

Naming the Split Self: Trauma, Doubling and Fragmented Identity in Shirley Jackson's *Hangsaman* and *The Bird's Nest*

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Abstract

Shirley Jackson's *Hangsaman* and *The Bird's Nest* present female subjectivity as unstable, divided and shaped by forces that exceed individual will. Through Natalie Waite and Elizabeth Richmond, Jackson develops two distinct but related representations of the split self, linking psychic fragmentation to trauma, repression and gendered expectation. In *Hangsaman*, Natalie's fractured identity emerges through ambiguity and fantasy, especially in relation to the elusive figure of Tony, whose uncertain status blurs the limits between projection, dissociation and desire. On the other hand, in *The Bird's Nest*, Elizabeth's divided consciousness is deemed explicit through the multiple identities she has and exposing the tension between inner fragmentation and the external efforts to name and classify female disturbance. Read together, the novels reveal a sustained interest in forms of selfhood that cannot be stabilized inside the cultural demands of normative femininity. They also show why split characters remain critically important in literary studies since they make visible the fragility of identity, the aftermath of traumas and the social pressures that shape psychological experience. Jackson's divided female characters are therefore complex narrative sites through which questions of gender, power and psychic survival become legible.

Keywords: Shirley Jackson, dissociation, female trauma, divided self

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1. Introduction

Shirley Jackson's fiction repeatedly returns to women whose sense of self is fragile, unstable or notably divided. Far from presenting psychological disturbance as an isolated personal defect, her novels more often than not suggest that identity is formed under pressure either from the familial environment, social expectations, gendered authority or the system that decides what counts as normal or pathological. Within this body of work, *Hangsaman* (1951) or *The Bird's Nest* (1954) stand out for the intensity with which they imagine female subjectivity as fractured. Natalie Waite and Elizabeth Richmond do not simply appear as troubled protagonists, they become figures through whom Jackson explores the complexity of maintaining a coherent self in environments that are marked by repression, control and emotional violence.

The divided or split self has long occupied a paramount space in literature since it makes visible what stable identity tends to conceal. Characters who experience psychic division often reveal that the self is neither unified nor transparent but conflictive, vulnerable and led by forces that cannot be easily integrated into conscious life. In Shirley Jackson's fiction, this instability acquires a specifically gendered form. Her women are frequently positioned inside domestic and social structures that demand obedience and restraint while offering little room for anger, desire or psychic autonomy. Under such conditions, fragmentation emerges as a response to forms of pressure that make coherent selfhood increasingly difficult to sustain instead of emerging as a mere internal collapse.

This dynamic is especially powerful in the two novels mentioned above, although each of them develops this dynamic differently. In *Hangsaman*, Natalie Waite's instability unfolds through ambiguity, disorientation and an uncertain relation between inner fantasy and external reality. Her movement through family space, college life and her private imagination builds a narrative where identity remains unsettled and difficult to fix. The figure of Tony intensifies this instability, functioning as a double whose status is never fully resolved and whose presence unsettles any secure distinction between companionship, projection, desire and dissociation, although her presence as an unreal character "may not be immediately clear to the reader" (Franklin, 2016, 295).

In *The Bird's Nest*, by contrast, Elizabeth Richmond's divided consciousness is represented in a more explicit

way. The novel gives visibility to psychic multiplicity but, at the same time, it foregrounds the external forces that attempt to interpret it. As a result, the text dramatizes the struggle over who has the authority to define female disturbance.

For this reason, the present study does not approach Natalie Waite and Elizabeth Richmond as fictional cases to be retrospectively diagnosed in rigid clinical terms. Although the language of dissociation is useful for understanding aspects of their fractured experience, a purely diagnostic reading would flatten the literary and cultural complexity of Jackson's work. What matters here is not whether these characters can be assigned to a modern psychiatric category but how Jackson uses psychic division as a narrative and symbolic form. The novels are less interested in offering medical certainty than in representing unstable selfhood as a condition produced at the intersection of trauma, repression, gender and also interpretation. Reading them in this way allows the analysis to remain attentive both to psychological nuance and to the broader social forces that shape it.

The concepts of naming, doubling and fragmented identity are especially useful for such a reading. Naming matters because identity in Jackson is never purely internal; it is constantly mediated by language, labels and the terms through which others seek to define the self. Doubling matters because the split self often appears not as a direct inner conflict or confession but as a displaced or externalized figure through which contradiction becomes visible. Finally, fragmentation matters because both novels resist the idea of a continuous, self-identical subject. They present female consciousness as unstable, discontinuous and exposed to pressures that make unity impossible or dangerous. Taken together, these concepts make it possible to read Natalie and Elizabeth not as *mad women* but as complex literary figures through whom Jackson questions the conditions of female psychic survival.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Shirley Jackson and Female Psychological Fragmentation

Critical work on Shirley Jackson has emphasized that psychological instability in her fiction cannot be reduced to individual abnormality alone. Instead, it emerges in relation to family pressure, domestic confinement, emotional violence and the social regulation of women. As Rubenstein argues, Jackson's fiction consistently links women's psychic disturbance to damaged familial structures and oppressive forms of domestic power (Rubenstein 1996). In the same manner, Hague reads Jackson's women as figures whose fractured identities reflect wider cultural and gendered pressures rather than a mere private disorder (Hague 2005). This body of criticism provides an essential starting point for approaching *Hangsaman* and *The Bird's Nest* for in Jackson, female instability is hardly ever isolated from the world that produces and interprets it.

This critical tendency is especially key for a comparative reading of Natalie Waite and Elizabeth Richmond. Although both characters are often discussed separately, criticism has long recognized that the two novels are centrally concerned with psychic division. More recent scholarship on Jackson's Gothic mode has also pointed out that *Hangsaman* and *The Bird's Nest* revolve around split forms of selfhood and the experience of confinement and mental dislocation (Hattenhauer 2003), which suggests that the divided self is not incidental in Jackson's fiction but one of her recurring imaginative structures.

2.2. Female Gothic and the Divided Self

The female Gothic offers a productive framework for understanding these novels because it connects fear and unstable subjectivity to gendered experience. In Jackson's work, Gothic anxiety is internalized and terror no longer depends on external monsters or castles in ruins and decay but on the precarious condition of consciousness. Bernice Murphy's work on psychoanalysis and the American popular Gothic places Jackson within a mid-century tradition in which repression, family and psychological fracture become central Gothic concerns. As Murphy states, Shirley Jackson successfully reconfigured "the tropes and conventions of existing gothic and horror literature in order to [...] dissect the mores and anxieties of the modern age" (Murphy 2009, 17). Therefore, *Hangsaman* and *The Bird's Nest* can be read as texts that relocate haunting from external space to female mind.

This would help explain why divided female characters remain so important in literary studies. The split self has served as a way of making contradiction visible, to show desire against duty and private fear against public composure. In female Gothic writing, those contradictions are intensified by social demands that women remain self-controlled and emotionally contained. Thus, Jackson's protagonists are figures through whom the instability of socially produced femininity becomes narratable. Criticism on Jackson returns to this point, showing that her

female characters become unreadable precisely when the words around them insist upon coherence and compliance in a strong manner.

2.3. Trauma, Dissociation and Literary Representation

Even though this article is not concerned with assigning psychiatric diagnoses to fictional characters, the concepts of trauma and dissociation are useful interpretive tools. Contemporary clinical literature describes trauma-related dissociation as “disconnections between thoughts, feelings, behaviors, sensations, and other mental processes that would normally be connected.” (Boyer et al. 2022, 79). This is relevant because Jackson’s novels constantly imagine subjectivity as discontinued and disoriented but most importantly, vulnerable to psychic splitting.

Trauma theory also helps clarify why characters marked by division matter so much in terms of narrative. Scholarship on dissociation underscores that “in the face of overwhelming traumatic experience, dissociation can offer psychic escape when there is no physical escape” (Boyer et al. 2022, 79). Therefore, literary representations of split or unstable characters do more than depict disturbance; they offer forms through which fiction can register damage that resists common narration. Jackson’s prose often relies on ambiguity and tonal dislocation and this is why it is especially relevant; in her fiction, not only is fragmentation a theme but also a formal principle.

2.4. Critical Approaches to *Hangsaman* and *The Bird’s Nest*

Criticism on *Hangsaman* has frequently focused on Natalie Waite’s unstable identity, the decaying structure of her family life and the ambiguous status of Tony. Susan Behren’s study of Natalie’s naming is especially useful here since it shows how questions of language and identity are woven into the novel’s treatment of selfhood. As Behren argues by playing with naming schemes “Jackson amplifies the multiple realities of multiple names by making use at crucial moments of false starts or opportunities to ‘relive’ an event in a new light” (Behren 2021, 3). This suggests that naming in *Hangsaman* is not superficial characterization but part of a larger pattern through which Natalie’s sense of reality and self becomes unsettled.

On the other hand, *The Bird’s Nest* has been discussed through the more explicit framework of multiple personality, while also attracting feminist readings that question how female instability is named and managed. Rubenstein’s essay remains foundational here because it situates Elizabeth Richmond inside Jackson’s broader interest in maternal absence, domestic pressure and fractured female identity.

2.5. Research Gap and Rationale

Therefore, the existing scholarship offers strong foundations but it also leaves a productive gap. Critics have shown that Jackson’s fiction is deeply invested in female psychic disturbance, domestic oppression and fractured forms of selfhood. They have also shown that *Hangsaman* and *The Bird’s Nest* are crucial to her treatment of divided identity. What remains less fully developed is a comparative account centered on the interconnected functions of naming, doubling and fragmentation across the two novels. While critics have recognized split subjectivity as paramount in Jackson, there is still room to explore more deeply how these two texts imagine divided female consciousness through different narrative strategies.

This study aims at attempting to fill in the gap by reading Natalie Waite and Elizabeth Richmond together rather than in isolation. This comparative approach makes it possible to trace continuity and difference from ambiguous doubling to explicit multiplicity. This would shed some light on why divided women are so central in Jackson’s fiction.

2.6. Methodology

This article adopts a comparative literary approach to *Hangsaman* and *The Bird’s Nest*, focusing on how each novel constructs divided female subjectivity through the interspersed dynamics of naming, doubling and fragmentation. The analysis draws on trauma and dissociation studies as interpretive tools while remaining grounded in literary form and narrative strategy.

More specifically, the article combines insights from feminist Gothic criticism, trauma theory and language-based approaches to identity formation. The comparative reading examines how each novel represents psychic fracture in different manners. *Hangsaman* represents it through ambiguity and unstable naming whereas *The*

Bird's Nest does it through explicit multiplicity and psychiatric interpretation. However, the objective of the article is not to determine which character fits more accurately a psychiatric model but to show how Shirley Jackson uses fractured consciousness to question normative femininity, authority and the conditions under which female selves become readable.

Inside this framework, naming is treated as a mechanism of both psychic and social organization; doubling is treated as a narrative form through which conflict is displaced and externalized; and finally, fragmentation is dealt with as a thematic concern and a formal principle.

This methodology allows the analysis to remain attentive to textual detail while situating Jackson's divided women inside a broader debate on gender, trauma and interpretive control. This is one of the reasons why these novels remain paramount in Jackson's work. The texts ask readers to take a closer look into the normalization of suffering in girls' passage into womanhood, especially since adolescence exposes female subjects to new forms of vulnerability and psychic pressure.

3. Naming the Split Self in *Hangsaman*.

3.1. Natalie Waite and Unstable Selfhood

From its opening pages, *Hangsaman*, presents Natalie Waite as a subject whose sense of self is already precarious rather than gradually broken by later events. Publisher descriptions and critical commentary alike emphasize that Natalie is a seventeen-year-old trying to leave behind an oppressive home and enter college, only to find that separation does not produce stability. In words of Judy Oppenheimer, *Hangsaman* is the "exploration of adolescence, [...] a look at the turbulent, lonely, half real, half-mad inner life of a brilliant, sensitive young girl" (Oppenheimer 1988, 145). The novel frames her movement away from home as the beginning of a more visible dislocation, one in which she becomes increasingly uncertain of where reality ends and imagination starts.

Natalie's family environment is key to that instability as "she moved from her parents' world to that of small women's college, from shaky integration to disintegration, then back, to a kind of a shaky whole" (Oppenheimer 1988, 145). Her father's language, for instance, does not simply express affection; it places Natalie within a possessive frame where she is continually addressed as an extension of someone else's authority. The problem of selfhood in the novel is inseparable from a household where identity is spoken for before it can be independently formed.

What makes Natalie compelling is the fact that Jackson does not present this crisis as a straightforward descent into madness. She constructs a consciousness marked by slippage, inward doubling and sudden shifts in perspective. As Behren argues, the novel is a "book in motion with shifting realities and narratives" (Behrens 2021, 2) that originate in Natalie's inner life. That formulation diverts attention from simplistic diagnostic reading and aims it toward the formal strategies with which Jackson renders a divided mind.

This is one reason why *Hangsaman* remains so important within Jackson's fiction. The text asks readers to look deeper at the normalization of horror in girls' passage into womanhood. This helps clarify why Natalie's instability should not be read as private eccentricity alone. The novel links her split inner self to structures of experience that are social and gendered. Her crisis is important because it exposes how brittle selfhood becomes when adolescence, female vulnerability and pressure converge.

3.2. Tony, Doubling and Psychic Projection

If Natalie's instability is the condition of the novel, Tony is the form it eventually takes. Behren suggests that Tony is the point at which Natalie is "at the greatest risk of losing herself" (Behrens 2021, 2) and argues that the novel tracks this danger through changes in naming and through the emergence of a separate Tony persona. Tony is never introduced as a fully verifiable character in the realist sense, she functions as a concentrated version of qualities already latent in Natalie's fractured consciousness.

What makes Tony so unsettling is the fact that the novel refuses to turn the uncertainty of her being just a figment of imagination into a neat solution. Jackson uses Tony to blur the line between companion and projection. She is intimate but also elusive; liberating albeit threatening. Through Tony, Natalie is able to occupy a position that feels more free than the roles available to her at home or at college, yet that freedom cannot be separate from danger since she embodies the attraction of a self no longer bound by obedience but she also represents the risk of dispersal. Thus, doubling in *Hangsaman* is the narrative mechanism that Jackson uses to stage both the appeal and the cost of psychic escape.

Equally significant is the gendered ambiguity of Tony. As Behrens notes, Tony is “a gender-ambiguous name” adopted at a point of great crisis and this disrupts the ordinary social coding attached to Natalie’s identity (Behrens 2021, 2). Tony is not simply another self; she is a form of being less easily absorbed into the scripts of daughterhood, decorum, and feminine compliance that surround Natalie. The double, therefore, does ideological work by marking a break from the language and expectations that have organized Natalie’s life, even as the break remains both unstable and unsustainable.

Tony should not be reduced to a conundrum for the reader to solve. The question is not if she “exists” but what her presence enables the novel to represent. She gives form to a self that cannot remain whole under existing conditions. At the same time, she gives visibility to Jackson’s larger interest in divided female consciousness as a structure of survival that is always on the verge of self-loss. Tony matters because she externalizes conflict without resolving it and she is the novel’s clearest sign that Natalie’s crisis cannot be contained within the language of ordinary maturation.

3.3. Naming, Language and Psychic Dislocation

Naming is one of the most original ways in which *Hangsaman* represents psychic fracture. Throughout the novel, Natalie is surrounded by unstable naming practices from the very beginning. For example, her mother remains curiously unnamed, her father repeatedly renames Natalie through possessive formulations (“my little daughter”) and Natalie herself generates private modes of self-address (“dearest, dearest darling [...] your own priceless own Natalie”). These passages show that identity in the novel is distributed across public labels, private invocations and coercive forms of address. Natalie does not begin with a secure name and then lose it; the novel suggests that her selfhood has always been mediated by unstable language.

This emphasis on naming would explain why the novel’s treatment of division feels so different from that of *The Bird’s Nest*. In *Hangsaman*, fracture is not yet fully organized into distinct identity states with clear external recognition. It appears as a crisis of legibility. Natalie is difficult to read since the language available to define her is itself compromised. Possessive naming, self-duplication and the eventual emergence of Tony show that the self in Jackson is not just psychological but linguistic because it is shaped by how one is called, claimed or reimagined. This is precisely why Natalie is such a powerful figure for a study of the split self, because her instability is inseparable from the words with which she is both constituted and undone.

Natalie Waite emerges as more than an early instance of psychological disturbance in Shirley Jackson’s fiction. She becomes a key figure in Jackson’s exploration of how female identity can splinter before it is formed. *Hangsaman* fails to offer a resolved account of that fragmentation and this is precisely why the novel is so effective. By binding unstable selfhood to language, doubling and interpretive uncertainty, Jackson creates a protagonist whose divided consciousness remains troubling since it is never fully mastered by any single explanation.

4. Fragmentation in *The Bird’s Nest*

4.1. Elizabeth Richmond and Divided Consciousness

If *Hangsaman* presents psychic fracture through uncertainty and dispersal, *The Bird’s Nest* makes division more visible from the start. Elizabeth Richmond is a quiet young woman who lives with her aunt, Morgan, working in a museum and suffering from headaches, backaches and increasing disturbance before it becomes clear that her identity is not singular. As Ruth Franklin states, Shirley Jackson consulted Morton Prince’s *The Dissociation of a Personality* while researching the novel (Franklin 2016, 335) where Dr. Prince affirmed that “fragmentation occurs as a result of trauma”. Although dissociation had already entered psychiatric discourse as stated by the American Psychiatric Association (1952, 32) as a “gross personality disorganization, the basis of which is a neurotic disturbance” by the early twentieth century, trauma-based explanations of psychic fragmentation were not uniformly dominant in mid-century clinical practice; Jackson’s use of Prince is, therefore, historically significant since it draws on an earlier psychiatric vocabulary while reworking it through the gendered concerns of the novel.

In this novel, Jackson moves from the elusive instability of Natalie Waite to a protagonist whose inner division is organized in four different selves: Elizabeth, Beth, Betsy and Bess. Then, the novel offers a more legible structure of fragmentation although not a simple one. Its apparent clarity is inseparable from the problem of how such a divided subject is perceived, interpreted and controlled by others. Oppenheimer suggests that like Natalie, “Elizabeth is mad. But the madness itself is a far from miserable state” (Oppenheimer 1988, 164). What emerges

from here is not a woman with a coherent self that later fragments but a character whose identity appears thin, overmanaged and vulnerable from the outset. Elizabeth's divided consciousness thus develops in a context where autonomy has already been weakened by emotional loss, dependency and a life organized by others. Jackson is not asking what happens when one person becomes many but what kind of world allows a woman to arrive at adulthood with so little ownership of herself.

This is one of the reasons why the novel is still today so striking. However, the text is not satisfied with presenting multiple selves as sensational material. Multiplicity in *The Bird's Nest* is an excess of selfhood as well as a sign of how little intact selfhood Elizabeth had been allowed to possess in the first place.

4.2 Multiplicity, Interpretation and Control

One of the novel's most distinctive features is that Elizabeth's fragmentation quickly becomes a matter of external management. Unlike Natalie, whose instability is difficult to fix from the outside, Elizabeth is drawn into a process of observation, treatment and explanation. The character of Doctor Wright becomes central to the unfolding of her divided identity, especially once hypnosis and psychiatric interpretation begin to organize the narrative. This structural choice is paramount since Jackson stages the institutional desire to read it, classify it and turn it into knowledge.

That desire to interpret is not neutral. The fact that Jackson consulted books, as the mentioned above by Dr. Prince, prevents the novel from being reduced to a simple fictional case history. *The Bird's Nest* borrows the legitimacy of psychiatric narrative and, at the same time, it exposes its limits. Dr Wright does not stand outside Elizabeth's instability as an observer; he is implicated in the very process through which her condition becomes intelligible. His later admission "Elizabeth R. was gone; I had corrupted her beyond redemption and in the cool eyes which now belonged entirely to Bess I read my own vanity and my own arrogance." (Jackson 2014b, 188) makes this implication explicit, revealing that psychiatric interpretation participates in reshaping her identity.

This makes control a key issue in the novel. Elizabeth's alternate selves disrupt social readability since each voice produces a different relation to speech, obedience, money, desire and confrontation, which makes difficult for the people around her to stabilize her inside an acceptable role. The pressure to identify which self is real or which one should govern the rest is, therefore, also a pressure to restore social order. By means of this multiplicity, Jackson exposes the violence hidden in that restoration. The problem is not simply that Elizabeth is divided but that every surrounding authority seeks to resolve that division on terms that do not originate with her.

4.3. Naming and Female Legibility

In *The Bird's Nest* naming operates in a different manner from *Hangsaman* but it is no less important. In this novel, naming does not produce uncertainty through fluid self-duplication, on the contrary, it breaks the subject into identifiable units. Elizabeth, Beth, Betsy and Bess are not just labels; they are the novel's way of turning psychic division into something traceable and that can be discussed. The names create a system of legibility around the fragmented self, giving form to difference while also subjecting it to categorization. In this sense, Jackson shows that naming can be disciplinary and descriptive and at the same time naming a self places it under interpretation.

The ending of the novel makes this issue clearer since the novel does not end simply with recovery; it ends with a renewed struggle over how the subject will be called and recognized. Identity remains bound to the authority of those who speak names into being. Jackson thereby suggests that the female self is something produced in relation to external acts of designation and not only an inward essence.

The Bird's Nest becomes especially valuable for a comparative reading with *Hangsaman* since Natalie's instability is hard to isolate because it moves through ambiguity and the uncertain figure of the double. By contrast, Elizabeth's fragmentation is rendered through a structure that seems more explicit and manageable. Nevertheless, this explicitness allows Jackson to reveal yet another problem, that is, once female division becomes legible, it is immediately subjected to medical, familial but also linguistic control. *The Bird's Nest* then extends Jackson's interest in the split female by showing not only how consciousness can fracture but also how fractured consciousness is organized into a readable object by others.

5. Conclusion

Hangsaman and *The Bird's Nest* show that Shirley Jackson's divided women are not merely eccentric figures of

private disturbance. Natalie Waite and Elizabeth Richmond occupy different points of a continuum of psychic fracture, yet both are shaped and molded by environments that make stable selfhood difficult to sustain. In *Hangsaman*, Jackson renders division through uncertainty, displacement and the unstable relation between Natalie and Tony; whereas in *The Bird's Nest*, she gives fragmentation a more explicit structure through different selves and as well as through the interpretive pressure exerted by those who seek to identify, explain and contain them.

The comparison also clarifies why naming matters so deeply in both works. In *Hangsaman* naming contributes to Natalie's difficulty in securing a coherent position from which to understand herself. In *The Bird's Nest*, names classify and divide. What changes between the two texts is not Jackson's interest in fractured subjectivity but the mode through which she represents it. One novel privileges ambiguity and the logic of the double; the other foregrounds categorization and the management of multiple selves. Seen side by side, they reveal a sustained exploration on how female identity can be split both from within and through the language imposed externally.

That is why these characters are important beyond the boundaries of Jackson studies. Figures marked by psychic division remain important because they expose fragility of identity and the limits of any model of the self built on coherence and continuity. Natalie and Elizabeth are significant because they make visible the pressure points at which trauma, gender, language and authority meet.

Jackson's achievement lies in refusing easy resolution; she does not offer divided consciousness as spectacle nor does she transform it into a simple allegory of madness. She writes fractured female subjectivity as a condition at once psychological and social; intimate and legible and painful yet revealing. *Hangsaman* and *The Bird's Nest* remain essential texts to think about the spilt self in twentieth century literature because they show that psychic fragmentation is never only a matter of inward collapse but a way of registering the difficulty of becoming a self under structures that demand obedience, readability and containment.

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