosmological reading of the story, Jackson has provided her readers with the cues to set the tale in a religiously primitive context: wagering on a "horse named Vulcan," or avoiding "fire signs on a Wednesday," or betting on a horse named "Tall Corn," all of which references place us back in the pagan world of "The Lottery" (337). Vulcan is the Roman god of fire, especially associated with destructive power and craftsmanship, while Wednesday is associated with the Norse god Woden or Odin, god of war and death, but also the god of poetry and wisdom. According to legend, Odin hung for nine days, pierced by his own spear, on the world tree. Here he learned nine powerful songs and 18 runes. And like a powerful poet, Odin can make the dead speak to question the wisest amongst them. The presence of Woden/Odin at this point in the story provides us with a clue as to the pagan religious origins of a seemingly slight tale about two people wandering around a city.

Past critical impulse has been to read the fluctuation between good and evil in the story as operating within the normative Judeo-Christian tradition. In fact, Parks quotes Heinrich Zimmer, a Jungian, to make sense of this story's Jacksonian spin on evil:

The function of evil is to keep in operation the dynamics of change. Cooperating with the beneficent forces, though antagonistically, those of evil thus assist in the weaving of the tapestry of life; hence the experience of evil, and to some extent this experience alone, produces maturity, real life, real command of the powers and tasks of life. The forbidden fruit—the fruit of guilt through experience, knowledge through experience—had to be swallowed in the Garden of Innocence before human history could begin. Evil had to be accepted and assimilated, not avoided.<sup>6</sup>

Certainly there is some validity in reading the story within a Jungian framework, but it does a certain amount of violence to Jackson's outré sensibilities. This is not to assert that she was a literal believer in Manicheanism; but it does make more sense to see these two characters as a male/female divinity, a dyadic force of good and evil spinning around the vortex of our everyday lives. Such a reading allows us to see that Jackson actually presents a theology, a system of ethical beliefs, in her fiction. Rather than being merely macabre or trivial or quotidian, her fiction is theological much in the same way that Flannery O'Connor's fiction is spiritual—gothically spiritual, that is.

### *Ghosts of Our Own: "Home"*

The afterlife is not a particularly attractive place in the universe of Jackson's fiction, although there is biographical evidence to suggest that she may have believed, or desperately tried to believe, that there was an afterlife that was positive and healing rather than frightening and ghastly. The last letter that Jackson wrote before her sudden death at the age of 47 described a "wonderful voyage" she was soon to take alone, where she would meet many new people (Oppenheimer 271). Whether she had a premonition of her death and actually believed the scenario that she crafted for her literary agent Carol Brandt is open to speculation. Given the scathing critique of the apocalyptic mind that she undertook in *The Sundial* (1958), Jackson cannot be assumed to describe a consistent or coherent vision of the afterlife in her fictions. What is not open to speculation, however, is the fictional presentations of the dead in her short works, most frighteningly in "Home."

Ethel Sloane, the story's protagonist, is a recent transplant to country living. After one day she considers herself "acquainted with most of the local people" through her numerous trips to the hardware store. But Ethel, like all of Jackson's smug female characters, has more than a little to learn before the day is finished. In Ethel's case, she is unaware of the fact that there are also "local people" who are not living and who she has not met in the hardware store. Indeed, she and her husband have just bought a house that is considered by the locals to be haunted. The old Sanderson place was the site of a kidnapping and double drowning some 60 years before, and local legend has it that on rainy days it is best to avoid the creek where the disaster occurred. But Ethel has no time to hear warnings or village history from the owner of the hardware store, who tries in vain to warn her to avoid the route. So she proceeds to take the haunted road and even stops to pick up two mysterious and bedraggled "figures standing silently in the rain by the side of the road" (400).

An old woman and little boy are shivering, and the "child was sick with misery, wet and shivering and crying in the rain" (400). Although the old woman speaks only to ask for directions to "the Sanderson place," she clearly is controlling the child and putting him in harm's way. Ethel is shocked when she sees the condition of the boy, barefoot, wearing "thin pajamas," and wrapped in a wet and dirty blanket (400). The boy never speaks, but the old woman informs Ethel that "he wants to go home" and home is the Sanderson place (401). Ethel can hardly imagine how these two can intend to visit her and her husband, and she "felt oddly feudal with pride. We're the lords of the manor" (401). But when she arrives at the home, the woman and boy have vanished from the back seat of her car.

Ethel receives the explanation she seeks from her husband Jim, who has heard the legend about a "crazy old woman" who kidnapped and disappeared with the little Sanderson boy. As the night was rainy and the creek had risen, it was believed that the two had drowned. Pride, elation, and ownership of the "ghosts" initially fills Ethel with happiness, and she intends to tell the story of her recent encounter with her very own ghosts in town the next day. But when she next enters her car she once again has company, for the ghosts are back and are complaining that they could not go home because there "were strangers in the house" (403). Desperate, Ethel proposes to take the two back to where she found them yesterday, next to the creek. But her passengers have another idea. As the car skids on the wet road and almost plunges into the creek, Ethel hears the young boy's "horrible laughter," and she realizes that the two of them want to take her with them into the dark waters (404).

We might recall here the Nietzschean or Kierkegaardian theory of the "eternal return," the notion that we will return over and over again to certain moments within our lives. For the boy and the old woman the eternal return will be to the site of the betrayal, the kidnapping, and its violent dénouement in drowning. Forever kept out of a home the boy can never return to, the two of them seek to dispossess others as they were dispossessed, by poverty and victimization. For Jackson there is an afterlife, but it is just like "home," a place where we will return in order to be wounded and betrayed once again. And there are no parents at "home," only a crazy old woman who takes us with her into the dark waters of death. Jackson's eschatology is predicated on the dysfunctional family, a site where victimization, abandonment, disappointment, and abuse lurk around every corner. "Home" is not a cheery vision of families gathered around their fireplaces, providing moral and emotional support to one another; Jackson's vision of the afterlife, suggests that if there cannot be good parents in this life, what hope can we have that they will exist in the next?

Shirley Jackson wrote a highly coded autobiography of sorts in much of her short fiction, and her later works are particularly rife with unresolved familial traumas and personal disappointments. This is not to argue that Jackson's fiction can only be appreciated if one knows her biography, or if one is willing to ascribe psychoanalytical categories of meaning to her works. But it seems clear that Jackson was a gothicist with a personal agenda. She wrote out of deep personal pain, but she presented that pain as universal, as the lot of all people who are born into a world where they are unwanted, imperfect, and condemned to rail at those facts.

## Notes

1. See Strauss's full commentary on Jackson in Judy Oppenheimer, *Private Demons: The Life of Shirley Jackson* (New York: Putnam, 1988), 125-6. Oppenheimer is particularly good on Jackson's conflicted relationship with her mother, see especially pp. 11-17. Darryl Hattenhauer also discusses in some detail her extensive drug use in *Shirley Jackson: American Gothic* (Albany: SUNY Press, 2003), 19-21. Moving out of the realm of the personal, John G. Parks notes that "Jackson's gothic fiction is an effective mode for her exploration of the violations of the human self—the aching loneliness, the unendurable guilt, the dissolution and disintegrations, the sinking into madness, the violence and lovelessness" (28). See his "Chambers of Yearning," *Twentieth Century Literature* 30 (1984), 15-29; rpt. in this volume.

2. Jackson quoted in Oppenheimer 125.

3. See, for instance, how Lenemaja Friedman discounts Jackson's gothic strain in the comprehensive *Shirley Jackson* (Boston: Twayne, 1975). Analyzing her humor or her profeminist tendencies are approaches taken by yet another large number of critics, most notably Lynette Carpenter, "Domestic Comedy, Black Comedy, and Real Life: Shirley Jackson, a Woman Writer," in *Faith of a (Woman) Writer*, eds. Alice Kessler-Harris and William McBrien (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1988), 143-48; Gayle Whittier, "'The Lottery' as Misogynist Parable," *Women's Studies* 18 (1991), 353-66.

4. All quotations from Jackson's stories taken from Shirley Jackson, *Just an Ordinary Day*, ed. Laurence Jackson Hyman and Sarah Hyman Stewart (New York: Bantam, 1998). Citations from the stories will be provided in parentheses in the text.

5. See John G. Parks, "The Possibility of Evil: A Key to Shirley Jackson's Fiction," *Studies in Short Fiction* 15 (1978), 320-23.

6. *The King and the Corpse: Tales of the Soul's Conquest of Evil*, ed. Joseph Campbell (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1971), 49; qtd. Parks, "Possibility," 322.