

## Female Malady: A Psychoanalytic Exploration of Woman's Madness in Shirley Jackson's "The Daemon Lover" and "The Tooth"

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### Abstract

This paper presents a psychoanalytic exploration of woman's madness in selected short stories of Shirley Jackson. Through the analytical lens of Elaine Showalter's concept of the "female malady," this study delves into the intricate layers of psychological complexity experienced by the female protagonists in two selected short stories "The Daemon Lover," which reveals the protagonist's obsession with her lover, and "The Tooth," which explores the interplay of anxiety, feminine identity, and societal pressure. The study is qualitative one, it is going to answer whether female's madness is an inherited trait in women's mentality or it is acquired due to the social pressures imposed upon women. A psychological theory is applied to demonstrate how seemingly mundane events can evoke profound psychological turmoil. This analysis uncovers the ways in which patriarchal system, individual psychology, and societal norms. The characters' experiences are dissected through the lens of suppressed desires, societal expectations, and the negotiation of identity within restrictive contexts.

**Keywords:** Daemon Lover, Female Malady, Identity, Madness, Psychology, Patriarchy, Societal Expectations, The Tooth.

### 1.1.Introduction

The Female Malady is a concept formed by Elaine Showalter, an American literary feminist critic, who has an interest in cultural and social issues. In her book "The Female Malady, 1985, Showalter delves into the intricate world of female insanity, shedding light on how societal notions of "appropriate" feminine conduct have influenced the characterization and management of mental disorders in women over the past century and a half. The book also

underscores the sexual undertones often associated with mental afflictions in women. In addition, she explores the realm of fiction from literary pioneers such as Mary Wollstonecraft to modern writers like Doris Lessing, enriching our understanding of mental illness through a cultural lens.

(Kirkus Reviews, 2023)

Showalter argues that the depictions of female insanity encompass two distinct perspectives on the connection between women and madness. Firstly, it is portrayed as an affliction that happens because of the perceived flaws in women, emphasizing madness as an expression of women deviating from their expected roles and behaving inappropriately when measured against male-driven scientific rationality. Secondly, madness is presented as an inherent aspect of feminine nature that emerges when contrasted with masculine rationality. This suggests that the historical perception of the relationship between women and madness has revolved around these two contrasting viewpoints. Moreover, Showalter highlights that on a more straightforward level, madness is often regarded as a predominantly female ailment simply because more women experience it than men do.

(Showalter, 1985)

To enhance her concept, Showalter gives an example of women's portrayal as insane by referring to a literary work from the eighteenth century when Wollstonecraft in *Maria; or, the wrongs of women*, 1797, describes the misery and oppression of a woman, who is locked in a mental hospital. The protagonist Maria finds herself involuntarily confined to a mental institution at the hands of her abusive husband, who seeks to gain control of her wealth and thwart her inclination to independence. For Maria, this "mansion of despair" where she is incarcerated becomes a powerful symbol representing the various societal constructs, including marriage and the legal system, that constrain women and push them towards insanity. As she listens to the songs and lamentations of other women within the asylum, Maria senses her own mental state deteriorating. (Showalter, 1985) However, she struggles to find a compelling reason to preserve her sanity or fight for her freedom: "Was not the world a vast prison, and women born Slaves?"

(Wollstonecraft, 1975, p. 27)

The historical and well-documented pattern of women being overrepresented among individuals with mental illness has been observed for centuries, dating back to as early as the seventeenth century, as evidenced by the records of Dr. Richard Napier. His records revealed that there were nearly twice as

many cases of mental disorders among his female patients as compared to male patients during that period. As we move forward in history to the mid-nineteenth century, official records continued to reflect this trend, showing that women had become the majority of patients in public mental asylums. This trend persisted into the twentieth century, with women constituting the majority of individuals seeking treatment in psychiatric hospitals and psychotherapy. In 1967, a significant study further solidified this fact, reporting, "more mental illness was observed among women than men, as consistently reported across all available data sources."

(Gilman, 1982, pp. 212- 13).

Nevertheless, interpreting this statistical phenomenon has remained a topic of debate. Some argue that the higher prevalence of mental disorders among women is a direct consequence of their societal circumstances, which encompass their roles as daughters, wives, and mothers, as well as their experiences of mistreatment within a male-dominated psychiatric profession that may potentially harbor misogynistic attitudes. For instance, Richard Napier's observations reveal that women from various social backgrounds reported elevated levels of stress and dissatisfaction in their marriages, heightened anxiety concerning their children, and increased instances of depression in their daily lives when compared to their male counterparts. (Showalter, 1985)

Showalter argues that there is potential to understand hysteria in the context of the nineteenth century as an unintentional manifestation of feminist defiance, echoing the resistance mounted by the women's movement against patriarchal norms during that era. According to this perspective, Freud's depiction of Dora can be likened to Ibsen's Nora; both characters challenge the societal constraints that confine them to the narrow boundaries of bourgeois femininity. However, it is important to note that making such claims treads on risky ground as they can romanticize and endorse madness as an attractive form of rebellion, rather than acknowledging it as a desperate form of communication used by those lacking power. (Showalter, 1985).

One of the brilliant female gothic writers whose work embraces the female psychology as a motif in her stories is the American author, Shirley Jackson, (1916 – 1965), who stands out as a source of inspiration for subsequent writers in the Gothic-fantastic and horror genres. She accomplishes this by infusing her tales with fear and horror while featuring alienated female characters placed in eerie Gothic settings. Through her storytelling, Jackson

effectively communicates the struggles faced by women striving to break free from the confines of the domestic sphere and the constraints of traditional gender roles. (Akçil, 2021)

In Shirley Jackson's fiction, the lines between the self and the Gothic space blur, and the boundary between reality and the fantastic becomes indistinct. Through her work, she sheds light on how various factors, such as the corruption of human society, madness, moral decay, the dominance of the patriarchal order, and the lingering influences of the nineteenth-century cult of true womanhood, converge to trigger identity fragmentation, mental distress, and a departure from what is commonly considered "reality" in her female protagonists. (Akçil, 2021)

In her two stories, "The Daemon Lover" (1949) and "The Tooth," (1949) Jackson displays the fragmented identity, hysteria, and madness that imposed on the female protagonists by the societal restriction, hence she views them as victims of the patriarchal society.

### 1.2. The Objectives of the Study

The study endeavors to investigate the origins of Female Madness, aiming to ascertain whether it is perceived as an inherent trait in women's mindset or it is social pressures that contribute to the development of this malady. Furthermore, the research seeks to examine how the patriarchal system shapes the experiences of female characters, and how societal norms and expectations play a role in the psychological struggles depicted in the selected short stories.

### 1.3. The Questions of the Research

The research aims at answering the following questions:

- What is Female malady? And why it is restricted to women only?
- Is Female's Madness considered as an inherited nature in women? or is it a sign of rebellion against the dominated patriarchal society?

### 1.4. Previous Studies

Previous studies about the concept of Female Malady, and Jackson's two short stories have been conducted for different purposes:

- N. Esinç Demirkapu (2006) in his thesis entitled "The Themes of the Female Malady and the Female Creativity in the Fiction of Charlotte Brontë: Shirley and Villette" explores the correlation between the female author and

the themes of female creativity and affliction in Charlotte Brontë's novels as reflections of both Victorian ideologies and societal perspectives on women's roles.

- In Julija Jeremić “The Female Malady in *Wuthering Heights* and *The Yellow Wallpaper*” The main topic of this paper is the representation of female malady in the Victorian era, in reality as well as in fiction
- Robert Haas (2015) “Shirley Jackson’s “The Tooth”: Dentistry as Horror, the Imagination as a Shield” explores the impact of Jackson's personal encounters with dentistry, wherein her own aversion stemming from extensive dental procedures contributes to her classification as primarily a horror writer.
- Chiho Nakagawa (2008) “Fears of the Demon Lover: Female Paranoia in the Demon Lover Stories by Elizabeth Bowen and Shirley Jackson” investigates the theme of paranoia within two short stories that draw inspiration from the same folk ballad featuring the concept of the demon lover.
- Gustavo V Cohen (2015) “Shirley Jackson’s Fictional Cosmos and the Quest for Crypto-Thematic Concurrences in *The Daemon Lover*” aims to uncover latent message-meanings within a text. These dormant and coded elements, once cryptic, have the potential to emerge and intertwine with the more apparent thematic elements of the scrutinized text.

## 2. Psychoanalytic Exploration of Female Madness in Shirley Jackson’s “The Daemon Lover”

The protagonist in "The Daemon Lover" does not feel threatened by the demon lover's arrival or his foreboding presence. James Harris, the demon in the story possesses a sense of malevolence in his sudden vanishing. The narrator-protagonist is a thirty-four-year-old woman awaiting the scheduled arrival of her lover, James Harris, at her apartment on their wedding day. Her extended wait eventually leads her to wander into town in search of him. As she embarks on this quest, it becomes evident that she has very limited knowledge of James. They have never spoken on the phone, supposedly due to his alleged lack of a telephone, and she has never visited his apartment. The unnamed heroine resorts to questioning people on the street about his whereabouts, enduring the awkwardness of revealing her unstable



relationship with her supposed fiancé. Ultimately, when she reaches an apartment based on the information she has gathered, she hears a voice emanating from inside the room but receives no response when she knocks at the door. She repeatedly returns to the apartment, persistently knocking and waiting, yet no one shows up. James Harris appears to have the uncanny ability to materialize and vanish at will, in accordance with the demon lover theme. (Nakagawa, 2008).

Jackson's portrayal of the narrator's frantic search for her lover takes on a nightmarish quality, as she faces an overwhelming amount of social ridicule and obstacles that seem surreal, providing a glimpse into her mental torment as she rushes around town. The story starts with the narrator's suffering of insomnia which is a result of anxiety and over thinking: "She had not slept well; from one-thirty, when Jamie left and she went lingeringly to bed, until seven, ... remembering over and over, slipping again into a feverish dream". (Jakson, 1949, p.9). The narrator's malady, as any other woman in a world controlled by a patriarchal society, is more complicated than madness in its literal meaning. Female malady has a variety of forms such as anxiety, insomnia, hysteria, obsession, and paranoia.

In a society structured around a male-dominated patriarchy that often judge's women based on a combination of their age and marital status, the narrator, a thirty-four years old woman who is listed thirty on her marriage license but unmarried, becomes the target of societal scrutiny. This scrutiny leads her to become "hysterical due to her lack of social status," as mentioned by Bonikowski. (Bonikowski, 2017, p. 66). Her lack of social validation intensifies her obsession with outward appearances. Consequently, in her pursuit of conformity within the narrowly defined gender roles and the quest for personal fulfillment, she embarks on a journey to find a husband.

As the story upholds, the heroine might be suffering from a schizophrenic delusion. For instance, she claims that it is her wedding day, yet as the story shows, she does not know her lover, Jamie, well and she has never called him up or known his whereabouts, so he might be an imaginary person. Again, while writing a letter to her sister informing her about her wedding and how she has met Jamie, she does not know any details to write about, hence she discards the letter:

"Dearest Anne, by the time you get this I will be married. Doesn't it sound funny? I can hardly believe it myself, but when I tell you how it happened, you'll see it's even stranger than that..." Sitting, pen in hand, she hesitated

over what to say next, read the lines already written, and tore up the letter. (Jakson, 1949, p.9)

The act of ripping up the letter is her subconscious reaction to remember that she does not know how they have met, because they may have never done. This can represent her awareness of society's faults and her choice to ignore them to fit into the confines of her gender and gain the superficial validation of her community.

Moreover, when the protagonist's lover is late to their due date, she goes down to the drugstore, and she wants to inform him if he comes to the apartment before she returns, however, she remembers that they have never had a call on phone, she thinks "If Jamie had had a phone, she would have called him then. Instead, she opened her desk and wrote a note: "Jamie, have gone downstairs to the drugstore. Back in five minutes." (Jakson, 1949, p.13) While the protagonist is looking for Jamie, she stops at a florist shop to buy flowers for him. The florist asks her about the kind of flowers her lover likes: "what sort of flowers were they?" "I don't know," she said, surprised. "He never—" "She stopped." (Jakson, 1949, p.21) The quote suggests that Jamie never buys her flowers, enhancing the idea that they were never lovers at all. Her obsession with superficial appearances is profoundly entwined with a sense of paranoia. (Cheung, 2020) She adamantly avoids rushing to Jamie's apartment, fearing that the taxi driver might observe her. She also hesitates to involve the police in locating Jamie because she dreads the possibility of others labeling her as irrational, even though involving the police is the most sensible approach when dealing with a missing person. Despite her desperation to find her fiancé, her primary concern remains how others perceive her:

The policemen, three or four of them standing around listening, looking at her, at the print dress, at her too-bright make-up, smiling at one another. She couldn't tell them any more than that, could not say, "Yes, it looks silly, doesn't it, me all dressed up and trying to find the young man who promised to marry me, but what about all of it you don't know? I have more than this, more than you see: talent, perhaps, and humor of a sort, and I'm a lady and I have pride and affection and delicacy and a certain clear view of life that might make a man satisfied and productive and happy; there's more than you think when you look at me." (Jakson, 1949, p. 23)

As the story nears its end, the narrator finally arrives at Jamie's apartment and faces a critical choice: ignorance or awareness. The door of the apartment separates between the two options. It may stand for ignorance and self-deception, therefore compliance with societal expectations for women. She goes on from block to block searching the houses, deceiving herself into hearing his laughter from behind the locked door, "Up on the next block she walked quickly, searching the houses from the outside to see if Jamie looked from a window, listening to hear his laughter somewhere inside" (Jakson, 1949, p.26), perpetuating the illusion of Jamie's existence. Choosing awareness involves facing the truth, which also means accepting the low social status that she is actively trying to avoid. Behind this door lies an empty and desolate apartment, forcing the narrator to confront Jamie Harris for what he truly is: a non-entity.

This decision is very hard, in which women are compelled to either conform to passive roles within rigid gender norms or be cast into a permanent state of anxiety, insecurity, and even madness. Ultimately, she chooses ignorance:

She knocked, and thought she heard voices inside, and she thought, suddenly, with terror, 'What shall I say if Jamie is there, if he comes to the door?' The voices seemed suddenly still. She knocked again and there was silence, except for something that might have been laughter far away. He could have seen me from the window, she thought, it's the front apartment and that little boy made a dreadful noise. She waited, and knocked again, but there was silence. (Jakson, 1949, p.27)

She repeatedly returns to the same locked door in the hope that, someday, the suitor will answer her call.

### **3. Psychoanalytic Exploration of Female Madness in Shirley Jackson's "The Tooth"**

Shirley Jackson's story "The Tooth" delves into the theme of mental deterioration and the breakdown of self in the context of a woman's journey in a large city, plagued by anxiety. The narrative revolves around Clara, who has endured a severe toothache for an extended period. With her husband's encouragement, she embarks on a trip to New York City to seek dental treatment. However, under the influence of drugs and pain medication, Clara's perception becomes distorted, and leads her to hallucinations and creating an imaginary character named "Jim," who appears and disappears throughout the story. Following her tooth extraction, Clara experiences a



profound disconnect when she cannot recognize herself while looking at her own reflection in the mirror. Finally, she encounters Jim Harris waiting for her at the exit, leading them to walk away together, hand in hand.

(Grayman, 2015)

Throughout "The Tooth," Clara's experiences are marked by hallucinations and dream-like episodes, causing her to lose her grip on reality to the extent that she can no longer recognize her own identity. Her arrival in the city, combined with the effects of medication and the persistent toothache, ultimately results in her abandonment of her former life.

Clara's evident emotional instability is a reflection of her struggle to establish a sense of self, and it becomes clear that her domestic environment only serves to disempower her within the patriarchal system. Her lack of a true understanding and genuine relationship with her husband exacerbates her discomfort. Clara's unease is rooted in her husband's presumptions about her condition. When he minimizes her pain and advises her not to worry, he effectively belittles both her physical state and her identity. In an early moment in the story, just before they board the bus, Clara expresses feeling "funny, light-headed, and sort of dizzy." Her husband's response, delivered in a patronizing tone, dismisses her toothache as "nothing very serious." (Jakson, 1949, p.266) This interaction symbolically emasculates her ability to assert herself, thereby impeding her independence. Richard Pascal, a critic, stated that by downplaying her condition, her husband's words reinforce her dependence on him, denying her the opportunity to envision a life free from emotional and physical pain and limitations. Her husband's encouragement for her to see a doctor appears self-serving, as it seems he merely wants to rid himself of the burden of dealing with her toothache. Jackson vividly illustrates the disintegration of self in the context of a patriarchal society. (Pascal,1982) Jim Harris's presence serves as a clear indicator of Clara's escalating mental instability. Initially, in the story's early stages, Jim Harris could plausibly be seen as a genuine character. He is first introduced as a man whom Clara encounters during her bus journey to New York. They strike up a conversation at one of the bus's rest stops, and he subsequently takes a seat beside her on the bus. As the narrative unfolds and Clara reaches New York, her encounters with Jim continue in seemingly random and unexpected ways, whether at the train station or on the city streets. Ultimately, the full extent of Clara's descent into madness becomes apparent when she envisions herself running on a beach with Jim, despite the reality that she remains in New

York. Clara articulates her condition while on the bus as feeling “closed in alone with the toothache” (Jakson, 1949, p.271). As she departs from the familiarity of her home, her sense of emptiness becomes more pronounced, underscoring her limited agency in her own life. Her preoccupation with the toothache serves as a metaphor for more profound psychological problems. In the doctor's office before the procedure, Jackson underscores that:

[Clara's] tooth, which had brought her here unerringly, seemed now the only part of her to have any identity. It seemed to have had its picture taken without her; it was the important creature, which must be recorded and examined and gratified; she was only its unwilling vehicle, and only as such was she of interest to the dentist and the nurse, only as the bearer of her tooth was she worth their immediate and practiced attention. (Jakson, 1949, p.276)

This highlights the centrality of Clara's toothache in her life at that moment, as it becomes the defining feature of her identity in that particular context. Clara's tooth extraction becomes the catalyst for her to envision a better life. As critic Joan Wylie Hall points out, the tooth extraction presides over a metaphorical sacrificial ceremony that uproots Clara's past. (Hall, 1993) By placing significance on the tooth and the pain it causes, it becomes evident that its extraction symbolizes liberation from the confines of traditional roles and expectations for women. Once the tooth is removed, women can shed their anxieties and explore their genuine desires and identities, close to Clara's newfound sense of freedom. In her description of the experience during the x-ray, she conveys it as if "there was nothing in her head to stop the malicious eye of the camera, as though the camera would look through her and photograph the nails in the wall next to her" (Jakson, 1949, pp. 275-276). This imagery evokes a sense of being under constant observation, akin to a panoptic surveillance system. Jackson employs this ironic dramatization to accentuate Clara's feelings of paranoia and vulnerability.

Following her dental operation, Clara experiences an extreme disconnection from her own self, to the point where she can no longer recognize even her own physical appearance. In the women's restroom after her oral surgery, Clara comes to the unsettling realization that she cannot distinguish herself from the other women in the restroom. Jackson describes Clara's experience, saying, "She looked into the mirror as though into a group of strangers, all staring at her or around her; no one was familiar in the group, no one smiled at her or looked at her with recognition; you'd think my own face would know me" (Jakson, 1949, p.283). Eventually, Clara decides to discard her

belongings, including her monogrammed barrette. She feels a complete lack of recognizable identity and chooses to eliminate any remnants of it. This act symbolizes the concrete loss of her sense of self. It is only at the end of the story, when Clara has completely lost her sense of self that she appears to act with conscious determination and clarity, free from the disorientation caused by a lack of sleep or medication. At this point, it becomes evident to the reader that Clara is disconnected from reality. She is described as "oblivious of the people who stepped sharply along the sidewalk," and "not noticing their occasional curious glances, her hand in Jim's and her hair down on her shoulders, she ran barefoot through hot sand" (Jakson, 1949, p.286). The mention of "occasional curious glances" from onlookers underscores that Clara's behavior is far from normal in the context of reality, and it is not just because her face may be swollen or pale from the surgery. Consequently, the line between Clara's fantasy and reality becomes clear at the end, definitively indicating that she has descended into madness.

### Conclusion

Showalter's concept of Female Malady is highly applicable to Jackson's stories "The Daemon Lover" and "The Tooth". Through her stories, Jackson delves deep into the intricate layers of modern women's anxieties, immersing her readers in the psychological landscape of her female characters. She sheds light on the Female Psychology and the pressure women have to go through, controlled by the patriarchal empowerment. Showalter suggests that women are more likely to suffer from what she refers to as psychological diseases like anxiety, hallucination, paranoia and madness.

Through analyzing the two stories under the lens of Showalter's concept, it is assumed that there are two potentially possible explanations for the source of the two female protagonists' madness. At one hand, it is suggested that they are purely mad. The unnamed female narrator in "The Daemon Lover" could be viewed as a hopeless spinster who fancies a lover, developing psychological problems like obsession and hysteria, searching for him in the streets, but in vain. Same for Clara in "The Tooth", who is suffering from paranoia and hallucination, as she progressively loses her sense of self during her journey to have her tooth extracted. The dramatization of her tooth extraction reflects her overall psychological disturbance.

On the other hand, Showalter suggests that woman's madness is driven by the oppressive patriarchal society that enforces women to flee in their imagination and develop serious psychological problems. The narrator in

"The Daemon Lover" constitutes an imaginary fiancé because she is afraid to face the reality that she is soon to be a spinster. However, whether Jamie were a real character that chooses to leave her at her wedding day, or an imaginary man, in both cases, he highlights her sickly obsession with marriage, which the patriarchal society presents as the appropriate and natural destiny of women. In "The Tooth", Clara's escaping of the confines of the household could provide an opportunity for self-discovery. Jackson explores the inner workings of the female psyche, skillfully portraying the psychosis and paranoia from which she suffers. Jackson vividly portrays the emotional emptiness experienced by women confined to domestic roles, highlighting how their lack of personal identity and individuality can lead to their mental disintegration when they step outside the home. She liberates herself from the constraints of societal expectations but enters a world of fantasy within her own imagination. To answer the question of the study, it is controversial whether Clara and the unnamed narrator are mad merely because they are women or it is the male dominance and female inferiority that led them to madness. However, the context of the two stories indicates that the female malady is a consequence of the subversive role of the patriarchal society. Jackson presents the male figure "Jamie Harris" in both stories as a demonic figure and holds the same name deliberately to draw a parallel between the two females' sufferings under the control of patriarchy. In "The Daemon Lover," he becomes the source of her madness as she imagines him as a husband and keeps visiting him in his empty apartment. In "The Tooth," he is a representation of Clara's madness as he appears when she starts hallucinating in the bus. Both stories narrate women's subjection to a demonic male figure, who leads them to dispossession of both home and self.

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المرض النسوي: دراسة نفسية لجنون المرأة  
في قصتي شيرلي جاكسون "الحبيب الشيطان" و "الضرس"

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مستخلص البحث:

يقدم هذا البحث دراسة نفسية لجنون المرأة في قصص مختارة لشيرلي جاكسون. من خلال المنظور التحليلي لمفهوم إلين شوولتر حول "المرض النسوي"، تتعمق هذه الدراسة في الطبقات المتداخلة للعقد النفسية التي تعيشها بطلتي قصتي "الحبيب الشيطان"، التي تعرض هوس البطلة الجنوني بحبيبها، و"الضرس"، التي تدرس القلق، والهوية الأنثوية والضغط الاجتماعي. تهدف هذه الدراسة النوعية إلى الإجابة على ما إذا كان جنون الإناث صفة موروثية في عقل النساء أم إنها اكتسبت بسبب الضغوط الاجتماعية المفروضة عليهن. يُطبق البحث النظرية النفسية لتوضيح كيف يمكن أن تثير الأحداث التافهة ظاهرياً اضطراباً نفسياً عميقاً. ويكشف هذا التحليل عن الطرق التي يتقاطع بها النظام الذكوري، والقوانين الاجتماعية المفروضة على النساء لتشكيل هذه السردية لجنون المرأة. يتم تحليل تجارب الشخصيات من خلال منظور الرغبات المكبوتة وتوقعات المجتمع واضطرابات الشخصية ضمن سياقات محددة.

**الكلمات المفتاحية:** الحبيب الشيطان، مرض النساء، الهوية، الجنون، علم النفس، الذكورية، الضغوط الاجتماعية، الضرس.