



4-2022

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Ledbetter, Cryslin A. (2022) "How Gender Affects Writing: Jackson's and Fitzgerald's Portrayals of Mental Illness," *Criterion: A Journal of Literary Criticism*: Vol. 15: Iss. 1, Article 4.
Available at: <https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/criterion/vol15/iss1/4>

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How Gender Affects Writing

Jackson's and Fitzgerald's Portrayals of Mental Illness

Cryslin Ledbetter

Since the beginning of published novels, such as Shikibu's *The Tale of Genji* and Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe*, authors have employed the common theme of portraying mental illness within their characters. Because mental illness has become more abundant in today's society, brought on by varying degrees of trauma and stressors that are becoming more common, it is only appropriate that characters in both *Tender is the Night* by F. Scott Fitzgerald and *We Have Always Lived in the Castle* by Shirley Jackson resonate with college students. Shirley Jackson, a haunted mind during the midst of twentieth century sexism and an uproar of female power, created several works that included supernatural elements in order to both shock and thrill her readers. Shirley Jackson does not exclude *We Have Always Lived in the Castle* from her common mystic, feminist sentimentist explorations. F. Scott Fitzgerald, on the other hand, an author most notably known for *The Great Gatsby*, produced *Tender is the Night* in reference to earthly afflictions as he writes of his wife's own battle with schizophrenia; however, while the plot of this novel contains worthwhile characters, the trauma of the novel presents conflicts within a patriarchally motivated society and balks against the archaic principle of male-centered hedonism.

Critics fond of Jackson and Fitzgerald have published a substantial amount of articles both formulating and analyzing arguments that exist in the aforementioned novels. Fitzgerald's critics focus on narcissism, dark romantic qualities, and the American Dream, a topic commonly found in Fitzgerald's writings. Tracienne Ravita, in her article "Dick Diver's Narcissistic Disturbance in 'Tender is the Night,'" which revolves around the male protagonist in this novel, goes as far as stating that "Dick employs a series of manipulative maneuvers to force her [Nicole] to idealize with her, while refusing to empathize with her" (62). Her statement remains undoubtedly true, and readers see Dick's narcissistic presence throughout the novel. Jackson's critics, however, connect with her vigorous modes of female power, gothicism, and womanliness: "Female self sufficiency, Jackson suggests, specifically women's forceful establishment of power over their own lives, threatens a society in which men hold primary power and leads inevitably to confrontation" (Carpenter 32). However, critics have yet to compare the ways these two authors choose to analyze trauma in familial settings, an analysis which is heavily influenced by gender. Yes, Dick Diver's narcissism arguably "drives" Nicole insane, and yes, Jackson heavily comments on the forceful establishment of female power, but how do these two novels, written only thirty-two years apart, relate in contemporary literary criticism? Modern readers will find that the authors utilize different approaches, such as Fitzgerald's misogynistic undertones versus Jackson's feminist undertones, to showcase their characters' mental illnesses; however, no matter their gender, Fitzgerald and Jackson flawlessly formulate an innate understanding of their characters' flaws within their novels, accurately depicting a variety of struggles that inhabit today's literary generation through both Jackson's internal and Fitzgerald's external glances into their characters' traumas.

To begin, Jackson introduces her main character, Merricat, to her audience with a borderline obscene description which begins the cyclical processes of Merricat's trauma and begins to formulate her character flaws. Merricat's familial traumas are easily recognized as Jackson states, "I like my sister Constance, and Richard Plantagenet, and Amanita Phalloides, the death-cup mushroom. Everyone else in my family is dead" (1). Upon entering the novel, the reader identifies Merricat and her sister as orphans; however, her family's cause of death remains a mystery. By Jackson's stipulation of the side effects of parental death, Merricat and Constance are both accompanied by a cloud of

sorrow—a dense cloud that shrouds their presence within the town—signaling to town residents that the children are unstable. As the novel progresses, the author delves deeper into Merricat’s unstable emotions and how they affect those around her. For example, soon after the arrival of Merricat’s and Constance’s cousin Charles, Merricat begins to formulate a grand plan to remove him from their household: “He had been lying on the bed, because it was disarranged, and his pipe, still burning, lay on the table beside the bed . . . I brushed the saucer and the pipe off the table into the wastebasket” (99). Without Merricat thinking of the consequences, a recurring theme, her “brush” of Charles’s pipe does more than banish him from the house; instead, her careless act causes a series of events in which Merricat and Constance lose both their house and their Uncle Julian (99). When Merricat’s past trauma of losing her parents is combined with the current loss of her home (the only one she has ever known) and the loss of her uncle, Merricat’s losses outweigh her gains. One final example of mental instability comes at the end of the novel when Merricat says to Constance, “I am going to put death in all their food and watch them die.” Constance responds, “The way you did before?” (110) explicitly stating to the reader for the first time that their parents’ death was caused by Merricat. These three examples point the reader to Merricat’s rather revolving, unmitigated effort to solve her problems: death. Through death, the problem of parental control is eliminated. Through death, Charles, an unwelcome figure in Merricat’s controlled disaster of a life, is banished. Through death, Uncle Julian’s overarching eye is closed. As Merricat kills her family, the reader learns about the never-ending trauma that stems from her first murders. Through the creation of Merricat’s trauma, Jackson portrays a grotesque character, burdened by her balk against societal norms much like the actions of today’s feminists.

By promoting Merricat’s murders as an outlet to relieve stressors, Jackson’s portrayal of mental illness embodies feminist undertones, ultimately connecting her main character to her own struggles and employing an internal viewpoint understood by her readers. In her essay “Madness at ‘The Divided Self’ in the Works of American Female Authors,” Katherine Sweat claims, “This sense of emptiness, fostered by feelings of estrangement from a world outside of the domestic sphere, was familiar to Jackson herself.” She continues by noting the presence of the male in Jackson’s story:

Notably, it is their selfish and patriarchal cousin Charles who threatens this arrangement, as his domineering male presence in the house soon becomes the catalyst for the collapse of Merricat and Constance's safety and comfort. In this sense, Jackson is able to emphasize the threat of external, specifically male, pressures to the tenuous identity that women are able to sustain. (59)

By connecting the male presence to Merricat's descent into madness as well as Jackson's feminist views, Sweat accurately synthesizes Jackson's unique portrayal of mental illness. To begin, Jackson constructs Merricat's illness with an internal lens, looking into herself and her struggles, stressors, and pressures. Afterward, Merricat's internal problems come to light within the story, as what was once a mystery of how her parents died becomes a typical chain of events, notably, with the strong male characters perishing. In this way, Jackson writes of the male pressures that exist in her own life; more specifically, Jackson's husband acted as one of her strongest critics. In *The Letters of Shirley Jackson*, a collection of unmailed letters written by Jackson before her death, Jackson describes her husband as being "belittling" and she delves into the nature of his brutality, concluding that she would rather avoid showing her work to her husband for this reason (499). With Jackson's internal seclusion from her husband in mind, the reader must observe that Merricat's mental illness is only achieved by writing through an internal lens; therefore, Merricat must be the narrator in order for the reader to learn her, and only her, thoughts, emotions, and motives.

In conjunction with Jackson's frequent feminist undertones, critics of Jackson have reassessed Jackson through a feminist lens by connecting her with the characters in her novels. Angela Hague, in "A Faithful Anatomy of Our Times: Reassessing Shirley Jackson," comments:

By focusing on her female characters' isolation, loneliness, and fragmenting identities, their simultaneous inability to relate to the world outside themselves or to function autonomously, and their confrontation with an inner emptiness that often results in mental illness, Jackson displays in pathological terms the position of many women in the 1950s. (74)

Jackson's thorough understanding of "isolation," "loneliness," and "fragmenting identities" directly relates to her own life, as seen through her husband's narrative of Jackson's struggles with presenting herself, and subsequently, her work, to the world (Hague 74). In the same way, Merricat

struggles with accessing the world around her, shying away from the neighbors that attempt to help her work through her trauma. Through this solitary point of view, the reader is cut off from the rest of the characters just as Merricat is cut off from the rest of the world, and overall, the author's madness becomes Merricat's madness becomes the reader's madness. Jackson's meticulous dive into murder, illness, and confinement formulates an unparalleled view into the effects of societal pressures—pressures that are easily understood by modern female readers.

On the other hand, Fitzgerald employs an external approach to showcase his main character's mental illness. Nicole Diver, the wife of a healthy physician, becomes engulfed in a plethora of triggers as her husband begins to fall for a younger, wealthy actress. By neglecting his wife, Dick once again leaves Nicole to her own devices, devices that include a teenage diagnosis of schizophrenia, depression, and breakdowns. Not only does Nicole suffer from a series of mental illnesses, but Dick's conflict with alcoholism and adultery further strains their marriage. Fitzgerald, unlike Jackson, introduces the reader to a variety of mental illnesses through external description within a third-person omniscient narrator. The reader first learns of Nicole's afflictions within Book Two of the novel as Fitzgerald transitions from Dick's affair to Nicole's backstory: "Diagnosis: Divided Personality. Acute and down-hill phase of the illness. The fear of men is a symptom of the illness and is not at all constitutional. . . . The prognosis must be reserved" (165). Throughout the early years of her treatment, Dr. Gregory focuses on Nicole's diagnosis and the triggers that caused her ailment; therefore, Nicole's impending relationship with Dick could severely affect her ability to recover. The reader learns of Nicole's treatments not from herself but instead from her male doctors. After her stay in Switzerland for treatment, Nicole and Dick marry. Throughout the first years of marriage, Dick struggles to uphold Nicole's failing health through extensive travel, but through the only first-person account in the novel, Nicole writes to her sister, "That was why he took me travelling but after my second child, my little girl, Topsy, was born everything got dark again" (Fitzgerald 208). With a vague account of Nicole's depressive episode, Fitzgerald signals the reader to Nicole's second mental breakdown, brought on by her child's birth. The reader must note that her first child, a boy, did not create a breakdown. Lastly, Nicole's final act of defiance towards Dick, signaling yet another mental breakdown, occurs when she purposefully crashes her car with the children inside: "the car

swerved violently left, swerved right, tipped on two wheels. . . . She was laughing hilariously, unashamed, unafraid, unconcerned. No one coming on the scene would have imagined that she had caused it" (Fitzgerald 249). With her final act of defiance against men, Nicole's slip back into madness is complete. Nicole, in most scenes of the novel, relies on Dick to "drive" her, both literally and figuratively, to where she needs to go in life. In this scene, however, Nicole literally takes control of her own life as she steers the car into blackness—a blackness very much representative of the negative personality occurring throughout her illness. She puts not only herself but also her children in danger, once again concluding that her split personality has taken effect. All in all, each instance of Nicole's insanity comes randomly, usually after an argument or relationship with a man, and thoroughly described by a male.

Fitzgerald's utilization of external description through a third-person narrator in his novel regarding Nicole Diver's fall into mental illness directly opposes Jackson's intrinsic methods and feminist undertones. While Jackson's method employs a heavy feminist undertone, Fitzgerald chooses to focus more on the misogynistic counterpart of the feminist movement. Even though he does not directly construct his characters to admonish Nicole, the constant male figures, who set out to save the afflicted, gesture misogyny, and instead of solely focusing on Nicole, Fitzgerald instead chooses to comment on how Nicole's actions affect the men in her life: "He [Dick] could not watch her disintegrations without participating in them" (247). Fitzgerald only gives Nicole male doctors despite her fear of men, written in her diagnosis. Some may argue that this is due to the time period of the early twentieth century because not many female doctors existed at the time; however, with the constant reminder of the Warrens' money, it is possible that Nicole's father could have found a female psychiatrist more equipped to handle the details of her diagnosis. The reader learns that Nicole's fear of men stems from her rape by her father. This small detail becomes very significant when the reader delves into the connotation behind the name Dick. This phallic nickname for Richard once again afflicts Nicole, furthering her fear of men, and overall, sex with men. In order to regain control of her life, Nicole arguably utilizes sex as an outlet with Dick, proving to herself that her rape does not define her; however, through her outlet, she suffers a series of breakdowns. In a detailed analysis of the effects of Nicole's relation with Dick, Tiffany Joseph in "Non-Combatant's Shell-Shock': Trauma and Gender in F. Scott

Fitzgerald's *Tender Is the Night*," suggests, "Through Dick's embodiment of the paternal / protective father / lover position, Dick and Nicole reenact the incestuous relationship that instigated Nicole's illness" (67). In many instances during the novel, the reader connects Nicole's breakdowns with either communications with or actions stemming from her relationship with Dick; however, the mere presence or reenactment of her former incestuous relationship with her father promotes Nicole's downfall into madness and a relapse of her schizophrenia. Notably, Nicole's breakdown after her second child occurs due to the child being a girl. The reader can infer that with Topsy's birth, Nicole's fear resurfaces as she imagines what happened to her could also happen to her child. With Nicole continually surrounding herself with reminders of her rape, her breakdowns are not without cause; instead, they are understood by readers as certain triggers such as feeling out of control (as seen in Book One during the family's party and after Topsy's birth) commence Nicole's breakdowns. This normalcy balks against Fitzgerald's claim of insanity; however, the definition of insanity as it relates to Nicole remains ambiguous in this novel. As Jessica Frost concludes in her article "F. Scott Fitzgerald and mental illness in 'Tender is the Night,'" "Fitzgerald's exposition of mental illness is one of ambiguity as he chooses to purposefully blur the boundaries between sanity and insanity, reversing the relationship of his doctor figure and mental patient and undermining societal expectations." The author chooses to describe how Nicole's illness affects the male figures who surround her, such as her husband, her doctor, and her father; however, if the author would have employed a different tactic of focusing solely on Nicole's ailments, her story, and her own emotions, as Jackson did with Merricat, the misogynistic undertones of his story and Nicole's illness would disappear.

Despite their profound differences in showcasing characters with mental illness, Jackson and Fitzgerald embody various similarities within their writing. For example, both authors construct novels which revolve around the mental illnesses that they experienced firsthand. Jackson's portrayal of agoraphobia is apparent in all of her works, mostly in *We Have Always Lived in the Castle*, as Constance refuses to leave her home after being acquitted of murder. By the same token, Fitzgerald's inspiration comes not from himself but instead from his mentally ill wife: "Although Zelda was treated for schizophrenia, mental-health experts later would contest both the diagnosis and recovery regimen. . . . From June 1930 to September 1931, Zelda lived at Les

Rives de Prangins Clinic in Nyon, Switzerland” (Curnutt). With this in mind, Nicole Diver in *Tender is the Night* heavily reflects Zelda’s afflictions, down to the place of treatment; therefore, both authors were heavily influenced and surrounded by the never-ending afflictions of mental illness which were showcased within their writings. With a personal connection to illnesses, both writers formulate an innate understanding of their effects on society and the family involved, presenting the reader with a better understanding of other characters within the novels.

In conclusion, Fitzgerald and Jackson, both broadly recognized writers of their time, employ different strategies to showcase main characters with debilitating mental illness. Jackson’s use of internal understanding accompanied with hints of feminism, creating a cyclical process in which her illness expands to the reader, is not generally employed but is so vigorously effective with modern readers. On the other hand, Fitzgerald steps back from an up-close and personal description of Nicole Diver, instead relying on the external male presence to describe her for the reader as he creates an impersonal relationship between the reader and Nicole. All the while, both authors’ unique strategies bring the modern reader closer to connecting and understanding those afflicted with the daily struggle of surviving what the world has to offer.

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