
‘They’re foreigners, that’s why’: Representations of ‘otherness’ in Shirley Jackson’s Short Fiction

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Abstract

In the past few years, there has been a noticeable re-emergence of interest in the works of Shirley Jackson (1916-1965): old works have been reissued, unpublished works published; in 2016, a biography and the first collection of academic essays about her works since the early 2000s was printed. But scholars of American gothic fiction have long argued her works’ significance within American literary canon. I would further argue that Jackson’s works deserve consideration for their representations of “otherness,” which reveal issues of gender and race that plague an increasingly diverse America. In her short fiction, provincial housewives seem to occupy the space of a house perfectly: they fry doughnuts, make their own jam, trim perfectly proportioned rose bushes, and are revolted by any sort of perceived inefficiency. Jackson attaches these parochial attitudes to a long tradition of womanliness spanning generations. These housewives form a contrast to characters representing (former) working women, political dissenters, city-dwellers, and the ethnically or religiously different (e.g. African Americans and Jews). The latter are depicted as unwelcome invaders who disturb the social order and are considered “other” by Jackson’s native New Englanders: they are monstrous, perhaps even harbingers of the supernatural. Yet ultimately, for the reader, it is the housewives with all of their prejudices and perfectionism who seem uncanny. Thus, Jackson’s short stories serve as a lens through which to criticize the dynamic between the “I” and the “other” in American society. Close readings of stories such as “Flower Garden,” which considers racial dynamics in a bucolic New England town, and “The Very Strange House Next Door,” which addresses issues of foreignness, will provide further evidence that borders need not be physical—they exist within communities and individuals, dividing us by invisible lines and providing a basis for Jackson’s gothic tales.

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