

Helping Eleanor Come Home: A Reassessment of Shirley Jackson's *The Haunting of Hill House*

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Critics have most frequently considered Shirley Jackson's novel *The Haunting of Hill House* (1959) a work of gothic genre fiction.¹ Critics like Roberta Rubenstein and Judie Newman refer to the psychological dissolution of Eleanor Vance, the novel's protagonist, as the inevitable consequence of Eleanor's relationship with her overbearing and controlling mother, for whom, as the novel opens, Eleanor has cared for the last eleven years of her life. At the novel's beginning, Eleanor is downtrodden and miserable. Jackson writes,

Her years with her mother had been built up devotedly around small guilts and small reproaches, constant weariness, and unending despair. Without ever wanting to become reserved and shy, she had spent so long alone, with no one to love, that it was difficult for her to talk, even casually, to another person without self-consciousness and an awkward inability to find words.²

Tracing Eleanor's unhappiness back to its source within her mother, critics like Rubenstein and Newman have taken a feminist-psychoanalytic approach to the novel, focusing primarily on the mother-daughter bond, the dynamics of the novel's families, and these dynamics' refraction and recapitulation in the domestic spaces of Hill House.³ For instance, Newman writes,

¹ For instance, see James Egan, 'Sanctuary: Shirley Jackson's Domestic and Fantastic Parables', *Studies in Weird Fiction*, 6.1 (1989), 15-24; Darryl Hattenhauer, *Shirley Jackson's American Gothic* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2003); Trisha Lootens, "'Whose Hand Was I Holding?' Familial and Sexual Politics in Shirley Jackson's *The Haunting of Hill House*", in *Shirley Jackson: Essays on the Literary Legacy*, ed. by Bernice M. Murphy (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2005), pp. 150-68; Bernice M. Murphy, "'The People of the Village Have Always Hated Us': Shirley Jackson's New-England Gothic", in Murphy, pp. 104-126; Judie Newman, 'Shirley Jackson and the Reproduction of Mothering: *The Haunting of Hill House*', in Murphy, pp. 169-82; John G. Parks, 'Chambers of Yearning: Shirley Jackson's Use of the Gothic', in Murphy, pp. 237-50; Roberta Rubenstein, 'House Mothers and Haunted Daughters: Shirley Jackson and the Female Gothic', in Murphy, pp. 127-49; and Andrew Smith, 'Children of the Night: Shirley Jackson's Domestic Female Gothic', in *The Female Gothic: New Directions*, ed. by Andrew Smith and Diana Wallace (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), pp. 152-65. While the above critics name *Hill House* a work of gothic fiction, some make distinctions among the various sub-genres of gothic fiction to which the work best belongs. Smith and Rubenstein describe the work as belonging to 'female gothic', Murphy argues that it exemplifies Jackson's brand of 'New-England gothic', and Hattenhauer describes Jackson's canon overall as an example of 'American Gothic'.

² Shirley Jackson, *The Haunting of Hill House* (New York: Penguin Books, 2006), p. 3.

³ For excellent analyses in this vein, see Lootens, Newman, and Rubenstein.

An exploration of *The Haunting of Hill House* in the light of feminist psychoanalytic theory reveals that the source of both the pleasures and the terrors of the text springs from the dynamics of the mother-daughter relation with its attendant motifs of psychic annihilation, reabsorption by the mother, vexed individuation, dissolution of individual ego boundaries, terror of separation and the attempted reproduction of the symbiotic bond through close female friendship.⁴

Indeed, the relationship between feminist-psychoanalytic theory and Jackson's novel has been extraordinarily productive, leading critic Andrew Smith to remark that '[i]t has become somewhat of a critical commonplace to note that the house represents the projection of Eleanor's ambivalent feelings about her dead mother'.⁵ In their influential readings, for instance, Rubenstein and Newman read the events that take place at Hill House as Eleanor's desperate attempt both to break away from and to retrieve a pre-oedipal, symbiotic unity with her demanding mother, who has given Eleanor's life its sole purpose, and without whom Eleanor does not know how to live. Taking a cue from Nancy Chodorow's study *The Reproduction of Mothering* (1978), Newman and Rubenstein read Eleanor's suicide at the novel's close as the sad return to her initial trauma, the mother-daughter bond, which never allowed Eleanor to differentiate herself from her mother fully.⁶ As Rubenstein argues,

Ultimately, the haunted Eleanor is destroyed by her own ambivalent submission to maternal domination. [...] By the novel's end, Eleanor is dead, having crashed her car into a tree just outside the house in a gesture that may be understood as a suicidal sacrifice to the embracing and consuming mother/house.⁷

In these psychoanalytically inflected readings, Hill House itself is presented as a source of evil, which preys upon Eleanor's weaknesses and desires for her own home by seducing her into killing herself in an attempt to merge with the house. The house, these critics conclude, thus tricks her into returning to the undifferentiated state of the 'home' she felt most comfortable in: the womb of her mother.⁸

Recent Jackson biographer Ruth Franklin states that, '[l]ike an abusive relationship [...] the house is both impossible to remain in and impossible to escape. In the end, of course, Eleanor's delusion that she is coming home to join whatever has been calling her turns out to

⁴ Newman, pp. 171-72.

⁵ Smith, p. 153.

⁶ Nancy Chodorow, *The Reproduction of Mothering: Psychoanalysis and the Sociology of Gender* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999).

⁷ Rubenstein, p. 137.

⁸ See in particular Newman and Rubenstein. Laura Miller also notes, in a passing remark, that '[t]he "lovers meeting" [Eleanor] has spent the whole novel humming about materializes as a return to the womb that is also a grave'. See Laura Miller, Introduction, in *The Haunting of Hill House*, by Shirley Jackson (New York: Penguin Books, 2006), pp. ix-xxii (p. xix).

have been painfully wrong.’⁹ On the surface, Franklin’s characterisation of the relationship between Eleanor and Hill House as ‘abusive’ seems apt; Eleanor is, indeed, increasingly isolated throughout her stay at Hill House, and the house does appear to play purposefully into Eleanor’s rich fantasy life. However, it is also worth stressing that Eleanor is a more complicated character than this and many other readings have proposed, and that her desires are not so easily elucidated. Many critics, like Carol Cleveland, James Egan, Tricia Lootens, and Andrew Smith have, admittedly, frequently acknowledged Eleanor’s initial desire for social acceptance and her early fantasies at Hill House of a new ‘family’ with the group that gathers there.¹⁰ However, her equally pronounced misanthropy and the fantasies of isolation in which she indulges on the way to Hill House have gone largely unremarked in much critical work on the novel. To lament Eleanor’s inability to find social acceptance within the group that gathers at Hill House, and to perceive the house’s interactions with Eleanor as an undesirable and predatory reconfiguration of the mother-daughter bond, is to recognise only Eleanor’s publicly stated desires for sociality, such as her assertion that ‘I am always afraid of being alone’.¹¹ The majority of interpretations of the novel therefore recognise only half of the character of Eleanor, or her *public* self-narration — and as Laura Miller remarks, ‘self-knowledge is not her forte’, as Eleanor’s publicly stated desires often conflict with the desires she most cherishes in private.¹²

This focus on the social dynamics of the group and Eleanor’s exclusion from it, rather than on the self and its associated dream homes that Eleanor constructs privately, has led many to label the novel as a gothic tale that culminates in tragedy and defeat for Eleanor.¹³ Ostracised from the group and forced to leave the home and her new ‘family’, she smashes her car into a tree. The conventional reading of *Hill House* thus identifies Eleanor’s inability to be fully accepted by her new family and to break away from her mother as key aspects of the novel’s tragic ending and of its status as a work of gothic fiction. However, this mode of analysis ironically replicates a patriarchal view of women by seeking to re-establish a

⁹ Ruth Franklin, *Shirley Jackson: A Rather Haunted Life* (New York: Liveright, 2016), p. 416.

¹⁰ Carol Cleveland, ‘Shirley Jackson’, in *And Then There Were Nine: More Women of Mystery*, ed. by Jane S. Bakerman (Bowling Green, OH: Bowling Green State University Popular Press, 1985), pp. 198-218; and Egan, ‘Sanctuary’.

¹¹ Jackson, p. 118.

¹² Laura Miller, Introduction, in *The Haunting of Hill House*, p. xx.

¹³ See in particular Egan’s ‘Sanctuary’, Lootens, Newman, and Rubenstein. Interestingly, Egan first speculates that perhaps Eleanor *has* found her own sanctuary in Hill House. He writes, ‘[t]rue, Eleanor commits suicide in the driveway of the house, but one might conclude that, based upon her behavior before she left, she had found the domestic sanctuary previously absent from her life. In part because of the novel’s inconclusive ending, Eleanor’s perception has not been conclusively refuted.’ However, Egan later notes that Eleanor has fallen victim to ‘betrayal and isolation, [...and to] her commitment to Gothic parodies of domesticity, the familial, sanctuary’. See Egan, ‘Sanctuary’, p. 21.

conventional domesticity at the novel's close, with Eleanor circumscribed within the very same imprisoning familial structure that she sought to escape at the novel's opening. To recognise and give serious critical attention to Eleanor's inner desires for isolation, and to the total rejection of family and social life that her private fantasies imply, is to recognise the self that Eleanor has had to deny throughout her adult life, and which she immediately begins to fashion following her mother's death. Importantly, as explored below, this is a self constructed out of multiple literary elements, such as fantasies and fairy-tale tropes, and *in participation with* multiple nonhuman, domestic items such as stone lions, oleander trees, and Hill House itself. This mode of reading renders Hill House's interactions with Eleanor ambiguous, suggesting a more complicated relationship between the house and Eleanor than the predatory, unidirectional relationship proposed by most critical readings to date. Daniel Miller's work is useful in this regard; in considering the many meanings of the word 'accommodating', Miller observes that this term encompasses not only our physical need for shelter, but also the reciprocal relationships that we develop with our nonhuman homes and the nonhuman material emblems of domesticity within them. He writes,

It [the term 'accommodation'] may imply our changing of a home to suit ourselves, but it can also imply the need to change ourselves in order to suit our accommodation. [...] [T]he term accommodating expresses a sense of willing, of benign agreement to compromise on behalf of the other, often the only spirit within which accommodation can be achieved. By considering our relationship to the home through the term accommodating we face the home not as a thing but as a process.¹⁴

If previous readings of *Hill House* have largely focused on the relationship between Eleanor and Hill House as abusive and unidirectional, a relationship that ignites a process of madness and dissolution of selfhood for Eleanor, I instead argue that the process undergone by Eleanor and Hill House is one of mutual fulfilment, a process of accommodating one another's needs. As I demonstrate, Hill House encourages Eleanor to achieve the romance of isolation that she fantasises about, thereby propelling Eleanor to actualise both the self she has begun to construct through fantasy and her most inwardly cherished desires.¹⁵ In return, Eleanor provides a genuine love and appreciation for Hill House and the seclusion, isolation, and silence it promises. Far from participating in the dissolution of Eleanor's selfhood, then, Hill

¹⁴ Daniel Miller, *Stuff* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2010), p. 96.

¹⁵ Laura Miller comes close to this reading of the novel when she observes, '[i]f it is Eleanor who now walks in Hill House, then she has arrived at something not too far from her dream of living in the little cottage behind the barricade of poisonous oleander. She walks alone, and that, as Theo would probably point out, is the fate that she most feared and most desired' (p. xxii). While Miller is among the few critics to have devoted attention to Eleanor's private fantasy life, her overall characterisation of Hill House itself is negative, a point from which I diverge.

House, and the many nonhuman emblems of domesticity and seclusion that Eleanor comes to care for throughout the novel, are instead co-creators of Eleanor's newfound identity.

Further, Eleanor is the work of a complicated and subtle writer whose texts delight in confusing, thwarting, distorting, and inverting generic conventions and reader expectations, as in the comedic, satiric, apocalyptic novel *The Sundial* (1958), in which the apocalypse never conclusively occurs. Like *The Sundial*, whose generic classification is ambiguous, *Hill House*'s own inter-textual dialogues with multiple genres complicate attempts to interpret the novel solely within a gothic framework.¹⁶ Instead, *The Haunting of Hill House* should be read within the context of Jackson's work as a whole, including her autobiographical domestic stories, collected in *Life Among the Savages* (1953) and its sequel *Raising Demons* (1957). As S. T. Joshi notes, even the boundaries between her autobiographical works, her non-supernatural fiction, and her weird fiction are difficult to define. Joshi argues,

Jackson's work returns time and again to certain fundamental domestic themes, sometimes in an autobiographical manner, sometimes in a mainstream manner, and sometimes in a weird manner. I again emphasize that these distinctions are arbitrary and nebulous; it takes only a small touch to push a story from one of these groups to another, and some stories remain resolutely averse to clear categorization.¹⁷

The Haunting of Hill House is indeed a gothic work, making use of well-established gothic tropes such as haunted mansions, isolated, well-off families, and disputes over property.¹⁸ However, the novel's central image of the house and Eleanor's pronounced desires for a home of her own bring the novel into conversation with Jackson's domestic fictions and family chronicles, which frequently stray into the territory of the gothic. Jackson's use of the gothic, which frequently appears in her work in the form of tropes or sinister language, suggests that she considered gothic a mode, rather than a genre. As John Frow explains,

[M]odes are understood as the extensions of certain genres beyond specific and time-bound formal structures to a broader specification of 'tone'. [...] Rather than standing

¹⁶ As Angela Hague notes, '*The Sundial* has received almost no attention from Jackson's critics, perhaps because it is among her most ambiguous and unclassifiable works'. See Angela Hague, "'A Faithful Anatomy of Our Times': Reassessing Shirley Jackson', *Frontiers: A Journal of Women Studies*, 26.2 (2005), 73-96 (p. 86).

¹⁷ S. T. Joshi, 'Shirley Jackson: Domestic Horror', in Murphy, pp. 183-98 (p. 192).

¹⁸ Murphy notes that Jackson's American homes and isolated families are modelled after the castles and aristocratic families of classic English gothic literature. She writes, 'Jackson's gothic mansions, [*sic*] are clearly intended to represent modern-day versions of the traditional gothic castle; generic clichés reconfigured for a new age, and created with a strong awareness of (and willingness to adapt) the generic codes that lend them such resonance in the first place. It is interesting to note, therefore, that Jackson's final novels all feature a mansion built by Victorian exemplars of American free enterprise, the new aristocracy in American life; and that her protagonists are all removed from the inhabitants and the locality in which they live — a removal symbolized by the actual physical barriers between them and the outside world.' See Murphy, "'The People of the Village Have Always Hated Us'", p. 114.

alone, modes are usually qualifications or modifications of particular genres [...]; they specify thematic features and certain forms and modalities of speech, but not the formal structures or even the semiotic medium through which the text is to be realised.¹⁹

Thinking of gothic as a mode allows a reconsideration of Jackson's work as a whole, and in particular its tendency to rapidly slip between atmospheres and registers. In Jackson's writings, gothic elements 'flavour' the stories, novels, and chronicles, but do not necessarily provide the blueprint for the narrative structure as a whole. Instead, Jackson's work moves freely — and at times unexpectedly — between humorous, light-hearted reflections on domesticity and family life and the oppressive, gloomy atmospheres characteristic of works like 'Pillar of Salt' (1948) and *The Haunting of Hill House*. As James Egan remarks, Jackson's 'most subtly crafted fictions draw upon interactive narrative modes', resulting in an oeuvre 'where the whole often exceeds the sum of its parts'. It is this interaction of narrative modes that results in what Egan terms '[t]he sophisticated tonality of the Jackson canon', or its impressive ability to draw upon and manipulate the conventions of various genres and modes for literary, comedic, satiric, and metatextual effects.²⁰ For instance, *Hill House's* status as a gothic work is complicated by Eleanor's frequent fairy-tale inflected daydreams and Jackson's careful placement, inversion, and doubling of fairy-tale tropes, such as the enchanted kingdom and the long-lost princess. The novel, then, might best be considered a domestic fairy tale in the gothic mode, or a gothic-domestic fairy tale. Rather than delivering a work of purely gothic terror, Jackson offers a blending of elements drawn from multiple genres and modes, resulting in a gothic-inflected tale with a fairy-tale ending in which a heroine achieves her long-desired kingdom.

Jackson's work is often characterised by a playful approach to genre, and characteristically, *Hill House* inverts and distorts the expectations raised by each of its generic components.²¹ The result is a novel which exceeds the sum of its generic parts, offering a series of delightful reversals: a domestic tale that seeks to deny the family, but keep the home; a fairy tale of wish fulfilment that delivers the enchanted kingdom Eleanor so

¹⁹ John Frow, *Genre*, 2nd edn (New York: Routledge, 2015), p. 71. Frow also notes that '[e]xhausted genres such as the Gothic romance may survive in their modal form — quite spectacularly so in the case of the gothic mode, which passes through early-Victorian stage melodrama into the stories of Edgar Allen Poe, the novel of sensation, and the novels of Charles Dickens, and thence into the vampire novel, the detective novel, and a number of other narrative genres, and more directly from melodrama into a range of Hollywood dramas including the "old house" movie, *film noir*, and the contemporary horror and slasher genres' (p. 72).

²⁰ Egan, 'Comic-Satiric-Fantastic-Gothic: Interactive Modes in Shirley Jackson's Narratives', in Murphy, pp. 34-51 (p. 34). See also Cleveland, who notes that 'Jackson had a strong penchant for mixing genres and reversing conventional expectations' (p. 202).

²¹ See Cleveland, Egan, and Joshi.

desperately wants, but in the form of a haunted house; and a morbid and ironic portrayal of a monstrous, gothic home that, I argue, challenges the notion of the monstrous by seeking not to kill Eleanor maliciously, but instead to give her the love she never received from her mother. To fail to recognise the interaction of these various elements — or, worse, to isolate and over-emphasise the gothic at the expense of the novel's more positive transformations — is to privilege a heteronormative, humanistic, and family-centred notion of progress and thereby to risk a serious misreading of the novel. As Jodey Castricano notes, '[i]t could be argued that what actually haunts Hill House is a certain interpretive model that still delimits what we can say about the "supernatural"', a model which relies on psychoanalysis to domesticate the novel's supernatural phenomena.²² This psychoanalytic model, which privileges human familial relationships and conventional domesticity, has led many critics to take the novel's ambiguously positive ending for a cruel tragedy.²³

In an attempt to restore what I view as the novel's more complex relationships to genre, the family, and self-actualisation in solitude, I depart from previous gothic-centric (and psychoanalytic) theoretical frameworks by re-establishing the text as a generic hybrid, a work combining gothic tropes, fairy-tale narrative structures, and domestic fantasies. Further, I depart from previous critical treatments of the text by proposing that *Hill House* presents social isolation — perhaps even agoraphobia — not as a tragedy, but as a potential alternative route to female happiness and liberation.²⁴ I consider *Hill House* within the context of Jackson's life and oeuvre and provide close readings of several key scenes within the novel to

²² Jodey Castricano, 'Shirley Jackson's *The Haunting of Hill House* and the Strange Question of Trans-Subjectivity', *Gothic Studies*, 7.1 (2005), 87-101 (p. 89).

²³ Indeed, Jackson herself may have found the conventional reading of the novel unnecessarily dark. As Carolyn Alessio states, 'Jackson tended to dissociate herself from overly academic — and especially dark — interpretations of her work'. See Alessio, 'Shirley Jackson', in *American Writers: A Collection of Literary Biographies, Supplement 9*, ed. by Jay Parini (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 2002), pp. 113-30 (p. 113).

²⁴ Interestingly, only one scholar, Jackson's biographer Judy Oppenheimer, has speculated that 'madness' may have positive overtones in Jackson's work. Speaking of Jackson's earlier 'mad' protagonists, Natalie from *Hangsaman* (1951) and Elizabeth from *The Bird's Nest* (1954), she notes, '[t]he madness itself is a far from miserable state; both young women experience a heady rush of delight, exultation, a pure sense of power in its sway. It is actually the reintegration into "sanity" which somehow feels like a loss — of potential, of possibility, of self. It is hard not to believe that Shirley, who took such pride in the strange quirks and turns of her own mind, was expressing her own feeling that a certain sort of madness had its appeal, at least up to a point. [...] Eleanor in *The Haunting of Hill House* kills herself rather than accept a lesser, saner reality.' See Judy Oppenheimer, *Private Demons: The Life of Shirley Jackson* (New York: Putnam, 1988), p. 164. Additionally, Julie Nash has convincingly argued that madness in *Hill House* is Eleanor's only possible reaction to a restrictive patriarchal society, and that madness is preferable to the society she left behind. See Julie J. Nash, "'Whatever Walked There, Walked Alone': The Feminist Supernatural in Charlotte Perkins Gilman, Shirley Jackson, and Fay Weldon', *Para-doxa: Studies in World Literary Genres*, 20 (2006), 173-84. Lastly, though she does not mention Shirley Jackson, Karen Stein has noted a tendency in heroines of the 'female gothic' to embrace madness. Stein writes, '[t]hese heroines experience madness as a stage on the journey toward self-knowledge'. See Karen Stein, 'Monsters and Madwomen: Changing Female Gothic', in *The Female Gothic*, ed. Juliann E. Fleener (Montreal: Eden, 1983), pp. 123-37 (p. 123).

argue that Jackson's clever and evasive text, most often considered a tragedy for the long-suffering Eleanor, instead rewards her with the fairy-tale ending she has always dreamed of: an isolated, enchanted kingdom; a home of her own that she never has to leave; and a nonhuman love more constant and nurturing than any she has ever experienced.

Human Nature and Haunted Families: Situating Jackson's Work in Jackson's Context

No discussion of the eponymous Hill House can begin without first acknowledging the intimate associations with family that houses carry in Jackson's fiction, for even more than the home itself, family is an especially challenging and contradictory concept within her writing. As James Egan notes,

A substantial part of her work may be interpreted as either the expression of an idyllic domestic vision or the inversion of that vision into the fantastic and Gothic. Jackson controls the tenor of her domestic and fantastic parables primarily by her sophisticated use of wit, irony, and paradox and by juxtaposing the premises of her domestic tales to those of her fantastic ones.²⁵

Indeed, Jackson's domestic chronicles, *Life Among the Savages* and *Raising Demons*, conjure a vision of a harmonious and safe family home, in which disorder reigns, but where the bonds of family nonetheless 'remain secure' and nurturing.²⁶ More importantly, the home within these works serves as a protective boundary between the family and the outside world, the latter of which is often peopled by small-minded groups dominated by 'prejudice and the human capacity for everyday savagery'.²⁷ On the surface, then, the chronicles reaffirm the conventional ideologies of heteronormative domesticity prevalent throughout mid-century American culture, which frequently depicted the home as a site of safety and luxurious comfort that offered the nuclear family protection from the horrors of a politically fraught and rapidly changing outside world.²⁸ However, the language in Jackson's domestic chronicles frequently slips into gothic registers, including the family's jokes in *Life Among the Savages*

²⁵ Egan, 'Sanctuary', p. 15.

²⁶ Egan, 'Sanctuary', p. 16.

²⁷ Alessio, p. 114.

²⁸ Egan notes that in the domestic chronicles, 'Jackson establishes her domestic vision, defining the values of the familial, nurturing and normative'. See 'Sanctuary', p. 15. Jackson's domestic visions largely affirm the normative predominant post-war culture of domesticity. However, they also point toward the Cold-War era's prevalent distrust of the outside world. As Elaine Tyler May comments, '[i]n the early years of the cold war, amid a world of uncertainties brought by World War II and its aftermath, the home seemed to offer a secure private nest removed from the dangers of the outside world. The message was ambivalent, however, for the family also seemed particularly vulnerable. It needed heavy protection against the intrusions of forces outside itself.' See Elaine Tyler May, *Homeward Bound: American Families in the Cold War Era* (New York: Basic Books, 1999), p. 3.

that the new family home is haunted and, perhaps most suggestively, the works' titles themselves, which refer to Jackson's children as 'demons' and her domestic life as one lived among 'savages'. While this language is seemingly deployed for comedic effect, the introduction of gothic elements, as Andrew Smith observes, 'suggests an alienation from the domesticity that the book [*Life Among the Savages*] ostensibly celebrates'.²⁹

In much of Jackson's longer fiction, and her last three novels in particular, this alienation from the domestic ideology of mid-century American culture would be more covertly displayed in plots dealing with the breakdown of families and the shattering of conventional domesticity. In *The Sundial*, *Hill House*, and *We Have Always Lived in the Castle* (1962), the home remains a barrier between the family and the outside world, but the bonds that connect family in *Life Among the Savages* and *Raising Demons* are dissolved. In these final novels, violence is often located within the family: a murder occurs in the Halloran family of *The Sundial*; death haunts both the family home of Hill House and the home that Eleanor is fleeing from; and Merricat Blackwood of *We Have Always Lived in the Castle* murders her entire family except her sister and her uncle. Curiously, each of these works preserves the status of the family home as a protected domain, even as those outside the houses come to fear or spread rumours about those inside, and even as the families within them disintegrate. In words that could be equally applied to Hill House and Eleanor, Dara Downey and Darryl Jones note of the Blackwood estate and its sisters that '[t]he more the house is a source of fear and superstition for the villagers, the more it is one of privacy and safety for the sisters: its *heimlichkeit* is made possible by means of its becoming *unheimlich* for everybody else'.³⁰ Thus, despite the differing portrayals of family bonds in Jackson's autobiographical work and her late fiction, all of her work is connected by the idea of the home as sanctuary. Egan notes that, in *Life Among the Savages* and *Raising Demons*,

Her personal setbacks and discouragements, the days her children went to school with unkempt hair, unbrushed teeth, or in other states of disrepair do not surface, nor does her ongoing discontent with her husband's extramarital love life. Her subtle omissions, to sustain the illusion of domestic tranquillity, may point to the idea that a sanctuary or safe place was very critical to her personality and writing.³¹

The absent content of these 'subtle omissions', it seems, surfaced in her fictional writing instead, doubled as broken families in *The Sundial*, *Hill House*, and *We Have Always Lived in*

²⁹ Smith, p. 157.

³⁰ Dara Downey and Darryl Jones, 'King of the Castle: Shirley Jackson and Stephen King', in Murphy, pp. 214-36 (p. 233).

³¹ Egan, 'Sanctuary', p. 17.

the Castle. Indeed, Trisha Lootens notes that throughout drafts for *Hill House*, Jackson worked increasingly toward the vision of the family — and particularly the notion of ‘togetherness’ — as the theme that would ‘haunt’ the novel, even mentioning in a note to her publisher that she wanted to work into the novel ‘the emphasis upon (yippee) togetherness’.³² That the embellished images of domestic harmony portrayed in her autobiographical work did not match her daily experiences and discontents perhaps offers insight into the bleak theme she returned to throughout her fictional work: ‘an insistence on the uncontrolled, unobserved wickedness of human behavior’, often within the family.³³

Her last three completed novels increasingly reach toward fantasies of being not only away from outsiders, but also of being family-less: away from everyone, yet safe.³⁴ In *The Sundial*, for instance, Mrs Halloran daydreams about ‘a place all my own, a house where I can live alone and put everything I love’ and in which ‘there will be only one of everything — one cup, one plate, one spoon, one knife’ and where ‘no one can ever find me’.³⁵ Like Eleanor’s fantasies in *Hill House*, this scene in *The Sundial* overlays the gothic mode upon a familiar fairy-tale image: perceiving the house to be made of candy, children soon attempt to eat the house, threatening Mrs Halloran’s imagined sanctuary. In her daydream, the house is under siege — she is accused of being a witch while her home is destroyed by outsiders. Similarly, Fanny Halloran, also from *The Sundial*, keeps a full-scale reproduction of her childhood apartment in the attic of the Halloran estate, which she introduces to the young Fancy Halloran as her ‘doll house’.³⁶ The reproduced apartment is so self-contained that ‘[i]f Aunt Fanny had cared to, she might have dropped from sight altogether into this apartment in the big house, might have left the others behind and gone into the apartment and closed the door, and stayed’.³⁷ In *Castle*, Merricat Blackwood’s desire for the family estate to remain inviolable to outsiders prompts her to perform daily rituals designed to keep out intruders. These protagonists’ dreams of a home of their own meet with different levels of success; only the Blackwood sisters and, I argue, Eleanor are able to fulfil their desires for domestic solitude by the end of their respective narratives.

³² Lootens, p. 155. Lootens also mentions that ‘two words are scrawled on the bottom of a page of notes for Hill House: “FAMILY, FAMILY”’ (p. 156).

³³ Oppenheimer, p. 125.

³⁴ Angela Hague notes, ‘[h]er indictment of the 1950s nuclear family and suburban lifestyles is an important interpretative rendering of the era, and her work insistently destabilizes the 1950s paradigm of containment and security in a variety of ways’ (p. 89). Indeed, Jackson’s work tends increasingly toward misanthropy, whether within the family or outside of it, until security comes only from oneself, as in *Hill House* and *Castle*.

³⁵ Shirley Jackson, *The Sundial* (New York: Popular Library, 1958), p. 119.

³⁶ Jackson, *The Sundial*, p. 188.

³⁷ Jackson, *The Sundial*, p. 187.

The home's consistent designation as a safe space in Jackson's writing perhaps reflects her experiences with agoraphobia in her later life. Jackson's biographer Judy Oppenheimer notes that, immediately following her completion of *Hill House* and upon her commencement of *Castle*, '[Jackson] was unable to leave the house; she was unable, for much of the time, even to leave her bedroom'.³⁸ As she wrote in a letter to a friend after completing *Castle*, 'I have written myself into the house'.³⁹ Jackson's agoraphobia suggests a dialogue between her life and the home-centric novels she created in her last years, which are often populated by characters who feel unable — or unwilling — to leave their homes. Indeed, for Eleanor Vance, who does not trust anyone, who has never had a home of her own, and for whom all homes that she has so far inhabited have been broken, what could be better than a home all to herself — a home she never has to leave? Mirroring Jackson's own familial dissatisfactions, Eleanor's attempts to establish intimacy and familial bonds have been thwarted at every turn.⁴⁰ Taken together with Eleanor's longing for a home, a safe space, and isolation, Jackson's novel offers a discourse in which the family is rotten, but the home is safe, and in which enclosure, seclusion, and isolation surface as strategies for happiness and safety. *Hill House* should thus be read within the context of Jackson's other work as a novel that tests out the fantasy of isolation that *Castle* eventually completes.⁴¹ Indeed, Eleanor's own enchanted, secluded kingdom, eventually found in the form of Hill House, mirrors the Blackwood sisters' heavily guarded manor in the later novel. For both Eleanor and the Blackwood sisters, these homes fulfil desires for seclusion, security, and a space of one's own, offering charmed, fairy-tale kingdoms and spaces of self-determination in the guise of macabre gothic homes. In what follows, I consider Eleanor's journey to and experiences at Hill House and how Jackson's depiction of Eleanor's growing relationship

³⁸ Oppenheimer, p. 247.

³⁹ Oppenheimer, p. 237.

⁴⁰ While I do not wish to fall into the trap of confusing Jackson herself with the characters she created, it is true that much of her work drew from her own life experiences. As Diane Long Hoeveler remarks, 'Shirley Jackson wrote a highly coded autobiography of sorts in much of her short fiction, and her later works are particularly rife with unresolved familial traumas and personal disappointments. [...] She wrote out of a deep personal pain, but she presented that pain as universal, as the lot of all who are born into a world where they are unwanted, imperfect, and condemned to rail at those facts.' See Diane Long Hoeveler, 'Life Lessons in Shirley Jackson's Late Fiction: Ethics, Cosmology, Eschatology', in Murphy, pp. 267-80 (p. 280).

⁴¹ In her insightful analysis of the feminist threat to patriarchal authority posed by the Blackwood sisters, Lynette Carpenter notes, 'Jackson's last completed novel and a bestseller, *We Have Always Lived in the Castle* is her most radical statement on the causes and consequences of female victimization and alienation, a theme that runs throughout her work. The novel may represent a personal culmination for Jackson, who suffered a nervous breakdown shortly after its publication in 1962; her journal from that period records longings for "freedom and security", "self-control", and "refuge" that echo the novel's central concern with the self-determination of women in a safe environment.' See Lynette Carpenter, 'The Establishment and Preservation of Female Power in Shirley Jackson's *We Have Always Lived in the Castle*', in Murphy, pp. 199-213 (p. 200).

with the house is often characterised by a mixture of gothic and fairy-tale tropes and registers. Indeed, what is unnerving and disquieting about Hill House to the Hillsdale villagers and to Hill House's other tenants proves a source of enchantment and comfort to Eleanor: its guarded isolation, its separation from the outside world, and its constant nonhuman presence, all of which is precisely what Eleanor's fairy-tale reveries suggest she longs for.

The Break from Family: A Fairy-Tale Journey

Eleanor's introduction in *Hill House* is bleak. Like many of Jackson's protagonists, she is 'a social misfit, a young woman not beautiful enough, charming enough, or articulate enough to get along with other people — [...] a woman with no recognized place in society'.⁴² Unlike her older sister, who married, started her own family, and escaped the burden of caring for her mother, Eleanor's adult life has been spent enduring her mother's cruelty and performing endless domestic tasks. Jackson writes,

The only person in the world she genuinely hated, now that her mother was dead, was her sister. She disliked her brother-in-law and her five-year-old niece, and she had no friends. [...] She could not remember ever being truly happy in her adult life.⁴³

The break she finally makes from her family — even if she has to 'steal' the car to do it — is entirely understandable, and it makes her transition into the language of fairy tale especially poignant. For the first time in her life, 'the car belonged entirely to her, a little contained world all her own', and she has made her first 'intimate', nonhuman, inanimate friend: the road.⁴⁴ Passing various homes along her journey to Hill House, Eleanor works through several fairy-tale scenarios, each of which involves the attainment of her own space. These scenarios are increasingly populated by nonhuman objects that, for Eleanor, carry extreme significance: oleander trees, stone lions, pillars, and white curtains all function to keep out the outside world. In fact, if Eleanor despises the thought of taking care of her mother, she fantasises over the prospect of cleaning the stone lions:

⁴² Carpenter, p. 210. Murphy also notes that *Hill House* 'has all the familiar trappings of the traditional haunted-house tale — unexplained noises in the middle of the night, a disorientating layout, strange occurrences — but the real horror lies perhaps in the fact that a lonely, unmarried woman like Eleanor is so out of place in a society that can only project one particular path for a young woman — that of wife and mother — that she becomes the perfect victim.' See Murphy, 'Introduction: "Do You Know Who I Am?": Reconsidering Shirley Jackson', in Murphy, pp. 1-21 (p. 11).

⁴³ Jackson, p. 3.

⁴⁴ Jackson, pp. 10, 12.

Every morning I swept the porch and dusted the lions, and every evening I patted their heads good night, and once a week I washed their faces and manes and paws with warm water and soda and cleaned between their teeth with a swab.⁴⁵

This is also a fantasy of being taken care of, for she imagines that ‘a little dainty old lady took care of me, moving starchily with a silver tea service on a tray and bringing me a glass of elderberry wine each evening for my health’s sake’.⁴⁶ It is, finally, a fantasy of death; Eleanor’s fantasy fades with a sentence only half formed, an image she perhaps cannot see beyond, which also closes the paragraph: ‘When I died ...’.⁴⁷ Death — Eleanor’s final experience at the novel’s close — even finds a place in Eleanor’s early fantasies of peaceful domestic bliss, an event romanticised and longed for, rather than feared.⁴⁸

As these fantasies progress, they tend increasingly toward isolation. In her first scenario, she imagines that she ‘took [her] dinner alone’.⁴⁹ In the second scenario, the world outside becomes more sinister:

Will I get out of my car and go between the ruined gates and then, once I am in the magic oleander square, find that I have wandered into a fairyland, protected poisonously from the eyes of people passing? Once I have stepped between the magic gateposts, will I find myself through the protective barrier, the spell broken?⁵⁰

If this particular fantasy begins with an intricate familial history, in which Eleanor imagines herself as a fairy-tale princess and rightful heir to an enchanted kingdom, then her fantasies change as she stops for lunch, where she abandons the thought of family and sits ‘in joyful loneliness’.⁵¹ It is after this feeling of joyful loneliness that she rejects family all together, retaining, in the final fairy-tale scenario, only the intimate, nonhuman markers of her own, protected space. Jackson writes,

She came to a tiny cottage buried in a garden. I could live there all alone [...]. No one would ever find me there, either, behind all those roses, and just to make sure I would plant oleanders by the road. [...] I will raise white cats and sew white curtains for the windows and sometimes come out of my door to go to the store to buy cinnamon and tea and thread.⁵²

⁴⁵ Jackson, p. 12.

⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁸ An earlier draft of *Hill House* indicated the protagonist’s desire for death more explicitly. Lootens notes that this earlier version included a protagonist who ‘had a secret desire for death “for no very clear reason, since she was seventeen years old”’ (p. 156).

⁴⁹ Jackson, p. 12.

⁵⁰ Jackson, p. 13, emphasis added.

⁵¹ Jackson, p. 15.

⁵² Ibid., emphasis added.

This blending of paranoia about other people and an increasingly pronounced desire for isolation and a space of her own — often indexed through inanimate, nonhuman items — are characteristics that come to define Eleanor. Her paranoia introduces gothic imagery into the domestic fairy tales that she weaves for herself, such as the ‘poisonous’ oleander trees that will protect her domestic space. It is through this mixture of literary genres and modes and the elaborate assortment of nonhuman items above that Eleanor fashions her ideal fantasy self: a nurturing and secluded woman nurtured by her isolation. As Darryl Hattenhauer has observed, Jackson’s novels are meta-fictional, often pointing toward the act of writing itself, and in particular the impact of writing and reading on subject formation. He notes that the setting of *Hill House* is ‘suffused with precise genres [...] and specific texts’, in particular the genres of fairy tales and gothic, didactic texts, moral primers, and novels such as Bram Stoker’s *Dracula* (1831) and Samuel Richardson’s *Pamela* (1740). These allusions, he argues, are used by Jackson as ‘a means for leading to larger discursive practices’, such as subject formation. He writes,

This strategy suggests that Jackson came to regard the role of discourse in subject formation and interpellation as not just a general process but rather a very precise one, in which not merely language in general but genres and even just a few specific texts directly determine much of the subject.⁵³

Eleanor’s journey to Hill House, during which she indulges in reveries of ideal fantasy homes, selves, and lives, suggests that for Eleanor, fairy tales have had a particular impact in her subject formation. In these fantasy selves and lives, isolation, seclusion, and paranoia directed toward the outside world are vital components, and they are vital to understanding the relationship that Eleanor develops with Hill House, which presents a gothic double to the enchanted kingdoms of her fantasies. As the next section demonstrates, this oscillation between gothic and fairy tale define the relationship between Eleanor and Hill House; drawing upon Eleanor’s buried fantasy life, Hill House attempts to manifest this fairy-tale fantasy for her.

A First Taste of Happiness

When Eleanor arrives in Hillsdale, where Hill House is located, ‘a tangled, disorderly mess of dirty houses and crooked streets’ greets her, forming a jarring contrast to the rich green

⁵³ Hattenhauer, p. 165.

paradises she has indulged in on her journey.⁵⁴ Like the villagers that Jackson depicts throughout her fiction, such as the villagers of ‘The Summer People’ (1949) and *We Have Always Lived in the Castle*, the people of Hillsdale are hostile to outsiders.⁵⁵ Jackson writes,

A woman stood in a doorway across the street and looked at Eleanor, and two young boys lounged against a fence, elaborately silent. Eleanor, who was afraid of strange dogs and jeering women and young hoodlums, went quickly into the diner, clutching her pocketbook and her car keys. [...] There was some elaborate joke going on between the man eating and the girl behind the counter.⁵⁶

Eleanor’s paranoia may be the result of what Hattenhauer terms Eleanor’s ‘grandiose assumption that romance is waiting for her behind every tree, and from her assumption that others persecute her’.⁵⁷ However, Hillsdale *is* unwelcoming toward outsiders: Dr Montague’s letter had warned her that the people of Hillsdale are ‘rude to strangers and openly hostile to anyone inquiring about Hill House’,⁵⁸ replicating a pattern in much of Jackson’s fiction of dangerous, small-minded locals who are hostile to outsiders, and undermining the assertion that Eleanor’s observations are the products of her grandiose assumptions. Her fantasies may colour her interpretations of her experiences, but Jackson also suggests that Eleanor’s fantasies have some basis in reality: there is, after all, reason to fear the villagers and their unhelpful, defensive responses to any questions raised about the house, just as Eleanor has had reason to distrust others throughout her adult life.

That Hill House is set six miles away from the village potentially implies that Hill House is a sanctuary from it, a protected fortress that will keep those inside safe from the judgmental eyes and hostile questions of the small-minded villagers. Though Eleanor herself does not yet realise it, her approach up the driveway of Hill House marks her progress through the ‘protected barriers’ that separate the enchanted kingdom from the outside world, just as she imagined in her earlier fantasies. The ‘thick, oppressive trees’ are the doubles of

⁵⁴ Jackson, p. 16.

⁵⁵ Murphy notes that Jackson’s consistent portrayal of insular, hostile communities might be the result of her own experiences as a newcomer to New England. Having grown up in California, moved to Syracuse, New York, as a teenager, and then lived for some time in New York City, Jackson felt herself an outsider to the small-town Vermont community to which she and her family moved for her husband’s work. Murphy writes, ‘Jackson would always be an outsider in New England. As is common in small, insular communities the world over, newcomers can remain categorized as such even many decades after their arrival. [...] Whatever Jackson’s own personal experiences of New England [...], there can be no denying the fact that her fiction time and time again depicts clashes between unwitting newcomers or outsiders and insular, laconic locals as her protagonists repeatedly and generally naively violate longstanding codes of behavior and etiquette.’ See Murphy, “‘The People of the Village Have Always Hated Us’”, p. 106.

⁵⁶ Jackson, p. 16-17.

⁵⁷ Hattenhauer, p. 157.

⁵⁸ Jackson, p. 10.

her oleanders; the gate, 'tall and ominous and heavy [and] set strongly into a stone wall which went off through the trees' is reminiscent of her pillars; and the 'dark and unwelcoming' Mr Dudley, the caretaker of Hill House, functions in just the same way as the stone lions, posted at the entrance to keep out interlopers.⁵⁹ Even her curtains have found a place in Hill House, where they appear in the windows 'holding darkness within', as has her dainty old woman, in the form of Mrs Dudley, who will 'set dinner on the dining-room sideboard at six sharp'.⁶⁰ Each of the elements of her earlier fantasies has been replicated, albeit in gothic fashion, until Eleanor finally is, just as she had earlier imagined, in her own enchanted and secluded kingdom. Jackson writes, '[t]here was no evidence that Hill House belonged in any way to the rest of the world. [...] Behind the house the hills were piled in great pressing masses, flooded with summer green now, rich, and still.'⁶¹ As Judie Newman observes, '[t]he emphasis here on locked gates, guards against entry, a tortuous access road, and the general difficulty of locating the house reinforces the impression of its desirability as *heimlich*, secret, a home kept away from the eyes of others', as fairy-tale and gothic homes often are.⁶² What is more, Hill House's abstraction from the rest of the world impresses Eleanor favourably. Upon seeing it, she notes, '[i]f it were on top of the hill everyone could see it. I vote for keeping it well hidden where it is.'⁶³ Despite the house's dark and unwelcoming atmosphere, Eleanor is drawn to its hiddenness, its separation from the outside world that, in all of her fantasies, she longed so desperately to keep out.

However, Eleanor is at first unable to make the conscious connection between her imagined fairy-tale homes and their gothic reflection in Hill House, which she finds 'vile' and 'diseased' upon first sight.⁶⁴ Though Hill House replicates her fairy-tale creations right down to their protective barriers, Eleanor cannot initially discern the fairy tale when presented in a more ambiguous, gothic form. Even the third-person narrator is impacted by Eleanor's initial prejudice.⁶⁵ We are told that

No human eye can isolate the unhappy coincidence of line and place which suggests evil in the face of a house, and yet somehow a maniac juxtaposition, a badly turned angle, some chance meeting of roof and sky, turned Hill House into a place of despair, more frightening because the face of Hill House seemed awake, with a watchfulness from the blank windows and a touch of glee in the eyebrow of a

⁵⁹ Jackson, pp. 19-20.

⁶⁰ Jackson, pp. 1, 27.

⁶¹ Jackson, p. 35.

⁶² Newman, p. 173.

⁶³ Jackson, p. 36.

⁶⁴ Jackson, p. 23.

⁶⁵ Hattenhauer, p. 164.

cornice. [...] A house arrogant and hating, never off guard, can only be evil. The house, which seemed somehow to have formed itself [...] reared its great head back without concession to humanity.⁶⁶

The narrator is careful here to emphasise that it is to the *human* eye that the house appears as such, and Hill House, being ‘without concession to humanity’, cannot be assessed according to human parameters. It is a direct confrontation with the nonhuman, and Eleanor is careful to leave her ‘human automobile’ parked out front to mitigate this shock.⁶⁷

However, before long, her physical contact with the house generates love. Jackson writes, ‘[j]ourneys end in lovers meeting, she thought, remembering her song at last, and laughed, standing on the steps of Hill House, journeys end in lovers meeting, and she put her feet down firmly and went up to the veranda and the door’.⁶⁸ The immediate juxtaposition of evil and love here is one that repeats throughout the text, most particularly within the familial history of the house. If the house carries a suggestion of evil to the human eye, we must remember that it was, first and foremost, built as a gesture of love from Hugh Crain to his family, who ‘hoped to see his children and grandchildren live in comfortable luxury’.⁶⁹ The characteristic that Eleanor is at first tempted to label ‘evil’ and ascribe to the *nature* of the house could therefore be read as a nonhuman refraction of Hugh Crain’s own warped sense of love for his daughters, over whom he assumed the role of patriarch and whom he raised under a strict moral code.⁷⁰ Hill House, then, was meant for children, and perhaps only for them, as Hugh Crain was ‘unlucky in his wives’: the first died in a carriage accident in the house’s driveway, the second of a mysterious fall, and the third of illness.⁷¹ The house, it seems, jealously guarded its role as primary caretaker of the two young daughters, raising them according to the tenets set down by Hugh Crain in a book of moral instruction he prepared for his eldest daughter Sophia. The book, compiled of illustrations culled from other works and moral lessons derived from Biblical scripture, commands Sophia to ‘hold apart from this world, that its lusts and ingritudes corrupt thee not’.⁷² In return, Sophia appears to have jealously guarded the house’s love. While her younger sister married, she herself fought bitterly for the deed to the house and, while ‘it is said that [she] was crossed in love [...], that

⁶⁶ Jackson, p. 24.

⁶⁷ Jackson, p. 25.

⁶⁸ Ibid.

⁶⁹ Jackson, p. 54.

⁷⁰ Jackson, p. 25.

⁷¹ Jackson, p. 55.

⁷² Jackson, p. 124.

is said of almost any lady who prefers, for whatever reason, to live alone'.⁷³ The unhappy relationship between Eleanor and her own sister echoes that of the Crain sisters; like the elder sister, who felt cheated out of Hill House, Eleanor feels cheated by her own sister, who has assumed control of the car they purchased together. Eleanor and Sophia are alike in another way as well: both share the desire to live alone. On the one hand, this lifestyle is precisely what Eleanor wants for herself; on the other, it also reflects her own moral upbringing, which, Lootens argues, is identical to that preached by Crain. As Lootens notes,

Eleanor has been raised in the ideological world of Hugh Crain's precepts; she may surreptitiously buy red clothing, but to glory in her own sexuality, to be a 'woman of some color', she would have to be a 'different person' indeed.⁷⁴

Like Sophia Crain, Eleanor has also been kept apart from her neighbours, because her mother 'wouldn't mix with them'.⁷⁵ She grew up isolated and alone into an unmarried woman of thirty-two, yet to have her first sexual experience, and still a child in many ways. Like the earlier Crain daughters and Hill House itself, then, Eleanor has been sequestered from the modern world. Raised within the same ideological moral code as Sophia Crain, who 'genuinely loved Hill House and looked upon it as her family home', Eleanor will love and respect the house as no one since Sophia Crain herself had.⁷⁶ For Hill House, 'nothing in it [had been] touched, nothing used, nothing here wanted by anyone any more'; the same could be said for Eleanor.⁷⁷ They find a source of love in each other: Eleanor has longed for her own home, and the home has longed for someone like Eleanor to fill it. Indeed, 'ever since her first memory, Eleanor had been waiting for something like Hill House'.⁷⁸

And Eleanor *is* happy at Hill House, despite her initial misgivings. Retiring on the first night, she muses,

Odd [...] that the house should be so dreadful and yet in many respects so physically comfortable — the soft bed, the pleasant lawn, the good fire, the cooking of Mrs Dudley. The company too, she thought, and then thought, Now I can think about them; I am all alone.⁷⁹

⁷³ Jackson, p. 56.

⁷⁴ Lootens, p. 164.

⁷⁵ Jackson, p. 53.

⁷⁶ Jackson, p. 56.

⁷⁷ Jackson, p. 59.

⁷⁸ Jackson, p. 4.

⁷⁹ Jackson, p. 66, emphasis added.

Eleanor at first misidentifies the source of her happiness, as she still does not recognise that this is her own fairy tale; she wonders whether it is the company of the others that makes her happy, swinging alternately between paranoia ('were they laughing at me?') and a reserved sense of feeling 'grateful to all of them for having me', that 'they were a family, greeting one another with easy formality'.⁸⁰ However, Hill House hovers on the edges of her consciousness as she wonders why 'it was so odd to wake up happy in Hill House', noting that she had 'arisen so aware, so conscious of herself, so deliberate and tender in her attentions'.⁸¹ It is the first time in Eleanor's life that she has ever been loved by anyone. Though unable to name the source of this love explicitly, she is aware of feeling engulfed within it, for the first time in her life.

A Final Taste of Happiness

That what lies at the 'heart of the house' is the nursery, with its 'indefinable air of neglect', is not a coincidence.⁸² Childhood, for Eleanor, was the last time that she was allowed to nurture a sense of self, an identity later circumscribed, as an adult, within the mundane conditions of domestic reality. The house's construction, then, in many ways mirrors the compartmentalisation of Eleanor's own identity. As Dr Montague notes on the first day of the group's arrival, '[s]ome of these rooms are entirely inside rooms [...]. No windows, no access to the outdoors at all.'⁸³ Like the nursery, long-abandoned and neglected, the freedom to self-invent that Eleanor enjoyed in childhood has been similarly partitioned off and separated from her daily activities, resulting in an inner self that is at first inaccessible to Eleanor. Hill House and Eleanor thus mirror each other: each is comprised of bits and pieces that have been subsumed by other elements. As Hattenhauer notes,

The house [...] is both a mirror reflecting Eleanor and a window in which she sees herself in the depths of the house. [...] [T]he first-floor rooms comprise a series of concentric circles; the inner rooms have no windows. As a result, she cannot see the inner self from the outside; she must go there. And getting there is problematic because the passageways do not go to places where they appear to be going.⁸⁴

Indeed, doors in Hill House open onto unexpected rooms; a simple journey from bedroom to dining room presents a labyrinthine series of obstacles for Eleanor and Theodora upon their

⁸⁰ Jackson, pp. 68, 71.

⁸¹ Jackson, p. 69.

⁸² Jackson, p. 87.

⁸³ Jackson, p. 46.

⁸⁴ Hattenhauer, p. 160.

first morning in Hill House. As Jackson indicated in her notes for the novel, the structural confusion of Hill House is meant to reflect Eleanor's own psyche; on a page of notes, Jackson wrote, 'Eleanor IS house/' and then, further on, added 'ALL DISTORTED LIKE HOUSE' in reference to each of the novel's main characters.⁸⁵ Eleanor, then, like the house she is loved by, may be thought of as a series of distorted passageways, a selfhood divided and compartmentalised in which various pieces do not always interconnect. At her heart is a buried, secret, childhood self, secluded and happily alone within her own inaccessible home. If she is to find this inner self, as Hattenhauer suggests, she must go *to* this space.

It is from this perspective that we should consider the particular form taken by the novel's first haunting incident: the psychic manifestation of a child. During the incident, Eleanor and Theodora, huddled together in Theodora's bedroom, hear a banging on the door that, to Eleanor, 'sounds like something children do'.⁸⁶ Desperately searching through Eleanor's psyche, the house materialises a snapshot of Eleanor's own, deeply buried self-image at the last time she was genuinely happy: her childhood, 'when it had seemed to be summer all the time'.⁸⁷ The 'little pattings' and 'small seeking sounds' that Eleanor hears beyond Theodora's bedroom door are the sounds of the house attempting to touch this part of Eleanor, the child self abandoned by Eleanor's forceful transition into adulthood.⁸⁸ That the house manifests the 'sticky sounds' and 'thin little giggle' of a child again links Eleanor to the earlier occupants of the home, the two Crain girls for whom Hill House was a space of domestic comfort.⁸⁹ Awakening the next day, Eleanor thinks to herself, '[i]t is my second morning in Hill House, and I am unbelievably happy. [...] You are happy, Eleanor, you have finally been given a part of your own measure of happiness', indicating that the house has, indeed, touched this long-buried part of Eleanor and begun its attempts to actualise the happiness she imagines in her fairy-tale longings.⁹⁰ 'Journeys end in lovers meeting', she insists to herself; she has only to name the lover, 'lovely Hill House', as she wishes 'to sing and to shout and to fling her arms and move in great emphatic, possessing circles around the rooms of Hill House'.⁹¹ Indeed, Eleanor and Hill House have claimed one another; 'HELP ELEANOR COME HOME', a message written on the hallway walls the next morning, serves as both a plea to Eleanor and a territorial boundary between Eleanor and Hill House on one

⁸⁵ Lootens, p. 159.

⁸⁶ Jackson, p. 94.

⁸⁷ Jackson, p. 9.

⁸⁸ Jackson, p. 96.

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*

⁹⁰ Jackson, p. 100.

⁹¹ Jackson, pp. 100, 106, 104.

side and Theodora, Luke, and Dr Montague on the other.⁹² As Eleanor and Theodora accuse each other of writing the message, Eleanor feels increasingly isolated and manipulated by the others, until the incident finally prompts her disengagement from the group. Stressing Eleanor's status as an outsider and her separation from the others, Jackson writes, 'I am outside, she thought madly, I am the one chosen'.⁹³ Eleanor's 'mad' embrace of her outsider status even becomes a point of self-determination: her inner monologue insists that '[i]f Eleanor is going to be the outsider, she is going to be it all alone'.⁹⁴

Throughout the remainder of the novel, Eleanor increasingly distances herself from the other humans who have gathered at Hill House. In the interpretation that I am suggesting here, this should not be read as a negative movement, however; Eleanor has been alone since the novel's beginning, and it has taken the nonhuman to comfort her where all human efforts have failed. As a telepath, Theodora should have been able to understand Eleanor's desires and needs better than anyone, but she uses her abilities only to tease Eleanor, and then increasingly to mock her. Between Theodora's teasing and Eleanor's own condemnations of Theodora's self-centred tendencies and bold clothing, the relationship, which began in friendship, has become increasingly hostile. When the message 'HELP ELEANOR COME HOME ELEANOR' appears again, this time written in Theodora's room in what appears to be blood, the breach between them is near final; Theodora angrily blames Eleanor, who, though she denies writing the message, 'found that she was smiling'.⁹⁵ As Lootens argues, '[t]he menstrual imagery seems unmistakable here: Hill House echoes and amplifies Eleanor's hatred of "dirty" female bodies, including her own. Theodora's bright clothes are trampled and soaked in blood. Even more significantly, she herself is bloodied — literally rendered a scarlet woman', as though Hill House has passed judgment on Theodora's bright clothing.⁹⁶ Though Eleanor emphatically denies having anything to do with the message, her 'wild, secret hilarity reveals the extent to which Hill House has indeed fulfilled her hidden desires'.⁹⁷ It is this breach that truly clears room for the house to prove to Eleanor that it is her only friend. The first night that Theodora and Eleanor spend in Eleanor's room, Eleanor, dreaming, hears a sound coming from what had been Theodora's room, 'a voice she had never heard before and yet knew she had heard always in her nightmares'.⁹⁸ The voice, as I

⁹² Jackson, p. 107.

⁹³ Jackson, p. 108.

⁹⁴ Jackson, p. 109.

⁹⁵ Jackson, p. 114.

⁹⁶ Lootens, p. 164.

⁹⁷ Ibid.

⁹⁸ Jackson, p. 120.

have been arguing, is her own buried self: 'Please let me go home', it begs.⁹⁹ When Eleanor wakes and desperately questions whose hand she has been holding in her dream, the answer seems evident: she has been holding the hand of the house, who is begging her to come home by speaking to the very part of her that wants to.

That this message is, somehow, reaching her is made very clear the following day: 'I am learning the pathways of the heart, Eleanor thought quite seriously, and then wondered what she could have meant by thinking any such thing.'¹⁰⁰ It is understandable that Eleanor is confused by this; this is, after all, the first time she has ever been loved. But she is clear that other people are not the source of this love. She thinks to herself, '[w]hy do people want to talk to each other? [...] Does [Luke] think that a *human* gesture of affection might seduce me into hurling myself madly at him?'¹⁰¹ A human gesture, for Eleanor, will surely not do the trick. But a *nonhuman* one, replicating the pattern of her previous affections for items like stone lions and white curtains, would invite her into a space of comfortable love, a space where she can 'be alone to think [...] with] nothing in her mind beyond an overwhelming wild happiness'.¹⁰²

That none of the humans gathered in Hill House are capable of the love and care that Hill House invests in Eleanor is a point that Jackson underscores throughout the text — and, indeed, throughout her fiction. In Jackson's oeuvre, very few humans are capable of love, but all are capable of evil. As Carol Cleveland notes, '[i]n Jackson's world, the guilty are not greedy or crazy individuals, but society itself acting collectively and purposely, like a slightly preoccupied lynch mob'.¹⁰³ The 'society' that gathers at Hill House, represented by Eleanor's fellow ghost-hunters, quickly turns against Eleanor once her 'weakness' and proclivity toward fantasy is revealed, deciding to expel her from the house and from the group.¹⁰⁴ Cleveland continues, '[h]er fellow ghost-hunters are very ordinary people, ill equipped to understand the despairing love affair that develops between Eleanor and the perverse house. What they can understand is her need for human relationship and they reject it.'¹⁰⁵ Of the several acquaintances she makes at the house, Theodora comes closest to caring for her;

⁹⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰⁰ Jackson, p. 121.

¹⁰¹ Jackson, pp. 120-21, emphasis added.

¹⁰² Jackson, p. 132.

¹⁰³ Cleveland, p. 200. Cleveland also notes that '[i]n Jackson's world, a healthy and complex moral growth is possible for individuals, but almost never for large groups of people', implying that Jackson held particularly negative feelings toward society as a whole (p. 210).

¹⁰⁴ Cleveland argues, '[t]he fundamental assumption of Jackson's serious work is that any social group will, for its own convenience or pleasure, sacrifice a victim' (p. 215).

¹⁰⁵ Cleveland, p. 203.

however, she is also the character who threatens Eleanor's fragile self-esteem the most. As Cleveland states, 'Theodora is a clever, witty, utterly selfish young woman who can give a surface affection if it costs her nothing, but who closes like a trap if asked for anything more'.¹⁰⁶ Luke, when he finally does give Eleanor attention, talks of nothing but himself; indeed, his comments to Eleanor become increasingly jocular as he takes her less and less seriously. Dr Montague, despite his incessant reading of Samuel Richardson's *Pamela* and *Clarissa*, is unable to recognise that Eleanor is the same sort of long-abused, unloved, and morally exacting woman as the heroines he reads about.¹⁰⁷ Far from providing Eleanor a protecting hand from the evils of the outside world, he loves Eleanor only as an experiment. In a subtle build-up throughout the novel, Jackson reveals Dr Montague to be 'little more than an intellectual voyeur, knowing very much, but really understanding very little, especially when it comes to the mysteries of the human personality and the human heart'.¹⁰⁸

Even Mrs Montague, who, despite her status as comic relief, is actually not that far off when she mentions that the house's spirits 'want to know that we are thinking of them lovingly', is incapable of feeling any love for her fellow humans.¹⁰⁹ She is cold and unfriendly to her husband and quickly disregards Eleanor, Theodora, and Luke, having only as much interest in them as their immediate connections to the manifestations allow. When her planchette brings a message from Eleanor's own psychic vibrations, amplified by the house, she only takes an interest in Eleanor long enough to deliver her message: a communication — seemingly from Eleanor's own childhood self — that desperately insists that she 'want[s] to be home', that she is 'waiting', that she wants her 'mother', and is 'lost. Lost. Lost.'¹¹⁰ This should not be read as evidence of Eleanor's desires to rejoin her mother; Eleanor's immediate thoughts upon receiving this message are not that she wants her mother, but that 'what I want in all this world is peace, a quiet spot to lie and think, a quiet spot up among the flowers where I can dream and tell myself sweet stories'.¹¹¹ The mention of 'sweet stories' recalls Eleanor's earlier fantasies of domesticity and fairy-tale kingdoms, indicating that her true desires lie elsewhere — in solitude, quiet, and dreams. However, Eleanor soon makes the crucial realisation that she does not need to tell herself stories, for her fairy tale is

¹⁰⁶ Ibid.

¹⁰⁷ Samuel Richardson's *Pamela; or, Virtue Rewarded* describes the tale of a virtuous 15-year-old servant girl who is sexually harassed by her employer. *Clarissa* (1748) chronicles the abuse, kidnapping, and eventual death of a morally irreproachable young woman.

¹⁰⁸ Parks, p. 246.

¹⁰⁹ Jackson, p. 135.

¹¹⁰ Jackson, p. 142.

¹¹¹ Jackson, p. 143.

already unfolding: '[n]o stone lions for me, she thought, no oleanders; I have broken the spell of Hill House and somehow come inside. I am home, she thought, and stopped in wonder at the thought. I am home, I am home.'¹¹² Indeed, Eleanor *is* home; mirroring her earlier fantasy of inheriting an enchanted kingdom, Eleanor has finally found her rightful domain. What neither she nor Hill House can bear is the thought that she might now have to abandon it.

A Domestic-Gothic Fairy Tale

As in many of Jackson's other works, the group at Hill House proves to be small-minded, ostracising, and capable of great social evil. Disturbed by Eleanor's erratic behaviour on her final night in Hill House, Dr Montague orders her departure, 'to protect [the] so-called experiment'.¹¹³ Eleanor protests their dismissal, stating,

I haven't any home, no place at all [...]. Everything in all the world that belongs to me is in a carton in the back of my car. That's all I have, some books and things I had when I was a little girl, and a watch my mother gave me. So you see there's no place you can send me.¹¹⁴

Despite Eleanor's protests, they insist that she go back to her sister, who, when she is told by Dr Montague where Eleanor has been, 'asked first about the car'.¹¹⁵ In the group's final moments with Eleanor, they underscore the selfishness that has characterised all those with whom she has interacted throughout her life. Able to embrace neither Eleanor nor the nonhuman house that loves her, they highlight their limited understanding of human fragility and the human need for love, ultimately performing a complete rejection of both. That the house is able to provide Eleanor with the love that other humans cannot is Jackson's final, ironic comment on humanity: 'no one else could satisfy [the house]' because no one else knows how to love.¹¹⁶ Indeed, Eleanor's final experience — her collision with a tree in the yard and subsequent death — is Hill House's last gift to her: the exact fulfilment of her earlier unfinished fantasy of death and her desire for 'a quiet spot up among the flowers where I can dream and tell myself sweet stories'.¹¹⁷ Eleanor, receiving this gift, transcends the human cruelty she has known throughout her life, entering instead into a constant, nonhuman love in her own isolated and secluded home where she can finally 'walk alone'.¹¹⁸

¹¹² Jackson, p. 171.

¹¹³ Parks, p. 25.

¹¹⁴ Jackson, p. 177.

¹¹⁵ Ibid.

¹¹⁶ Jackson, p. 178.

¹¹⁷ Jackson, pp. 12, 143.

¹¹⁸ Jackson, p. 182.

In light of the cruel rejection of Eleanor performed by the others, which in many ways mirrors Eleanor's displacement from the broader heteronormative mid-century American society, the house's earnest protection of and attention toward unmarried women who wish to live alone, such as Sophia Crain and Eleanor, raises the question of why Hill House has been so maligned by critics, the other characters within the novel, and even the narrator, who observes that Hill House 'was a house without kindness, never meant to be lived in, not a fit place for people or for love or for hope'.¹¹⁹ However, in a very real sense, the house is *not* the evil force it has been made out to be.¹²⁰ Far from being a reservoir of 'misery and agony waiting for suitably tenuous human beings to drink from [it]',¹²¹ it is instead, as I have been arguing, a misunderstood nonhuman entity, with an undeveloped understanding of the human boundaries between self and other; an unclear understanding of the human love it refracts; and, existing as it does, 'not sane' and in 'conditions of absolute reality', an undeveloped understanding of the boundaries between human fantasy and reality, since *everything* within its bounds is absolute reality.¹²² In this sense, it is very much like Eleanor, who similarly cannot tell the difference between the sense of self she has developed through fairy tale and her actual reality. Like Eleanor, Hill House wants a life of isolation and peace, enclosed securely within its gates, far from the prying eyes of people. That Hill House attempts to literalise Eleanor's fairy-tale desires of isolation throughout the novel is, I argue, a gesture of the house's own need for Eleanor — these are attempts to show her that she has found her home, a place where she can transform into 'absolute reality' the fantasies she has longed for throughout the text. By plumbing the depths of Eleanor's psyche, it materialises the conditions which seem to render her most happy: fantastic narratives of a home of her own; childish manifestations of her youth, when she was not subsumed by the needs of others; and an unending, impenetrable solitude in which to be alone and think.

The novel, then, is not solely a gothic tale. In keeping with Jackson's taste for subverting traditional reader expectations, *Hill House*, like her next novel *We Have Always Lived in the Castle*, offers a macabre twist on the conventional happy ending. *Castle* ends

¹¹⁹ See Jackson, p. 24. The character of Mrs Dudley is, perhaps, one exception to this rule. While Theodora and, at first, Eleanor speak of the house critically, 'Eleanor sensed, with a quick turn of apprehension, that flippant or critical talk about the house bothered Mrs Dudley in some manner'. Despite the house's gruesome reputation, Dr Montague notes that "'the Dudleys have taken care of Hill House ever since anyone can remember'", and Mrs Dudley expresses a respect for the house and an attention to its care that causes Eleanor to declare, "'I think Mrs Dudley is proud of the house'". Mrs Dudley's relationship to Hill House is, however, ambiguous at best; her pride in the house notwithstanding, she is careful to repeat, almost mechanically and in ominous fashion, "'I leave before dark comes'". See Jackson, pp. 31, 47, 27.

¹²⁰ See in particular Cleveland, Downey and Jones, Hague, Miller, Newman, and Rubenstein.

¹²¹ Cleveland, p. 203.

¹²² Jackson, p. 1.

with the image of Merricat and Constance Blackwood living blissfully together in the charred ruins of the Blackwood estate, ‘so happy’ to have at last attained seclusion from the hostile villagers responsible for damaging their home and an inviolable isolation in which to practice their unconventional, self-sufficient, female-centric lifestyle.¹²³ In true fairy-tale style, Jackson ends *Hill House* with the fulfilment of another wish: Eleanor’s longed-for ‘quiet spot to lie and think’, which recalls both the secluded silence of the grave and of ‘Hill House itself’, where ‘silence lay steadily against the wood and stone’.¹²⁴ Crossing into the nonhuman realm, away from the eyes of the world, has been Eleanor’s dream throughout the text. With its gloomy reputation to precede it and frighten off unwelcome visitors, its boundaries to cross, and its gates, chains, and protective barriers to pass through, Hill House is the ultimate protector for a ‘sad maiden’ like Eleanor who has been rejected by human society.¹²⁵ Its otherworldliness removes it from the reach of hurtful human hands. For those suffering in a cruel world, the thought of a house in which ‘whatever walked there, walked alone’ offers an enticing image of seclusion and, thus, of protection.¹²⁶ Far from being solely a gothic novel, then, *The Haunting of Hill House* is perhaps best thought of as a domestic-gothic fairy tale. As Jackson herself stated while writing the novel, ‘[m]ore than ever before I am wandering in a kind of fairytale world’.¹²⁷ However, this world — and its associated happy ending — eluded Jackson throughout her life. As Lynette Carpenter observes, the journal Jackson kept during her illness

reiterates a longing for safety and security in the context of personal liberation, and it emphasizes Jackson’s desire to be alone: ‘I look forward every now and then to freedom and security (and I do mean security by myself) [...]’. She describes ‘the glorious world of the future’ when she will be ‘alone, safe’ [...], and her aspirations: ‘to be separate, to be alone, to *stand* and *walk* alone’.¹²⁸

Later, in a diary entry from 1964, Jackson wrote,

this is not a refuge, these pages, but a way through, a path not charted; i feel my way, but there is a way through. not a refuge yet. on the other side somewhere there is a country, perhaps the glorious country of well-dom, perhaps a country of a story.¹²⁹

¹²³ Jackson, *We Have Always Lived in the Castle* (New York: Penguin, 2006), p. 146. For an excellent analysis of the anti-patriarchal themes of *Castle*, see Carpenter.

¹²⁴ Jackson, *Hill House*, pp. 143, 182.

¹²⁵ Jackson, p. 15.

¹²⁶ Jackson, p. 182.

¹²⁷ Oppenheimer, p. 226.

¹²⁸ Carpenter, p. 211. The desire expressed in Jackson’s journal to ‘walk alone’ mirrors the assertion that opens and closes *The Haunting of Hill House*: that ‘whatever walked [in Hill House], walked alone’ (p. 182).

¹²⁹ Quoted in Hattenhauer, p. 27, capitalisation as in original.

A letter sent days before her death in 1965 perhaps hinted at her intent to reach this other side, the ‘country of a story’. Jackson, who never travelled anywhere, who could not even leave her home during the worst stages of her illness due to her agoraphobia, was about to go on a ‘wonderful voyage [...] alone’.¹³⁰ For Eleanor, and perhaps for Jackson herself, journeys end in lovers meeting; on the other side, there lies Hill House.

¹³⁰ Oppenheimer, p. 271. This language also echoes the plot of Jackson’s last novel, *Come Along With Me*, which was unfinished at her time of death in 1965. Carpenter notes that ‘[i]n it, a middle-aged woman buries her husband, picks a city at random, and sets off alone to make a new life for herself, with a new name of her own invention’ (p. 212).