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THE HIDDEN COSTS OF PERFECTION: SACRIFICE, GENDER AND GOTHIC BODIES IN THREE NORTH AMERICAN SHORT STORIES

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OS CUSTOS OCULTOS DA PERFEIÇÃO: SACRIFÍCIO, GÊNERO E CORPOS GÓTICOS EM TRÊS CONTOS NORTE-AMERICANOS

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“I began writing about power because I had so little.”

— Octavia E. Butler

“Só há duas opções nesta vida: se resignar ou se indignar. E eu não vou me resignar nunca.”
[There are only two options in this life: to resign oneself or to become indignant. And I will never resign myself.]

— Darcy Ribeiro

ABSTRACT

This research examines how three North American short stories by women writers represent the hidden costs of apparently “perfect” or orderly societies, with a focus on sacrifice, gender and control over the body. The corpus is composed of Shirley Jackson’s *The Lottery* (1948), Ursula K. Le Guin’s *The Ones Who Walk Away from Omelas* (1973) and Carmen Maria Machado’s *The Husband Stitch* (2014). Drawing on short story theory, utopian, dystopian, and “ustopian” studies, and debates on Gothic embodiment and performativity, the study adopts a qualitative, comparative and thematic approach based on close reading. The analysis is organized around six axes: ethics of sacrifice; moral compromise and complicity; control over the body; Gothic elements; symbolism; and situational irony. The readings show that, in all three stories, collective happiness or stability depends on the suffering of vulnerable figures, often women or children, whose bodies are treated as expendable. The Gothic atmosphere, central symbols, and ironic reversals work together to reveal how violence is normalized through tradition, love, domesticity and utopian promises. By placing these texts in dialogue, the research argues that modern and contemporary short fiction can illuminate ethical and political tensions that remain urgent today, particularly debates on bodily autonomy, gendered violence and the notion that some lives may be sacrificed for the supposed good of the community.

Keywords: sacrifice; ustopia; Gothic; short story; gender; bodily autonomy.

RESUMO

Esta pesquisa examina como três contos de autoras norte-americanas representam os custos ocultos de sociedades aparentemente “perfeitas” ou ordenadas, com foco em sacrifício, gênero e controle do corpo. O corpus é composto por *The Lottery* (1948), de Shirley Jackson, *The Ones Who Walk Away from Omelas* (1973), de Ursula K. Le Guin, e *The Husband Stitch* (2014), de Carmen Maria Machado. Com base em teorias do conto, em estudos sobre utopia, distopia e “ustopia” e debates sobre o corpo gótico e performatividade, o trabalho adota uma abordagem qualitativa, comparativa e temática, baseada em *close reading*. A análise organiza-se em seis eixos: ética do sacrifício; compromisso moral e cumplicidade; controle do corpo; elementos góticos; simbolismo; e ironia situacional. As leituras mostram que, nos três contos, a felicidade ou estabilidade coletiva depende do sofrimento de figuras vulneráveis, frequentemente mulheres ou crianças, cujos corpos são tratados como descartáveis. A atmosfera gótica, os símbolos centrais e as inversões irônicas de expectativa revelam como a violência é normalizada por meio da tradição, do amor, da domesticidade e de promessas utópicas. Ao colocar esses textos em diálogo, a pesquisa argumenta que o conto moderno e contemporâneo torna visíveis tensões éticas e políticas ainda urgentes, em especial debates sobre autonomia corporal, violência de gênero e a ideia de que algumas vidas podem ser sacrificadas em nome do suposto bem-estar da comunidade.

Palavras-chave: sacrifício; ustopia; gótico; conto; gênero; autonomia corporal.

SUMMARY

1. INTRODUCTION

The Oxford English Dictionary defines the word *perfect* as an adjective describing the concept of “having all the required or desirable elements, qualities, or characteristics; as good as it is possible to be,” also as “free from any flaw or defect, in condition or quality; faultless,” and finally as “complete and whole; without a lack or defect.” This idea of flawlessness has long shaped human imagination about the perfect life. Throughout history, people have not only sought personal improvement but also dreamed of living in ideal societies, often built in contexts of inequality, slavery, class division, and oppression of minorities. From the Garden of Eden to philosophical and literary visions in modern society, the perfect world is often imagined as a place without suffering, fear, or injustice. Yet this raises a critical question: at what cost, and who bears that cost?

Based on this notion of perfection, the English philosopher and writer Thomas More (1478–1535) coined the term *utopia* to describe a place far from reality. Derived from the ancient Greek *ou topos*, meaning “no place” or “nowhere,” More’s term also puns with eutopia, “good place.” In his 1516 essay, *Utopia*, More imagines an ideal society governed by reason and harmony. While More popularized the term, the concept of a perfect place predates him, appearing in the writings of Plato, in the poetry of Tao Yuanming, and in religious texts such as the Bible and the Quran, in which Eden and Jannah are portrayed as spaces free of sorrow, pain or fear. Across these texts, however, the perfection of a society is rarely without cost; it is often maintained through moral compromises, exclusion, or the suffering of certain groups.

While the idea of perfection typically suggests something complete and desirable, the application to entire societies introduces complex ethical tensions. Margaret Atwood’s *The Handmaid’s Tale* (1985) captures this complexity when the Commander states: “We thought we could do better... Better never means better for everyone... It always means worse, for some.” This line highlights how the pursuit of collective perfection frequently relies on inequality and the exclusion of those who diverge from dominant norms. Historical examples reinforce this: when the Pilgrims arrived in what they imagined as a promised land, they encountered slavery, rigid class hierarchies, hypocrisy, envy, greed and lust – evidence that idealized societies often

carry within them the weight of human vices. Utopia, whether real or imagined, is rarely impeccable, revealing the inescapable moral compromises behind its creation.

From this perspective, many fictional narratives frequently explore societies that present themselves as *utopias*: paradises where everyone is supposedly happy and thriving. On the other hand, there are *dystopias* that are often seen as the opposite: chaotic, unjust and marked by suffering. However, this apparent binary between utopia and dystopia is not always so clear.

The professor and historian Gregory Claeys offers an important framework for understanding these "fabricated worlds". In his book *Dystopia: A Natural History* (2017), he points out that utopian and dystopian visions are not just literary forms, but political tools that reflect the way these crafted worlds organize power, exclude certain groups, and legitimize suffering in the name of so-called order and progress. Claeys helps reveal how speculative fiction does not merely imagine other worlds, but how it holds up a mirror to our own.

Drawing from Claeys' political framework and Atwood's concept of *ustopia*, this study investigates how speculative short stories reveal the hidden systems of control and sacrifice that sustain utopian ideals, especially when examined through the lens of gender, moral compromise and bodily autonomy. Short stories are particularly well-suited to this analysis due to their brevity and intensity. Charles E. May (1994) explains that the compressed structure of short stories requires every detail to contribute directly to emotional and thematic impact, while Valerie Shaw (1983) emphasizes that the form crystallizes pivotal moments of crisis, revealing ethical and societal concerns with precision.

In order to conduct this study, I selected short stories from three North American female authors: *The Lottery* (1948) by Shirley Jackson*, The Ones Who Walk Away from Omelas* (1973) by Ursula K. Le Guin, and *The Husband Stitch* (2014) by Carmen Maria Machado. The analysis will focus on the following aspects: the ethics of sacrifice (who suffers and why), moral compromise (how individuals and communities uphold unfair systems), control over the body (particularly female or marginalized bodies), Gothic elements (fear, threat, and repression), symbolism (how objects, spaces and recurring images convey hidden critiques), and situational irony (how outcomes and

narrative framing expose the contradiction between expectation and reality). These criteria allow for a systematic comparison of how the stories depict societies that appear idyllic but rely on the subjugation or suffering of certain individuals.

In order to achieve these purposes, this monograph is structured as follows: Chapter 2 discusses the short story as a genre, the representation of marginalized voices, and the role of ustopian, gothic, symbolic, and ironic strategies in articulating social critique. Chapter 3 presents the methodology adopted in this investigation, outlining six analytical axes: ethics of sacrifice; moral compromise and complicity; control over the body; Gothic elements; symbolism; and situational irony. Chapter 4 offers the analysis and discussion, divided into four subsections: 4.1. “Three ‘perfect’ communities and the ethics of sacrifice”; 4.2. “Ustopian contradictions: moral compromise and complicity, and control over the body”; 4.3. “Symbolism and Gothic elements: black box, dark room and green ribbon”; and 4.4. “Situational irony and gendered perspectives”. Chapter 5 presents the final considerations, reflecting on how these stories expose persistent inequalities and the mechanisms of control that sustain seemingly ideal societies. Together, these chapters aim to demonstrate how these short stories illuminate the hidden costs of “perfection” and the mechanisms of control that sustain seemingly ideal societies.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Short story and symbolic condensation

A short story's brevity and focus on symbolic moments make it a particularly powerful tool for literary exploration, especially when examining moral dilemmas and social structures. As Frank O'Connor asserts, through the words of Russell Banks in the introduction of the book *The Lonely Voice – A study of the short story*, "the short story has never had a hero. What it has instead is a submerged population group" (1962, p. 10). These submerged figures live on the margins of society, often overlooked or oppressed and their experiences reveal social injustices and ethical tensions that longer, more expansive forms like the novel might soften or dilute. By focusing on marginalized voices and brief, intense experiences, the short story shows power, complicity, and the costs of conformity in a clear, concentrated way. Small events and symbolic actions reveal social pressures and moral tensions, making injustices and ethical stakes immediate and hard to ignore.

Unlike novels, which can adhere to classical structures of coherence and social integration, the short story "remains by its very nature remote from the community – romantic, individualistic, and intransigent" (p. 10). This structural independence allows the short story to examine moments of rupture and moral ambiguity without requiring resolution or conventional closure. By remaining somewhat detached from societal norms, the genre is particularly well suited for exploring utopian or dystopian ethics, where the appearance of social harmony often rests on the suffering of certain individuals or groups. Its compact form intensifies the focus on ethical conflicts, creating a concentrated space in which readers face social and moral tensions head-on.

O'Connor also emphasizes the intensity of the form, comparing the short story to "a single moment of peculiar significance," in which "a whole lifetime must be crowded into a few minutes… those minutes must be carefully chosen indeed and lit by an unearthly glow" (1962, p. 19). This focus on carefully chosen, ethically charged moments allows short stories to expose injustices and social tensions with sharp precision. The compression of the form amplifies the impact of symbolic objects,

actions or events, turning them into mirrors that reflect both societal norms and the consequences of individual choices. In this way, short stories are more than narrative choices, they function as ethical statements, bringing to light what longer forms might easily obscure.

2.2 Utopia, dystopia and the ethics of sacrifice

Utopian and dystopian narratives consistently examine the tension between ideals of societal perfection and the moral compromises required to sustain them. Historically, utopia has been imagined as a space of harmony, justice, and collective happiness. From Plato's *Republic* to Thomas More's *Utopia* (1516), the concept has reflected humanity's aspiration to design a rational and orderly society. Drawing on Claeys (2017), utopian models can be seen as far from ethically neutral: they operate as moral maps that project the dominant values and exclusions of their historical moment. Utopias, therefore, reveal both the hopes and hierarchies of the societies that produce them. They are visions of what might be achieved, but also of who must be excluded for that vision to exist. In this sense, and following Claeys (2010, 2017), both utopia and dystopia can be understood as didactic models – political instruments that explore how power and morality are justified through social design.

Building on this political framework, Margaret Atwood redefines the traditional binary between utopia and dystopia through her concept of ustopia, a term combining both. In the essay "Dire Cartographies: The Roads to Ustopia", collected in *In Other Worlds* (2011, p. 63), she coins "ustopia" to describe a world that fuses utopia and dystopia – the imagined perfect society and its opposite – arguing that "each contains a latent version of the other" (Atwood, 2011, p. 63). This formulation underscores the inseparability of idealism and control: every imagined perfection conceals a mechanism of exclusion. The ustopian perspective highlights the link between desire and control, showing that the pursuit of the "good place" (*eu-topos*) always produces its opposite, the "no place" (*ou-topos*). In other words, any society that tries to create moral order also defines an outsider – people who must be silenced, hidden, or sacrificed to maintain collective well-being.

The relationship between social perfection and moral exclusion is central to the

ethics of speculative fiction. Levitas (2013) argues that utopian thinking is always bound up with its social context: it reflects the ideological structures, hierarchies, and anxieties of its time. Utopian imagination, far from being purely idealistic, thus exposes the very conditions that sustain inequality. Similarly, Fredric Jameson (2005) reads utopian and dystopian narratives as structured by a tension between desire and fear, in which the dream of a just society coexists with anxiety over what must be suppressed to maintain order. This dialectical structure transforms utopia into an ethical paradox – a vision of liberation that depends on exclusion, surveillance, or moral compromise. Dystopia, in this sense, becomes not the negation of utopia but its logical outcome: the point at which moral perfection reveals its coercive underside.

At the core of this dynamic lies the idea of sacrifice. The notion that harmony or stability requires the suffering of a few is one of the most persistent moral questions in utopian and dystopian fiction. The “necessary victim” or “sacrificial figure” sustains the illusion of order, becoming both a product and a critique of collective morality. In Huxley’s *Brave New World* (1932), social stability is secured through genetic control and the erasure of individuality, rendering the outsider (the Savage) a reminder of the cost of engineered happiness. Lowry’s *The Giver* (1993) imagines a society that achieves peace through the elimination of memory, emotion, and difference, while Atwood’s *The Handmaid’s Tale* (1985) exposes how women’s bodies become the literal foundation of political and reproductive control.

Building on Gregory Claeys (2017) and Krishan Kumar (2013) – the latter describing dystopia as “the shadow of utopia” – this connection becomes explicit: dystopia marks the space where the moral costs of perfection become visible. When read together, utopian and dystopian texts form a dialectical pair: utopia imagines possibility, while dystopia reveals consequence. Both act as ethical laboratories, testing the boundaries of justice and human compassion. They compel readers to confront uncomfortable questions: *What forms of suffering are we willing to ignore in the name of progress? How does the pursuit of perfection reproduce inequality? And to what extent are we complicit in the systems we critique?*

These questions gain particular force when filtered through the concentrated lens of a short story. As a form that privileges compression and symbolic precision, a short story may isolate moments of rupture in which moral contradictions become

inescapable. Through a single event, image, or decision, it can crystallize the ethical structure of a utopian or dystopian world, staging the tension between social order and sacrificial violence without the mediating comfort of extended narrative development. In speculative short fiction, the figure of the “necessary victim” often functions as a hinge between collective harmony and individual suffering, exposing how ideals of stability are secured through exclusion.

By centering marginalized perspectives and ethically charged situations, a short story may bring into focus the hidden mechanisms that sustain both utopian dreams and dystopian realities. Its brevity forces readers to confront these dilemmas abruptly, rather than dispersing them across a long narrative arc. Symbolic details (a ritual, a wound, a silenced child, a marked body) become mirrors of the ethical architecture of society itself. In this sense, short stories such as Ursula K. Le Guin’s *The Ones Who Walk Away from Omelas* (1973), Shirley Jackson’s *The Lottery* (1948), and Carmen Maria Machado’s *The Husband Stitch* (2014) will be examined, in later chapters, not merely as literary texts, but as ethical acts that illuminate the human consequences of collective desires for order, purity and perfection.

2.3 Gothic bodies and the politics of control

The Gothic tradition has long provided a symbolic space for exploring repression, fear, and the fragility of the human body. Its characteristic darkness, both atmospheric and psychological, brings to light what polite society suppresses: desire, violence, moral decay and the anxiety of transgressing social order. The Gothic haunted settings and tormented characters reveal the costs of purity and discipline, exposing the hidden mechanisms through which individuals are controlled in the name of virtue or progress.

Drawing on Judith Butler’s theory of gender performativity in *Gender Trouble* (1990), it is possible to read the Gothic as a fiction of social control at the level of the body. For Butler, identity is not an inner essence but an effect of repeated acts that follow and reiterate social norms, giving identity the appearance of something natural and stable. Although Butler does not write about the Gothic specifically, her framework helps illuminate how Gothic narratives stage the disciplining of gendered bodies: the trembling heroine confined within domestic walls, the forbidden room she cannot enter,

or the family secret that silently organizes her life. Such tropes, common in the (female) Gothic tradition, turn patriarchal regulation into space, atmosphere and plot, showing how femininity is scripted through fear, surveillance, and enclosure. At the same time, because norms depend on repetition, performances can fracture and be repeated with a difference, opening a margin for subversion. Moments of excessive fear, unruly desire or open disobedience interrupt the expected script of feminine docility, suggesting that even within structures of control the body can become a site of resistance.

In its early British form, Gothic fiction emerged in the late eighteenth century partly as a reaction against Enlightenment rationalism and its faith in clarity, order, and secular reason. Novels such as Horace Walpole's *The Castle of Otranto* (1764) and Ann Radcliffe's *The Mysteries of Udolpho* (1794) transformed anxieties about modernity into tales of confinement, inheritance, and moral corruption. In these works, the castle, the monastery, and the subterranean passage externalize fear and repression, turning social and religious authority into architecture and landscape.

As Diane Long Hoeveler argues in her chapter "American Female Gothic: From *The Madwoman in the Attic* to Contemporary Fiction", in *The Cambridge Companion to American Gothic* (2017), the genre undergoes a profound transformation in the hands of women writers. What had once been primarily a literature of external terror becomes an exploration of internalized repression: in the hands of female authors, the dungeon becomes the drawing room; the tyrant becomes the husband or father; the ghost appears as a manifestation of moral guilt, domestic frustration, or social expectation. For Hoeveler, the Female Gothic designates "Gothic works written by women that use specific themes, tropes, and conventions of the Gothic to reflect and address female concerns such as marriage, childbirth, inheritance laws, and patriarchal disempowerment" (p. 99). Through imagery of confinement and secrecy, female authors reveal how these structures limit women's agency under the guise of moral protection. The heroine's fear thus reflects a deeper cultural anxiety: the realization that safety and submission are intertwined.

As the Gothic migrated into the American literary context, these tensions deepened. The European castle gave way to the domestic home, a setting that outwardly embodied moral order and Calvinist virtue but concealed the same dynamics

of control and suppression. The American gothic heroine is not imprisoned by aristocratic lineage but by ideology: by the expectation to embody purity, motherhood, and self-sacrifice. Hoeveler notes that this shift reflects the rise of bourgeois domesticity in nineteenth-century America, where the household became both a moral sanctuary and a disciplinary system. The domestic ideal turns virtue into surveillance, love into obligation, and motherhood into moral labor. Discussing Edith Wharton's short story "The Fullness of Life", Hoeveler cites Jeffrey Andrew Weinstock's remark that "[W]omen are expected to sacrifice their personal fulfillment for the sake of the happiness of others, while men are free to pursue personal satisfaction even when it may affect negatively those around them" (Weinstock, *Scare Tactics*, p. 117, qtd. in Hoeveler, p. 103). This formulation encapsulates the gendered double standard that underlies many American Female Gothic narratives.

In this context, the American Female Gothic exposes how the body itself becomes a moral and political battleground. Childbearing, sexuality, illness, and aging are not merely private experiences but social signs of virtue or failure. The body functions both as symbol and as site: it carries the weight of cultural ideals while simultaneously registering their violence. Fear and horror, in this sense, operate as epistemological tools, revealing the invisible workings of ideology and the costs of moral conformity and complicity.

This gendered reading of the Gothic also helps illuminate its enduring connection to ethical inquiry. By centering on the body as a locus of both punishment and resistance, the Gothic reveals how moral systems depend on the containment of physical and emotional expression. The suffering female body (bruised, silenced or raped) becomes a metaphor for social order itself. It mirrors the utopian ideal's hidden counterpart: the violence required to maintain harmony.

In the American context, the Gothic becomes not only a site of horror but also a strategy of resistance. By transforming the haunted castle into the domestic space and the monstrous figure into the disciplined woman, American female authors redefined the Gothic as a language of social critique. Their stories turn the ordinary into the uncanny, revealing how fear and morality operate within everyday life. The home, the body and the community – all spaces once idealized as moral sanctuaries – emerge as the true scenes of confinement and sacrifice.

As Diane Long Hoeveler (1998) argues, the American Female Gothic exposes the contradictions of the very ideals it appears to uphold. It reveals that purity depends on repression, that virtue demands silence, and that “civilization” itself is sustained by hidden acts of violence. Through symbolic imagery (the closed room, the ritual, the marked body) these narratives articulate a distinct female understanding of power and vulnerability.

Rather than offering resolution, they leave the reader within an uneasy moral space, one where the familiar turns threatening and ethical boundaries blur. In this sense, the American Female Gothic anticipates the ustopian tension between order and transgression, showing that the pursuit of perfection, whether moral, domestic or social, inevitably demands a sacrifice.

2.4 Symbolism and irony

Short stories are marked by brevity and intensity, which means that they often rely on symbolism to convey meanings that go beyond the surface of the plot. In this context, a symbol can be understood, following Northrop Frye’s discussion in *Anatomy of Criticism* (1957), as an element within the narrative that points beyond itself, connecting the text to wide cultural patterns, myths or social structures. Objects, spaces and gestures thus become sites where different layers of significance overlap, they may simultaneously describe a concrete situation, suggest a psychological state, and register a form of social conflict. Critical readings of Gothic short fiction, particularly studies of the famous author Edgar Allan Poe, have shown how recurrent settings and objects can condense feelings of fear, guilt, desire and repression into a limited number of striking images.

In Gothic and speculative narratives, symbolic meaning frequently attaches to spaces and domestic environments. Castles, houses, locked rooms and thresholds often function as material representations of power relations and psychological constraints, turning architecture and interior space into maps of social and gender hierarchies. The home, in particular, may appear as both refuge and constraint, embodying ideals of safety and respectability while simultaneously marking out the boundaries of acceptable behavior. The body may also acquire a symbolic dimension: scars, marks and adornments can encode expectations regarding purity, obedience,

sexuality or motherhood. In short fiction, such details are especially significant, since they allow complex tensions about authority, resistance and vulnerability to be expressed in a highly economical form.

Irony is another central device in this process. In the case of situational irony, there is a marked discrepancy between what the reader or the characters are led to expect and what actually takes place. This contrast highlights the distance between declared values and lived practices, often exposing the fractures within a given moral or social order. Wayne C. Booth, in *A Rhetoric of Irony* (1974), emphasizes that irony is not merely a stylistic embellishment, but a mode of communication that requires the reader to reject a purely literal reading and to infer an implied meaning that is frequently critical or dissident. Irony, therefore, invites an active interpretative stance as it encourages the reader to valuate norms and behaviors rather than simply observe them.

As Valerie Shaw observes in *The Short Story: A Critical Introduction*, many modern short stories are structured around an intense moment of revelation in which everyday situations are suddenly seen from a different perspective (1983). Such moments frequently depend on the combined effect of symbol and irony: an apparently ordinary object, space or action acquires a new significance when placed against an unexpected outcome or a disquieting final image. The result is that what initially appeared normal or harmless comes to be perceived as unsettling, unjust or ethically problematic. In this way, short fiction can articulate complex social and moral tensions within a very limited narrative space.

When symbolism and irony converge, they become particularly effective instruments of social critique. A narrative may introduce an object, a setting or a bodily detail as if it were innocuous, only to reveal later that it is intimately connected to mechanisms of exclusion, sacrifice or control. These symbols do not necessarily admit a single, fixed interpretation, but they draw attention to the gap between the ideals a community claims to uphold and the forms of violence or injustice that sustain its order. This understanding of symbolism and situational irony informs the analyses developed in the following chapters, especially in the examination of how recurring objects, spaces and bodily marks in the selected short stories reveal the hidden costs of ostensibly harmonious or “perfect” social arrangements.

3. METHODOLOGY

3.1 Corpus definition

In this study, I analyze three short stories by North American female authors. Each text explores the ethics of sacrifice from a different, but related, perspective. The analysis follows the chronological order of publication in order to situate each narrative within its historical context and to trace both continuities and shifts in the representation of collective violence, moral complicity and control over the body, particularly in relation to gender. *The Lottery*, by Shirley Jackson (1948), reveals the violence that exists inside tradition in a small community that keeps social order through an annual ritual of public execution, which is carried out without serious questions or guilt. *The Ones Who Walk Away from Omelas*, by Ursula K. Le Guin (1973), presents a joyful and prosperous city whose collective happiness depends on the constant suffering of a single child. Finally, *The Husband Stitch*, by contemporary author Carmen Maria Machado (2014), approaches sacrifice as something intimate, personal and strongly gendered.

The decision to focus on short stories rather than novels follows the discussion developed in Chapter 2. There, drawing on critics such as Charles E. May (1994) and Valerie Shaw (1983), I argue that the short story form is marked by brevity, concentration and symbolic density. These features make this literary genre especially suitable for examining intense moments of ethical conflict and social tension within a limited narrative space. In the context of speculative and Gothic fiction, this allows authors to place readers directly in situations of power imbalance and hidden sacrifice, without the slower build-up that longer forms often require.

Together, these three stories form a coherent corpus for examining how apparently harmonious or utopian social arrangements are sustained by mechanisms of sacrifice and control that often affect women and other subordinated groups.

3.2 Selection criteria

The choice of *The Ones Who Walk Away from Omelas*, *The Lottery* and *The Husband Stitch* follows three main types of criteria: thematic, formal and contextual.

From a thematic point of view, all three short stories explore the connection between collective order and individual suffering. Each narrative constructs a social setting (whether a city, a village or a domestic environment) in which the stability of the group depends on the sacrifice of one or more individuals. In addition, all three texts engage with questions of gender, bodily autonomy and moral complicity.

From a formal perspective, the short story form is essential to the project. The three texts share an emphasis on narrative economy, symbolic density and intense ethical confrontation. This combination makes it possible to compare how similar motifs - such as ritual, secrecy and bodily vulnerability - appear in different narrative strategies. Their brevity also facilitates close reading and makes it clear how particular images, objects and scenes carry a large part of the interpretative weight.

From a contextual perspective, the corpus covers different historical moments and phases of North American literary production. Jackson's *The Lottery* (1948) belongs to the post-war period, marked by discourses of domesticity and social conformity. Le Guin's *The Ones Who Walk Away from Omelas* (1973) appears in a context of speculative ethics, political critique and experiments with alternative social models. Machado's *The Husband Stitch* (2014) is part of a contemporary moment shaped by feminist, queer and intersectional debates on violence, consent and the politics of the body. Even with these differences, the three stories share a common interest in North American ideas of community, morality and belonging. This allows the study to trace both continuity and change in the literary representation of sacrifice and control.

3.3 Analytical approach

This analysis uses a qualitative, comparative and thematic approach based on close reading. It envisages literary texts as spaces where social tensions can be imagined, questioned and transformed through choices of form, voice and imagery.

The analysis of the three short stories is organized around six interconnected axes, presented in the introduction:

1) Ethics of sacrifice – who is sacrificed, for what reasons, and with what consequences in the narrative.

2) Moral compromise and complicity – how individuals and communities accept, justify or resist unfair systems.
3) Control over the body – especially how female or marginalized bodies are regulated, exposed or silenced.
4) Gothic elements – how fear, horror, threat and atmosphere reveal structures of repression and anxiety.
5) Symbolism – how objects, spaces and recurring images condense meaning and expose hidden structures
6) Situational irony – how outcomes and narrative framing expose the gap between idealized values and lived realities.

Although the analysis is organized around six axes, the discussion is divided into four sections to avoid repetition. Each section highlights the axis that is most central while also addressing related ones when relevant. Chapter 4 applies these criteria to the primary texts and relate them to the theoretical framework developed in Chapter 2. Concepts such as ustopia, Gothic embodiment and performativity help to show how the three short stories imagine the hidden costs of an apparently “perfect” or orderly society. The aim is not to offer a definitive reading of each text, but to highlight convergences and differences that illuminate large questions about sacrifice, control and the politics of the body in modern and contemporary North American short fiction.

4. DATA ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

Short stories often construct entire worlds in very few pages. A green ribbon that must never be untied, a village that stones one of its own in the name of tradition, a city whose happiness depends on a single suffering child: such images are introduced swiftly and linger longer after the reading ends. They do not need a long exposition as they are introduced almost quietly and then refuse to disappear. It is through this dramatic intensity that the short story shows itself not as a reduced version of the novel, but as a distinct literary form. By compressing meaning, it sharpens frequently ethical tension, frequently resists easy consolation and often leaves crucial questions unresolved.

This capacity for compression and ambiguity makes the short story particularly effective for ethical inquiry. The stories examined in this study – *The Ones Who Walk Away from Omelas* (Le Guin), *The Lottery* (Jackson), and *The Husband Stitch* (Machado) – exemplify how the form can combine symbolic economy with moral complexity. Each narrative constructs a self-contained symbolic world in which a single image, event, or act embodies complex social structures, gendered power dynamics and moral compromises. Through the lens of the short story, the suffering of marginalized individuals, the costs of pursuing societal perfection, and the ethical dilemmas of complicity become more clearly discernible.

In all three narratives analyzed in this chapter, the short story form is used to explore ethical tensions at the core of seemingly harmonious communities. *The Ones Who Walk Away from Omelas, The Lottery* and *The Husband Stitch* begin in settings that appear ordinary, peaceful or even ideal. Gradually, however, each text introduces a point of rupture that exposes the hidden structures of sacrifice, control and exclusion upon which these communities depend. Through their concise structure and focus on morally charged moments, these stories show how utopian or orderly communities often depend on hidden acts of violence or complicity.

The analysis that follows is organized around the criteria defined in the methodological chapter: ethics of sacrifice, moral compromise and complicity, control over the body, Gothic elements, symbolism and situational irony. By examining how these elements operate in each text, the chapter seeks to show how the stories

construct ustopian worlds in which the promise of perfection always has a price.

4.1 Three "perfect" communities and the ethics of sacrifice

4.1.1 *The Lottery*: everyday normality before the ritual

Shirley Jackson's *The Lottery* also begins with a peaceful scene. The story takes place on a clear summer morning in a small rural village. Children gather stones and play, men talk about planting and taxes, and women exchange brief comments while they arrive at the square. There is a sense of routine and familiarity; the lottery appears to be just another communal event, perhaps similar to a festival or town meeting. Nothing in the opening paragraphs immediately suggests horror.

> The morning of June 27th was clear and sunny, with the fresh warmth of a full-summer day; the flowers were blossoming profusely and the grass was richly green. The people of the village began to gather in the square, between the post office and the bank, around ten o'clock; in some towns there were so many people that the lottery took two days and had to be started on June 2nd, but, in this village, where there were only about three hundred people, the lottery took less than two hours, so it could begin at ten o'clock in the morning and still be through in time to allow the villagers to get home for noon dinner. (n.p)

Only gradually does the reader realize that the lottery is not a celebration but a ritual that will end with the stoning of one member of the community. The contrast between the calm, almost cheerful atmosphere at the beginning and the brutality of the ending creates a strong effect of irony and shock. The village, which initially seems like an idyllic symbol of American small-town life, becomes a scene of collective violence.

4.1.2 *The Ones Who Walk Away from Omelas*: earthly paradise with a hidden cost

Le Guin's *The Ones Who Walk Away from Omelas* opens with a celebration. The narrator describes a bright summer day, music, processions and the joy of a city that seems to know neither guilt nor misery. Omelas is presented as an almost impossible place: a society without kings, without soldiers, without slaves, where citizens enjoy pleasure without shame or restriction. The narrator insists that this is not

a dark, oppressive dystopia, but something closer to an earthly paradise:

> How can I tell you about the people of Omelas? They were not naïve and happy children – though their children were, in fact, happy. They were mature, intelligent, passionate adults whose lives were not wretched. O miracle! But I wish I could describe it better. I wish I could convince you. Omelas sounds in my words like a city in a fairy tale, long ago and far away, once upon a time. Perhaps it would be best if you imagined it as your own fancy bids, assuming it will rise to the occasion, for certainly I cannot suit you all. (p. 97)

Here, the narrator explicitly refuses to fix Omelas in a precise geographical or historical frame. Instead, the city is offered as a kind of open image: a place the reader is invited to complete with their own idea of what a perfect society might be. Omelas is, therefore, less a realistic location and more a projection of desire.

At the same time, the invented name of the city can also be read symbolically. It is possible to hear in “Omelas” an echo of “Salem”, a city strongly associated, in American cultural memory, with religious persecution and witch trials. The story’s festive setting and harmonious surface also suggest, in a different register, the idea of a “promised land” or earthly Jerusalem. This possible connection does not fix a single meaning, but it allows Omelas to bring together, in one imagined space, both the dream of a perfect community and the historical memory of societies built on exclusion and violence.

At first, there is no visible sign of conflict. Only later does the narrative reveal the existence of a child locked in a small, dirty room, whose suffering sustains the happiness of everyone else. This revelation will be analyzed in detail in section 4.2, but it is important to note here how the initial idyllic tone intensifies the shock of the discovery. The utopian surface of Omelas is precisely what makes the ethical contradiction so powerful.

4.1.3 *The Husband Stitch*: romance, domesticity and the appearance of stability

The Husband Stitch, by Carmen Maria Machado, at first appears to tell a story

of desire, romance and domestic life. The narrator meets the man who will become her husband, describes their intense sexual relationship, and later narrates their marriage and the birth of their son: “In the beginning, I know I want him before he does. This isn’t how things are done, but this is how I am going to do them.” (p. 3). On the surface, her life corresponds to an ideal of romantic fulfilment: a loving partner, a child, a home. However, from the beginning, there is also an element of mystery: the green ribbon around her neck, which she insists must not be touched or untied:

> (...) His eyes dart around for a moment before settling on my throat.
>
> “What’s that?” he asks.
>
> “Oh, this?” I touch the ribbon at the back of my neck. “It’s just my ribbon”. I run my fingers halfway around its green and glossy length, and bring them to rest on the tight bow that sits in the front. He reaches out his hand, and I seize it and press it away.
>
> “You shouldn’t touch it,” I say. “You can’t touch it”. (p. 4)

In the early sections of the story, the ribbon seems to be a small eccentricity, perhaps a harmless secret. As the narrative progresses, it becomes clear that the husband’s desire to untie the ribbon symbolizes a broader demand for access and control over the narrator’s body and inner self. The tension between an apparently successful domestic life and the constant pressure to surrender the ribbon already prepares the ground for the themes of sacrifice and bodily autonomy that will be developed later in this chapter.

4.2 Ustopian contradictions: the ethics of sacrifice, moral compromise and complicity, and control over the body

As discussed in the theoretical chapters, ustopian worlds unite utopian and dystopian elements through promises of harmony, pleasure and stability, but are sustained by hidden structures of exclusion and pain. In the three short stories analyzed in this paper, this contradiction appears through systems that explicitly or implicitly demand sacrifice. The happiness of the many depends on the suffering of one, or on the gradual erosion of the autonomy of a few. The ethics of sacrifice, therefore, becomes central: who is sacrificed, under what conditions, and how do the communities justify this cost?

4.2.1 *The Lottery*: promised land, tradition and ritualized killing

The Lottery also interrogates the ethics of sacrifice, but in a different register. The story is set in a small rural village that initially appears peaceful and ordinary. The opening description - of children playing, men discussing planting and taxes, women exchanging casual remarks - evokes a familiar image of American small-town life. This image resonates with the myth of the United States as a “promised land”, a place of opportunity and moral simplicity. However, just as the history of that land is marked by slavery, class division and hypocrisy, Jackson’s village hides a darker reality beneath its ordinary surface.

The annual lottery is revealed to be a ritual of public execution. One inhabitant is selected at random and stoned to death by neighbors, friends and relatives. The black box used in the drawing is old, worn and in need of replacement, but the villagers resist any change: it is kept because it “has always been there”. Tradition becomes the main justification for violence. The community’s commitment to the ritual is so strong that any attempt to question it is treated as dangerous, as something that might “ruin everything”. In this sense, the lottery functions as the village’s equivalent of Omelas’s child: a recurring sacrifice that is believed to preserve social order.

> "They do say," Mr. Adams said to Old Man Warner, who stood next to him, "that over in the north village they're talking of giving up the lottery."
>
> Old Man Warner snorted. "Pack of crazy fools," he said. "Listening to the young folks, nothing's good enough for them. Next thing you know, they'll be wanting to go back to living in caves, nobody work anymore, live that way for a while. Used to be a saying about 'Lottery in June, corn be heavy soon. First thing you know, we'd all be eating stewed chickweed and acorns. There's always been a lottery," he added petulantly. "Bad enough to see young Joe Summers up there joking with everybody."
>
> "Some places have already quit lotteries." Mrs. Adams said.
>
> "Nothing but trouble in that," Old Man Warner said stoutly. "Pack of young fools."

Tessie Hutchinson’s fate illustrates the moral compromise at the heart of this system. While she fully participates in the ritual when it threatens others, she protests when she herself is chosen, insisting that “it isn’t fair”:

> Tessie Hutchinson was in the center of a cleared space by now, and she held her hands out desperately as the villagers moved in on her. "It isn't fair," she said. A stone hit her on the side of the head. Old Man Warner was saying, "Come on, come on, everyone." Steve Adams was in the front of the crowd of villagers, with Mrs. Graves beside him.
>
> "It isn't fair, it isn't right," Mrs. Hutchinson screamed, and then they were upon her.

Her protest is ignored, and even her family members join the attack. Jackson thus exposes how conformity and social pressure ("social mob") work together to silence dissents. The village's apparent normality rests on the willingness of its inhabitants to accept and enact violence as long as it is framed as necessary and traditional. The story suggests that utopia, or even simple "order", may be a utopia only for those who are not chosen as victims.

4.2.2 *The Ones Who Walk Away from Omelas*: earthly paradise and the sacrificed child

As the previous section has shown, Omelas is introduced as a joyful and apparently harmonious city, imagined almost as an earthly paradise. From an ethical point of view, however, this apparent harmony depends on a single, hidden act of violence. The prosperity and joy of the community are sustained by the suffering of one child, kept in a small, filthy room and denied even the most basic forms of care. The child is neglected, humiliated and abused; its body is reduced to a bare life whose only function is to sustain the happiness of others.

> Do you believe? Do you accept the festival, the city, the joy? No? Then let me describe one more thing.
>
> In a basement under one of the beautiful public buildings of Omelas (...) It has one locked door, and no window. (...)
>
> The room is about three paces long and two wide: a mere broom closet or disused tool room. In the room, a child is sitting. It could be a boy or a girl. It looks about six, but actually is nearly ten.
>
> It is feeble-minded. Perhaps it was born defective, or perhaps it has become imbecile through fear, malnutrition, and neglect. It picks its nose and occasionally fumbles vaguely with its toes or genitals, as it sits hunched in the

> corner farthest from the bucket and the two mops. It is afraid of the mops. It finds them horrible. It shuts its eyes, but it knows the mops are still standing there; and the door is locked; and nobody will come. The door is always locked; and nobody ever comes, except that sometimes - the child has no understanding of time or interval - sometimes the door rattles terribly and opens, and a person, or several people, are there. One of them may come in and kick the child to make it stand up. The others never come close, but peer in at it with frightened, disgusted eyes. (p. 98)

Citizens are eventually told the truth and are expected to accept it as the necessary condition of their way of life. Some react with shock or anger, but most learn to live with the knowledge. The maintenance of Omelas's "perfection" thus requires not only the continued suffering of the child, but also the community's willingness to treat that suffering as an acceptable price:

> They all know it is there, all the people of Omelas. Some of them have come to see it, others are content to know it is there. They all know that it has to be there. Some of them understand why, and some do not, but they all understand that their happiness, the beauty of their city, the tenderness of their friendships, the heath of their children, the wisdom of their scholars, the skill of their makers, even the abundance of their harvest and the kindly weathers of their skies, depend wholly on this child's abominable misery. (p. 99)

Le Guin constructs a clear ethical dilemma: whether a society that consciously sacrifices one innocent person for the comfort of the many can still be considered just.

The story also highlights a second form of response: a few individuals choose to walk away from Omelas after seeing the child. They do not attempt to free it or to change the system; they simply leave and disappear into an unknown elsewhere:

> Now do you believe them? Are they not more credible? But there is one more thing to tell, and this is quite incredible.
>
> At times one of the adolescent girls or boys who go see the child does not go home to weep or rage, does not, in fact, go home at all. Sometimes also a man or a woman much older falls silent for a day or two, then leaves home. These people go out into the street, and walk down the street alone. They keep walking, and walk straight out of the city of Omelas, through the beautiful gates. They keep walking across the farmlands of Omelas. Each one goes alone, youth or girl, man or woman.

> Night falls; the traveler must pass down village streets, between the houses with yellow-lit windows, and on out into the darkness of the fields. Each alone, they go west or north, towards the mountains. They go on. They leave Omelas, they walk ahead into the darkness, and they do not come back. The place they go towards is a place even less imaginable to most of us than the city of happiness. I cannot describe it at all. It is possible that it does not exist. But they seem to know where they are going, the ones who walk away from Omelas. (p. 101)

Their decision does not repair the injustice, but it refuses the moral compromise on which the city is built. In this sense, the narrative invites the reader to consider both the limits of individual resistance and the difficulty of acting ethically within structures that normalize sacrifice.

4.2.3 *The Husband Stitch*: domestic ideal and intimate sacrifice

In *The Husband Stitch*, the sacrificial structure is more intimate, but no less radical. On the surface, the narrator's life seems close to a domestic ideal: she falls in love, enjoys a passionate sexual relationship, marries, has a child and builds a home. For her husband, this may appear as a kind of personal utopia, a life in which love, desire and family are all present. However, the story reveals that this apparent perfection is sustained by continuous compromises imposed on the narrator's body and identity.

The green ribbon she wears around her neck symbolizes a limit, a part of herself that must remain untouched. From the beginning, she clearly asks her husband never to untie it. His repeated insistence on doing so, and his refusal to accept her boundary, expose his belief that love entitles him to full access.

Over the course of the narrative, the narrator also experiences the violence of childbirth

> I am certain that if any more time passes, I will crush my own teeth to powder. I look to my husband, who kisses my forehead and asks the doctor what's happening.
>
> "I'm not satisfied this will be a natural birth," the doctor says.
>
> "We may have to deliver the baby surgically."
>
> "No, please," I say. "I don't want that, please."
>
> "If there's no movement soon, we're going to do it," the doctor says. "It may

> be best for everyone." He looks up and I am almost certain he winks at my husband, but pain makes the mind see things differently than they are. (p. 15)

and a medical system that normalizes interventions designed to increase male pleasure – a reference to the so-called “husband stitch”:

> They take the baby so that they may fix me where they cut. They give me something that makes me sleepy, delivered through a mask pressed gently to my mouth and nose. My husband jokes around with the doctor as he holds my hand.
>
> "How much to get that extra stitch?" he asks. "You offer that, right?"
>
> "Please," I say to him. But it comes out slurred and twisted and possibly no more than a small moan. Neither man turns his head toward me.
>
> The doctor chuckles. "You aren't the first—"
>
> I slide down a long tunnel, and then surface again, but covered in something heavy and dark, like oil. I feel like I am going to vomit.
>
> "—the rumor is something like—"
>
> "—like a vir—"
>
> And then I am awake, wide awake, and my husband is gone and the doctor is gone. And the baby, where is—
>
> (...)
>
> “You’re all sewn up, don’t you worry,” he [the doctor] said. “Nice and tight, everyone’s happy. The nurse will speak with you about recovery. You’re going to need to rest for a while” (p. 16-17)

Her body becomes the site where social expectations about being a “good wife” and a “good mother” are inscribed, often against her explicit wishes.

The sacrifice here is not a single, public event, but a series of small and large losses: of privacy, of bodily autonomy, of the right to say no. While Le Guin and Jackson focus on sacrificial victims chosen by the community, Machado reveals a model of sacrifice that operates within intimate relationships and domestic spaces. The narrator’s suffering is deeply personal, but it also reflects a broader cultural pattern in which women are expected to accept pain, silence and self-erasure as the price of

maintaining love and social stability.

4.2.4 Comparative ethical discussion

Across the three stories, the ethics of sacrifice follows a similar logic: the continuity of the community depends on the suffering of a specific body. In Omelas, it is the isolated child; in Jackson's village, it is the randomly chosen victim, Tessie; in Machado's story, it is the female narrator whose body is gradually claimed and controlled. In each case, the sacrificial figure belongs to a vulnerable or less powerful group: a child, a woman, a wife and mother. The distribution of suffering is not neutral; it reflects hierarchies of age, gender and power.

At the same time, the narratives explore different responses to these systems. In Omelas, some leave, but cannot repair the injustice; in *The Lottery*, protest is crushed by collective violence; in *The Husband Stitch*, resistance takes the form of insistence on a boundary that is repeatedly violated. Utopian or "normal" life is preserved at the cost of those who do not fit or who dare to question the rules.

By placing these sacrifices at the center of their plots, the stories reveal the moral contradictions of societies that claim to be just, harmonious or loving while depending on structural harm and, therefore, challenges the myth of the American Dream. The next section approaches these contradictions through the lens of symbolism, examining how specific objects and spaces – the black box, the dark room and the green ribbon – condense and communicate these ethical tensions.

4.3 Symbolism and gothic elements: black box, dark room and green ribbon

As discussed in Chapter 2, symbolism is a crucial strategy in short fiction, especially in Gothic and speculative texts. Objects, spaces and bodily details often carry meanings that go beyond their literal function, inviting the reader to infer hidden structures of power, fear and control. In *The Lottery*, *The Ones Who Walk Away from Omelas* and *The Husband Stitch,* three central images organize much of the ethical and emotional force of the narratives: the black box, the dark room and the green ribbon. This section examines how these symbols operate and what they reveal about tradition, secrecy, bodily autonomy and resistance.

4.3.1 The black box in *The Lottery*

In *The Lottery*, the black box is one of the most carefully described objects in the story. Jackson dedicates several lines to its appearance, calling attention to the fact that it is old, worn and shabby. The paint is chipped, the wood is splintered, and the box no longer has the dignified look it might once have had. This insistence on its physical decay suggests that the object has outlived its original context. It belongs to the past, yet it continues to occupy a central place in the ritual life of the village.

The narrative also notes that some pieces of the original box have been preserved and incorporated into the current one. This detail reinforces the idea that the box is valued not for its practical function, but for its connection to an earlier time. It is a material link to an origin that no one in the story fully remembers. When villagers occasionally raise the possibility of replacing it, the idea is quickly abandoned. As the narrator explains, no one likes to "upset even as much tradition as was represented by the black box". Symbolically, the box stands for a tradition that persists through inertia: it is maintained simply because it already exists, not because its meaning is understood or its effects are questioned.

> The original paraphernalia for the lottery had been lost long ago, and the black box now resting on the stool had been put into use even before Old Man Warner, the oldest man in town, was born. Mr. Summers spoke frequently to the villagers about making a new box, but no one liked to upset even as much tradition as was presented by the black box. There was a story that the present box had been made with some pieces of the box that had preceded it, the one that had been constructed when the first people settled down to make a village here. Every year, after the lottery, Mr. Summers began talking again about a new box, but every year the subject was allowed to fade off without anything's being done.
>
> The black box grew shabbier each year: by now it was no longer completely black but splintered badly along one side to show the original wood color, and in some places faded or stained.

The color of the box is also significant. Its blackness evokes secrecy, obscurity and the unknown. The slips of paper that determine life or death are hidden inside it, out of sight, until the moment of the draw. For most of the year, the box is kept in different places (like the post office, the grocery store, the coal company etc.) under the responsibility of specific men in the community: "the box was put way, sometimes

one place, sometimes another; it had spent one year In Mr. Grave's barn and another year underfoot in the post office, and sometimes it was set on a shelf in the Martin grocery and left there."

This circulation within male-controlled spaces reinforces its association with authority and with the management of communal fate. The villagers do not see what happens inside the box, nor do they participate in decisions about its use; they simply gather when called and accept the result.

> People began to look around to see the Hutchisons. Bill Hutchinson was standing quiet, staring down at the paper in his hand. Suddenly. Tessie Hutchinson shouted to Mr. Summers. "You didn't give him time enough to take any paper he wanted. I saw you. It wasn't fair!"
>
> "Be a good sport, Tessie." Mrs. Delacroix called, and Mrs. Graves said, "All of us took the same chance."

Taken together, these details show how the black box condenses several layers of meaning. It is an object marked by age and decay, yet it continues to command respect. It is a container for the slips that mark the chosen victim, yet its own origin and purpose are no longer fully understood. It is associated with tradition, but its preservation serves to protect the ritual from scrutiny rather than to honor any specific value. As a symbol, the box makes visible the mechanisms by which destructive practices can be maintained: through habit, fear of change and attachment to objects that stand in for "the way things have always been". In this sense, the box does not simply participate in the plot of *The Lottery*; it crystallizes the story's critique of a community that prefers to hold on to an old, opaque symbol rather than confront the violence it helps to legitimize.

4.3.2 The dark room in *The Ones Who Walk Away from Omelas*: abject space and hidden cost

In Le Guin's short story, the small, dark room where the child is imprisoned functions as the spatial equivalent of the black box. The narrator describes it as a filthy, windowless space, with a locked door and almost no light. The child's body is confined in this space, surrounded by dirt, neglect and fear. The contrast between the bright streets of Omelas and this cramped room is extreme. Above, there are festivals, music and beauty; below, there is only suffering.

The room symbolizes the hidden cost of the city's happiness. It is not simply a neutral storage space, but the materialization of everything Omelas refuses to see about itself: exploitation, cruelty and exclusion. The room's position "under" the city suggests a kind of psychological and historical basement, where all the uncomfortable truths are deposited so that life on the surface can continue undisturbed. When citizens are brought to see the child, they are also brought into this space, forced for a brief moment to confront the foundations of their own comfort. The fact that they then return to the light, leaving the child behind, shows how firmly the society is built on the decision to keep the horror contained.

> It is too degraded and imbecile to know any real joy. It has been afraid too long ever to be free of fear Its habits are too uncouth for it to respond to humane treatment. Indeed, after so long it would probably be wretched without walls about it to protect it, and darkness for its eyes, and its own excrement to sit in. Their tears at the bitter injustice dry when they begin to perceive the terrible justice of reality, and to accept it. Yet it is their tears and anger, the trying of their generosity and the acceptance of their helplessness, which are perhaps the true source of the splendor of their lives. Theirs is no vapid, irresponsible happiness. They know that they, like the child, are not free. They know compassion. It is the existence of the child, and their knowledge of its existence, that makes possible the nobility of their architecture, the poignancy of their music, the profundity of their science. It is because of the child that they are so gentle with children. They know that if the wretched one were not there sniveling in the dark, the other one, the flute-player, could make no joyful music as the young riders line up in their beauty for the race in the sunlight of the first morning of summer.

This symbol can also be connected to broader stories of the so-called "New World", often imagined as a promised land. Many stories about countries such as the United States present them as places of freedom, opportunity and moral progress. At the same time, these societies were built on slavery, colonization and exploitation. The organization of space in Omelas reflects this contradiction in a very simple way: the city above is full of light, music and apparent goodness, while the child lives below, in a small, filthy room. For many readers, this image recalls the contrast between "heaven" and "hell": a happy world above and a world of suffering beneath it.

The room, then, can be read as a small version of this pattern. It is a place of deep suffering and shame that must stay out of sight so that the surface can appear clean and pure. Everything that does not fit the image of harmony and abundance is

sent “down” and locked away. The child’s invisible pain mirrors the way real societies have often pushed the suffering of enslaved, colonized and marginalized groups out of official history, in order to protect the idea that the nation is innocent and progressive. The dark room, like the black box in *The Lottery*, makes visible the hidden cost behind an apparently ordered and successful community.

4.3.3 The green ribbon in *The Husband Stitch*: identity, boundary and violated autonomy

The green ribbon in *The Husband Stitch* is a more intimate symbol, but no less powerful. From the beginning, the narrator makes it clear that the ribbon must not be touched or untied. It is part of her body and identity, a boundary she establishes with the man who will become her husband. Unlike the black box and the dark room, which are controlled by the community, the ribbon is initially under the narrator’s control. It represents a part of herself that she claims as inviolable.

> (...) His eyes dart around for a moment before settling on my throat.
>
> "What's that?" he asks.
>
> "Oh, this?" I touch the ribbon at the back of my neck. "It's just my ribbon." I run my fingers halfway around its green and glossy length, and bring them to rest on the tight bow that sits in the front. He reaches out his hand, and I seize it and press it away.
>
> "You shouldn't touch it," I say. "You can't touch it." (p. 4)

However, as the story develops, the ribbon becomes the focus of the husband’s desire and frustration. He repeatedly asks about it, tries to touch it, and minimizes her fear and her requests for respect. In one key scene, he holds her wrists and insists on touching the ribbon despite her clear pleas for him to stop:

> He startles me, then, running his hand around my throat. I put up my hands to stop him but he uses his strength, grabbing my wrists with one hand as he touches the ribbon with the other. He presses the silky length with his thumb. He touches the bow delicately, as if he is massaging my sex.
>
> “Please”, I say. “Please don’t”
>
> He does not seem to hear. “Please,” I say again, my voice louder, but cracking

> in the middle.
>
> He could have done it then, untied the bow, if he'd chose to. But he releases me and rolls on his back as if nothing has happened. (p. 12-13)

This moment reveals that, for him, love and intimacy are incompatible with limits he cannot cross. The ribbon thus shifts from being a simple marker of identity to a symbol of bodily autonomy under threat.

In the context of the story's references to childbirth, medical violence and the "husband stitch", the ribbon also points to the many ways in which women's bodies are treated as objects for male satisfaction. Throughout the narrative, the narrator offers almost everything to her husband — her time, her care, her sexuality — yet insists on keeping one thing for herself: the ribbon. It marks a space of intimacy and self-ownership that she tries to protect. When he continues to ask about it after "these many years", the request is no longer innocent curiosity, but a refusal to accept any limit. This tension reaches its climax in the final scene:

> "Do you want to untie the ribbon?" I ask him. "After these many years, is that what you want of me?"
>
> His face flashes gaily, and then greedily, and he runs his hand up my bare breast and to my bow. "Yes," he says. "Yes.'
>
> (...)
>
> "Then," I say, "do what you want."
>
> With trembling fingers, he takes one of the ends. The bow un-does, slowly, the long-bound ends crimped with habit. My husband groans, but I do not think he realizes it. He loops his finger through the final twist and pulls. The ribbon falls away. It floats down and curls on the bed, or so I imagine, because I cannot look down to follow its descent.
>
> My husband frowns, and then his face begins to open with some other expression — sorrow, or maybe preemptive loss. My hand flies up in front of me — an involuntary motion, for balance or some other futility — and beyond it his image is gone.
>
> "I love you," I assure him, "more than you can possibly know."
>
> "No," he says, but I don't know to what he's responding.
>
> If you are reading this story out loud, you may be wondering if that place my

> ribbon protected was wet with blood and openings, or smooth and neutered like the nexus between the legs of a doll.
>
> I'm afraid I can't tell you, because I don't know. For these questions and others, and their lack of resolution, I am sorry.
>
> My weight shifts, and with it, gravity seizes me. My husband's face falls away, and then I see the ceiling, and the wall behind me.
>
> As my lopped head tips backward off my neck and rolls off the bed, I feel as lonely as I have ever been.

This passage brings together several themes already present in the story. The narrator's words "then… do what you want" can be read less as enthusiastic consent and more as resignation: after years of pressure, she abandons the only boundary she had tried to keep. The untying of the ribbon is narrated in intimate, almost sensual detail, but it is also an invasion of her most private space. The ribbon concentrated her deepest intimacy and self-ownership, and when it falls away, the limit she had defended since the beginning of the relationship is finally broken.

At the same time, the husband's reaction can be read as a kind of symbolic death, and the narrator's as a loss of self. His desire seems to depend on the ribbon as a mystery; once it is gone, his face shifts to "sorrow, or maybe preemptive loss", and his image disappears from her view. The relationship loses the secret that sustained his fascination. The narrator, however, gains no new knowledge in exchange: she admits that she does not know what the ribbon protected and cannot describe her own body without it. As her head falls and she feels "as lonely as I have ever been", the scene suggests that the removal of the ribbon erases the last part of herself that was not accessible to others. The symbolic destruction of the ribbon thus marks both the collapse of the husband's desire and the annihilation of the small protected space that still belonged to her.

4.3.4 Symbolism, indirection and reader participation

These three symbols (the black box, the dark room and the green ribbon) do not explicitly explain the stories' critiques. Instead, they invite the reader to guess and feel their hidden meanings. The box is never called evil, but its age, color and

persistence suggest the weight of a violent tradition that nobody wants to question. The room is not described as a political metaphor, yet its position “below” the city and its degraded condition reveal the moral foundation of Omelas. The ribbon is not named as a feminist symbol, but it clearly marks a struggle over the narrator’s control of her own body and over the small space of intimacy she tries to keep for herself.

In all three cases, symbolism allows the authors to communicate complex ideas about tradition, secrecy, sacrifice and gender without turning the narrative into a direct moral lecture. The objects and spaces condense meaning and create strong visual images that remain in the reader’s memory long after the stories end. Because the short story form has limited space, these symbols work as points of concentration: they gather many layers of social critique into a few, carefully chosen details. The reader is invited to participate actively in the interpretation, connecting the symbol to the broader social and ethical questions suggested by the plot.

By reading these symbols in dialogue with one another, it becomes clear that the critique of ustopian societies is not only articulated at the level of what happens, the plot of sacrifice and conformity, but is also inscribed in the material details that organize each narrative world. A box, a room and a ribbon become the places where power, violence and resistance are made visible. The next section will build on this symbolic analysis to examine how Gothic atmosphere and situational irony further intensify the tension between utopian promises and their hidden costs.

4.4 Situational irony and gendered perspectives

Situational irony, as discussed in Chapter 2, occurs when events develop in a way that contradicts what characters and readers would normally expect. In the three short stories analyzed in this study, this irony is always tied to sacrifice. The moment when the real function of the community or relationship becomes clear is also the moment when a vulnerable body is revealed as expendable. What had been presented as natural, protective or loving is suddenly shown to depend on harm.

In *The Lottery* the procedure of drawing slips of paper is treated as a routine event, carried out with calm instructions and a familiar sequence: “Although the villagers had forgotten the ritual and lost the original black box, they still remembered to use stones”. (p. 100)

The villagers speak of “the lottery” as if it were a normal part of community life, and the title itself suggests something positive, since a lottery usually means winning a desirable prize. The irony is that here the “winner” receives not a reward but death by stoning. When Tessie Hutchinson receives the marked slip and protests that “it isn’t fair”, the full meaning of the ritual becomes visible. The community insists that the process is fair because everyone participates under the same rules, but the result is the arbitrary killing of one person. The gap between the villagers’ sense of normality and the violence of their action is what gives the ending its disturbing power. The lottery is revealed not as a celebration but as a mechanism that produces a victim while protecting the majority from responsibility.

In *The Ones Who Walk Away from Omelas* the ironic reversal happens when the reader discovers the child in the dark room. Up to that point, the narrative voice insists that Omelas is a convincing model of happiness and meaning, inviting the reader to imagine “a city in a fairy tale, long ago and far away, once upon a time” and to complete the description with whatever they consider ideal. After the revelation, those same descriptions acquire a different value. The city’s beauty and harmony are no longer neutral; they become part of the justification for keeping the child where it is. Citizens tell themselves that their art, friendships and achievements depend on the child’s misery, and that it would be wrong to abandon so much good for the sake of one life. The irony lies in the way ethical language is used to defend an unethical situation. The more noble Omelas appears, the more shocking it becomes that its people choose to live with this knowledge.

In *The Husband Stitch*, situational irony operates on the scale of a single relationship. Marriage, sexuality and motherhood are social institutions often associated with fulfilment and protection, especially for women. In Machado’s story, these same institutions are repeatedly linked to pain and loss of control. The narrator’s experiences with medical care and the allusion to the “husband stitch” show how her body can be modified for male pleasure, with little concern for her own comfort or consent. The green ribbon marks the one limit she asks her husband to respect. When she finally says “then… do what you want” and allows him to untie it, the expected reward of love and intimacy does not arrive. Instead of deeper connection, the scene results in her physical destruction and in a final feeling of extreme loneliness. The irony here is that the relationship that was supposed to give her security becomes the

context in which her last boundary is erased.

These reversals are not neutral; they are strongly gendered. In all three stories, certain characters are allowed to continue seeing their world as ordered and justified, while others pay the price for maintaining that vision. The village preserves its sense of tradition at the cost of Tessie's life. Omelas continues to understand itself as a good city while a powerless child bears its suffering. In *The Husband Stitch* the husband's desire to fully possess his wife is treated as understandable, while her need for privacy is framed as an obstacle. Women and children occupy the positions most exposed to sacrifice: they are the bodies that can be offered, locked away or "adjusted" so that the community or the partner does not have to change.

Irony also appears at the level of narrative voice and language. In *The Lottery* the tone remains calm and descriptive even when the stoning begins, which makes the violence feel even more shocking. In *The Ones Who Walk Away from Omelas* the narrator's playful, self-conscious comments ("I wish I could convince you") and the invitation for the reader to imagine their own version of the city create a subtle ironic distance from the ideal they describe. In *The Husband Stitch* the instructions to an imagined listener ("If you are reading this story out loud…") and the blending of urban legends with the narrator's life introduce a darkly humorous and ironic frame that contrasts with the seriousness of what happens to her body. In each case, the narrative voice plays with words, symbols and expectations, guiding the reader toward a critical understanding of what is at stake without turning the text into an explicit moral lesson.

Situational irony, combined with this ironic narrative tone, does more than surprise the reader at the end of each story. It performs an ethical function. By starting from familiar frameworks such as communal ritual, ideal city and romantic and domestic life, and then revealing their hidden costs, the stories invite readers to question who benefits from these arrangements and who is harmed by them. When read together, the three texts suggest that ustopian societies often appear most convincing to those who do not pay the price for their stability. The bodies that carry that price, frequently female or otherwise marginalized, are the ones through which the irony becomes visible.

5. FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

Although these three authors write from different historical moments and work with distinct modes of speculative fiction, their short stories share strong thematic connections. All of them challenge dominant social structures, especially those tied to gender and control over the body, and question systems that sacrifice marginalized voices and lives in the name of social ideals. Through different combinations of Gothic atmosphere, symbolic objects and situational irony, Shirley Jackson, Carmen Maria Machado and Ursula K. Le Guin expose the violence hidden in rituals, domestic roles and utopian projects. Jackson's psychological horror critiques the pressures of conformity in post-war America; Machado offers a feminist perspective on intimate and medicalized violence; and Le Guin confronts the ethical compromises behind apparently perfect societies.

Despite differences in period, style and genre approach, the three authors share a commitment to revealing the hidden costs of what is presented as normal, harmonious or desirable. Whether through psychological horror, magical realism or speculative world-building, each writer uses the short story form to intensify critique. The brevity and symbolic density of the short story, as discussed in Chapter 2, allow them to concentrate social tensions in a few decisive scenes and images. The result is not a reassuring resolution, but an open ending that leaves readers with a strong sense of discomfort and unresolved ethical questions.

Across the three texts, the analysis has shown how protagonists and vulnerable figures are caught in webs of sacrifice and moral compromise. In *The Ones Who Walk Away from Omelas* the suffering of a single child sustains the happiness of an entire city. In *The Lottery* ritual violence is performed collectively and justified as necessary tradition. In *The Husband Stitch* the focus shifts to the personal and intimate, showing how a woman's body and desires are continually negotiated, ignored or overwritten in the name of love, stability and male satisfaction. In each case, the cost of maintaining an idealized system falls on those who have the least power to refuse: children, women and other marginalized subjects. These stories insist that the apparent perfection of these communities is built on the suffering of those who are sidelined, silenced or treated as expendable.

These fictional worlds mirror ongoing struggles over bodily autonomy, ethical compromise and social responsibility. Recent debates about reproductive rights and state control over women's bodies, including attempts to restrict access to abortion and contraception in countries such as the United States, show that questions of bodily autonomy remain deeply contested. At the same time, reports of women being punished or even stoned for alleged moral transgressions, and of children experiencing physical and psychological abuse in families, schools, religious institutions or state facilities, echo the logics exposed in these narratives: the belief that "order", "tradition" or "family values" can justify the suffering of specific groups. The suffering child in Omelas, the chosen victim in *The Lottery* and the narrator whose ribbon is finally untied in *The Husband Stitch* function as powerful metaphors for the ways in which certain lives are still treated as acceptable sacrifices for the sake of social harmony, ideological comfort or the maintenance of privilege.

The study has also shown that Gothic elements, symbolism and irony play a crucial role in articulating these critiques. The black box, the dark room and the green ribbon are not merely narrative details; they are symbolic condensations of tradition, secrecy and contested autonomy. Likewise, the Gothic body (humiliated, exposed, silenced or dismembered) reveals what must be hidden in order for an ideal image of community to be sustained. Situational irony strengthens this effect by breaking expectations: the "lottery" that brings death instead of fortune, the joyful city built on misery, the love story that ends in erasure rather than protection. Through these strategies, the stories avoid direct moral lecturing and instead invite readers to participate in the ethical work of interpretation.

This monograph inevitably has limitations. It focuses on a small corpus of three North American short stories by female authors and centers primarily on questions of sacrifice, gender and bodily control. Other perspectives - for example, race, class, sexuality or disability - could be explored in more depth in further studies, as well as comparisons with non-American texts or with other media such as film and television. Nevertheless, by reading *The Lottery*, *The Ones Who Walk Away from Omelas* and *The Husband Stitch* in dialogue, this study highlights how modern and contemporary short fiction can illuminate the politics of sacrifice and the fragile borders between utopia and dystopia.

The legacy of these stories, however, goes beyond their formal innovation or their position in literary history. They remain sharply relevant in a world where governments and institutions still attempt to regulate women's bodies, where public discourse often demands that some lives be restricted "for the good of the majority", and where the suffering of children and other vulnerable groups is frequently minimized or hidden. By confronting readers with unsettling images of ritualized violence, hidden rooms and intimate violations, these narratives help develop a critical awareness of how power operates in both private and public spaces. They encourage readers to question who is being asked to sacrifice, who is allowed to feel safe and whose pain is considered an acceptable price for the preservation of order, tradition or comfort. In this sense, the legacy of Jackson, Le Guin and Machado lies in their capacity to make visible the lives and bodies that are too often pushed to the margins of social imagination, and to insist that any vision of a "better" world must take seriously the voices of those who have been forced to pay its cost.

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