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ENG 355: Ghost Stories

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Stuck Between *The Rock* and a Hard Place

Shirley Jackson is perhaps one of the best ghost story writers in history. Her stories, which typically center on a lonely female character, leave questions unanswered yet often seem so realistic, giving them their extra scary quality. *The Rock* by Jackson is no exception. A truly terrifying tale that plays on a woman's loneliness and desire to be needed in life, we are immediately introduced to Paula, a third wheel to her brother Charles and his wife Virginia, all of whom are taking a vacation on an island, out of season. Right from the beginning, Jackson sets her audience up for an uneasy story from the use of her language. She builds suspense throughout the story and it ultimately culminates in a terrifying revelation. This is a common theme throughout many of her stories and it is a very effective way to scare readers. She plays on common fears that many people possess, which adds to the level of scariness in her stories; they seem so plausible. In *The Rock* the fear Jackson plays off is the fear of being trapped and unable to escape, a fear I know is prevalent within my own life.

Jackson does not wait to unnerve her readers. From the very beginning, the island in *The Rock* is described by Virginia as looking like some sort of "pirate stronghold... or a prison" (121). And anyone vacationing on an island outside of the summer season is bound to experience something paranormal. Jackson also draws parallels to older, pre-existing scary figures. The man who is steering the small boat that the three characters

take to the island is similar to the ferryman of Hades, from Greek Mythology, who takes dead people in his boat. This parallel is terrifying once the audience makes these connections. This mysterious ferryman seemingly has no personality and only utters short phrases, without any emotion behind them. “Nearly there,” he says, and “We land on the other side,” are really the only things he says. He wordlessly assists them onto the island and then disappears, never to be seen again in the story. His character is very ghostlike in this sense. His departure scares Paula, as he symbolizes her only way of escape from the island but she manages to shake off her worry, as all characters do in scary stories when in reality they should listen to their intuition.

At breakfast the following day, Paula is quite confused when Mrs. Carter appears to be talking to someone else, another guest at Rock Island. Paula “felt an immediate shock of recognition, as though this were someone she had known all her life, and then realized that she had never seen him before,” (129). What is creepier still, is that this man’s description changes between the times that Paula meets him. At first he is described as “excruciatingly shy” and “very small” (129) and introduces himself as Mr. Johnson whereas Mrs. Carter calls him Mr. Arnold. Later, Paula notes that he is “somehow taller” (137), more foreboding. He is the island personified. He is interesting because he says to Paula, “I was waiting for your sister-in-law, actually” but follows that with “You’ll *do* of course” (129). In the moment, this does not seem too terribly out of place, but once the end of the story is reached, it becomes very important. Adding to his uneasy presence, Mr. Johnson says he’s been at the island “quite a while...a very long time, in fact,” (129). Yet somehow, Paula is attracted to him and agrees to go on a walk of the island with him. He preys on Paula’s insecurities, makes her feel unnecessary in

life, unimportant by pointing out that Charles would not take care of her in the same way if she were sick rather than he. He drives a sort of wedge between Paula and her brother and his wife: "If she [Virginia] is there, you can hardly be needed" (134). He also implies that Paula will not be leaving the island when he says, "I suppose they will feel sorry for you? ...That you have gone, I mean. Sorry to be without you," (135). And Paula's reaction is not a very alarmed one; she only says, "I suppose so," (135).

Jackson also builds suspense by including small details that should raise red flags for the characters. Mrs. Carter, the landlady, suggests, "You'll want to put in curtains and such, I daresay... And flowers, I suppose," (125). Not only is this mentioned to nobody in particular, merely a statement by Mrs. Carter, this shouldn't be necessary unless the guest is staying for an extended period of time, which the three main characters do not intend to do. When Paula tries to describe Mr. Johnson to Virginia, Mrs. Carter constantly interrupts, changing the subject. Virginia also has no knowledge of another guest staying at the house. "What other guest?" she asks Paula (132). Paula does not even have time to answer because Mrs. Carter interrupted.

Behaviors such as this lead to the reader thinking that perhaps Mrs. Carter and Mr. Johnson are working together in some regard. She is, after all, the one that introduces Paula to Mr. Johnson and she also tells Paula, "Try late tonight in front of the great fire after the rest of us are abed. *There* you will find him," (134), encouraging her to seek out Mr. Johnson again. In the final scene, when the story culminates to its chilling revelation by Paula, Mrs. Carter again seems to be in cahoots with Mr. Johnson. When Virginia fails to see Mr. Johnson standing in the doorway, Paula starts to realize that there is something very off about him. Mrs. Carter "was watching Paula silently and

with an expression which might have been humorous,” (138), which is a very scary image. It implies that she is taking some pleasure in this series of events. While she does offer to Paula, “There’s no answer he’ll take... Try to hide behind me,” (138), there is something mysterious that implies that she knew this was going to happen all along.

Yet Mr. Johnson’s final words and refute to Mrs. Carter’s attempt to help Paula, “No use, Mrs. Carter... No use at all, you know... *She* knows,” (138) are the most terrifying words of the whole story. Paula is trapped, quite literally, on this rock, this island, with no way off. This is a terrifying realization that she comes to and Jackson’s strategy of ending the story in the middle of the climax is very effective. She lets the readers draw their own conclusions about what happens next, which is perhaps is even more frightening because it allows the fears of the reader to shape their own ending. Jackson knew what was scary and she played that up to an extreme, but still maintained a sense of reality in order for her stories to remain believable, creating some of the scariest ghost stories in existence.