

Journal of the Midwest Modern Language Association

Influence and Inspiration

Spring 2022, Volume 55, Number 1

Elusive Allusions: Shirley Jackson's Gothic Intertextuality

Emily Banks

Abstract: This article analyzes Shirley Jackson's use of allusions in *The Haunting of Hill House* and *Hangsaman*. Drawing from Nicholas Royle's work on the Freudian uncanny in relation to literature and pedagogy, it argues that, in both novels, allusions draw readers with literary knowledge into the protagonist's psychological experience and ultimately comment on literary studies as an inherently gothic practice. In *Hill House*, a connected web of allusions to Charles Perrault's "Bluebeard," Oscar Wilde's "The Canterville Ghost," and Samuel Richardson's *Pamela* works to convey the house's telepathic power while simultaneously inviting us to feel, along with Eleanor, a proud possessiveness if we are (or think we are) able to discern the allusions' significance for the novel. In this way, Jackson puts her well-read readers in the place of gothic protagonist; we believe we have a special ability to unearth the novel's secrets but must ultimately wonder whether we, like Eleanor, are the ones who have been consumed. In *Hangsaman*, allusions to *Pamela*, *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*, *Through the Looking-Glass*, the 1908 pornographic novel *The Way of a Man with a Maid*, and "The Waste Land," as well as the Tarot and Tony Sarg's marionettes, lead readers through a disorienting maze of clues and connections that replicates its protagonist's disconnection from reality during her first year of college. In both novels, Jackson cultivates an uncanny reading experience through uncertain recollections, telepathic communications, and surprising correspondences. She illuminates both the allure and danger of literature's enchanting power, revealing the intrinsically gothic nature of our engagements with the literary tradition.

Keywords: fiction, gender studies, gothic, identity formation, literary criticism, pedagogy, symbolism

Redeeming Professions: Wollstonecraft, Austen, and Vocational Choice

Amy L. Gates

Abstract: Jane Austen's novels insist that readers notice characters' professions and vocational choices. This essay argues that Austen's ideas develop from—and expand on—Wollstonecraft's claims about the power and potential of vocational choice to benefit self and society. In *A Vindication of the Rights of Men* (1790) and *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1792), Mary Wollstonecraft famously critiques clergy, soldiers, and sailors because too often men in these professions were—like women of the time—without choice of career and without self-determination within those careers. Austen illustrates novelistically many of the complaints Wollstonecraft levels against men in clerical and military professions, but she also offers examples that redeem these professions and the men who intentionally adopt them. Previous studies of Wollstonecraftian influence on Austen have largely overlooked Austen's insistent attention to men's

careers and the ways in which they affirm Wollstonecraft's critiques as well as extend the possibility of moral and social benefits to be realized from vocational choice, equipping men, too, to be better marriage partners and citizens. This essay provides an overview of Wollstonecraft's theories about vocational choice and Austen's fictional echoes of these theories within the context of contemporary ideas of vocation and the professions. Then it turns to two case studies from Austen's fiction and two characters who most directly and extensively discuss their choices of profession: Edward Ferrars in *Sense and Sensibility* (1811) and Edmund Bertram in *Mansfield Park* (1814). Bringing these elements together not only illuminates another aspect of Wollstonecraft's influence on Austen that has received scant critical attention but also reveals Austen's contribution to changing notions of profession and egalitarian marriage partnerships.

Keywords: Austen, Jane, feminist studies, Romanticism, vocation, Wollstonecraft, Mary

“He’s Busy Espalliering Sylvia”: Ted Hughes, Sylvia Plath, and Assia Wevill

Julie Goodspeed-Chadwick

Abstract: Prompted by recent feminist recovery efforts, this essay traces and considers Assia Wevill (1927–1969) as a noteworthy woman writer, whose life and literary contributions were influenced and inspired by the Pulitzer Prize–winning Sylvia Plath (1932–1963) and the former British Poet Laureate Ted Hughes (1930–1998). Reflecting on the manner in which Assia has been understood as a femme fatale archetype, the article seeks to reframe our understanding of her life primarily and her work secondarily by foregrounding them in her own words. While Assia has conventionally been approached as an attendant figure in the biographies and poetry of Plath and Hughes, this piece maintains that her life and literary contributions provide material for literary scholars to engage with and make inroads in feminist scholarship, as well as to forge new pathways in Plath studies and Hughes studies. Increasingly more than a footnote to Plath and Hughes, Assia Wevill emerges as a relevant subject for scholars who wish to track and map gendered dynamics in connection with biography in twentieth-century literature and letters.

Keywords: Assia Wevill, feminist studies, poetry, women and gender studies, women writers

“What Would Become of My Literary Career?” Julia Ward Howe, Elizabeth Stoddard, and the Limits of Literary Traditions

Nicole C. Livengood

Abstract: In *The Hermaphrodite* (ca. 1846) and “Collected by a Valetudinarian” (1870), Julia Ward Howe and Elizabeth Stoddard indulge in fantasies in which their protagonists, Laurence and Alicia, embrace fully Romantic modes of authorship. Laurence and Alicia can fulfill Romantic ideals of authorship partly because they publish their work through the circulation of ideas rather than in printed, mass-produced form; they also embrace life writing as a genre and explore the aesthetics of manuscripts' materiality. Through these characters, Howe and Stoddard explore the costs and consequences of self- and literary authorship at the intersections of two overlapping mid-nineteenth-

century media traditions: nonprint salon and manuscript cultures and the more recent tradition of commercial print culture. Even as *The Hermaphrodite* and “Collected” emphasize life writing’s artistry and authenticity and showcase nonprint modes of authorship and circulation as a way of embracing literary and personal autonomy, they also reveal those pathways as imperfect. When read together, these works neither condemn one tradition nor condone the other. Rather, they ask readers to reassess—and address—critical paradigms that limit conceptions of authorship and literary careers.

Keywords: Elizabeth Stoddard, Julia Ward Howe, *The Hermaphrodite*, manuscript culture, genius

Illness in Isolation: Katie Farris’ *A Net to Catch My Body in its Weaving* in Conversation with Emily Dickinson

Ronnie Stephens

Abstract: Katie Farris’s chapbook, *A Net to Catch My Body in Its Weaving*, chronicles the author’s diagnosis and subsequent treatment of breast cancer during the COVID-19 pandemic. Farris directly invokes Dickinson on several occasions and employs some of her stylistic idiosyncrasies, such as the em dash. Farris taps into a connection between the societal fears of tuberculosis during Dickinson’s lifetime and the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic as well as between the two poets’ personal challenges: the fact that both Dickinson and Farris experienced health issues that hindered their ability to create. Speaking directly to these parallels, other scholars have noted the ways in which tuberculosis informs Dickinson’s writing and have suggested that the COVID-19 pandemic will influence contemporary authors in many of those same ways. This article describes how Farris turns to Dickinson during her diagnosis, especially in the sense that Dickinson’s preoccupation with death and illness presents a conduit through which Farris can process her own mortality. I argue that Farris finds companionship and camaraderie in Dickinson’s work specifically because, in both instances, the women face potentially fatal illness largely in isolation. Farris’s invocations of Dickinson and of Dickinson’s poems help shed light on the earlier poet’s attempts to process the impact that tuberculosis had on her family, her social circle, and the nation at large.

Keywords: collectivity, illness, isolation, literary criticism, pandemic, poetry