

# Shirley Jackson: Intertexts and Afterlives

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## INTRODUCTION

### Shirley Jackson: Intertexts and Afterlives

Emily Banks and Alexis Finc

Being a Shirley Jackson scholar can feel like being haunted. From her influence on Stephen King—and, consequently, everything in the horror genre that *his* work influenced—to contemporary authors like Carmen Maria Machado and Elizabeth Hand whose fiction is both explicitly and more subtly inspired by her, it would be difficult to overstate the continued relevance of Jackson’s oeuvre. In recent years, of course, Mike Flanagan’s Netflix adaption *The Haunting of House* (2018), Stacie Passon’s *We Have Always Lived in the Castle* (2018), and Josephine Decker’s *Shirley* (2020) have brought Jackson back into the mainstream public eye, generating new interest in her life and work.

Beyond these overt adaptations, reworkings, and references, though, more surprising moments of recognition often generate what Sigmund Freud might call an uncanny feeling of *déjà vu* ([1919] 1957, 238). Karyn Kusama’s *Yellowjackets*, Nick Antosca’s *Channel Zero*, and Iain Reid’s *I’m Thinking of Ending Things* (adapted in Charlie Kaufman’s 2020 film), to offer just a few examples, *feel* Jackson-esque, whether their creators cite her as an influence (as Antosca does) or leave us to speculate. Her legacy is felt when domestic spaces are infused with an ambiguous terror, when lines are blurred between loving friendships and insidious mind control, when we are prompted to question the reality of selfhood and the nature of identity, and sometimes when our darkest impulses are made briefly permissible and disturbingly delicious.

As Darryl Hattenhauer details in his introduction to *Shirley Jackson’s American Gothic* (2003), Jackson was, during her lifetime, “ranked among America’s most highly regarded fiction writers” (1) regardless of genre. Anthologized alongside contemporaries like Langston Hughes, Arthur Miller, Ralph Ellison, and Richard Wright, and included with Albert Camus, Allen Ginsberg, J.D. Salinger, and Vladimir Nabokov on a 1958 contemporary literature reading list at the New School for Social Research, Jackson was understood to be an important new voice in American letters (Hattenhauer 2003, 1). Until a recent resurgence of Jackson scholarship stimulated by Hattenhauer’s monograph as well as Bernice Murphy’s *Essays on the Literary Legacy* (2005) and Melanie R. Anderson and Lisa Kröger’s *Influences and Confluences* (2016), Jackson’s work had fallen out of favour amongst critics who dismissed it with the dreaded label of “genre fiction.”

Continuing this work, Melanie R. Anderson and Jill E. Anderson's *Shirley Jackson and Domesticity: Beyond the Haunted House* (2020), Kristopher Woofte's *Shirley Jackson: A Companion* (2021), and the newly inaugurated *Shirley Jackson Studies* journal have made progress towards solidifying Jackson's crucial place in the American canon, using contemporary critical lenses to unpack her commentary on gender, sexuality, race, disability, consumerism, McCarthyism, the Cold War, climate change, and other themes. Hattenhauer argues that Jackson deserves "recuperation not for her few works that readers have simplified as horror," but to be "included with many of the other canonical writers of her time" for the "number of forms and themes" (2) in which she excels. While she is undoubtedly a pivotal author of the American Gothic tradition, current scholarship insists that she be read in the tradition of authors like Edgar Allan Poe, Nathaniel Hawthorne, and William Faulkner, whose Gothic works have long been acknowledged as critical for our understandings of American literature and culture.

The lapse in critical attention to Jackson's work is part of what makes her influence feel so haunting. A reference to Poe or Hawthorne in a hit television series will hardly surprise us, but Jackson's relative obscurity in the academy makes her far-reaching influence feel uncanny when we encounter it. Outside the horror genre, Jackson resurfaces in unlikely places. In Jonathan Franzen's latest novel, *Crossroads* (2021), dissatisfied minister's wife Marion Hildebrandt's backstory is linked intriguingly to Jackson's in a manner that appears to suggest thematic overlap. Marion's sister is named Shirley, and their mother is "a fourth-generation Californian from a family whose once-extensive property holdings [...] had largely been squandered" (140). Her mother rebelliously marries a Jewish man who is also "a self-taught architect" and often spends nights "alone with his drafting tools, forever redesigning an even bigger house" (140). These details correlate with Jackson's heritage; the mansions her great-great grandfather built for millionaires in California were the source of her family's wealth—Ruth Franklin quotes her as writing, "My grandfather was an architect, and his father, and *his father*"—and her parents initially disapproved of her marriage to the Jewish Stanley Hyman (2016, 14, 96–97).

Beyond these seeming Easter eggs, Jackson's influence comes into focus more clearly as Marion's character develops. Frequently designating people, including her mother and sister, as "need[ing] murdering" (Franzen 2021, 147, 162) and concealing from her family a mental breakdown in her early adulthood, she reads like the Jackson heroines whose hidden hatefulness and violent impulses are rendered uncomfortably sympathetic for readers as we spend time in her mind. Simultaneously unnerving and appealing, Marion's nonchalant cruelty recalls that of Merricat Blackwood in *We Have Always Lived in the Castle*, who fantasizes about seeing the

townspeople who mock her “lying there crying with the pain and dying” (Jackson 1962, 10), and Eleanor whom Jackson introduces with the matter-of-fact statement: “The only person in the world she genuinely hated, now that her mother was dead, was her sister. She disliked her brother-in-law and her five-year-old niece, and she had no friends” (1956, 3). As Franzen’s novel concludes and the Hildebrandt family regains an albeit-damaged version of its once-peaceful veneer, Marion’s penchant for spite and revenge remains a lurking danger within the midwestern suburban pastor’s home.

Similarly, Don DeLillo’s *White Noise* (1985) seems at points to echo the apocalyptic absurdism of Jackson’s *The Sundial* (1958). Though rarely spoken of in the same breath, the two apocalyptic novels bear striking similarities. Jackson’s description of “A television set in Florida” that “refused to let itself be turned off until its owners took an axe to it” and “continued, on or off, presenting inferior music and stale movies and endless, maddening advertising” before dying “with the praises of hair tonic on its lips,” (1958, 179) for example, could easily be mistaken for a passage from *White Noise*. In addition to their interest in postmodern anxiety about cataclysmic disaster from environmental, foreign, or even extraterrestrial sources, the two novels share a metafictional interest in sources of information, commodification’s blurring of high and low art, and the possibility of marketing materials becoming our primary source of narrative. Hattenhauer classifies Jackson as a *proto-postmodernist* for her disunified characters and plot, unreliable narration, and intertextual style (2003, 3–5). Travis Snyder has expanded on the intertextuality that characterizes her work in his description of “meta-gothic parody” in *Hill House* (2020, 245). Jackson’s characters are often attempting or failing to parse literary works; *Hill House*, *Hangsamen*, and *The Sundial* all feature literary scholars as prominent characters, which draws attention to our own attempts to disentangle reality from fiction within her fiction. It is unsurprising that Wes Craven abandoned a remake of *The Haunting* (1963) prior to creating *Scream* (1996), the first film in a franchise that has come to connote metafictional horror with characters keenly aware of the genre.

Jackson’s influence on contemporary fiction, film, and television feels contiguous with her own writing practice. Her recently published *Letters* confirm the omnivorous nature of her own reading, and this is evident in the multitude of allusions that surface, overtly or otherwise, throughout her fiction. *The Sundial*, for example, alludes to Chaucer’s “The Knight’s Tale” as well as Theodore Sturgeon’s 1953 queer science fiction story “The World Well Lost,” while *Hangsamen* references *Alice in Wonderland* and the 1908 pornographic novel *The Way of a Man with a Maid*, to name just a few. I have elsewhere discussed the Gothic effects of her unique use of allusion, arguing that she crafts referential webs which the well-read reader is drawn into as

we attempt to unpack the novel's secrets. For literary scholars, this reading experience aligns us with the Gothic protagonist as we find ourselves—or believe we find ourselves—uniquely capable of unearthing the deeper meanings of a fictional work (Banks 2022, 117). The Jackson scholar, then, is constantly pursuing allusions and references, both in Jackson's work and in the contemporary works in which we recognize traces of her hand.

For the decades following her death, Jackson's relative obscurity made her influence less legible to the majority of those encountering it. My students often remark that "The Lottery" (1948) reminds them of *The Hunger Games* (2012) or *The Purge* (2016), films that clearly borrowed something from the story, which once appeared on high school curriculums across the United States and is often recalled with a shudder by those who experienced it in that context. Even those familiar with *The Shining* (1977) typically fail to recognize its relationship to *Hill House*, despite King's good faith attempts to honour Jackson's legacy with direct reference in the novel. Interestingly, King both references *Hill House* explicitly and alludes to it *through* his repeated references to the fairytale *Bluebeard* (1977, 248), which Eleanor references when she first sets foot in the blue room and thinks, "Sister Anne, Sister Anne" (Jackson 1956, 27). This allusion through reference suggests that he is not only inspired by Jackson, but inspired by her inspiration; that is, the intertextual nature of her fiction has become a feature of her legacy.

In his introduction to "Rethinking Shirley Jackson," a special issue of *Women's Studies* published in 2020, Daniel Kasper discusses the "polyvocal" potentiality of Jackson's work through the example of the short story "Charles," published in *Mademoiselle* in 1948, *The Lottery and Other Stories* in 1949, and again as part of the memoir *Life Among the Savages* in 1953. That this one story could be "at once a piece for a women's magazine, a chapter in 'The Lottery' story cycle, and a small slice of domestic memoir," Kasper writes, "reflects the story's theme of multiple/imaginary personality as well as Jackson's ability to effortlessly shift between writerly poses and contexts" (2020, 806). With this in mind, he argues that "In order to understand [Jackson's] contribution to American literature [...] we must first understand her works outside their post hoc relationship to the author-function" (806) of a Jackson pigeonholed by her authorship of "The Lottery." While Jackson's voice has undoubtedly shaped horror and the Gothic, her contributions to other sub-genres, such as memoir and domestic fiction, are rarely considered. To comprehensively approach Jackson's literary influence, it is necessary to consider her as an innovator across genres and modes—and, indeed, an innovator for literature that resists easy generic categorization.

This resistance is, in part, what makes Jackson's Gothic and horror fiction so chilling as it often wavers over the line between reality as we know

it and supernatural activity, portraying psychological disturbance and domestic entrapment as horrors of their own and leaving readers with something akin to “Hill House legs” (Jackson 1956, 78) as we seek to regain our footing in reality. In other words, if we don’t know what sub-genre we’re reading, we can never be sure what is possible within a fictional world. As Freud contends in “The Uncanny,” the imaginative writer “can select his world of representation so that it either coincides with the realities we are familiar with or departs from them in what particulars he pleases” ([1919] 1957, 250). Features like “wish-fulfilments, secret powers, omnipotence of thoughts, [and] animation of inanimate objects” are not, he explains, unnerving in the world of a fairy tale, but become disturbing “as soon as the writer pretends to move into the world of common reality” (250). Jackson enhances this uncanny effect by defying easy generic categorization, leaving open the question of whether we are in the world of common reality, fairy tale, folk horror, a ghost story, or even science fiction. Jackson’s fiction has impacted writers and directors across genres, but has also contributed to the playful, irreverent engagement with genre now seen as a feature of postmodern and contemporary literature.

In this issue, we dip our toes into a project with seemingly infinite potential: tracing Jackson’s influence on contemporary works of literature, cinema, and television. From direct adaptations to more oblique allusions, references, and inspirations, the articles collected here consider Jackson’s work through its intertextual afterlives.

— Emily Banks

### On This Special Issue

Complicated familial relationships and isolated houses are the focus of Paige Allen’s “Homes for Strange Children: Shirley Jackson’s Legacy in Daisy Johnson’s *Sisters*.” In this essay, Allen delves into the fraught dynamics between a pair of emotionally entwined sisters, July and September, and their single mother, Sheela, while also considering Jackson’s influence on these relationships and the domestic uncanny. Allen argues that Jackson and Johnson both subvert the traditional understanding of the female Gothic by focusing on ambivalent experiences of motherhood and strong sister relationships. However, rather than domesticity representing confinement, as in Jackson’s work, Johnson embraces embodiment, “a particular terror,” where possession rewrites the typical haunted house story.

Jill E. Anderson also tackles the theme of embodiment in her exploration of Jackson’s and Carmen Maria Machado’s work. In “Her Body

and Other Ghosts: Embodied Horror in the Works of Shirley Jackson and Carmen Maria Machado,” Anderson writes that both authors use embodied horror to articulate how women react to the profound, albeit less apparent, challenges of navigating their patriarchal realities. According to Anderson, for Jackson, embodying horror becomes a tool to manoeuvre through a world fraught with oppressive structures; for Machado, it becomes a method of resilience against past violence. Yet both authors offer strong pathways for women to express their lived experiences.

Moving away from the page, Savannah Bly Richardson considers a television episode of *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* in relation to Jackson’s 1957 short story “The Missing Girl,” two narratives that explore themes of female subjectivity and invisibility. Reading the televisual text within the context of Jackson’s themes, Richardson notes that both narratives centre the struggle of young women to be seen by their peers and adults and explore what happens when women are psychologically and/or physically erased. Richardson argues that *Buffy* presents a third-wave feminist ending—one very different from Jackson’s—where invisibility becomes a superpower, and ultimately something more transformative.

We return to Carmen Maria Machado’s work in Carolin Jesussek’s essay, “Gothic Inheritances: Shirley Jackson’s Legacy in Carmen Maria Machado’s ‘A Hundred Miles and a Mile’ and *In the Dream House*.” Jesussek explores how both authors use fantasy and utopian imagination to create queer futures and suggests the term “gothic inheritances” to explore the transmission of knowledge among non-heteronormative women through storytelling and tangible objects. This transmission forms non-traditional, queer familial connections that pass on feminine wisdom, and these intergenerational bonds underscore a continual emphasis on envisioning potential queer futures across time and narratives.

Jackson’s influence can be seen in another contemporary author’s work, as Ibi Kaslik proposes in the essay, “Murderers, Whores, and Thieves: Crime and Violence as Acts of Resistance in Selected Works of Shirley Jackson and Virginia Feito.” Kaslik dives deep into Feito’s *Mrs. March*, about the wife of a famous novelist who suspects that her husband has humiliated her with the publication of his latest book. Kaslik connects Mrs. March’s experience of fractured female selfhood to several of Jackson’s female protagonists and argues that Feito expands on Jackson’s distinctive exploration of identity’s fragility, a common experience for women among the adversarial patriarchal frameworks of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries.

Whether evoking or alluding to the work of Shirley Jackson, these creators are part of a continued dialogue with the unsettling (staying) power of Jackson’s literary legacy. While the conversation is rich and ongoing, we

hope that this special issue of *Monstrum* will inspire further intertextual scholarship on Jackson's influence across genres, modes, and mediums.

— Alexis Finc

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