

# Terror and Fear as Paradigmatic Undercurrents of the Contemporary Society in the Works of Shirley Jackson

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Garčević, Karla

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**SVEUČILIŠTE U ZAGREBU**  
**UČITELJSKI FAKULTET**  
**ODSJEK ZA UČITELJSKE STUDIJE**

**KARLA GARČEVIĆ**  
**DIPLOMSKI RAD**

**TERROR AND FEAR AS  
PARADIGMATIC UNDERCURRENTS  
OF THE CONTEMPORARY SOCIETY  
IN THE WORKS OF SHIRLEY  
JACKSON**

**Zagreb, rujan 2018**

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**(Zagreb)**

**DIPLOMSKI RAD**

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**TEMA DIPLOMSKOG RADA: Terror and Fear as Paradigmatic  
Undercurrents of the Contemporary Society in the Works of Shirley Jackson**

**MENTOR: doc. dr. sc. Krunoslav Mikulan**

**Zagreb, rujan 2018.**

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## **SUMMARY**

In this thesis, feelings of terror and fear as paradigmatic undercurrents of the contemporary society in the works of Shirley Jackson will be explored. The thesis is divided into two main parts: historical background and literary analysis.

The first part of the thesis presents Jackson's biography including a timeline of her distinguished novels and short stories. It also explains the development of horror as a genre from Ancient Greece and Rome until today and describes characteristics of different categories of horror.

The second part analyses Jackson's novels and short stories in a way that shows Jackson's underlying criticism of the contemporary society and how the society or any social group can have a significant effect on the individual. Moreover, the thesis deals with feelings of terror and fear simultaneously present in the characters and in the reader, and how those negative feelings derive from a troubled human mind infected by social pressure and restraints.

**Key words: horror, terror, fear, contemporary society**

## SAŽETAK

U ovom radu bit će istraženi osjećaji straha i užasa kao karakterističnih naznaka suvremenog društva u djelima Shirley Jackson. Rad je podijeljen na dva glavna dijela: povijesni kontekst i analiza književnih djela.

Prvi dio rada donosi biografiju Shirley Jackson uključujući vremenski pregled njenih značajnih romana i kratkih priča. Također opisuje razvoj horora kao književne vrste od antičke Grčke i Rima do danas i značajke različitih kategorija horora kao žanra.

Drugi dio rada prikazuje analizu romana i kratkih priča Shirley Jackson kojoj je cilj dokazati prikrivenu kritiku suvremenog društva i kako društvo može imati značajan utjecaj na pojedinca. Nadalje, rad se bavi osjećajima straha i užasa koji su istovremeno prisutni u književnom liku i čitatelju i kako ti osjećaji proizlaze iz poremećenog ljudskog uma pokvarenog društvenim pritiscima i ograničenjima.

**Ključne riječi: horor, strah, užas, suvremeno društvo**

## **1. Introduction**

Shirley Jackson (December 14, 1916 – August 8, 1965) was an American author mostly acclaimed for her frightening and mysterious works. During her lifetime she wrote six novels, two memoirs and more than 200 short stories.

Characters in her books are generally mentally ill or trouble minded women who went through a major trauma in their life. Their mental instability causes instability of their thoughts and actions and by that, the instability of the reader. Human mind is the source of terror and fear that the reader experiences. Jackson criticizes the monotony and dullness of lives in the contemporary society, pointless social norms, and inferiority of women in her time, racism, and most importantly, the evil nature of human mind. Jackson was always fascinated by the evil present in everyone and made it her central theme of all her novels and stories. There is not one of her characters who is purely good-hearted; they all have ulterior motives and dark thoughts.

Her books belong to the horror genre because of the dark atmosphere that she creates and the element of shock caused by her characters' madness or delusion. But Jackson did not create her characters only for the sake of causing fear; she made them subtle and subversive commentators of the society. Jackson, who herself suffered from anxiety and depression, related to her characters and justified their mental state with a simple idea - why would a person be sane if the world that they live in is not?

## 2. Biography

### 2.1. Childhood

Shirley Jackson was born on December 14, 1916 in San Francisco and two years later her brother Barry was born. During her early childhood Jackson family often moved until settling in Burlingame, California. Even as a child, Jackson was dedicated to writing. She wrote poems, diaries, stories, school plays and many letters. Any feeling she wanted to express, she wrote down in her diary or on a scratch of paper. When she was 16, she moved again with her parents to Rochester, New York. Despite the fact that Jackson's were a wealthy and privileged family, their old photographs reveal their unnatural demeanor:

"The Jacksons were trading a life of comfort and privilege on one coast—country clubs, social teas, garden parties—for a very similar life on the other. But though they were decorated with all the trappings of wealth, the photograph reveals them as ill at ease with one another, their stiff, formal body language radiating anxiety and mistrust." (Franklin, 2016, p. 21)

Shirley's childhood was not ideal; her parents were distant - her father Leslie was busy with his work and her mother Geraldine focused on raising Shirley's brother. The reason for her mother's favoritism towards her son was accepting his mother's conventions and ways of life. Shirley was Geraldine's first child and many sources reveal she was not satisfied with how she turned out. Shirley's son, Barry Hyman, once said: "She was just a deeply conventional woman who was horrified by the idea that her daughter was not going to be deeply conventional." (Franklin, 2016, p.31)

Rejection and criticism she constantly received from her mother left Jackson with strong insecurities with which she dealt throughout her adult life. The complicated relationship between Jackson and her mother resulted in the repetitive and almost regular theme in most of Jackson's books and stories - motherhood. Jackson's characters are either motherless or have unloving, critical mothers. Another theme appearing in Jackson's work is racism, which also comes from the attitude of her family. Jackson's parents were racist, just like most of the elite in 1920s. (Ibid. 32) Taking a closer look into Jackson's writing, there is much evidence that Jackson was extremely, if not completely different from her family. She was an outcast in her own home, which is another association with her characters.

During her high school and college years, she was often puzzled by the world and the darkness hidden in people surrounding her. In one of her many diaries, she wrote:

“I can’t understand this desire— this requirement—to hide true things, and display to the world a suave, untroubled visage. If one is bewildered and unhappy, why not show it, and why will not people explain and comfort? But instead—this pretense at calm satisfaction, where underneath there is all the seething restless desire to be off, away from all this anger at self and others, to where there are other conventions, other thoughts, other passions.” (Jackson, 1934)

## 2.2.Career

### 2.2.1. *Janice* (1937)

In 1934, Jackson enrolled the University of Rochester, but she managed to stay there only a year before she was asked to leave. She avoided going to classes and had once said that she could not go because she hated them. It is assumed that around that time Jackson had her first nervous breakdown and tried to kill herself. Time off from college apparently suited Jackson and her mental health was improving. In 1937, she started studying at Syracuse University and published her first story titled *Janice* about a girl who attempted suicide because she could not go back to college. (Franklin, 2016, p.68)

Soon after publishing the story, literary critic Stanley Edgar Hyman was impressed by the story and wanted to meet Jackson. While she was still in college, they founded a literary magazine *Spectre*. Two years after their first meeting in 1938, they got married and moved to Greenwich Village, New York. (Ibid. 111) Greenwich Village was a perfect place for writers and all artists, and Jackson explains her decision to move there in her story *The Villager*: “When she was twenty-three she had come to New York from a small town upstate because she wanted to be a dancer, and because everyone who wanted to study dancing or sculpture or book-binding had come to Greenwich Village then.” (Jackson, 2005, p.40) Just like Hilda from the story, Jackson was around the age of 23 when she moved to the town with Hyman, and the reason for moving there was to become a successful author.

At first, the newly married couple had to work at various jobs to make a living, and one of those jobs is satirically described by Jackson in her short story "My Life with R. H. Macy" which was published in *The New Republic* in 1941. She wrote many stories during her stay in Greenwich Village, but received many rejections from publishers, which she apparently did not take well. She was sensitive to criticism - possibly another consequence of her family's judgment. Her already deeply rooted insecurity and self-loathing was intensified by Hyman's infidelity. Now, there was one more person in her life for whom she was not good enough. In one of her typewritten journals she wrote: "it isn't jealousy . . . it's [being] hurt and being left alone." (Franklin, 2016, 145) Despite her husband's affairs, she stayed with him and was soon going to start a new chapter of her life that would inspire many of her works - being a mother.

### 2.2.2. *The Road Through the Wall* and *The Lottery* (1948)

Laurence Jackson Hyman was born in October, 1942. Jackson as a mother was anything but typical. She wanted to raise her children differently than her own restrictive and conventional upbringing. Just like many fathers of that time, Stanley Hyman was buried in his work and did not spend much time with Shirley and Laurence, so Shirley was forced to accustom to her new role as a housewife. (Ibid. 165)

By 1943, Jackson published 8 of her stories, including *After You, My Dear Alphonse*, addressing the problem of racism and *Afternoon in Linen*, one of many Jackson's stories about the pressure that families often impose on a child. Both of the stories were published in *The New Yorker*. This was a great confidence boost for Jackson who was from then on completely dedicated to her writing. Two years later, Hyman's career went through a major change. He was offered a teaching position at Bennington College and Hymans moved to North Bennington, Vermont. (Ibid. 174)

That same year their second child was born and Jackson had to balance between writing and taking care of the household. Soon after the arrival of their second child, Joanne, Jackson finished her first novel *The Road Through the Wall*, published in 1948. The whole plot of the novel happens on Pepper Street, a literary version of the street where Jackson grew up, Forest View Avenue in Burlingame. The protagonist of the novel, Harriet, is modeled on Shirley Jackson and her life in

Burlingame. At one point in the novel, Harriet's mother forbids her to socialize with a Jewish girl who she became close friends with. The novel tackles the problems of alienation, racism and antisemitism.

Around the time she published her first novel, she was working on a short story that would become her most distinguished and analyzed work and later included in the list of required reading in American high schools. *The Lottery*, a short story about a long lasting ritual called the lottery performed every year in a small village, whose purpose is to sacrifice one villager by stoning them to death. Each villager draws a paper which decides their faith. Jackson said she got the idea for the story on her walk home from the grocery store. The story was published in *The New Yorker* in June, 1948 and received negative reactions. This negative response resulted in numerous cancellations of subscriptions to the magazine. Readers were shocked by the story and sent many letters to Jackson and *The New Yorker* inquiring about what the story meant and about where rituals like the lottery can be found. Jackson stated that she received over 300 letters about the meaning of the story. The story seemed so realistic that people were convinced that it was true. "The story, with shades of *The Scarlet Letter*, unfolds in Jackson's signature plain style, which is perhaps what fooled some of its initial readers into believing it was fact." (Ibid. 205)

Although many readers of *The New Yorker* were appalled and shocked by the story, literary critics were impressed and recognized the brilliance and originality of Jackson's writing. In 1949, the story was published in a collection of Jackson's stories *The Lottery and Other Stories*, originally titled *The Lottery, or The Adventures of James Harris*. The collection included stories previously published in *The New Yorker* and *The New Republic*. The story was adapted for television in 1952. In October the same year *The Lottery* was published, Jackson gave birth to her third child, Sarah. Maintaining balance between her housework, raising her children and writing was beginning to burden Jackson. The fame that *The Lottery* brought was naturally followed by invitations to hold lectures and public readings. Jackson enjoyed the attention at the beginning, having lost her shyness and anxiety, but only for a while. Being overwhelmed, first signs of agoraphobia were apparent and she started to refuse giving lectures and rather stayed at home. (Ibid. 243)

### 2.2.3. *Hangsaman* (1951) and *The Bird's Nest* (1954)

By the end of 1949, Hyman household moved from North Bennington to Westport, Connecticut. The same year Jackson's fourth child Barry was born, she published her second novel *Hangsaman*, about a seventeen-year-old girl preparing to go to college. Like all of her characters, Natalie's mind works in an unexpected way confusing the reader. Most of the plot of the novel happens at a college very similar to Bennington College. The character of Arthur Langdon, a college professor, is based on Jackson's husband and his close relationship with female students which Jackson did not approve of. (Franklin, 2016, p.267) Langdon's wife, Elizabeth, expresses it throughout the novel. "You still chasing after my husband?" Elizabeth said suddenly to Anne. "Doing any better this year?" (Jackson, 2013, p.79) The novel is complex and addresses many themes – infidelity, growing up, parent-child relationship, peer pressure and sexual abuse.

*The Bird's Nest*, published in 1954, is Jackson's novel that deals with the complexity of the human mind. Elizabeth Richmond suffers from multiple personality disorder and has developed into four personalities - Elizabeth (shy and reserved), Beth (kind and charming), Betsy (childlike and mischievous) and Bess (mean and stingy). The novel is categorized as psychological horror novel, which it truly is. Right around the time she started writing the novel, Jackson experienced strong headaches, just like Elizabeth in the novel. Her anxiety got worse; she had severe nightmares and started crying for apparently no reason. She called her state "nervous hysteria" (Franklin, 2016, p.308), another parallel to the novel - Elizabeth's aunt called her niece's state "nervous fever". The novel was adapted to a movie called "Lizzie" in 1957.

In between publishing *Hangsaman* and *The Bird's Nest*, Jackson wrote and published her widely popular and amusing memoir, *Life Among the Savages* (1953). The memoirs depict her domestic life with four children in a humorous, whimsical way. In 1957, she published a sequel titled *Raising Demons*. The books were different from Jackson's usual writing style and considering Jackson's mental health at the time, which she omitted from the memoirs, did not completely illustrate her life.

#### 2.2.4. *The Sundial* (1958)

*The Sundial*, a novel about the possible apocalypse and the Halloran family who are convinced that they will be the only surviving people, is a satiric novel about the world and people's flaws. Some scenes in the novel are frightening, but most of the book is amusing, and at times absurd. The whole novel is set in the Halloran house while the family awaits the end of the world. The ending is abrupt; we do not find out if the apocalypse happened or not, which can frustrate the reader. Stanley Hyman even suggested that she should change the ending, being frustrated himself, but Jackson refused to do so (Franklin, 2016, p. 350) Jackson will use the same type of ending in her last finished novel, *We Have Always Lived in the Castle*. The title is symbolic - a massive sundial set at the center of the Halloran house bears a quote from Geoffrey Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales* which represents the main idea of the novel: "WHAT IS THIS WORLD?"

#### 2.2.5. *The Haunting of Hill House* (1959)

Shirley Jackson was a writer known for including elements of her private life in her novels and stories, which makes them a direct entryway into her mind. Jackson had many obsessions except writing, one being houses. Almost all of her works have a plot revolving around a certain house described in details and usually inspired by a house that really exists. For example, the haunted house from her most famous novel *The Haunting of Hill House* was based on a house built by her great-great-grandfather (Ibid. 22)

Immediately after the publication of *The Sundial*, Jackson started working on her next novel. Her unhappiness with her marriage was increasing, and she showed minor symptoms of agoraphobia. (Ibid. 243) Jackson's desire for isolation may be the reason for writing novels with characters closing themselves up in a house. *The Haunting of Hill House*, which would prove to be her most recognized and discussed novel, is a ghost story on the surface, but just like everything Jackson wrote, it is not as simple as that. Eleanor Vance, the protagonist, is invited by Dr. Montague to stay in Hill House, supposedly a haunted house, with four other people. The purpose of their stay is to notice and examine possible supernatural occurrences in the house. The initial focus on the house switches to Eleanor and her disturbed mind and the

reader is left wondering if the ghostly appearances were real or a figment of Eleanor's imagination.

The novel was a great success - the reviewers praised Jackson's writing style and the publishers sold "around 12,000 copies for the hardcover edition in the first six months." (Ibid. 377) The novel was adapted to film twice (1963 and 1999), both times under the title *The Haunting*. Although Jackson's career was taking a big step upwards, her mental and physical health was deteriorating. She stopped leaving her house and even said that she "wrote herself into the house" (Ibid. 379)

#### 2.2.6. *We Have Always Lived in the Castle* (1962)

In 1961, Jackson was diagnosed with colitis, an inflammation of the colon which resulted in abdominal pain and nausea. The illness only increased her anxiety and the fear of leaving her house. She used her inability to go outside to write her last novel which was declared as her masterpiece. (Ibid. 399) In September, 1962, *We Have Always Lived in the Castle* was published. It was the most complex novel she had ever written - sisterhood, alienation, mother-daughter relationship, the dark side of the world and the human mind are only some of the themes found in the novel. Like *The Haunting of Hill House*, the plot mostly develops in a house. We meet 18-year-old Mary Katherine Blackwood who lives with her sister Constance and her uncle Julian. The rest of the Blackwood family was poisoned 6 years ago by another member of the family who we later find out is Mary Katherine, the protagonist. Jackson provides subtle clues about why Mary Katherine killed her family, but in a manner typical for her writing, leaves the reader uncertain.

By the end of the year, the novel reached The New York Times best-seller list. The critics were impressed and fascinated by the novel and the complexity of the characters. Jackson enjoyed the positive reactions, but her health was dramatically worse. She had panic attacks the moment she left the house, she was overweight, a smoker and took medication to ease her anxiety and agoraphobia. On August 8, 1965, in the middle of writing her novel *Come Along With Me*, she died from a heart failure in her sleep. (Ibid. 439)

### 2.2.7. Posthumous publications

In 1966, Stanley Edgar Hyman published Jackson's unfinished novel and 14 uncollected stories and three of her lectures in a collection titled *Come Along With Me*. The same year he released a collection of her works (11 stories from *The Lottery* collection, *The Bird's Nest*, *Life Among the Savages*, and *Raising Demons*) named *The Magic of Shirley Jackson*. Her children, Laurence Jackson Hyman and Sarah Hyman Stewart collected and published 31 Jackson's unpublished stories and 23 published, but uncollected stories under the title *Just An Ordinary Day* in 1997. Again in 2015, they published *Let Me Tell You*, a collection of 30 unpublished or uncollected short stories; 21 unpublished or uncollected essays, reviews, or articles and five lectures.

### 3. Horror as a genre

The Oxford dictionary defines ‘horror’ as: “an intense feeling of fear, shock, or disgust”. (The Oxford English dictionary, 2010) In the literary sense, this intense feeling is what the reader experiences while reading a horror novel or a story. What has always been puzzling is the fact that the horror genre is widely popular and attracts readers despite the fact that it provokes feelings of unease, anxiety, fear or disgust in the reader. Some theories suggest that the experience of fear through imagination lessens or weakens the experience of fear caused by reality:

“Since Freud considered art as an organized activity of sublimation, providing the reader with pleasures ‘under wraps’, it is tempting to argue that the horror tale actively eliminates and exorcises our fears by allowing them to be relegated to the imaginary realm of fiction.” (Newman, 1990, p. 121)

Felton in his work *Haunted Greece and Rome* explains the popularity of frightening stories like this:

“There are many reasons why people enjoy them and enjoy being scared by them. There’s certainly a cathartic effect to hearing a ghost story and being scared out of your wits without ever being in any real danger.” (Felton, 1999, p.36)

There are many explanations for scary and disturbing works of fiction attracting so many people, but what we know is that it challenges the mind of readers, confronts them with the unknown or unexpected, and breaks them out of their ‘comfort zone’. The horror genre went through different stages of development and assimilated itself into different genres like fantasy and science fiction.

#### 3.1. The development of the horror genre

Even though horror as a genre developed in the 18<sup>th</sup> century, its origins go back to Ancient Greece and Rome. Elements found in modern horror stories can be traced back to scary stories created by Romans and Greeks. For example, Greek tragedians like Euripides and Sophocles came close to the genre with their famous tragedies describing deaths and murders, and the general eerie atmosphere of the plays. Roman author Pliny the Younger told a story about a haunted house and an

encounter with a ghost that dates around 80 AD. The emotion of fear is the oldest human emotion and it can be found in literary works from the beginning of stories and storytelling. But, as previously mentioned, the genre was formally established in the 18<sup>th</sup> century and it developed from gothic fiction.

Horace Walpole and his novel *The Castle of Otranto* published in 1764 marked the beginning of gothic fiction. Shirley Jackson even named the main character in her short story *The Renegade* 'Mrs. Walpole'. His work contained elements of medieval romance, realism and fantasy. Other gothic authors like Ann Radcliffe and Matthew Lewis also used castles as settings in their works and their novel started the transformation of gothic novels to horror.

In 1818, Mary Shelley wrote her first novel *Frankenstein, or The Modern Prometheus* which marked the beginning of the horror genre. Shelley tells a story about a scientist, Victor Frankenstein, who creates an intelligent, but big and grotesque creature who is immediately rejected and hated by people. He eventually hides away in an abandoned cottage. The creature can be related to Jackson's characters in many ways. James C. Hatch in his article *Disruptive Affects: Shame, Disgust, and Sympathy in "Frankenstein"* suggests that the creature "registers, through psychological pathology, a "moral" fact – "Treat a person ill, and he will become wicked." (Hatch, 2008, p.33) This is a moral paradigm that Jackson implicitly used in her novels and stories; her characters' unstable and dark mind is the result of their mistreatment by their environment.

The rest of the 19<sup>th</sup> century was prolific for the horror genre. Washington Irving's story *The Legend of Sleepy Hollow* (1820), Jane C. Loudon's three-volume novel *The Mummy!: Or a Tale of Twenty-Second Century* (1827), Frederick Marryat's novel *The Phantom Ship* (1839), Edgar Allan Poe's *Black Cat* (1843), H.G. Wells' *The Invisible Man* (1897) and Bram Stoker's *Dracula* (1897) are only some of the works involved in establishing the horror genre in literature and they are responsible for the horror genre's rising popularity in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. (Prohászková, 2012, p.135)

Considering the genre's acclaim and recognition, 20<sup>th</sup> century authors continued exploring horror and its possibilities. Authors like Ray Bradbury (*Fahrenheit 451*, 1953), Robert Bloch (*Psycho*, 1959), Ira Levin (*Rosemary's Baby*, 1967), Shirley Jackson (*The Haunting of Hill House*, 1959) and Thomas Harris (*Red*

*Dragon*, 1981 and *The Silence of the Lambs*, 1988) helped shape the contemporary horror genre and influenced authors of modern horror. Although most of their works include descriptions of violence and murders, the focus is greatly on the psychology of characters. (Prohászková, 2012, p.136)

One of the most acknowledged contemporary horror authors is Stephen King who published 58 novels and more than 200 short stories. King has received many awards for his work including The Bram Stoker Award and The World Fantasy Award. He has often been named the “King of Horror” and the “Master of Suspense”. His best-known works are his first published novel *Carrie* (1974), his first short story collection *Night Shift* (1993), novels *The Shining* (1977), *It* (1986) and *Misery* (1987). His work is characterized by tense and terrifying atmosphere, psychotic characters, and common digressions (his novels include chapters with detailed information unrelated to the plot).

Mentioned characteristics are found in Shirley Jackson’s work. In fact, King mentions Jackson as his inspiration numerous times and frequently praises her work. His 1975 novel *Salem’s Lot* opens with the first paragraph of Jackson’s novel *The Haunting of Hill House*. In his non-fiction book about horror fiction *Danse Macabre*, he analyses the novel’s first paragraph:

“I think there are few if any descriptive passages in the English language that are any finer than this; it is the sort of quiet epiphany every writer hopes for: words that somehow transcend words, words which add up to a total greater than the sum of the parts.” (King, 1983, p.270)

A character in his novel *Wolves of the Calla* mentions *We Have Always Lived in the Castle*:

"Maybe," he said, "but there was this book I read for a report back in high school-I think it was called *We Have Always Lived in the Castle*-where this nutty chick poisoned her whole family with things like that." (King, 2003, p.51)

Another common feature in King’s and Jackson’s novels and short stories is laughter. They both use laughter as a sign of insanity and thus create a chilling atmosphere of the story.

Other influential writers of contemporary horror are Dean Koontz (*The Good Guy*, 2007), Clive Barker (*Book of Blood*, 1984/1985) and Anne Rice (*Interview with*

a *Vampire*, 1976). Horror fiction continues to expand its boundaries and combine different genres.

### 3.2. Categories of horror (Colavito)

J. Colavito (2008) divided works of horror fiction into six categories or subgenres: supernatural horror, weird tales, *Contes cruels*, psychological horror, dark fantasy and science fiction. The common feature of all categories is the emotion of fear, horror or terror inflicted on the reader. Shirley Jackson's work belongs to supernatural and psychological horror, and in some aspects it can be associated with weird tales.

#### Supernatural horror

Work of fiction belonging to the category of supernatural horror must include a character encountering a supernatural or ghostly threat. The horror derives from the feeling of fear that the character experiences which is transferred to the reader. The most prominent works of supernatural horror are *Dracula* by Bram Stoker, *It* by Stephen King, and *The Haunting of Hill House* by Shirley Jackson.

Alex Kurtagic, in his foreword of H. P. Lovecraft's book *Supernatural Horror in Literature* explains the style of writing in supernatural horror tale with following words: "On an aesthetic level, the supernatural horror tale is lavishly furnished with beauty, albeit of a dark romantic sort" (Kurtagic, 2013, p.28)

#### Weird tales

Weird fiction is characterized by the presence of something uncontrollable. "The horror of the story derives from the realization by the protagonist or the reader that natural law was violated and that powers beyond our comprehension are at work." (Colavito, 2008, p.14) The most influential author of weird tales is H. P. Lovecraft who wrote the tale *The Rats in the Walls*. Jackson's fourth novel *The Sundial* can be categorized as a weird tale – the characters are awaiting the forthcoming apocalypse.

### *Contes cruels* ('cruel tales')

Edgar Allan Poe's short story *The Pit and the Pendulum* is a perfect example of a 'cruel tale'. The story describes in detail the torture of a man imprisoned by the Spanish Inquisition. Graphic descriptions of intense physical pain and extreme cruelty are the key element of the subgenre. The focus is on reality, not on the supernatural.

### Psychological horror

Psychological horror is another category which dismisses the supernatural and uses reality as the motive for fear. In the case of psychological horror, the fear arises from the mind of the characters. Even though *The Haunting of Hill House* is often classified as supernatural horror novel, it is that only on the surface. The protagonist's mind is the real source of horror. Some interpretations of the novel even suggest that the ghostly appearances were only the product of Eleanor's imagination.

The majority of Jackson's books and stories have elements of psychological horror. Her realistic novels *Hangsaman*, *The Bird's Nest*, and *We Have Always Lived in the Castle* include several shared features found in all psychological horror stories: the protagonist is in some way mentally disturbed, usually because of a previously endured trauma; the horror of the reader is derived from the thoughts and behavior of the protagonist, and those thoughts and actions create suspense and a feeling of uncertainty which lead to a chilling and ominous atmosphere.

### Dark Fantasy

Dark fantasy is another literary combination of fantasy and horror, but it includes elements of science fiction and high fantasy. Supernatural horror is recognized by any mysterious or ghostly presence, while dark fantasy demands a secondary or parallel world. Secondary world is a world different than the primary or the 'real' world and it is a creation of the writer. The supernatural elements usually come from the secondary world where the supernatural is possible. Anne Rice's

series of novels *The Vampire Chronicles* are a perfect example of the subgenre. H. P. Lovecraft's work is often categorized as dark fantasy, as well as supernatural horror.

### Science Fiction

Sometimes the line between horror and science fiction is not completely clear. There are some horror stories that contain elements of science fiction and there are frightening science fiction works that could easily be classified as horror fiction. A novella *Who Goes There?* (1938) by John Campbell is an example of such work. Even though the plot revolves around scientists that discover an extraterrestrial creature, there is tension and violence characteristic for the horror genre.

#### 4. Terror and fear in Jackson's books and stories

Shirley Jackson is largely known as an author of horror novels and stories. She wrote stories that do not belong to the horror genre, but was mostly acclaimed for her frightening and sometimes disturbing texts. What marks Jackson's work as unique in the horror genre is the writing style. The suspenseful and eerie atmosphere that Jackson's writing style creates is the reason Jackson's books continue to be read by a large readership. Jackson's writing is an unusual combination of twisted and disturbing, but at the same time enjoyable, pleasant and sometimes even humorous language. The plot is unpredictable; dialogues between characters are disturbing but simultaneously playful and at times absurd. Jackson does not describe brutal violence and murders, her characters do not fight beasts or monsters, but she still manages to frighten and terrify the reader.

##### 4.1. The human mind as the source of terror

Even though Jackson mostly wrote books including supernatural elements (ghosts in *The Haunting of Hill House* and *The Sundial* or sympathetic magic in *We Have Always Lived in the Castle*), they are not the main source of terror. Minds of her characters, which are usually troubled and neurotic people, are the real trigger for fear. The best example is the character of Eleanor Vance, the protagonist of *The Haunting of Hill House*. The plot of the novel begins with introducing the character of Dr. Montague who wants to prove the existence of the paranormal and writes letters to four people, including Eleanor. The four people are required to stay in Hill House, an isolated and allegedly haunted house, and observe the supernatural occurrences they experience. Right at the time the horrors start to happen, Eleanor starts losing her mind. Her shyness and gentleness slowly transform into boldness and wickedness.

There are several indications that some of the ghostly appearances were the product of Eleanor's imagination: "I will never be able to sleep again with all this noise coming from inside my head; how can these others hear the noise when it is coming from inside my head?" (Jackson, 2006, p.145), but even if they really

happened, they are not the main focus of the novel. Jackson made Eleanor the central figure of the frightening and strange events in the house, and repeatedly related her with the house. Eleanor does not reveal her true thoughts and intentions on the outside, but the reader learns about them from her thoughts.

Jackson's characters are complex, and their inconsistency and unpredictability is usually shocking, disturbing or scary. Happiness that the character feels can suddenly turn into sadness, calmness into madness, and the bright tone of the text can quickly become dark and ominous: "It's charming, Eleanor thought, surprised at herself; she wondered if she was the first person ever to find Hill House charming and then thought, chilled, Or do they *all* think so, the *first* morning?" (Jackson, 1959, p. 77)

Character's psyche is a central theme in another Jackson's novel, *The Bird's Nest*, whose protagonist is Elizabeth Richmond, who suffers from a multiple personality disorder. The novel is written from different points of view, depending on the personality Elizabeth embodies. Elizabeth's personalities fight for survival, each one wanting to "stay forever". The fight can become so turbulent, that it can be hard to understand which of the four has become Elizabeth. The real terror occurs when the reader relates to Elizabeth and realizes his own mental struggles: "And thus we discover the true focus of Jackson's genius: the mysterious contents within all of us, the self-destructive tendencies that threaten to ruin the structure that keeps them hidden from the rest of the world." (Wilson, 2014, p.7)

Another mentally ill character is Mary Katherine Blackwood, the protagonist of Jackson's last novel *We Have Always Lived in the Castle*. It is not stated in the novel what disorder she suffers from, but signs of schizophrenia and sociopathy are evident in her behavior. She lives with her sister and uncle, but the novel is written from Mary Katherine's point of view. The reader is never prepared for what she might say next, or what she might do. Her instability and unpredictability, just like Elizabeth's, is what makes the novel terrifying.

Jackson always describes the character's living circumstances to give hints about why the character acts like he does. Natalie Waite in *Hangsaman* is an extremely intelligent, but socially awkward and mentally disturbed teenage girl. Most of the novel describes Natalie's mental processes which are confusing and hard

to follow. For example, this short paragraph is a conversation between Natalie and her mother which is interrupted by a detective who is a projection of Natalie's mind:

"She'll keep your father out there all afternoon," Mrs. Waite whispered urgently. "I *know*."

"Really," Natalie was saying silently, "I don't know what you mean."

"Do you pretend," the detective said, "that you are actually the daughter of these people? That they will acknowledge you?"

"Sir," Natalie said silently, "this is my mother. That is my father out there."

"And if I ask them?" the detective demanded. "You must be very foolish to suppose that you can rely upon the generosity of strangers."

"The next people who come," Mrs. Waite said, "I'll ask them inside. Then maybe once she's standing up she'll think of going home."

"And your name?" said the detective." (Jackson, 2013, p. 33)

In this paragraph we find out that there is a possibility that Natalie's father is cheating on his wife and that her mother openly talks about it to Natalie. Natalie's mind works as a shield from her environment and she uses imagination to defend herself from her family's problems. The result is the imaginary detective that appears any time Natalie does not want to have another uncomfortable conversation with her family. Finally, the reader is not certain if he is afraid of Natalie or of what made Natalie think and behave the way she does.

The minds of Jackson's characters can be so complex and dark, working in their own specific way that the reader is in the end not sure of anything. The events can become unclear and ambiguous; characters can at times seem completely sane, and at other time completely deranged or psychotic. The transitions of character's mental states can be so abrupt that it completely bewilders the reader:

"Jackson has always written with such precision about the delicate nature of our psyches, and as someone who has struggled with mental illness for my entire adult life, I think that there are few writers who know the ways in which our minds betray us as well as she does." (Wilson, 2014, p.7/8)

When her books describe psychological processes and the secret paths of the mind, they become perplexing and frightening, and Jackson's brilliance is then unmistakable.

#### 4.2. Everyday life as the source of terror

Monotony and tediousness of everyday life is widely present in Jackson's work. Jackson considered her life as a housewife boring, and found an escape in writing. She spent last years of her life not leaving her house and she focused on her last novel, which would be proclaimed her masterpiece, *We Have Always Lived in The Castle*. The horror of the novel is derived not only from Mary Katherine's disturbed mind, but from the way the Blackwood family lives. They spend their days in their big house following their fixed routines and usually not even talking to each other:

“On Tuesdays and Fridays I went into the village, and on Thursday, which was my most powerful day, I went into the big attic and dressed in their clothes. Mondays we neatened the house, Constance and I, going into every room with mops and dustcloths, carefully setting the little things back after we had dusted, never altering the perfect line of our mother's tortoise-shell comb.” (Jackson, 2006, p.50)

The terrifying aspect of people's lives is expressed in Jackson's novel *Hangsaman* when Mrs. Waite explains to her daughter that she is miserable with her life:

“This is the only life I've got—you understand? I mean, this is *all*. And look what's happening to me. I spend most of my time just thinking about how nice things used to be and wondering if they'll ever be nice again. If I should go on and on and die someday and nothing was ever nice again—wouldn't that be a fine thing? Wouldn't I have been cheated, don't you think?” (Jackson, 2013, p.35)

The short story *Mrs. Anderson* revolves around a married couple whose dull lives became their worst nightmare. Mrs. Anderson wakes up one day and tells her husband about her dream – she dreamt that he did not say the things he says every day: “Every single morning you take out a cigarette and you look for your lighter and then you go over to the stove and get a match and you say you left your damn lighter upstairs again. Every single morning.” (Jackson, 1996, p.125) The rest of the story follows Mr. Anderson's day at work where he continuously realizes that he always says the same things over and over again. The story ends with him coming home and finding Mrs. Anderson holding a knife. Right before she kills her husband, she says: “Why I was so worried,” she said, “was because if people didn't say those damn

things over and over, then they wouldn't talk to each other at all." (Jackson, 1996, p.127)

Jackson finishes the story with an underlying thought – can monotony and dullness of our lives drive us crazy, just like it did Mrs. Anderson?

#### 4.3. Ambiguity as the source of terror

Jackson is known for leaving big parts of the story to the interpretation of the reader which sometimes frustrates even her most devoted fans. Ruth Franklin, the author of Jackson's 2016 biography, *A Rather Haunted Life*, read and analyzed Jackson's notes and found out that she had planned to put much more information about the plot and the characters in her works than she eventually did.

In *We Have Always Lived in the Castle*, Merricat, Constance and their uncle Julian live as outcasts completely detached from the rest of their village because of a tragedy that happened six years ago. The only connection with the outside world is Merricat who leaves the house only on Tuesdays and Thursdays to buy groceries. The whole novel is set in their home and depicts their tedious days which are almost entirely the same. Constance is the only one who thinks about reaching out to the world again. Right before the end of the novel, their house is almost completely ruined by fire and uncle Julian dies. It is the point in the novel where the reader hopes that the sisters will finally be able to lead a normal, happy life. But, Jackson shocks right at the end by not adding anything new – the sisters go back to the house and continue living in the remaining parts of the house:

"I am so happy," Constance said at last, gasping. "Merricat, I am so happy."

"I told you that you would like it on the moon." (Jackson, 2006, p.138/139)

Jackson only insinuates that the sisters will spend their whole lives in the ruined house, but the reader cannot be sure. She leaves the final, most crucial information to the interpretation of her readers. Such example is found in her most anticlimactic novel about the possible apocalypse, *The Sundial*, which ends with the characters still waiting for the world to end and the reader does not find out what happened.

*Hangsaman* is a novel about Natalie, a seventeen-year-old girl leaving home for his first year at college. Natalie is very mature for her age and highly intelligent, but her social competence is damaged. Her college experience is not pleasant; she is isolated and considered “spooky” by other girls. She is repeatedly bullied and manipulated. The novel gets unusually ambiguous, even for Jackson. Natalie meets a girl named Tony who appears not to be real. There are still theories about Tony being a real character because Jackson’s writing becomes terribly confusing and unconnected. Natalie runs away from college with Tony, but it is not clear where and for how long:

“A week from today we’ll be on the boat.”

“And two weeks from today,” Tony said, “we’ll be in Venice.”

“In London,” Natalie said.

“In Moscow,” Tony said. “In Lisbon, in Rome.”

“In Stockholm.”

“I only hope that train isn’t late,” Tony said.” (Jackson, 2013, p.151)

The novel ends with Natalie attempting to commit suicide, but finally she changes her mind and thinks: “As she had never been before, she was now alone, and grown-up, and powerful, and not at all afraid.” (Jackson, 2013, p.173)

The ending indicates that Natalie came to her senses and will now start a different life, but just like with the sisters in *We Have Always Lived in the Castle*, the reader cannot be certain. As Rombes (2013) suggests in his article about the novel:

“Like a shifting territory that refuses to be mapped, *Hangsaman* keeps on moving long after you’ve finished it; as if, having activated the novel, you have set in motion an unfamiliar machine whose miniature gears are right there beneath your fingertips, underneath the words on the page, in some subterranean part of the book that always threatens to reveal itself but never, thankfully, does.” (Rombes, 2013, p.17)

Rombes’ metaphor about *Hangsaman* can be applied to every Jackson’s novel or story. Her power to tell a story without a typical denouement and nevertheless leaving the reader with a strong feeling of unease and confusion is brilliant.

## 5. The connotative level of Jackson's characters

Jackson's characters have a way of confusing readers with their strange behavior, complex personality and unpredictability. Except for their explicit purpose, to cause fear and anxiety in readers, they carry implicit meaning. Once Jackson stated that she first creates the characters, and then the plot. In Jackson's biography, Ruth Franklin brings a conversation between Jackson and her husband:

“well, i like the title,” said stanley. “what’s the plot?”

“what plot?” i asked.

“the plot of the novel,” said stanley, wide-eyed.

“don’t be silly,” i said. “i let the characters make the plot as they go along.”

“you mean you don’t have any idea what’s going to happen?”

“not the slightest,” i said proudly.

“but,” said stanley rather breathlessly, “people don’t write novels like that.”

“i do,” i told him very smugly indeed. (Franklin, 2016, p.122)

Characters in Jackson's works usually represent Jackson's own personal struggles and struggles any person might experience. Moreover, they stand for the negative effects of social pressure and social norms imposed on an individual.

Jackson is best known as a horror fiction writer, but to characterize Jackson's work only as terrifying stories would mean disregarding their subversion and connotative meaning. To completely understand Jackson's work requires thorough investigation of dialogues between characters and inner dialogues of the main character. Her stories are usually written from the perspective of the main character and their perspective is always altered and distorted. The reader gradually becomes aware of the main character's different interpretation of reality. Main characters in Jackson's books and stories are repeatedly lonely and unhappy women who lead troubled or empty lives. The darkness and terror of her work arise from the thoughts of the main characters who, without exception, think about the most dreadful things.

In her last novel *We Have Always Lived in the Castle*, the main character is Mary Katherine Blackwood, a disturbed and troubled young woman who introduces herself in the first lines of the novel:

“My name is Mary Katherine Blackwood. I am eighteen years old, and I live with my sister Constance. I have often thought that with any luck at all I could have been born a werewolf, because the two middle fingers on both my hands are the same length, but I have had to be content with what I had. I dislike washing myself, and dogs, and noise. I like my sister Constance, and Richard Plantagenet, and Amanita phalloides, the deathcup mushroom. Everyone else in my family is dead.” (Jackson, 2006, p.15)

The way in which Mary Katherine presents herself immediately shows features found in other Jackson's characters. Mary Katherine is recognizable as Jackson's creation by the creepiness and the disturbance that she evokes in the reader. What separates Merricat and other female protagonists of Jackson's stories is the variety of feelings that the reader experiences while getting to know her evil side. The reader meets Merricat as she goes shopping for food in her village and realizes that the villagers are not fond of Merricat, and vice versa. The reader's first reaction is to be on Mary Katherine's side, firstly because she is the protagonist of the novel, and secondly because of the image of an innocent and childish girl she portrays. Even though the reader can see that she is disturbed and troubled, Merricat confuses the reader by showing her sweet, childish side. For example, on her way home she daydreams about her house on the moon:

"I liked my house on the moon, and I put a fireplace in it and a garden outside (what would flourish, growing on the moon? I must ask Constance) and I was going to have lunch outside in my garden on the moon. Things on the moon were very bright, and odd colors; my little house would be blue." (Jackson, 2006, p.27)

Most main characters in Jackson's books lead a strange inner dialogue. The reason for this might be Jackson's personal thoughts which were so dark that they found place only in horror fiction. Considering the fact that the main characters present their evil and dark psyche, a reader who accidentally comes upon reading one of Jackson's books would think the character introduced is the antagonist. But Jackson's characters are more complicated than the usual protagonist-antagonist form. Her main characters serve as protagonists and antagonists at the same time,

being the source of evil in the stories (for example, the reader finds out that Mary Katherine killed almost everyone in her family), but at the same time gaining the sympathy of the reader.

Something similar is found in Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*. The creature possesses all characteristics of a typical monster in a horror story, but he turns out not to be the real culprit of the novel. The real culprits are people, who judged the creature by its deformed and terrifying appearance and immediately rejected it and treated it like a monster. The hatred of the people turned the creature into a real monster people thought he was. Applied to Jackson's characters, they are usually rejected and criticized from the moment they were born and the constant pressure and judgments of their environment awakened their evil and dark side, which is present in every human being.

There are many theories that characters of Merricat and Constance were projections of Jackson's dual personality:

“In her late novels, Jackson's female characters are often split versions of herself—most clearly in *We Have Always Lived in the Castle*, in which Merricat and Constance represent both wanderer and homebody, one a bundle of barely controlled animosity, the other a calming domestic presence.” (Franklin, 2016, p.127)

Jackson was discontent with her domestic life, but she had no choice, pressured by her family and the society she lived in. Her view of herself as having two different personalities happens to everyone forced to be someone they, in reality, are not. Even if a person is generally happy and pleased with their life, fantasies about a different life or a different version of themselves are present. Jackson saw herself as a “wanderer and a homeboy” but she was captured in a world that required her to be a reliable housewife.

In *The Haunting of Hill House*, Eleanor and Theodora, another resident in Hill House, are another representation of people's divided personalities. Eleanor unwillingly stayed at home her whole life to take care of her sick mother and never experienced her independence which turned her into a reserved and shy woman. Theodora on the other hand, was everything Eleanor wanted to be. “Theodora was not at all like Eleanor. Duty and conscience were, for Theodora, attributes which belonged properly to Girl Scouts.” (Jackson, 2006, p.24)

Eleanor expresses a wish to be like Theodora: “Theodora came through the bathroom door into Eleanor’s room; she is lovely, Eleanor thought, turning to look; I wish I were lovely.” (Jackson, 2006, p.48) Theodora is independent, bold and careless; she does not follow social rules and lives her life by her own terms. The connotation is evident – there are two people hidden in every person. One is bold and fearless just like Theodora and one is timid and oppressed like Eleanor.

*The Deamon Lover* tells a story about a woman searching for a man all over town. It is their wedding day and he does not show up. Jackson uses the story as a metaphor – women search for a man their whole life; their life is worth something only if they get married. The woman in the story is a connotation of all women who let themselves be defined by a presence of a man in their life:

“Yes, it looks silly, doesn’t it, me all dressed up and trying to find the young man who promised to marry me, but what about all of it you don’t know? I have more than this, more than you see: talent, perhaps, and humor of a sort, and I’m a lady and I have pride and affection and delicacy and a certain clear view of life that might make a man satisfied and productive and happy; there’s more than you think when you look at me.” (Jackson, 1949, p. 9)

In the short story *The Villager*, the protagonist Hilda pretends that she is a successful dancer, even though she works as a stenographer. Her unfulfilled ambitions of an exciting career and life are a metaphor for every time someone told a small lie about themselves and pretended to be someone that they are not. People’s desire to be viewed as successful and accomplished, and generally the human need to be liked portrayed by Jackson in many of her works. In her short *Afternoon in Linen*, a grandmother forces her granddaughter to read her poems aloud in front of people at her grandmother’s party even though the girl refuses to do it a number of times. In the end, the girl says that the poems are copied from someone else and shows a rebellious character that does not want to give in to other peoples’ hypocrisies, even her grandmother’s.

Her most debated short story, *The Lottery*, brings many connotations to the character of Tessie Hutchinson, the person chosen as the winner of the lottery. She represents the most horrid human weaknesses. The ritual’s purpose is human sacrifice and the ‘winner’ is stoned to death because of a belief that “corn be heavy soon” (Jackson, 2005, p.200) which means that their corns will start sprouting

because of the sacrifice. Mrs. Hutchinson is so casual about the ritual that she arrives late because she was washing the dishes. In Jackson's style, she is chosen as the winner and instantly after realizing what might happen to her, she appeals to have her daughter included in the draw. By this horrifying act, Jackson alludes to the dark part of the human mind; the unknown that may be hidden in everyone, even the person we might think would give their life for us.

Connotations to Jackson's characters are endless. Every character and their way of thinking can be related to Jackson, the reader, or in fact, every human being. The fact that she creates characters first and then lets them decide what will happen makes her work character-driven fiction. Readers can relate to the characters, each finding similarities and discovering the complexity of the human mind.

## 6. Jackson's characters as outcasts

Isolation and detachment from society is an essential theme for Jackson. In addition with her passion for houses, setting is in almost any case, a house or a home of some kind. Almost all of her protagonists live as outcasts, communicating with the outside world only when it is necessary, or not at all. A line from a short story *The Intoxicated* is a perfect example of how she thought the society made people hide in their homes away from the outside world: "Maybe there'll be a law not to live in houses, so then no one can hide from anyone else, you see."(Jackson, 1949, p. 13)

Jackson herself experienced strong depression, anxiety and paranoia, leading to agoraphobia and finally, never even leaving her room. As her anxiety grew stronger, her characters became more anxious and as her fear of the outside world became evident, she wrote her two most acclaimed novels *The Haunting of Hill House* and *We Have Always Lived in the Castle*. Characters in both novels shut themselves out from the world and the setting of the novels is the inside a house.

### 6.1. Houses – shields from the rest of the world

*The Sundial*, a novel about the Halloran's, another dysfunctional and bizarre family, is set in a house completely isolated from the rest of the world:

"The character of the house is perhaps of interest. It stood upon a small rise in ground, and all the land it surveyed belonged to the Halloran family. The Halloran land was distinguished from the rest of the world by a stone wall, which went completely around the estate, so that all inside the wall was Halloran, all outside was not." (Jackson, 1958, p.14)

Isolated houses are something that connects almost all Jackson's novels. In *We Have Always Lived in the Castle*, the Blackwood family is detached from the world by a wire fence: "Blackwood Road goes in a great circle around the Blackwood land and along every inch of Blackwood Road is a wire fence built by our father." (Jackson, 2006, p.18)

As previously mentioned, something similar is found in Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*. The grotesque creature because of being unaccepted, hated and

rejected from his environment, isolated itself from the rest of the world, just like many of Jackson's characters. In the end, the creature became everything people expected it to be, violent and monster-like:

“He was an abortion and an anomaly; and though his mind was such as its first impressions framed it, affectionate and full of moral sensibility, yet the circumstances of his existence are so monstrous and uncommon, that, when the consequences of them became developed in action, his original goodness was gradually turned into inextinguishable misanthropy and revenge.” (Shelley, 1999)

This is another connotation to Jackson's characters. There is ambiguity in Jackson's books regarding her characters. She implies that the characters circumstantially became wicked, but she never explicitly says so. But there must be a reason why Jackson gives so much information about the character's environment and the relationship with their family. Showing the bad side of the people surrounding her characters, the reader cannot help but wonder if they made the characters the way they are.

Before leaving her home to stay in Hill House, Eleanor has a conversation with her sister who does not want Eleanor to leave. Jackson gives several implications that the sister is wicked and bullies Eleanor, probably since she was little. Eleanor's freedom is once again reassured by leaving despite her sister's disagreement. The Hill House is Eleanor's chance to start all over, her escape. In the end, she begins to like, or even love, Hill House just because it accepted her.

Jackson's decision to isolate her characters comes from her personal fears and anxieties. Since she was a child, she was considered different and an outcast, like her characters. And just like the creature in *Frankenstein*, Jackson and her characters experienced strong judgments from their environment which made them shelter themselves from the world.

## 6.2. Paranoia, anxiety and agoraphobia

Mrs. Halloran, also a deeply troubled and unhappy character dreams of living alone. In this sophisticatedly written, but frightening paragraph we can find Jackson's own desires:

“A place of my own, Mrs. Halloran thought, turning restlessly and dreaming in the great rosy bed with silk sheets, a place all my own, a house where I can live alone and put everything I love, a little small house of my own. The woods around are dark, but the fire inside is bright, and dances in moving colors over the painted walls, and the books and the one chair; over the fireplace are the things I put there. I will sit in the one chair or I will lie on the soft rug by the fire, and no one will talk to me, and no one will hear me; there will be only one of everything—one cup, one plate, one spoon, one knife. Deep in the forest I am living in my little house and no one can ever find me.” (Jackson, 2014, p.86)

As mentioned in Jackson’s biography, she suffered from severe anxiety and depression which developed into agoraphobia in the last years of her life, and eventually resulted in not even leaving her room. Nearly every character that is Jackson’s creation at one moment in the story, expresses longings to go away to a faraway place where they can be all alone, detached from the rest of the world. Jackson’s dark thoughts and mental instability must have had a major influence on her characters’ development. Her husband, Stanley Edgar Hyman, once said that Jackson had “no idea what the things she wrote meant. Whatever came out of her head, she put on the page.” (Franklin, 2016, p.93) This can be seen in the way Jackson writes and develops the plot and the characters. Unexpected, sometimes illogical twists and mood changes are probably manifestations of Jackson’s personal state and well-being. Her character’s madness could be her own madness, and their paranoia and anxiety could be what she felt while writing the pieces.

Eleanor in *The Haunting of Hill House* thinks:

“Peace, Eleanor thought concretely; what I want in all this world is peace, a quiet spot to lie and think, a quiet spot up among the flowers where I can dream and tell myself sweet stories.” (Jackson, 2006, p.141)

In this paragraph, Eleanor wishes what everyone wished at least once in their lifetime. The human mind needs peace to develop correctly and if a person was never at peace and was constantly oppressed and disturbed, there is a great chance of the mind developing abnormally. Eleanor was mistreated her whole life and as a result, her mind became dysfunctional. Because she did not have a chance to normally evolve as a person, she constantly doubts herself and everything she does. Her paranoid behavior is something widely present in the contemporary society. Now,

more than ever before, people overthink everything they do and feel strong anxieties when engaging in interactions with other people.

Eleanor's suicide in the novel is not portrayed as a tragedy, but as a metaphor. She was confused, overwhelmed and tired of depending on other people so she did one thing she could do to find the peace she always wanted. The need for peace and detachment from society that fiercely rejects everything different and special, and accepts all that fits in the already given mold, is ever-present today, when many people want to 'get away' and live their life by their own terms.

The character of Constance, Merricat's sister is agoraphobic:

"Today she had come to the end of the garden, and I saw her as soon as I came around the turn; she was standing with the house behind her, in the sunlight, and I ran to meet her.

"Merricat," she said, smiling at me, "look how far I came today." (Jackson, 2006, p.31)

She did not leave the Blackwood house for six years because of the hatred and insults inflicted to her by the villagers. She was wrongly accused of her parent's murder, but the villagers still bully Merricat when she goes out to the village to buy food. Even though Constance was not to blame for the tragedy that happened to her family, she is gossiped and hated by the villagers six years after the incident. The villagers are represented as vicious and primitive people who have nothing better do to than to talk about the Blackwood's.

Jackson wrote the novel at the time she herself was suffering from agoraphobia and had intense panic attacks immediately after leaving her house. She was always gossiped by her neighbors because of her unconventional behavior and it is no coincidence that she characterized the villagers as the ones responsible for Constance's condition. Again, the pressure of the society was too much for a single individual to endure.

## 7. Jackson's books and stories as social commentary

Jackson's most recognized work, the short story *The Lottery* (1948) is an excellent example of subversion in horror fiction. Horror fiction is meant to frighten or at least, disturb the reader, which Jackson's style of writing undoubtedly succeeds in. Apart from the evident intention of her work, that is to scare her readers, the undertone of her texts reveals that Jackson had something else in mind while writing her books and stories.

### 7.1. Social conformity

*The Lottery* is a horror story about a ritual practiced in a small village called The Lottery in which villagers take a piece of paper out of a black box which determines who will be stoned that day. The plot of the story ends right at the moment when the stoning begins. While the unexpected ending serves as a means for shocking and frightening the reader, the rest of the story acts as social commentary. The story's introduction has a breezy, happy tone:

"The morning of June 27th was clear and sunny, with the fresh warmth of a full-summer day; the flowers were blossoming profusely and the grass was richly green. [...] the whole lottery took less than two hours, so it could begin at ten o'clock in the morning and still be through in time to allow the villagers to get home for noon dinner." (Jackson, 2005, p.196)

The beginning might not be appropriate considering the fact that the ritual's purpose is to stone one villager to death, but readers of Jackson's work know that the atmosphere of the story will soon dramatically change. Many people interpreted villagers' indifference towards the lottery as Jackson's comment on people's undoubting acceptance of rituals and tradition, however strange they may be. In psychology this is called 'social conformity'. A definition by McLeod (2007) says that social conformity is "a type of social influence involving a change in belief or behavior in order to fit in with a group." (McLeod, 2007, p.1) The villagers had to know that the ritual is pointless and cruel, but they felt like it is their responsibility to cooperate because everyone else in the village did. The protagonist, Tessie

Hutchinson, who is eventually chosen as the “lucky winner”, brought a new level of social conformity in the story by being so casual about the ritual that she forgot about it: “clean forgot what day it was” (Jackson, 1948, p. 198) The fact that Tessie drew the fatal paper is irony most typical for Shirley Jackson – in this moment Tessie becomes a mirror to the reader who wonders if he would act in the same way: “From this point of view, Tessie Hutchinson is a representative not only for her own family, but also for all the villagers, even the whole mankind.” (Chen, 2012, p.1024)

Conformity is also addressed in the short story *Paranoia* whose protagonist believes he is being followed by a man on his way home to his wife. Considering the title of the story, the reader immediately assumes that the man is paranoid and Jackson suggestively, but subtly, provides other indications for that, too: “There were twenty small-size gray suits like Mr. Beresford’s on every New York block, fifty men still clean-shaven and pressed after a day in an air-cooled office, a hundred small men, perhaps, pleased with themselves for remembering their wives’ birthdays.” (Jackson, 2017, p. 37) The man’s paranoia can be interpreted as anxiety and nervousness because of the sameness and routine surrounding lives of people in the contemporary society.

People’s need to fit in a social group is evident in Jackson’s short story dealing with the problem of racism *Flower Garden*. Mrs. Winning lives in a small village. When Mrs. MacLane moves to the neighborhood, Mrs. Winning immediately likes her and they become friends. After Mrs. MacLane hires an African-American man as her gardener, Mrs. Winning receives a few rude comments only because she spends time with Mrs. MacLane. Mrs. Winning eventually stops talking to Mrs. MacLane and the story ends with her not even looking at her as she walks past her house. Mrs. Winning’s need to be just like everyone else in her village was strong enough to end a friendship over it.

Just like characters in Jackson’s works, people in the contemporary society have a tendency to infiltrate social groups. Jackson may have used extreme cases, for example the villagers in *The Lottery*, but the motive is the same. What people do to achieve social conformity varies from small and insignificant adjustments to great changes in their beliefs and moral values.

## 7.2. The evil nature of humanity

Another theme of *The Lottery* is the dark side of the human mind. Variations of the ritual described in the story still exist in some parts of the world. Some Islamic countries, like Iran, Pakistan and Somalia, still use stoning as a punishment for adultery. The story might be an allegory of the Islamic patriarchal society and its cruel penal system. Most punishments for adultery happen only to women which might be the reason Jackson chose to make the victim female. (Al-Joulani, 2010, p.34)

No matter how cruel and inhuman the lottery may seem every villager participated, children even eagerly: “Bobby Martin had already stuffed his pockets full of stones, and the other boys soon followed his example, selecting the smoothest and roundest stones.” (Jackson, 2005, p. 196) Jackson herself stated that the intention of writing the story was to give the readers “a graphic dramatization of the pointless violence and general inhumanity in their own lives” (Friedman, 1975, p. 64)

Jackson was aware of the evil present in the world and people around her since she was a child. On every New Year’s Eve, she would write her resolutions for the next year. One year, when she was in high school, she wrote: “I must lose that sense of inferiority, but not go so far as vulgarity, and, above all things, I must cultivate charm, and ‘seek out the good in others, rather than explore for the evil.” (Franklin, 2016, p.42) The short story cleverly titled *The Possibility of Evil* revolves around Adela Strangeworth, a character with a connotative last name who anonymously sends vicious letters to her neighbors. At the beginning of the story, she is portrayed as a sweet, old lady who loves her village and then is gradually revealed as the true villain of the story. Near the end of the story, Miss Strangeworth explains why she sends the letters: “[...] 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.” (Jackson, 2017, p. 15)

It is possible that Jackson related herself to the character of Miss Strangeworth and the letters to her own stories. Her writing is dark and twisted, at times unpleasant, but serves as a warning to readers - just like Adela, Jackson points

to the possibility of evil in the world. Elizabeth Barrette in her essay *Elements of Aversion* writes:

“Sometimes a story intends to shock and disgust, but the best horror intends to rattle our cages and shake us out of our complacency. It makes us think, forces us to confront ideas we might rather ignore, and challenges preconceptions of all kinds. Horror reminds us that the world is not always as safe as it seems, which exercises our mental muscles and reminds us to keep a little healthy caution close at hand.” (Barrette, 1997, p.3)

The evil nature of humanity is a theme found in all Jackson’s novels and stories. In *The Sundial*, a novel about an upcoming apocalypse, the only people aware of the end of the world are members of the Halloran family, and it is indicated that they will be the only surviving people. The members of the family have different personalities, but one thing in common – they do not care for each other. All characters in the novel are flawed and presented in a negative light. They are greedy, vicious, untruthful, and selfish. By putting them in charge of the new world, Jackson turns them into a metaphor – they represent the whole humanity. Just like one of the characters in the novel puts it: “Evil, and jealousy, and fear, are all going to be removed from us. I told you clearly this morning. Humanity, as an experiment, has failed.” (Jackson, 2014, p.36)

### 7.3. Motherhood and family

It is well known that Shirley Jackson did not have a good relationship with her mother, which can explain why the characters of mothers in her work tend to be wicked or vile. In the short story *The Lottery*, Tessie Hutchinson whose family has been chosen to draw the lottery, whose winner is stoned to death, appeals to include her married daughter in the draw. “[...] Tessie Hutchinson is not only a mother, but a mother who sees her daughter as so much an extension of herself that she attempts to improve her own chances of survival by involving Eva in the fatal draw.” (Newman, 1990, p. 123)

Jackson’s last novel *We Have Always Lived in the Castle* examines the topic of family relations. Most of the Blackwood family was poisoned by another family member, Mary Katherine, who was twelve years old at the time. The only surviving Blackwood’s are Mary Katherine, her sister Constance and their uncle Julian. The

only person who speaks about the events before the poisoning, which was six years ago, is the uncle. From him the reader discovers that the family was dysfunctional. It is unknown if Mary Katherine became disturbed because of the family relations, but there is an insinuation in the novel that Constance hid the evidence necessary to blame her sister, and when they arrested her she said that the family deserved to die. There is an assumption that Merricat poisoned her family because they mistreated and abused their children. Is it possible that disturbed 12-year-old Merricat just wanted to save herself and her sister from the abuse of their parents?

In her novel about multiple personality disorder, *The Bird's Nest*, the trauma responsible for the development of Elizabeth's disease is the death of her mother. Elizabeth's aunt describes her mother as "brutal, unprincipled, drunken, vice-ridden beast." (Jackson, 2014, p.154) It is indicated that her mother sometimes physically assaulted her and that her mother's boyfriend sexually abused Elizabeth. Most of Jackson's characters go crazy because of their family, usually mothers. Like her characters, Jackson was negatively influenced by her mother and kept exposing it in her works.

*The Haunting of Hill House* is another Jackson's novel revolving around the theme of motherhood. At the beginning of the novel, Eleanor states that: "The only person in the world she genuinely hated, now that her mother was dead, was her sister." (Jackson, 2006, p.23)

Another young woman, Natalie, the protagonist of *Hangsaman* expresses negative feelings towards her parents:

"Her second consolation was the recurring thought that she might always give up college if she chose, and simply stay at home with her mother and father; this prospect was so horrible that Natalie found herself, when she thought confidently about it, almost enjoying her fear of going away." (Jackson, 2013, p.13)

Her father is unfaithful to her mother and addresses himself as her "God". He is a successful writer and criticizes everything Natalie writes. Even when she is away in college, he responds to her letters with harsh criticism. Her mother, on the other hand, is discontent with her marriage and constantly complains to Natalie about her husband, Natalie's father. Natalie's mental instability is justified because of the conditions she grew up in. It is no wonder that Natalie imagines to talk to a detective every time her parents talk to her.

In conclusion, all Jackson's characters have two significant factors that connect them: they are mentally unstable and have or had unfit parents taking care of them. This problem is as present in the modern society as it was in Jackson's time. Many people suffer from insecurities, anxieties and mental illnesses because of the pain inflicted to them by their parents. Parent abuse is a problem that continues to grow and Jackson's work shines a light on the topic avoided by many authors. The message that her novels send is that we might be terrified of the women Jackson illustrates as abnormal and even dangerous, but there is always a reason for their abnormality, and the reason is the true danger of her work.

#### 7.4. Inferiority of women

In many of her works, Jackson touches upon the problem of social conformity and socially determined roles, especially women's role as a housewife. Even though Jackson did not identify her work as feminist, there are many traces of the movement in her texts. Considering the fact that almost all of her work revolves around female characters and their struggle in the world dominated by men, women's inferiority must have been on her mind while creating her stories. In the short story *The Renegade*, we are introduced with Mrs. Walpole who wakes up in the morning, makes breakfast and gets her children ready for school. When her husband comes down to eat, her inferiority is obvious:

“Mr. Walpole devoted himself to his paper, and Mrs. Walpole, who wanted desperately also to say, “I don't suppose you notice that I haven't had a chance to eat—” set the dishes down as softly as she could.” (Jackson, 2005, p.55)

In her novel *The Haunting of Hill House*, the main character Eleanor spent her entire life caring for her ill mother and that resulted in hating her and perceiving her mother's death as an escape from captivity. Jackson points out that it was expected of Eleanor to take care of her mother, or as Eleanor suggests it in the novel: “I had to stay with Mother, of course” (Jackson, 2006, 72), even though her mother seems to not have been a good person. She did not sacrifice her own life to look after her mother out of love or sense of family; she simply did not have a choice. Social restraints of Shirley's time and the contemporary society in *The Haunting of Hill House* are skillfully represented in this short paragraph which appears when Eleanor

is drinking coffee in a café where she sees a little girl demanding a cup with stars on the bottom, just like the one she has at home:

“Don’t do it, Eleanor told the little girl; insist on your cup of stars; once they have trapped you into being like everyone else you will never see your cup of stars again; don’t do it; and the little girl glanced at her, and smiled a little subtle, dimpling, wholly comprehending smile and shook her head stubbornly at the glass. Brave girl, Eleanor thought; wise, brave girl.” (Jackson, 2006, p. 32)

When Eleanor says “once they have trapped you into being like everyone else you will never see your cup of stars again”, the underlying thought is obvious if the reader is familiar with Jackson’s background. “They” can be interpreted as the restrictive society in which Shirley lived, and “the cup of stars” is a metaphor for desires and ambitions of women “trapped” in their roles of housewives. The emphasis put on the word “brave” also has an underlying meaning. The little girl will be characterized as brave if she defies her mother and insists on what she wants, just like it takes bravery to resist the norms and rules of the confining society. The novel ends with Eleanor committing a suicide, and her last thoughts are:

“I am really doing it, she thought, turning the wheel to send the car directly at the great tree at the curve of the driveway, I am really doing it, I am doing this all by myself, now, at last; this is me, I am really really really doing it by myself.” (Jackson, 2006, p.173)

Eleanor in the end kills herself because of the desire to be free and independent, and finds that ending her life is the only way to do something by her own rules.

The sophistication of Jackson’s writing and the skill to subtly comment on the position of women in her time while engaging readers in a horror story is exceptional. The way in which Jackson’s characters immerse in their own inner dialogues shows us that Jackson related to her characters and wanted to express her own struggles and perspective on society. Eleanor’s powerful inner dialogues work as a device for suspension and maybe even fear, but suggest that Jackson wanted women to break out of roles given to them by society. Another Eleanor’s inner dialogue shows the dullness and tediousness of women’s lives as housewives:

“Caring for her mother, lifting a cross old lady from her chair to her bed, setting out endless little trays of soup and oatmeal, steeling herself to the filthy laundry, Eleanor

had held fast to the belief that someday something would happen.” (Jackson, 2006, p. 23)

Jackson gives another perspective of the confinement of women in unhappy marriages in her novel *Hangsaman*: "It has always been my opinion, you know, that princesses are confined in towers only because they choose to stay confined, and the only dragon required to keep them there was their own desire to be kept." (Jackson, 2013, p.111)

Jackson proposes another point of view - women are prisoners because they subconsciously want to be imprisoned. This can be applied to women of contemporary society who stay in unhappy marriages even though they have the freedom to leave their husbands. Natalie's mother, Mrs. Waite, constantly talks about how miserable she is, but she never thinks of leaving despite her husband's infidelities. Another character in *Hangsaman*, Mrs. Langdon, is also married to an unfaithful husband. There is another hidden message in this paragraph and it relates to Jackson's life. She repeatedly thought about leaving her husband because of his affairs, but she chose to stay. She was aware that women should and can claim their freedom, but chose not to.

Jackson's choice to create the majority of her characters as female is unclear, but it can be explained by the autobiographic level of her work. She wanted to express her own troubles and opinions, and it could be done best with a female protagonist. But there is a possibility that she wanted to make women the focus of her work because they were usually on the sidelines. Her success and fame was shadowed by her husband's and she was never equally appreciated: "It was Hyman, rather than Jackson, who was considered the intellectual of the couple during their lifetimes. It was Jackson, however, who paid the bills, with her stories and novels, while also taking care of her children." (Weinman, 2014, p.4)

Inferiority of women is a major problem in the contemporary society even though women have more freedom and independence than ever before. Jackson was required to live the life of a housewife even though she was an ambitious and self-accomplished woman who wanted to focus on her career. Although Jackson had to take care of her four children, the household and her husband, she managed to find time to write her two masterpieces. Despite all the things she had to balance to develop her career, Hyman was considered the successful writer in the family.

Every woman, just like Jackson, Mrs. Walpole, Eleanor and Mrs. Waite experienced being underestimated, manipulated or bullied by a man. The reality of today's world is that women are still not entirely equal and they are still considered as the ones required to take care of housework and children.

## 7.5. Racism

Being born into an upper class family, Shirley Jackson was surrounded by racism and the cruelty that racism brings. Her first published and her most subversive novel *The Road Through the Wall* is set on Pepper Street, a literary version of the street where Jackson grew up. Residents of Pepper Street are described as elitist and racist, and they enjoy being detached from the rest of the town by a wall. When a hole is torn through the wall and they are no longer isolated from the middle class, their lives become entirely disrupted.

Some of her short stories also involve the problem of racism. In *Flower Garden*, a newcomer in the village, Mrs. MacLane immediately attracts attention of other residents by dressing and acting differently. Mrs. MacLane wears bright and nonmatching colors and shows other signs of unconventionality. When she hires a black man from the village as her gardener, she and her son instantly become outcasts. For example, he is not invited to birthday parties of other boys in the village. Even Mrs. Winning, who was Mrs. MacLane's friend from the moment she arrived to the village starts ignoring her after the pressure of her family and other villagers: "It's the MacLane girl, about her, I mean. You know her so well, you ought to talk to her about that colored man working there." (Jackson, 1949, p.91)

Even though Mrs. Winning does not agree with others and in reality supports Mrs. MacLane, in the end she conforms to the opinion of others and distances herself from the MacLane family: "Mrs. MacLane and Mr. Jones both turned, and Mrs. MacLane waved and called out, "Hello!" Mrs. Winning swung around without speaking and started, with great dignity, back up the hill toward the old Winning house." (Jackson, 1949, p.97) The irony here is evident – Mrs. Winning's act is anything but dignified, and Jackson tactfully reveals her opinion of the behavior of her protagonist.

In *After You, My Dear Alphonse*, the mother in the story is surprised when her son brings home an African American friend and offers him her son's old clothes and asks him insulting question. This over-politeness only disguises her racism.

Despite the fact that Jackson grew up surrounded by racism, she knew it was wrong since she was a child. Her frustration with her racist parents and neighbors is evident in her novels and stories. Considering the background of Jackson's childhood, it is no wonder her first novel's theme was racism and the consequences it brings. The problem of racism is still alive and it will take a long time for people to completely abandon beliefs that were transmitted through many generations. Jackson made the first step by writing *The Road Through the Wall* and continued revealing racism as an absurd and unnecessary concept.

## 8. Conclusion

To categorize Shirley Jackson as only a horror story writer would diminish the complexity and subversion of her work. Every Jackson's novel or a story hides an underlying meaning underneath the ominous atmosphere and tension. The fear and terror of her works derive from the dark side of the human mind, the monotony and tediousness of everyday life and the ambiguity of the plot.

Jackson's characters are usually mentally disturbed women in some way rejected from the society. Even though their thoughts and actions appear terrifying, the real terror comes from the people surrounding them. They were mistreated and judged since they were children, by their family or the society, and consequently grew up to be different from their environment. Constant social pressure resulted in Jackson's characters giving up on the society and living in complete isolation.

In her works, Jackson firstly comments on the problem of social conformity. Many of her novels and stories carry an underlying message about the monotony and sameness surrounding the contemporary society. Secondly, she comments on the evil nature of humanity which is well hidden in the contemporary society, but still present, waiting for the right moment to come out. Thirdly, she points out the problem of dysfunctional families and abusive parents that turn their children into anxious and insecure people. Fourthly, her work discusses inferiority of women greatly present in Jackson's time as well as nowadays. And finally, her work openly criticizes racism and its negative consequences.

To conclude, Jackson's work shows that the human mind can become a dark place if the society in which the mind develops is dark, too.

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### **Izjava o samostalnoj izradi rada**

Ja, Karla Garčević, studentica Učiteljskog fakulteta Sveučilišta u Zagrebu, s matičnim brojem 34-2013-54, izjavljujem i svojim potpisom jamčim da sam samostalno istražila literature i napisala diplomski rad na temu: **TERROR AND FEAR AS PARADIGMATIC UNDERCURRENTS OF THE CONTEMPORARY SOCIETY IN THE WORKS OF SHIRLEY JACKSON.**

Zagreb, rujan 2018.

Potpis studenta: \_\_\_\_\_