

Shirley: A fictionalized account of writer Shirley Jackson's life

By David Walsh
29 July 2020

Directed by Josephine Decker; written by Sarah Gubbins, based on a novel by Susan Scarf Merrell

American writer Shirley Jackson (1916-1965) was a distinctive, intriguing literary figure. Even those, belonging to certain generations, who do not know her name, will likely recall her disturbing 1948 short story, “The Lottery,” one of the most anthologized such pieces of fiction in American history.

In “The Lottery,” townspeople in a small, contemporary New England community participate—as though it were the most ordinary, everyday event—in an annual ritual of selecting one man, woman or child to be stoned to death, a venerated tradition considered to be vital to the town’s overall well-being. The publication of the story in the *New Yorker* magazine brought Jackson instant fame and notoriety.

Shirley is a new film, directed by Josephine Decker, with a screenplay by Sarah Gubbins and based on a novel by Susan Scarf Merrell, which fictionally imagines a period early in Jackson’s writing career.

The novel and film invent a young couple, Fred (Logan Lerman), an aspiring academic, and Rose Nemser (Odessa Young), who come to the college town where Shirley Jackson (Elisabeth Moss) and her husband Stanley Hyman (Michael Stuhlbarg) reside and end up staying with the older couple for an extended period.

Jackson and Hyman, in fact, lived for decades in North Bennington, Vermont, while Hyman taught at Bennington College, then a women’s college. His course on Myth, Ritual and Literature was for several years one of the most popular at the institution. Hyman was also a well-known literary critic, who wrote book reviews and other pieces for the *New Republic*, *New Yorker* and other publications and authored several volumes of criticism, including *The Tangled Bank: Darwin, Marx, Frazer and Freud as Imaginative Writers* (1962).

When Fred and Rose arrive at the Jackson-Hyman home, Shirley does not greet them with open arms. Asked what she is working on, she replies, “A little novella, ‘None of Your Goddamn Business,’” which sets the general tone. Shirley, according to Stanley, is having one of her “bouts,” during which she seldom leaves her bed, much less the house. He unctuously asks Rose, who hopes to sit in on classes at the college, if she can look after Shirley and the housework. The young woman reluctantly agrees.

Meanwhile, Shirley mutters to her husband, “I don’t want strangers. I don’t like them. ... I’m going to get better.” She senses that Rose is pregnant and taunts her about a supposed “shotgun wedding.” When the phone rings during a meal, Shirley announces that she doesn’t want Stanley’s “slut calling during dinner.”

Fred, opportunistically, urges Rose to put up with the situation for the sake of his career. He begins coming home late, drunk.

Shirley begins to warm to Rose, enlisting her in an effort to obtain information about the case of a missing Bennington College student on which she plans to base a novel. (In fact, her 1951 novel *Hangsaman*, is about a lonely female college student who descends into insanity.)

Shirley and Rose begin conspiring together, and more. Furthermore, at least in Shirley’s imagination, Rose and the missing girl begin to merge. Stanley continues his infidelities, and, in the film’s denouement, Rose discovers her own husband has been sleeping with his students.

The film’s theme seems crudely summed up in Shirley’s comment to Rose about the latter’s pregnancy: “Let’s pray for a boy. The world is too cruel to girls.”

Shirley Jackson had many problems. She once said of her stories and novels, “I wrote of neuroses and fear and I think all my books laid end to end would be one long documentation of anxiety,” but it is unlikely that she ever suffered from a case of such nauseating self-pity.

Moss is perfectly fine at portraying neurosis and instability, Stuhlbarg, as always, creates a specific and indelible character and Josephine Decker directs in an interesting manner, attempting to capture the world the way Jackson might have seen it—fragmented, threatening, sometimes hallucinatory.

Unfortunately, however, *Shirley* manages to remove from Jackson’s work nearly everything that was important about it. In its reduction of the artist’s life and condition to gender, Decker’s film manages to avoid being as empty-headed as Madeleine Olnek’s *Wild Nights with Emily* (2018, about poet Emily Dickinson), but the same general approach is at work.

Jackson was born into a well-to-do San Francisco family, stuffy and conservative, against which she was in revolt from an early age. A never-ending conflict with her disapproving, apparently dreadful mother was surely a factor, but the onset of the Great Depression and radically altered conditions in the US were probably more decisive ones.

At Syracuse University in 1938, Jackson met New York-born Stanley Hyman, a member of the Young Communist League (YCL) and an aspiring writer. Although Jackson’s politics apparently never went beyond attending a few meetings of the YCL and occasionally reading the *Daily Worker* (in part to outrage her father), her oppositional inclinations were genuine. At any event, according to Ruth Franklin’s *Shirley Jackson, A Rather Haunted Life* (2016), the future writer already knew enough to be “appalled” by the Stalin regime’s repressive policies.

Hyman and Jackson married in 1940 (to the disapproval of her family—and his, for that matter), took up permanent residence in Bennington in 1945, and led an active intellectual and artistic life, raising four children and becoming the center of “a social set that included [poet] Howard Nemerov, [novelist] Ralph Ellison, [novelist] Bernard Malamud, and [screenwriter] Walter Bernstein,” according to a recent *New Yorker* profile.

Jackson’s debut novel, *The Road Through the Wall* (1948), a semi-autobiographical work about her childhood in California, took up themes that would preoccupy her throughout her relatively brief literary career.

Fritz Oehlschlaeger, literary critic and professor at Virginia Tech, observes that the novel is “about the people on a single street of a small,

isolated community, in this case situated in California. Its theme is scapegoating, directed by the ordinary middle class people of Pepper Street at a whole series of victims: a Chinaman, a young Jewish girl, a somewhat slow-witted boy, a poor girl, a girl whose mother is suspected of prostitution, and a high-school girl who has run away to get married. The name of this last girl, Hester Lucas, quite obviously recalls [Nathaniel] Hawthorne's great heroine [in *The Scarlet Letter*], Hester Prynne."

Jackson—whose mother traced her heritage to a Revolutionary War general—admired Hawthorne, and his stories, many of them set in early, repressive Puritan New England, seem a clear influence. Oehlschlaeger also makes the case that "The Lottery," published the same year, had "a clear precedent in New England history of ritual, collective murder"—i.e., the Salem, Massachusetts, witch trials and executions in 1692-1693. In the 1950s, Jackson "wrote about the witchcraft hysteria in a book for adolescents called *The Witchcraft of Salem Village*."

The name of Tessie Hutchinson, the ultimate victim in "The Lottery," suggests the famous religious reformer Anne Hutchinson, who came into conflict with the Massachusetts authorities and who was banished from the colony. Hawthorne's "The Gentle Boy" (1832), which describes the beating and stoning of an innocent boy because he happens to be the son of persecuted Quakers, seems another source. ("In an instant he was the centre of a brood of baby-fiends, who lifted sticks against him, pelted him with stones and displayed an instinct of destruction far more loathsome than the bloodthirstiness of manhood.")

In fact, numerous claims are made for "The Lottery," and considering how the artistic imagination works, most of them are probably accurate. One commentator, Michael Robinson, suggests the story, in representing "the phenomena of scapegoating and death selection in a small town in the US," "invokes the themes of Holocaust literature."

Jackson's story seems to exemplify the well-known "banality of evil," with the various townspeople on "a full-summer day" standing around "speaking of planting and rain, tractors and taxes," while they prepare to carry out a hideous execution and get "home for noon dinner." Among other things, the story was meant as a shot across the bow against small-town complacency and backwardness.

Conformism in America, at the outset of the Cold War, is also a theme. The House Un-American Activities Committee was in motion at the time of the publication of "The Lottery," and the blacklist was already under way (which Hyman's close friend Walter Bernstein, who first came to Hollywood in 1947, would have been well aware of). The scapegoating of "reds" is unquestionably another element.

Jackson herself commented, "I suppose I hoped, by setting a particularly brutal rite in the present and in my own village, to shock the readers with a graphic dramatization of the pointless violence and general inhumanity of their own lives."

Her *Life Among the Savages* (1953), an entrant in the genre now known as "the literature of domestic chaos," is an amusing account of the disorder and confusion involved in the raising of four children. It begins: "Our house is old, and noisy, and full. When we moved into it we had two children and about five thousand books; I expect that when we finally overflow and move out again we will have perhaps twenty children and easily half a million books; we also own assorted beds and tables and chairs and rocking horses and lamps and doll dresses and ship models and paint brushes and literally thousands of socks. This is the way of life my husband and I have fallen into, inadvertently, as though we had fallen into a well and decided that since there was no way out we might as well stay there and set up a chair and desk and a light of some kind. ..."

(Decker's film helps itself along by removing Jackson's children and making her very nearly dysfunctional, a numbed victim of the "patriarchy." No doubt the condition of being a woman with four young children and an unhelpful, philandering—if artistically supportive—husband

and pursuing a serious literary career was an immense undertaking, requiring a great deal of determination and even courage. However, the real-life writer does not seem to have been focused, unlike her screen counterpart, on feeling sorry for herself.)

Presumably Jackson "rounded off" and prettified her life somewhat in this first memoir and a subsequent one (*Raising Demons*, 1957), but there is no reason to doubt the sincerity of her feelings. Life in America in the 1950s was not simply a nightmare, there were also new possibilities, new opportunities. But cheerfulness was certainly not her dominant mood.

If a single major difficulty arises in regard to Jackson's writings, it is that working in stagnant, limited cultural times her own themes and concerns seem somewhat stagnant and limited. With Jackson and Hyman, one senses the disappointment, disillusionment and even depression that the Eisenhower years generated within a generation of left, bohemian intellectuals. They felt at odds with the American population, isolated from and betrayed by it. There was something superficial in this, and self-serving.

Jackson's last novel, *We Have Always Lived in the Castle* (1962) is considered by some to be her "masterpiece." In fact, although cleverly and chillingly done, it seems less interesting than some of her earlier work. The story is narrated by 18-year-old Mary Katharine "Merricat" Blackwood, the youngest surviving member of the Blackwood family. Six years earlier, her parents, aunt and younger brother died after being poisoned at dinner, an action for which we eventually come to learn "Merricat" herself was responsible.

The narrator, in Jackson's time-honored manner, spits out venom at the local townspeople: "In this village the men stayed young and did the gossiping and the women aged with grey evil weariness and stood silently waiting for the men to get up and come home," "The people of the village have always hated us." Speaking of those same locals, she asserts, "I wished they were dead. I would have liked to come into the grocery some morning and see them all...lying there crying with the pain and dying. I would then help myself to groceries, I thought, stepping over their bodies, taking whatever I fancied from the shelves, and go home, with perhaps a kick for Mrs. Donell while she lay there."

There is a certain jolt of anarchistic contrariness in such darkness, but it quickly wears thin.

Suffering from severe agoraphobia, afflicted with various ailments, drinking too much and abusing prescription drugs, Jackson died from a heart condition at the age of 48, in 1965.

We have merely tried to point out that Jackson's life and fate were bound up with big historical processes and problems, the Great Depression, the Second World War, Stalinism in the Soviet Union, fascism and anti-Semitism, the Cold War and McCarthyism, the climate of the 1950s. Not a hint of any of this is to be found in *Shirley*—there is merely the awfulness of men and the relentless persecution of women.

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