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“IMAGINING DIFFERENTLY”: TALES OF TAROT
AND THE FANTASTIC IN SHIRLEY JACKSON’S *HANGSAMAN*

Faced with the overpowering feeling of the apparent and common normality that this society wishes to impose on us, literature must chronicle the unusual. Because, in our existence, neither from an ontological nor a circumstantial perspective, there is nothing that is not odd. We want to accustom ourselves to the most comfortable of routines to forget that strangeness, that oddness that is the real sign of our condition.

José María Merino

I have had for many years a consuming interest in magic and the supernatural. I think this is because I find there so convenient a shorthand statement of the possibilities of human adjustment to what seems to be at best an inhuman world.

Shirley Jackson

In her lecture entitled “Memory and Delusion,” Shirley Jackson confesses: “The very nicest thing about being a writer is that you can afford to indulge yourself endlessly with oddness” (375). Indeed, Jackson’s oeuvre—her short stories, novels, even her humorous sketches on domestic life—all seem to be characterized by the need to challenge the established ways of

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looking at “reality,” by the urge to interrogate the limits of the familiar. In mid-century America, celebrating conformity and traditional family values and enforcing ideas of outside threats and the necessity for containment, Jackson looks for ways to move beyond the boundaries of her world. Her interest in the mysterious and the occult, her fascination with the Tarot, or her study of the history of New England witchcraft, all of which earn Jackson a reputation of “an amateur practicing witch,” manifest the author’s persistent desire to question the official ways of understanding reality, to look for meaning outside the dominant discourse. Venturing into the areas of the unknown is also Jackson’s way of challenging different forms of limitation she experiences as a female writer, housewife, and woman in the male-oriented 1950s. This essay examines the role of the fantastic and the occult in Jackson’s most “curious and cryptic” (Kaslik 171), but also most undervalued novel *Hangsaman* (1951). I argue that the author’s blurring of boundaries between external and internal worlds, between reality and fantasy, as well as her use of Tarot imagery in the novel function not only as a form of interrogating the social order and gender politics of her times, but also undermine the patriarchal discourse and open new spaces of feminine experience.

During her lifetime, Jackson’s popularity was based largely on her reputation as a Housewife Writer.¹ In her domestic sketches, published regularly in magazines such as *Woman’s Home Companion* or *Good Housekeeping*, and collected later into *Life Among the Savages* (1953) and *Raising Demons* (1957), she talks about everyday trials of motherhood and middle-class family life in witty, often hilarious ways. As a mother of four and full-time housewife, Jackson is intimate with the ordinary—as she writes in one of her stories, “Women with homes live so closely with substances: bread, soap, and buttons” (“Homecoming” 291). She depicts her life as cluttered with objects and filled with everyday challenges: finding matching socks, fixing a refrigerator, surviving P-T-A meetings and children’s pranks. At the same time, narrating her struggles as mother and wife, Jackson tries to “take the edge off cold reality” by inventing other worlds: “[a]ll the time that I am making beds and doing dishes and driving to town for dancing shoes, I am telling myself stories” (“Memory and Delusion” 377). In a short essay entitled “The Real Me,” she confesses that she is tired of pretending to be “a trim little housewife” and describes herself as living “in a dank old place with a ghost that stomps around in the attic room,” and as someone who re-

¹ The term was used by Betty Friedan in *The Feminine Mystique* in relation to Jackson and other female writers of mid-century America, p. 52.

lies "almost entirely on image and number magic" (357). The comic, light-hearted tone coexists in Jackson's work with the impulse to look beyond the limits of everyday reality, to peer under the surface of the familiar. As Eric Savoy puts it, Jackson's "narrative eye is finely attuned to the *potential* of the normative household to unravel toward something *other*—something dark, destructive, psychotic ... she writes, and consistently invites us to read, with bifurcated vision, or with an attention divided between the amusing details of what children do or say and the looming possibility that the 'savage' and the 'demonic' are something other than clever metaphors" (829; emphasis in the original).

While for Jackson the housewife slipping into a private fantasy realm may have been an escape from the drudgery of everyday duties, in her writing this proclivity for "delusions" takes the form of serious critical inquiry into the mechanisms of culture and complexities of the self. Her fictional works focus primarily on young, unmarried women whose attitudes to motherhood and their own femininity are highly problematic. By creating female characters who are not mothers or housewives, and who are often in search of a home, Jackson challenges the 1950s' myth of domesticated femininity and foregrounds those aspects of womanhood which the official culture (and the American mid-century idiom) attempted so hard to repress: instability, irrationality, and otherness. Rather than focusing on female entrapment in marriage and motherhood, Jackson's narratives reveal a far more terrifying form of containment—that within patriarchal cultural frames and ideology.

Undoubtedly, Jackson's interest in the exploration of the female psyche was inspired by the mid-century popularity of psychoanalysis as well as her own reading of Freud. While highlighting the significance of the unconscious with its non-articulated anxieties and desires, Freud's works also challenged the idea of the self as coherent, rational, and stable. As Ann Williams writes, "Freud acknowledged the reality and the power of those 'female' forces that Western culture had always excluded: sexuality, non-linguistic modes of meaning, madness, dreams" (247). At the same time, admitting the existence of the "other," he undermined the laws of logic and the authority of the Word, and expanded language to include non-verbal, non-symbolic forms of communication (Williams 247). Freudian psychoanalysis and its methods were also similar, in some ways, to the magical or occult practices popular at the time, and when he was beginning his research, Freud was concerned that associations between psychiatry and spiritualism

might damage his reputation as a serious scholar.² The 1940s and 1950s witnessed a peak of interest in the broadly understood magic and the paranormal, and its relevance for psychoanalysis was confirmed by such publications as George Devereux' volume *Psychoanalysis and the Occult* (1953), which included essays by Freud and other contemporary psychiatrists. While Freud himself was officially rather skeptical about the supernatural, he had a long-lasting private fascination with paranormal phenomena, especially telepathy, and claimed in one of his earlier works that "the words we use in our everyday speech are nothing other than watered down magic" (285). Throughout his career, however, he "often expressed his belief that the occult was inextricable from psychoanalysis, which, he believed, in order to be effective, had to embrace those manifestations of thought and emotion that are normally excluded from rational, scientific study" (Brottman 474–75).

Jackson's attraction to magic and the occult and her interest in psychoanalysis manifest themselves in her love of the fantastic as a literary mode. Among the author's favorite books are L. Frank Baum's *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz*, Lewis Carroll's *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* and *Through the Looking-Glass*, Tolkien's *Hobbit*, and fairy tales. As a writer, Jackson herself is drawn towards the "supernatural economy" and "magical thought mode" (R. Jackson 53) of fantasy, whose ambiguity and ellipticality make it a perfect medium for the exploration of private fears and cultural or historical anxieties. As Rosemary Jackson has argued, the fantastic can be seen as a subversive category which "traces the unsaid and the unseen of culture: that which has been silenced, made invisible, covered over and made 'absent'" (4). Like psychoanalysis, fantastic texts are preoccupied with the unconscious, with "revealing and exploring the interrelations of the 'I' and the 'not-I', of self and other" and, like the Freudian *Unheimlich*, function "to dis-cover, reveal, expose areas normally kept out of sight" (R. Jackson 53, 65). By expressing unconscious drives, literary fantasies depict "in graphic forms a tension between the 'laws of human society' and the resistance of the unconscious mind to those laws" (R. Jackson 6–7). At the same time, fantastic narratives, as David Roas puts it, "reflect on reality and its frontiers, on our knowledge of it and the validity of the tools we have developed

² For a broader discussion of the relationship between Western esoteric traditions and psychoanalysis see, for example, John Boyle, "Before and after Science: Esoteric Traces in the Formation of the Freudian Psychoanalytic Subject," *Journal of the Irish Society for the Academic Study of Religions*, vol. 7, 2019, pp. 59–103, <https://jisasr.org/about/current-issue-volume-7-2019>; or Maria Pierri, *Occultism and the Origins of Psychoanalysis: Freud, Ferenczi and the Challenge of Thought Transference* (2023).

to understand and represent it" (15). Investing her stories with irrational, supernatural or "unreal" events, and thus transcending the limitations of realist writing, Jackson challenges the laws of the symbolic and draws attention to other ways of seeing and making sense of the world.

Hangsaman, in many ways Jackson's "most revealing, complex, and difficult book" (Oppenheimer 145), combines the author's interest in psychology and the occult with the subversive potential of the fantastic. Often described as "weird" (Franklin 291) or "erratic" (Oppenheimer 145), the narrative is a female coming-of-age story, whose teenage protagonist, Natalie Waite, escapes the pressures of the external world by creating her own half-demonic, half-liberating internal reality. While the book has typically been read as "a novel of initiation into the adult world" (Lyons 63, qtd. in Ingram 58), or a fictional account of a young woman's descent into schizophrenia, these interpretations are not mutually exclusive. By focusing on the process of becoming a woman, *Hangsaman* addresses some of the central feminist concerns of mid-century America: the cultural silencing and subordination of women as well as the effects of such pressures on individuals. Compared by some critics to Sylvia Plath's autobiographical *The Bell Jar*, Jackson's novel, too, contains references to the author's life, but its narrative structure and uncertain boundaries between reality and fantasy make it a far more complex and challenging text. Through the coded mechanisms of the fantastic, the novel draws attention to the processes of gender construction and the ways in which young women are expected to diminish themselves, sacrifice part of their personality, and adopt their subordinate roles in society. Exploring the turbulent process of growing up, Jackson probes into the very mechanism of incorporation into the symbolic and, at the same time, investigates the losses such incorporation involves.

The first part of the novel presents Natalie in the context of the traditional family, an institution especially glorified in postwar America. The book opens with Natalie's father, introduced in the first line as "Mr. Arnold Waite—husband, parent, man of his word" (3). As Wyatt Bonikowski observes, "the novel begins with the Name-of-the-Father in a way that highlights both his position as patriarch and his relation to language" (77), but also draws attention to the Word as belonging to an authority, the man who only half-jokingly calls himself "God." Mr. Waite's domination and control over the home space is highlighted from the start by showing him comfortably "leaned back in his chair," with the sun touching his hair as if to form a halo of an ancient solar deity or a crowned king. Natalie's mother, on the

other hand, embodies the concerns of many women of Jackson's era: the entrapment in a social script which, veiled in the romantic myth of love and family bliss, places women in compulsory domesticity, and which both contains and obliterates them (cf. Grosz 120). Looking desperately for ways in which she could verbalize her resentment, Mrs. Waite becomes aware of another type of constraint—that inside the limits of conventional discourse, which effectively censors forms of experience other than the dominant ones or considers them meaningless. In the character of Mrs. Waite, Jackson addresses the complicated relationship between the oppression of patriarchy and limitations of language, as Mrs. Waite laments both the loss of self and the inability to mediate this loss.

Mr. Waite's influence over Natalie replicates in many ways the pattern of patriarchal control experienced by her mother. He not only instructs Natalie on how to write and systematically comments on her work, but also chooses her college, her reading and her interests. The father, as an agent of the symbolic, thus holds himself in charge of Natalie's language, education and thought. By denying Natalie any form of agency, Mr. Waite performs the same act of censoring and erasing of female identity he exercises towards his wife. The persistent power of the Lacanian Law-of-the-Father also reverberates in the girl's mind through the fantasy of a police detective interrogating her about an imaginary murder. As another representative of the symbolic law, the detective accosts her with questions which she boldly and consistently refuses to answer. The subjugation of female voice and body are rendered most dramatically through Natalie's experience of sexual violence. The assaulter is a nameless old man the girl meets during her father's party, but it is Mr. Waite who, introducing them, asks his daughter, "Has anyone yet corrupted you?" (33). The three male figures—the father, the detective, and the old man—merge into one in the voice of the oppressive interrogator who "would not stop until he had from her what he wanted" (37). Like her mother, then, Natalie finds herself abused, her language and body suppressed, controlled, and no longer her own.

To preserve a sense of autonomy, Natalie learns to retreat into "the farthest places of her mind," and this ability to create a private imaginary reality is also a form of writing "against the father—out from under his gaze and outside of the signifier" (Bonikowski 81). As she leaves home for college—another institution governed by patriarchal laws—Natalie withdraws even more into her own psychic space, where she encounters a character with an androgynous name Tony. With the discovery of Tony as the "other" part of

her self, Natalie experiences a sense of completeness characteristic of the preoedipal stage: "a feeling of warmth and comfort and security," as if returning to the maternal place, where she and Tony "were the finest and luckiest persons imaginable" (179, 178). As Rosemary Jackson observes, such fragmentation of the character is typical for fantastic narratives which often challenge the idea of a unified, rational self and "try to *reverse* or rupture the process of ego formation which took place during the mirror stage, i.e. they attempt to re-enter the imaginary" (90; emphasis in the original). The creation of Tony embodies Natalie's desire to return to the Lacanian imaginary realm, the state of the original unity, which is lost when the subject enters the symbolic order. It thus alludes to the sacrificial logic of identity formation in Western culture: for a coherent social self to be formed, part of the subject must be foreclosed and made inaccessible. Yet, the social contract based on the requirement for such foreclosure causes, as Jackson's novel shows, "a vindictive return of alterity in paranoid and projective forms" (Sjöholm 90).

The fantasy of freeing oneself from the conventional world initiated by Tony brings about the discovery of Natalie's sexuality outside of the normative order. The homoerotic undertones of Natalie's relationship with Tony are first indicated by their bedtime reading: a pornographic reworking of Carroll's *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*. Written by an anonymous author, the text is not specifically lesbian in character, but the passage quoted by Jackson is a fragment of an explicitly homoerotic scene between Alice and her maid. As Laura Helen Marks explains, such "adult" versions of *Alice* books were largely inspired by the sexual undertones and erotic vocabulary Carroll's narratives contain. For Marks, these pornographic adaptations "reclaim Wonderland for Alice, literalizing the sexual symbolism of the novels while at the same time offering a transformed Alice who is free to author her own sexual coming of age" (99). By evoking the "grown-up" version of Alice, Jackson highlights her character's sexual maturity as opposed to Alice's childhood innocence, while her assumed queerness becomes another form of challenging the dominant expectations of her era regarding sex and gender. Like her mental disintegration leading to schizophrenia, Natalie's homosexuality constitutes a threat to paternal authority, if not to the paranoid America's sense of national security, and becomes another form of reinventing reality outside patriarchy.

From the moment Natalie meets her other self, the narrative turns into a surreal and ultimately frightful tale, in which both characters leave the col-

lege behind and wander through a dreamlike town and into a dark forest encountering strange, half-real figures on their way. In this imaginary realm, outside of the world of learning and reason, Natalie and Tony discover an alternative system of communication—the magical, esoteric metalanguage of the Tarot. As they stroll through the town, Natalie and Tony recognize Tarot images all around them: a three-section candelabra in an antique shop window is the Three of Wands, and the fire hydrant becomes the Ace of Cups. In their invented game, one of the girls names a card symbol, while the other is supposed to give the Tarot meaning of the card, both upright and reversed. Jackson's choice of the Tarot's intricate, dual symbolism as an alternative type of vocabulary not only highlights the complexity of Natalie's internal reality, but also draws attention to other, unofficial ways of interpreting the world that transgress the formal, patriarchal systems of knowledge and meaning-making.

While Jackson's own fascination with the Tarot has been well-documented and may be seen as part of her general interest in the mystical and the occult, its use in the novel testifies to the author's more profound understanding of Tarot's complex imagery. As Inna Semetsky points out, the Tarot is a specific, non-verbal language which represents "meaningful patterns of thoughts, affects, emotions, feelings and behaviors, thus embodying the very values implicit in collective experiences that transcend times, places, language barriers, disparate beliefs and cultures" (4–5). In contrast to the formal discourse and traditional science, Tarot images speak "in a different voice" and foreground "women's ways of knowing" in the sense that they include "insight, imagination and intuition" (Semetsky 6). As Semetsky claims, interpreting Tarot symbolism, with its roots in the Jungian theory of the collective unconscious, belongs to what Julia Kristeva has termed *semanalysis*—a combination of semiotics and psychoanalysis, which focuses on unconscious drives and affects (Semetsky 183). The Tarot layout of images is a pictorial text, in which the invisible realm of thoughts, emotions, and drives becomes symbolically represented. In speculative fiction, as Juliette Wood observes, "Tarot can structure the narrative by foreshadowing events, revealing the personalities and fates of characters, or providing a metaphor for an actual or an interior journey" (234).

When she first sees Tony playing with the Tarot, Natalie identifies herself with the card depicting a young man called the Magician, a symbol of "be-

comingness," also emphasized by the card's number, which is one.³ "The number one is symbolic of the yang, or masculine power," Sally Nichols writes, but it "has hidden ambiguities, for its very concept implies *another*" (53, emphasis in the original). While number one, which "stands erect connecting heaven and earth" points to man's consciousness, it also suggests a duality: "It is as if, hidden in the rib of our Magician, there is already contained the feminine principle, whose number is two. As the white yang 'fish' of the Tai-Chi symbol carries the dark eye of its counterpart, embedded in the pure spirit of the Magician is a dark spot of feminine ambivalence" (Nichols 53–55). In the face of the Magician, Natalie recognizes her own ambivalent sexuality and inherent heterogeneity.

Among several Tarot images the novel mentions, the most significant is, undoubtedly, that of the Hanged Man, alluded to in the book's title and its epigraph.⁴ According to Arthur E. Waite and his *The Pictorial Key to the Tarot* popular in Jackson's times, "it is a card of profound significance, but all the significance is veiled."⁵ The upside-down figure of the Hanged Man seems suspended between opposite categories: heaven and earth, life and death, or "the conscious mind and its shadow" (Douglas 87). As the major card of the shamanic realm, it indicates "entrance into an inner order that requires a death and resurrection into new life" (Greer 71).⁶ As another guide to the

³ Sally Nichols' reading of the Magician card is based on the Marseilles deck, an older version of the Tarot used by Jackson in her own readings. Although she was familiar with the Waite-Smith deck, she preferred the French version (Franklin 291). For an interesting discussion of the differences between Waite's interpretation of the Magician and the Marseilles deck's symbolism of the card, see Nichols 55–56.

⁴ The novel's title and epigraph come from Francis James Child's nineteenth century ballad "The Maid Freed from the Gallows," which tells the story of a young woman just about to be hanged, yet still waiting for someone to come to her rescue. Members of her family come to see her one after another but none of them brings ransom to save her life. In the fragment quoted by Jackson, the woman finds herself caught up between life and death as her "true love" approaches to set her free: "Slack your rope, Hangsaman, / O slack it for a while, / I think I see my true love coming, / Coming many a mile." The image of a young woman in the hands of a powerful man, and hovering between salvation by love on the one hand, and death on the other, encapsulates the major idea of the novel in which Natalie finds herself balancing on a fragile border between child and adult, insanity and reason, the semiotic maternal and the symbolic law.

⁵ The name of Arthur E. Waite is clearly alluded to in Natalie's surname. The first name is also evoked in Arthur Langdon, Natalie's teacher at college and the double of Natalie's dad.

⁶ Held in suspension between death and new life, the Hanged Man alludes, inevitably, to ancient initiation rites, in which the individual moves from one defined position, or stage in life, to another. Arnold Van Gennep states that "[w]hoever passes from one [zone] to the other finds himself physically and magico-religiously in a special situation for a certain length of time: he wavers between two worlds" (18).

Tarot explains, the card number is twelve, which signifies the interaction of unity with duality, so that the hero

becomes agonizingly aware that he is *not one person*, the conscious self he identifies with, but only part of a greater whole. He sees *two halves* which are antagonistic to one another, yet are at the same time complementary. He cannot go back and reclaim the assured selfhood of his youth, yet equally *he must not submit to his shadow*.... In order to proceed he must have the courage to let go of all he has learnt, voluntarily release the grip of intellect, and allow *the deeper forces within* to take the reins.

To deliberately float oneself on *the secret tides of the unconscious* implies a deliberate *reversal of the teachings and values of the outer world*, and the acceptance of a grave risk – *the laws and values of the inner worlds* are in many cases the exact reverse of those we are familiar with, and are only transgressed at one's peril. (Douglas 87; emphases added)

Thus, the complex symbolism of the card illuminates even more profoundly Natalie's predicament: like the Hanged Man, she finds herself perilously dangling between "the grip of intellect" and reason, that is the Law of the Father on the one hand, and "the laws and values of her inner worlds," which may lead her to lose the grip on reality.

Like other, more subtle, textual references to Carroll's fantasy novels, or avant-garde surreal movies, the Hanged Man manifests the role and power of the unconscious as well as the refusal to accept the rule of the so called "normal" perspective. While the Tarot is, in general, an alternative way of reading and interpreting human experience, the Hanged Man is an "anarchist" among other cards in that his position is already reversed. In Greer's words, "the *Hanged Man* is about total surrender to an opposing point of view, reversing your consciousness, and imagining differently" (70). The extraordinary position of this figure, the fact that it can be "immobilized and stagnant" when its head is down, and in the upright position playfully "dancing a jig" on one leg (Nichols 216), creates the image of a double body—another representation of inherent contradictions and heterogeneity that is the basis of subjectivity and that Jackson addresses in the Natalie–Tony pair.

In *Strangers to Ourselves*, a book on modern societies' fear of the foreigner as Other, Kristeva observes that it was Freud who brought us the courage to see the stranger in ourselves and "to call ourselves disintegrated" (190–91). At the center of Kristeva's vision as a post-Freudian psychoanalyst lies the need to recognize our own uncanny strangeness, "[t]o

discover our disturbing otherness, for that indeed is what bursts in to confront that 'demon,' that threat, that apprehension generated by the projective apparition of the other at the heart of what we persist in maintaining as a proper, solid 'us'" (*Strangers* 192). In *Hangsaman*, the "projective apparition" assumes an embodied form in the shape of Tony, who becomes a manifestation of both the Freudian uncanny double and the Kristevan *abject*, of the feminine, corporeal aspect of Natalie's subjectivity, and of the fear and desire of sexuality. This idea again finds its reflection in the Tarot symbolism since "[o]f all the suits, Tony most favored swords, and the card named Page of Swords was always her particular card" (178). In Paul Foster Case's *An Introduction to the Study of Tarot* (1920), which Jackson may have been familiar with, we read that Pages in the Tarot minor arcana symbolize the physical body (12).

To understand the true nature of her loss, Natalie has to return to the original pre-Oedipal space outside of time, to the space preceding her constitution as subject. Hence, in the last section of the novel, Tony leads Natalie into a dark forest at "the very edge of town" (204), past an empty and forlorn amusement park, where "warmth and movement had once abided, where a skeletal roller-coaster presided ghoulishly over the remains of a merry-go-round" (205). The deserted playground evoking images of death suggests that childhood and innocence are long gone. Walking in the darkness and rain, Natalie hears Tony's voice luring her deeper into the woods and into that part of her unconscious which has to be excluded from the symbolic. As Tony is trying to seduce her, Natalie pushes her away in a violent act of separation from the Other and rejection of the feminine *jouissance*—a gesture necessary for incorporation into the symbolic order (cf. Bonikowski 83). Having rejected Tony and the intimate, fantasy life they enjoyed together, Natalie feels "she has defeated her own enemy"—"the claim of the Real outside of the Symbolic order" (Bonikowski 83).

Jackson seems well-aware of how easy it is to cross the precarious border and sink into lunacy, and how this kind of "retrospective longing" may be seen in terms of demonic powers of the unconscious.⁷ In an early manuscript

⁷ The idea of "the demon in the mind" may have had its roots in Jung's writing on the unconscious. In *Psychology of the Unconscious*, published in America in 1949, that is two years before *Hangsaman*, Jung sees the longing for the maternal in demonic terms: "The retrospective longing acts like a paralyzing poison upon the energy and enterprise, so that it may well be compared to a poisonous serpent which lies across our path. Apparently, it is a hostile demon which robs us of energy, but, in reality, it is the individual unconscious, the retrogressive tendency of which begins to overcome the conscious forward striving..." (335–36).

version of *Hangsaman*, Natalie hears the voice of the devil Asmodeus telling her to “walk in strange places” and, as Jackson herself explains, it is this voice—“the demon in the mind”—that is Natalie’s “perfect adversary.”⁸ Asmodeus, known as a demon of lust, was also thought to be responsible for spreading madness among women and, therefore, worshiped by witches. In one of the early versions of the novel, Jackson refers to madness as a sought for and feared encounter with the devil:

She longed for it, and it was bad; witness the devil. her body ached for it, and it was crazy; witness the powerful figure who led her through the woods. sometimes, almost crying, she prayed for an unspecified insanity, so that she might be shut up, relieved of her mind, and allowed to go forever without herself in an amiable dream of heroes and devils, pitied perhaps by the world but at least never recalled to the blunt actuality of natalie waking up in the morning to face another day. time would be suspended when she was crazy; the world would go on in a half light of soft whispering faces, there would be no solid things in her way, so that she need [not] fear walking into trees and walls; she need not clothe her mind nor feed her heart, and somewhere, someplace, with tears and with sorrow, they would be caring for her body without her help.⁹

While this passage never made it into the final text of the novel, the sense of Natalie’s balancing on the thin line between sanity and madness remains one of its main themes, enacted rather than told, rupturing the text from within and fragmenting the narrative as if to mirror the fragmented mind of its protagonist. There is a strong sense, too, of “lunacy” being not only a form of dissent from patriarchal norms, but also a way of liberating oneself from their crippling power.

Commenting on the significance of Tony in her private notes, Jackson clearly alludes to the internal duality of the self—“an ambivalence of the spirit, or the mind”—that interests her the most. The author suggests that Tony, with her androgynous name, could be a *he* as well as a *she*, since her role is that of an antagonist, an Other, “the secret devil”: “the devil is not of course that devil, but the personal one, the area of me which is not-good, which is my private delight and public embarrassment, the romantic, the one who sits dreaming, the bad bad one whom i never contemplate without that

⁸ Shirley Jackson Papers at the Library of Congress, Washington, DC, Box 31. Further references to this source will be abbreviated as SJP, LoC.

⁹ SJP, LoC, Box 31; original spelling.

kind of secret tender oh-god-if-anyone-knew feeling."¹⁰ The way Jackson refers to her own "infernal" regions of the mind as "private delight and public embarrassment," exposes the double bind of identity construction as the subject must always choose between the inner self and the Wor(l)d. Also, at the end of *Hangsaman*, as Tony disappears among the trees never to come back, Natalie experiences a profound sense of abandonment and asks: "What did I do wrong?" (215). While showing female subjectivity as forever "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" (Bonikowski 68), there is also a sense that being deprived of that safe place inside the mind would feel "like a loss—of potential, of possibility, of self" (Oppenheimer 164). Hence the subtle irony with which Jackson shows her heroine returning towards the familiar college buildings "alone, and grown-up, and powerful, and not at all afraid" (218). Focusing on the young female character's split between the "demonic" unconscious and the social, the internal drives and the Father's Law, and the final triumph of reason over the phantoms of the mind, *Hangsaman* draws attention to those repressed aspects of subjectivity which, unexpressed, threaten to pull us apart.

The logic of the dream, the mysticism of the Tarot, and the language of fantasy in *Hangsaman* allow Jackson to address some of the social and cultural tensions of her era and reinvent reality outside the dominant order. The fantastic, like dreams, is deeply rooted in the unconscious and can serve as a means of dealing with both personal phantoms and the anxieties and losses resulting from cultural constraints. As Rosemary Jackson reminds us, fantasy is "a literature of desire, which seeks that which is experienced as absence and loss" (3). At the same time, the fantasy mode makes it possible for both the author and the reader to venture, if only for a short time, into disorder, "on to that which lies outside the law, that which is outside dominant value systems" (R. Jackson 4). As a female writer in mid-century America, Jackson uses mysticism and the fantastic not only to interrogate the limits of the known, but also to show reality and reason as arbitrary constructs and remind us, in a somewhat Freudian fashion, of the "other" forever hovering at the limits of our consciousness.

¹⁰ SJP, LoC, Box 14.

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“IMAGINING DIFFERENTLY”: TALES OF TAROT AND THE FANTASTIC
IN SHIRLEY JACKSON’S *HANGSAMAN*

Summary

The essay discusses the role of the Tarot and the fantastic in Shirley Jackson’s novel *Hangsaman* (1951). As a female writer in mid-century America, Jackson uses elements of mysticism and fantasy genre as a means of interrogating the social order and gender politics of her times, but also to undermine the official patriarchal discourse and open new spaces of female experience. By blurring the boundaries between external and internal worlds, and by employing elements of the occult, the author shows reality and reason as arbitrary constructs and draws attention to other ways of meaning making. In contrast to the formal discourse and traditional science, Tarot images and its complex symbolism foreground “women’s ways of knowing” and offer an alternative feminine language beyond official systems of communication.

Keywords: literary fantasy; Shirley Jackson; mysticism; psychoanalysis; Tarot

„MYŚLAĆ INACZEJ” – SYMBOLIKA TAROTA I ELEMENTY FANTASTYKI
W POWIEŚCI SHIRLEY JACKSON *HANGSAMAN*

Streszczenie

Artykuł jest próbą analizy symboliki tarota oraz elementów literatury fantasty w powieści Shirley Jackson pt. *Hangsaman*. Pisząc z perspektywy kobiety żyjącej w Ameryce lat 50. XX wieku, Jackson wykorzystuje elementy mistycyzmu i fantastyki w odniesieniu do sytuacji społeczno-politycznej oraz problemów kobiet. Zacierając granice między światem zewnętrznym a wewnętrznym oraz między tym, co rzeczywiste a tym, co wyobrażone, autorka analizuje mechanizmy kulturowe odpowiedzialne za kształtowanie jednostki i przygotowywanie jej do określonych ról społecznych. Wykorzystanie symboliki tarota w powieści służy wskazaniu innych, przekraczających społeczne schematy możliwości doświadczania i interpretowania świata.

Słowa kluczowe: fantasty; Shirley Jackson; mistycyzm; psychoanaliza; tarot