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The Uncanny Tapestry of Shirley Jackson's "The Lovely House"

Shirley Jackson had always been fascinated with enclosed spaces. Her two most famous novels, *The Haunting of Hill House* (1959) and *We Have Always Lived in the Castle* (1962) both centre around buildings, which entrap the protagonists and terrify the readers. As in most American Gothic, the house in Jackson's writing functions, not infrequently, as a substitute of the European haunted castle and a site of unresolved dramas and repressed anxieties. In her almost obsessive interest in the horror concealed by the elegant frame of the domestic setting, Jackson continues the tradition of the New England Female Gothic popularized by Mary Wilkins Freeman, Sarah Orne Jewett and Charlotte Perkins Gilman and infuses it with the spirit of American post-war reality, in which many middle-class women suffer from, what Betty Friedan has famously called, "the problem that has no name" (1). As a full-time housewife and mother of four, Jackson consistently articulates in her fiction a sense of entrapment and anxiety about confining social roles for women in the Cold War era. The image of the house as a site of trauma and Gothic entrapment appears not only in the author's highly acclaimed novels and stories but also in her non-fictional accounts of domestic life, aptly titled *Life Among the Savages* and *Raising Demons*. Indeed, as Andrew Smith has argued, Jackson's oeuvre anticipates in many ways Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique* and voices the ideological tensions concerning the roles of women in the 1950s and 1960s. What is more, her work captures "a specific mood of pessimism which existed before the passing of various emancipatory acts that colour her model of the Female Gothic in which social, emotional, and intellectual advancement seems to be an impossibility" (Smith, 164). In "The Lovely House", a short story published in 1952 and dedicated to Dylan Thomas,¹ Jackson combines the subjective experiences of her female protagonist with an uncanny sense of the supernatural to probe into the very real horrors of domesticity and femininity in mid-century America. The story, considered to be one of Jackson's most Gothic (Hattenhauer, 53), is also emblematic of the writer's "poetics of architectural haunting" (Savoy, 839) – a tendency to expose the horrifying reality in the most secure and ordinary setting, or to focus on those moments when the Symbolic suddenly begins to crack.

In the story's opening paragraphs the reader immediately identifies the familiar elements of the Female Gothic: a young and vulnerable heroine named Margaret arrives at a grand but mysterious country house invited by her college friend Carla Montague. A few days later Carla's brother arrives with a friend named Paul, who charms Margaret and soon becomes her close companion. The protagonist's curiosity takes her to an old ruined tower adjacent to the house, where she meets a strange old lady also named Margaret, who knew Paul in her youth and, probably, also fell in love with him. As the old lady and Paul meet during a ball and reminisce about the old days, it becomes apparent that while the woman has visibly aged, Paul is still a young man. When Paul disappears suddenly at the end of the story, Margaret realizes with horror that he was visible only to herself and to the old woman in the tower. At the end of the story, when Carla's brother and Paul are gone, it dawns on Margaret, and the reader, that she will never be able to leave the house.

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1 The story was written in 1950 under the title "A Visit: For Dylan Thomas." It was the writer's response to the meeting with Thomas, who visited Jackson and her husband in their house, and during which Jackson and Thomas apparently had "some kind of intimate encounter" (Franklin, 280). The story was published for the first time in 1952 in a magazine called *New World Writing*; later it was reprinted as "The Lovely House."

As Jackson's biographer Ruth Franklin observes, houses have always been one of the author's "lifetime obsessions and the gravitational center of much of her fiction" (13). In "The Lovely House," the Montagues' family mansion, surrounded by a park, a river and wooded hill appears to be a nostalgic evocation of the pastoral ideal. At the same time, with its "perfect grace" and "long-boned structure,"² it clearly possesses feminine features and, like other houses in Jackson's writing, it seems not only alive but may also be seen to correspond to the protagonist's self. However, the most significant aspect of the building is its unusual interior. The moment Margaret enters the house, she is confronted with a tapestry so huge that she can easily discern the individual threads but cannot see the whole picture unless she moves far away. Then, as she discovers, tapestries of different sizes and colours can be found in all the rooms and each of them presents an image of the house. The proliferation of almost mirror-reflections of the building is brought to a terrifying extreme in a room in which

everything grew smaller as they looked at it: the mirrors at both sides of the room showed the door opening and Margaret and Carla coming through, and then, reflected, a smaller door opening and a small Margaret and a smaller Carla coming through, and then, reflected again, a still smaller door and Margaret and Carla, and so on, endlessly, Margaret and Carla diminishing and reflecting. . . . The tapestries in this room were of the house reflected in the lake, and the tapestries themselves were reflected, in and out, among the mirrors on the wall, with the house in the tapestries reflected in the lake. (206–7)

The effect of this excess of reflections multiplying *ad infinitum* is the experience of confinement. As Susan Stewart points out in her study *On Longing*, "the reduction in scale which the miniature presents skews the time and space relations of the everyday lifeworld," while the miniature itself "represents closure, interiority, the domestic, and the overly cultural" (65, 70). The fact that the house looks exactly the same in the tapestries created by Carla's mother and in those done by her "grandmamas and [her] great-grandmamas and [her] great-great-grandmamas" (206) makes the protagonist feel entrapped not only in space but also in time. The blurring of boundaries between the interior and exterior of the house replete with its own miniaturized reflections leads to the creation of an 'other' time, "a type of transcendent time which negates change and the flux of lived reality" (Stewart, 65), and results in a sense of timelessness and stasis. On the one hand, the feelings of immobility and entrapment are inevitably linked to the middle-class idea of domesticity, constructed by the repetition of the same pattern of womanhood devoid of agency and passed from generation to generation. On the other, this strange time out of time defamiliarizes the known reality and allows for the intrusion of the supernatural.

Consequently, the lovely house as a "space of endless repetition" (Vidler, 38) becomes the source of the uncanny. The familiar idyllic country mansion, reflected infinitely in mirrors and tapestries, makes the protagonist feel frightened,

² Shirley Jackson, "The Lovely House," in *American Gothic Tales*, ed. Joyce Carol Oates (New York: Plume, 1996), p. 204. All subsequent parenthetical references will be to this edition.

as it becomes “difficult for her to tell what was in it and what was not, and how far in any direction she might easily move” (207). The multiplication disturbs the boundaries not only of inside and outside but also of subjectivity, and creates a feeling of defamiliarization. Indeed, Freud, following Jentsch, sees the uncanny as the “defamiliarized familiar,” or “that class of the frightening which leads back to what is known of old and long familiar”; or to use another definition, “*Unheimlich is the name for everything that ought to have remained . . . secret and hidden but has come to light*” (Freud, 220, 224; italics in the original). In Jackson’s story it is the idealization of domesticity, its power to entrap as well as the idea of selfhood established by domestic fictions, which are the greatest sources of anxiety. The claustrophobia of the Montagues’ house mirrors that experienced by many mid-century American housewives, ideally immobilized and isolated in their lovely suburban homes.

While the lovely house in Jackson’s story brings the existing ideology of domesticity to a parodic if highly disturbing extreme, it also shows the Symbolic as continually threatened by the manifestations of the Real. As Ann Williams argues in her *Art of Darkness*, Gothic is a discourse which relies precisely on uncovering what has been repressed and revealing cracks in the system of representation:

Even the most typically Gothic manifestations of the supernatural, such as ghosts . . . bleeding portraits, and animated statues and skeletons manifest this pattern of anxiety about the Symbolic: whatever their other functions in terms of plot or theme, such phenomena suggest the fragility of our usual systems of making sense of the world. (70)

In Jackson’s narrative, the uncanny disruption of the familiar is achieved in the most predictable ways. A stone statue in front of the house seems to be alive when Margaret touches its warm head, while Carla’s ancestors in the gallery of family portraits “[lean] down to stare” at the passing guests. In the old, ruined tower the protagonist meets the old Margaret, who moved there because she could not endure the sight of tapestries: she is “not very clearly visible” (215) and it is almost certain that “the great-aunt,” like Paul, is a ghost. The dilapidated tower stands in stark contrast to the idyllic lovely house: in the tower room, behind “a heavy wooden door” (215), windows on all sides are open to the winds and the old lady waves at them, saying: “My tapestries” (216). When Margaret looks through the windows, she can only see leaves and branches but no trace of the beautiful lawns or the roofs of the house. When suddenly the storm breaks, and the loud wind and rain dash into the room, it becomes clear that while the house with its many reproductions stands for culture, the tower belongs to unruly, unpredictable nature. The old lady, with her books and her black old cat, and a suggestion that she may practice alchemy up there, is clearly Jackson’s version of the madwoman in the attic; she may even be a witch. In any case, the old Margaret appears to be “a rebel against a life of cycling through timeless reproductions of domesticity” (Hattenhauer, 56), an embodiment of disorder, of the subversive and uncontrollable female principle. But she is also, undeniably, the young Margaret’s uncanny double. Before meeting the old woman, the protagonist discovers the floor mosaic containing “a curiously made picture of a girl’s face, with blue chip eyes and a red chip mouth, staring blindly from the floor”,

and underneath the letters saying: “Here was Margaret . . . who died for love” (210). As the story reveals, the old Margaret was also, in her youth, seduced by Paul – a version of the “daemon lover” familiar from Jackson’s early tales. In *The Lottery and Other Stories*, Jackson’s first short-story collection, the author creates the character of James Harris, whom she borrows from Francis James Child’s ballad of the same name.³ The demon lover appears in several stories as a tall, attractive man who lures and ultimately destroys young women. In Jackson’s reworking of the trope, however, the women who fall prey to the charms of the demon lover are more than helpless victims of a powerful male. As Wyatt Bonikowski suggests,

the complexity of the trope in Jackson’s Female Gothic lies in the fact that the woman is not merely a victim or object of male power; something of her own subjectivity is involved that connects her intimately with the very force that attempts to destroy her. The demon lover trope in Jackson’s work reveals a vision of feminine subjectivity exposed to an anxiety borne out of her relation both to the ‘external’ structures of the patriarchal Symbolic order and to her own ‘internal’ drives. (10)

In “The Lovely House” the figure of Paul corresponds to the demon lover image: he is described as “tall and haughty” and, as he disappears later stepping through the window, he is “black for a moment against the white marble” (224). But if the young Margaret lets herself become enchanted by Paul, it is because of her own subversive, feminine potential. Indeed, when talking to the old lady inside the tower, Margaret feels “there might be a thread of reason tangling the old lady and the cat and the tower and the rain, and even, with abrupt clarity, defining Margaret herself and the strange hesitation which had caught at her here in the tower” (217). The moment of hesitation Margaret experiences results from a sudden realization of her own suppressed female energies ordinarily controlled by social and cultural expectations of what a woman should be. Indeed, when meeting her double Jackson’s protagonist becomes aware of the impossible choice women have to face: “either to conform to a passive position within rigidly defined gender roles or be abjected into a permanent state of anxiety, insecurity, and even madness outside of the Symbolic order” (Bonikowski, 69). As the story develops, the reader recognizes that the young and old Margaret perfectly embody these two incompatible female positions, but it is also possible to look at them as representing two sides of one female self – the old, unruly Margaret standing for a disturbing, repressed feminine potential hovering constantly at the margins of our consciousness.

No wonder the inhabitants of the lovely house consistently avoid mentioning the tower and its captive. What they also refuse to see, as they are surrounded by the idealized representations, is that the house itself is deteriorating: there

3 The figure of ‘James Harris’ appears, for example, in “The Daemon Lover,” “The Beautiful Stranger,” or “The Tooth.” As Bonikowski argues, the use of this trope links Jackson’s work not only to the ballad tradition but also to the association of women with demons in the Middle Ages. Interestingly, one of the epigraphs in *The Lottery* refers to a woman named Margaret Jackson, who claims she has given her whole body to the devil (68). According to Bonikowski, “the post-Freudian Jackson is interested not in the physical reality but in the *psychical* reality of the demon. In the demon lover, Jackson has found a way to figure a *jouissance* excluded by the restrictive Symbolic order, which, because of its repression, returns with a destructive force” (69).

is a crack in the wall, the sofa is torn and carpets are worn out. The ever multiplying tapestries, in which the house remains the same for generations seem to serve as shields against the most uncomfortable truths: they are meant to deceive the characters and the reader into believing that it is possible to defeat the passing of time, that one can live eternally in a state of innocence, denying the existence of decay and death. The tapestries, like photographs, become pictures of arrested time, a way of coping with the inevitability of decline. Consequently, the endless reproductions of the idyllic domestic vision in the story consistently leave out disturbing aspects of reality. Since Mrs. Montague creates new tapestries looking not at the house but using other representations as a model, the relation between the signifier and the signified becomes fraught. The recreating of the domestic ideal may be seen as “an attempt to defeat time through artifice” (Hattenhauer, 56), but it is also an act of cultural exclusion of the inexpressible other. The repressed, “feminine” elements – “the ‘maternal’ qualities of darkness, infinity, irregularity” (Williams, 78), as well as death – have to remain outside the tapestry, locked away behind the heavy door of the tower. As Anthony Vidler points out, art was “invented to ward off the threat of extinction” (35) and Jackson’s story may be read as a commentary on that process of distancing terrifying, abject conditions through artistic representation.

And yet, the real phantom that haunts the house and its inhabitants is the compulsion to repeat and represent. The “endless drive to repeat,” Vidler reminds us, is uncanny not only because of its associations with the death drive (38), but also because it “forces upon us the idea of something fateful and inescapable” (Freud, 237). Indeed, Jackson’s story could be interpreted as another tale of female confinement in the patriarchal model of domesticity, but it is also, inevitably, a way of drawing attention to the still more constraining process of the repetition of such imprisoning structures in life and art.⁴ The proliferation of the idyllic visions of the country house in Jackson’s tapestries becomes uncanny not because of what they present but precisely because of what they consistently refuse to depict. According to Freud, the uncanny “is in reality nothing new or alien, but something which is familiar and old established in the mind and which has become alienated from it only through the process of repression” (241). Therefore, what makes the lovely house the site of the uncanny, and what *recurs* in its tapestries, is the tension between the need to represent and the impossibility of representing the totality. Since the idyllic house portrayed in the tapestries refers only to its other idealized depictions, the reader is reminded of both the inability of language, or art to mediate experience and of the uncomfortable, unspeakable Real that has to remain forever outside representation.

The most uncanny aspect of Jackson’s tale is the final realization that the lovely house *itself* exists only as tapestry. When Margaret enters the house for the first time, she faces a huge woven image of the building, too big to be seen in its entirety, but which presents the whole house “as a complete body of story together, all joined and in sequence” (205). Mrs. Montague, wearing “pale green and pale blue” is working with her needle in “a pale green and

4 The idea of oppressive domesticity and emotional tyranny of the family structure appear as frequent themes in Jackson’s writing. As T.S. Joshi claims, Jackson had the ability to “detect horror in the everyday world” and the importance of her domestic fiction, including *Life Among the Savages* and *Raising Demons*, for understanding her other work, “rests in its manipulation of very basic familial and personal scenarios that would be utilized in her weird work in perverted and twisted ways” (188).

pale blue long room” and embroidering “the pale sweet pattern . . . all soft colors . . . melting into one another endlessly, and not finished” (205). As days go by, “[t]he small thread of days and sunlight . . . that bound Margaret to the house, was woven here as she watched” (212) until, finally, at the end of the story, the protagonist realizes that she and Carla

still wore their ball gowns, which they had been wearing for so long that the soft richness of them seemed natural, as though they were to wear nothing else for an eternity in the house, and the gay confusion of helping one another dress, and admiring one another, and straightening the last folds to hang more gracefully, seemed all to have happened longer ago than memory, to be perhaps a dream that might never have happened at all, as perhaps the figures in the tapestries on the walls of the dining room might remember, secretly, an imagined process of dressing themselves and *coming with laughter and light voices to sit on the lawn where they were woven.* (221; italics added)

Indeed, in the last scene of the narrative, Mrs. Montague is finishing her embroidery while Carla and Margaret, laughing, come to sit on the lawn to become “models of stillness” (225). Thus incorporated into the picture of idyllic domesticity, the girls, with their pretty dresses and light voices, become figures of feminine passivity, graceful but powerless “angels in the house.”

As Margaret becomes a figure in the tapestry her entrapment takes on a new significance. She is trapped not only by the physical building and the domestic ideology it represents, but also by “a radically enclosed space of the Symbolic order” (Wesley, 51). If the space of the house reflected infinitely through mirror-like representations may be seen to correspond to the Lacanian Imaginary, being woven into the tapestry of the house marks this young girl’s entry into the social system of language and culture. As a matter of fact, Margaret exists only as part of the tapestry, or Jackson’s narrative – she is always already trapped in representation. As Marilyn C. Wesley explains, “[o]utside of the symbolic order of authorizing patriarchal language there is no existence, but existence within it is purchased at the loss of the self, a process which Lacan calls aphanisis, a ‘lethal’ division defined as ‘the fading of the subject’” (49). Through the use of this narrative *trompe l’oeil* of literally weaving her heroine into the textual tapestry,⁵ Jackson makes her character and her reader confront this long-known but repressed, uncomfortable possibility.

In Jackson’s story the act of weaving little replicas of the house may also be read as a metaphor for writing. As Stewart observes, in its attempt to create a realizable world “every narrative is a miniature and every book a microcosm” (Stewart, xii). “The lovely house” is not only the story’s setting and central motif but also the text itself, which suggests that “the house of fiction and the fiction of the house interpenetrate” (Castricano, 96). As in Jackson’s novel *The Haunting of Hill House*, here also the architectural principal of the lovely house is “that of the house of fiction: it is the uncanny scene of writing that lends itself, in and as literature, to tracing and displacing the classical distinctions between interiority and exteriority, between consciousnesses and unconsciousnesses, between psyche and matter” (Castricano, 93). Weaving

⁵ Interestingly, the word “text” comes from Latin *textus*, or *texere*, which means “to weave.”

the heroine into the tapestry of the story not only exposes the narrative's status as a fictional construct but also makes the readers participate in the process of entrapment, filling them, at the same time, with a sense of anxiety about the ambiguous boundary between fiction and reality, past and present, reading and writing.

To conclude, by employing the familiar Gothic model of domestic entrapment, and incorporating its characteristic motifs, such as ghosts, doppelgängers, darkness and ruins, Jackson clearly alludes to the Female Gothic convention and, at the same time, goes beyond that tradition. "The Lovely House" complicates the idea of patriarchal domination by showing women as prisoners of domestic fictions woven by themselves, immobilized by their own attempts to ward off uncomfortable truths. By setting her story, from beginning to end, in and around the house, by multiplying the domestic and finally incorporating her heroine into the tapestry of the story, Jackson creates what could be called "the claustrophobia of the uncanny" (cf. Vidler, 39). The simulacral character of Jackson's "lovely house" becomes a metacommentary on numerous other fictions of domesticity and a discussion of the nature of representation. As Darryl Hattenhauer observes, Jackson's writing anticipates postmodernist self-consciousness of form, while this particular story "approximates postmodernism's concern with representing representation" (55). Finally, by depicting Margaret's entry into the tapestry, Jackson's Gothic narrative makes clear that the only way to escape extinction is to remain trapped forever in the eternity of language.

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