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# Unmasking the Shadow: Confronting Repressed Fears and Moral Ambiguity through Gothic Horror Fiction by Gilman, Poe, and Jackson

<sup>\*1</sup> Swarali Jayram Joshi

<sup>\*1</sup> Assistant Professor, Symbiosis College of Arts and Commerce, Pune, Maharashtra, India.

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### \*Corresponding Author

Swarali Jayram Joshi

Assistant Professor, Symbiosis College  
of Arts and Commerce, Pune,  
Maharashtra, India.

### Abstract

This paper explores the multifaceted portrayal of the shadow archetype, as theorised by Carl Jung, in selected works of Gothic Horror Fiction. Through a thematic analysis of “The Yellow Wallpaper” by Charlotte Perkins Gilman, “The Fall of the House of Usher” by Edgar Allen Poe and “The Lottery” by Shirley Jackson, this paper reveals the shadow’s pervasive influence manifesting as repressed fears and/or moral ambiguity across individual, familial and societal levels. Gilman’s “The Yellow Wallpaper” explores the personal shadow, where the protagonist’s psychological fragmentation is caused by her suppressed creativity and unacknowledged desires, embodied in the haunting figure trapped behind the titular yellow wallpaper. Poe’s “The Fall of the House of Usher” illustrates the familial shadow, wherein the Usher family’s inherited fear, induced by the legacy of mental disorders, symbolises the disintegration of generational sanity, paralleled by the decaying family mansion. Jackson’s “The Lottery” exposes the societal shadow, demonstrating how communal violence becomes institutionalised under the guise of tradition, allowing socially sanctioned expression of humanity’s darkest impulses. By examining these narratives through the lens of the shadow archetype coupled with reader response theory, this paper argues that gothic horror fiction serves as a powerful vehicle for exploring the hidden psychological tensions that shape societal attitudes and behaviours, offering readers insights into human nature and understanding their “Self”.

**Keywords:** Shadow archetype, gothic horror fiction, repressed fears, moral ambiguity, unconscious mind.

### Introduction

#### In the Fractures of Light: The Jungian Shadow

Carl Jung’s Shadow Archetype is a foundational element of his theory of individuation. The shadow represents the subconscious aspects of the personality that an individual represses or rejects. These shadow traits can be instinctual drives, irrational desires, moral dilemmas or socially unacceptable thoughts and emotions, which often conflict with not only societal norms but also one’s conscious self-image. (Jung 8) Though the Shadow is typically perceived as negative, Jung argued that it is not inherently or completely evil. Rather, it comprises both darker impulses and untapped creative potential, encompassing what is suppressed due to social and psychological conditioning. (Jung 266) The process of individuation necessitates acknowledging the shadow and integrating it into one’s conscious identity through self-reflection and introspection, thereby fostering a more authentic identity. (Jung 190) Jung also posits that failing to recognise and embrace the shadow can result in psychological

disturbances such as anxiety, depression, mania or psychosis. Thus, a harmonious relationship with the shadow is vital for one’s psychological stability. The denial or repression of this darker self can resurface in unhealthy and harmful ways (threatening both the individual and their surroundings) due to unregulated expression.

#### Flickering Figures: Shadowplay in Gothic Realms

In gothic horror fiction, both character and setting play pivotal roles in manifesting the shadow archetype, offering rich symbolic avenues for exploring the darker, often hidden aspects of human nature. Characters in such works frequently embody shadow figures, representing the repressed fears, desires, and moral contradictions that exist beneath the surface of their conscious identities. These characters are usually depicted struggling with internal duality, reflecting Jung’s concept of the fragmented self, where the conscious ego denies and suppresses elements that are socially or morally unacceptable. As the shadow emerges, characters are

often caught in psychological conflict, leading to madness, guilt, or moral degradation. The shadow thus drives narrative tension, revealing the inescapable pull of the subconscious on human behaviour. Furthermore, the setting in gothic horror fiction often acts as a symbolic extension of the characters' internal worlds, externalising their shadows through gloomy, decaying, or oppressive environments. Haunted houses, dark forests, and abandoned ruins create an atmosphere that mirrors the psychological turmoil of the characters, with the physical space serving as a projection of their inner chaos. The boundaries between character and environment become porous as the eerie surroundings intensify the exploration of repressed fears, primal instincts, and moral ambiguity. The interplay of light and dark, isolation, and the uncanny further highlights the shadow's pervasive influence, reinforcing the narrative's psychological depth. These settings are not mere backdrops but active participants in the story, symbolising the unresolved inner darkness of the protagonists. The horrors encountered within these environments are often projections of the characters' hidden fears and suppressed desires, externalised through the unsettling atmosphere, thus creating a seamless link between psychological conflict and physical space. This symbiotic relationship between character and setting enhances the exploration of the shadow archetype, making the gothic landscape apt for exploring and illustrating the darker aspects of the human psyche.

### **Darkness Within and Without**

#### **The Individual Shadow in Charlotte Perkins Gilman's the Yellow Wallpaper**

Charlotte Perkins Gilman's *The Yellow Wallpaper* can be read as a critical exploration of 19th-century societal norms, medical practices, understanding of mental illnesses, gender roles, and restrictions on self-expression and autonomy, vividly portrayed through the protagonist's descent into madness and her obsessive fixation on the wallpaper in the nursery where she is confined. By examining the text through the lens of the shadow archetype as theorised by Carl Jung, we can uncover the depths of the narrator's psychological turmoil and the daunting implications of her oppression.

The protagonist in "The Yellow Wallpaper" is diagnosed with "temporary nervous depression-a slight hysterical tendency," reflecting the limited understanding of mental health in contemporary times. (Gilman 2) Her husband, John, who is a physician by profession, embodies patriarchal and medical authority in prescribing her a "rest cure" that forbids her from socialising, writing or engaging in any self-expressive activities. (Gilman 14) This treatment, symbolic of the oppressive medical and patriarchal practices that have been silencing women's voices and denying them agency, imposes an unbearable experience of isolation upon the protagonist, which exacerbates her mental distress, leading to a fixation on the wallpaper as an externalised manifestation of her entrapment. The grave extent of her confined existence is revealed by the fact that she is unable and unwilling to cry in front of her husband. Just like with writing, she has to do it secretly, lest he find out and send her away to undergo an even more intensely oppressive treatment at the hands of physician Weir Mitchell. (Gilman 20).

As the narrative unfolds, the chaotic patterns of the wallpaper begin mirroring the protagonist's fragmented psyche, soon transforming her obsession with the wallpaper into identification with the figure of a woman she sees trapped behind the design. (Gilman 44) The shadow archetype, in this context, is the projection of her longing for freedom and self-

expression, the aspects of herself that have been confined and oppressed; physically, mentally, emotionally and socially, onto this trapped figure, bringing to the surface her fears and desires buried deep within the recesses of her unconscious mind. Her efforts to liberate the trapped woman become a direct confrontation with her own shadow, as she seeks to reclaim her autonomy in the face of overwhelming societal constraints. Her physical isolation in the mansion parallels her emotional and psychological alienation. The absurdity of her situation is exposed when, in a space as nurturing as a nursery, an environment traditionally associated with children and playfulness, she experiences brutal incarceration and daunting loneliness. As her mental state deteriorates, the wallpaper's oppressive presence heightens her feelings of isolation, mirroring the struggles faced by women in a man's world. This sense of alienation is compounded by John's dismissive attitude towards her condition, further entrenching her in her feelings of desperation.

Despite John's prohibitions, the act of writing becomes a vital form of resistance for the narrator, as it allows her to articulate her experiences and confront her reality. Although writing symbolises her yearning for autonomy, it also amplifies the tension between her desire for self-expression and the patriarchal authority that seeks to silence her. The story culminates in a grave moment of transformation, where the narrator tears down the wallpaper in a frantic attempt to free herself from her mental torment and physical confinement. (Gilman 51) This act of rebellion is both a reclaiming of agency and an acknowledgement of her fractured identity. However, in seeking to confront her shadow and liberate herself, she succumbs to madness. Her breakdown prompts the reader to grapple with questions about the cost of liberation in a repressive society. It intricately draws the audience into the protagonist's inner turmoil, evoking a sense of claustrophobic discomfort, compelling the readers to confront their own battles with autonomy, self-expression, mental health, and systemic societal oppression.

#### **The Familial Shadow in Edgar Allan Poe's The Fall of the House of Usher**

In Edgar Allan Poe's *The Fall of the House of Usher*, the shadow archetype is intricately woven into the familial structure, symbolising the inherited psychological battles passed down through generations. The story centres on the Usher family and the inevitable obliteration of both the bloodline and dynastic residence, reflecting the deep psychological tensions that haunt the family lineage. This analysis explores how the familial shadow manifests as repressed fears and foreboding within the Usher household, offering a gothic meditation on the destructive power of the unconscious mind.

The Usher family is portrayed as a once-illustrious but now deteriorating lineage, and this decay is represented by the gothic mansion that shares the same name as its inhabitants. (Poe 146) The house, with its crumbling structure, becomes a powerful symbol of the familial shadow; a representation of the deep-seated anxieties that have accumulated over generations. Roderick Usher, the last male heir of the family, is shown as suffering from acute psychological torment, symbolising the disintegration of both individual sanity and familial legacy. His condition is not just a personal affliction but rather an embodiment of the family's collective shadow, a repository of repressed fears and unacknowledged anxieties passed down through the bloodline. (Poe 147, 149)

Moreover, Roderick's fear of death and his obsession with the supernatural play a crucial role in the manifestation of the familial shadow. His belief that the house is sentient, an active participant in the family's demise, reflects the pervasive influence of the unconscious mind on his perception of reality. This belief may also suggest a projection of his repressed fears onto the house, further blurring the line between the psychological and the material. The house, in this interpretation, is not merely a physical structure but a living entity that absorbs and reflects the accumulated fears and lineal decay of the Usher family. (Poe 146) The reader's engagement is heightened as the rotting, crumbling mansion evokes feelings of dread and disorientation, compelling them to confront their own fears regarding their unresolved anxieties surrounding personal and familial legacies, mortality, and the darker aspects of familial bonds.

The burial of Madeline, while she is still alive, serves as a potent symbol of the repression of the feminine and the darker aspects of the familial psyche. Roderick's decision to entomb his sister prematurely can be interpreted as an attempt to deny or suppress the troubling elements of the family's shadow. However, Madeline's return from the grave in the story's climax represents the inevitable resurgence of the repressed. Her return and the subsequent death of both siblings underscore the idea that the shadow cannot be permanently buried or ignored; it will eventually break free and exact its toll. (Poe 152)

### **The Societal Shadow in Shirley Jackson's The Lottery**

In Shirley Jackson's *The Lottery*, a seemingly quaint village is painted where an annual ritual known as "the lottery" unfolds. This ritual, although conducted with the same casualness as a community gathering or celebration, gradually reveals the sinister nature of a community that blindly adheres to tradition. The story serves as a stark examination of the societal shadow, exploring themes of conformity, tradition, and the darker aspects of collective consciousness.

At the core of the story is the concept of conformity, which reveals how societal norms can suppress individual morality. The villagers participate in the lottery without questioning its purpose or ethics, illustrating how social pressures can lead individuals to act against their better judgment. (Jackson) The collective participation in this barbaric ritual highlights the dangers of unexamined traditions; the community's willingness to sacrifice one of their own reflects a disturbing acceptance of violence as a means of maintaining order and cohesion. This conformity fosters an environment where the ethical implications of their actions are obscured, allowing individuals to evade personal responsibility. The story can be read as a critique of how societal pressures can compel individuals to partake in horrific acts simply because it is expected, emphasising the ease with which morality can be compromised in the name of tradition. Tradition plays a crucial role in shaping the societal shadow depicted in *The Lottery*. The villagers cling to the lottery as an age-old practice, illustrating how the weight of history can create an unbreakable bond to violence and cruelty. Even as the children participate in the gathering, they inherit the violent legacy without understanding its implications. Moreover, the story explores the theme of desensitisation to violence, highlighting how familiarity with brutality can dull moral sensitivity. The villagers' casual attitude towards the lottery and its brutal conclusion reveals a disturbing acceptance of violence as a societal norm. This desensitisation allows individuals to detach from the moral implications of their

actions, making it easier to perpetrate violence without guilt or remorse. The chilling final scene, where the villagers turn on Tessie, underscores the ease with which individuals can become complicit in atrocity when enveloped in a collective mindset. (Jackson).

The ritualistic nature of the lottery vividly embodies the societal shadow by illustrating how communities can externalise their collective anxieties and frustrations through scapegoating. This reveals a fundamental aspect of human nature: the tendency to project internal conflicts onto an individual or group, thus alleviating societal tensions at the expense of the chosen victim. The villagers' ritual serves as a mechanism to channel their fears, insecurities, and the darker impulses of human behaviour into a single act of violence. This act of violence becomes a means for the community to confront and expel their own darkness, creating a false sense of unity through shared complicity in the ritual. As readers experience feelings of shock, discomfort, or even outrage, they are compelled to reflect on how ritualised violence and passive conformity operate within their own societal contexts. This introspective process opens a space for readers to question the normalcy of societal traditions, consider their personal complicity in upholding questionable practices, and reassess their stance on collective morality. By eliciting such visceral emotional reactions, *The Lottery* serves as a mirror, engaging readers in a deeper examination of the underlying social structures that perpetuate violence and ethical compromise.

### **Conclusion**

This research paper undertakes a critical examination of how the individual, familial, and societal shadows, as delineated in *The Yellow Wallpaper*, *The Fall of the House of Usher*, and *The Lottery*, serve as complex allegories for broader socio-cultural anxieties.

In *The Yellow Wallpaper*, the protagonist's struggle with her shadow is an internal, isolated experience, a product of personal repression and gendered oppression. Her disintegration, though rooted in her psyche, reflects a broader patriarchal structure that affects women collectively. This movement from personal repression to societal dynamics hints at the interconnectedness of the individual with societal structures, even if the latter remains more implicit in the narrative.

Poe's *The Fall of the House of Usher* introduces a familial dimension, where the protagonist's shadow is deeply entwined with his family's history. This familial legacy of decay and trauma affects Roderick at an individual level but also reflects the erosion of long-established social orders. The crumbling mansion symbolises this decay on a larger scale, where family and tradition both serve as oppressive forces, linking the personal to a generational shadow.

Jackson's *The Lottery* zooms out further, exploring how the shadow operates at the societal level. The collective shadow, represented by the town's unquestioning acceptance of ritualistic violence, reveals how individuals are complicit in upholding destructive traditions. This societal dimension brings the shadow out of the realm of personal fears, suggesting that it manifests not only within individuals but is also embedded in collective, cultural practices. The juxtaposition of these texts reveals a continuum where the shadow, initially personal, expands to familial and ultimately societal levels, illustrating its pervasive influence across human experience.

Incorporating reader-response theory, this paper emphasises how these Gothic texts engage readers by invoking discomfort and forcing introspection. The portrayal of the shadow archetype in each narrative taps into the reader's own subconscious, compelling them to confront unsettling truths about human nature and the darker aspects of the self and society. Gilman's narrative invites readers to experience the protagonist's growing paranoia, pushing them to question the limitations placed on individual autonomy. Poe's atmospheric descent into madness mirrors the reader's own anxieties about legacy, inheritance, and the uncanny, while Jackson's depiction of societal complicity in violence forces readers to reflect on their ethical stances in the face of collective immorality. The emotional discomfort these stories generate—through isolation, madness, or societal cruelty—serves to destabilise the reader's sense of normalcy, prompting deeper reflection on their repressed fears and moral dilemmas. By drawing readers into these uncomfortable emotional spaces, the study shows how Gothic Horror Fiction uses the shadow archetype not just to entertain but to provoke ethical and psychological self-examination.

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