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**THE PERFECTLY EVIL HOME: THE HOUSE AS A LIVING CHARACTER IN SHIRLEY  
JACKSON'S *THE HAUNTING OF HILL HOUSE*.**



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The house isn't haunted, I know a lot of people think that, because it's so – the house isn't haunted, but it is a haunting, in itself.

*(Mabel, episode 7)*

So, what does it mean, for a place to be haunted? A place can be haunted by someone, some poor soul whose bones lie restless in the shallow soil. It can be haunted by something, some crime or atrocity that indelibly marked itself upon the soul of a spot. But can it be haunted by somewhere?

*(The Magnus Archives, episode 196)*

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## **Abstract**

*The Haunting of Hill House* is one of the most well-known Gothic novels written in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. It has been thoroughly analyzed due to its psychologically complex characters, especially in the field of trauma with the main character, Eleanor Vance, as the focus on the analysis. This analysis, however, focuses on the house as a living character and the relationship it has with Eleanor.

The first part of this dissertation is focused on Hill House's physical characteristics, describing all the elements that make it disturbing and all the instances in which the house is personified or given human attributes. The second part focuses on the psychological dimension and the mother-child dynamic it forms with Eleanor, as well as analyzing how this relationship evolves throughout the novel.

**Keywords:** Shirley Jackson, *The Haunting of Hill House*, architecture, psychology, mother house, trauma.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Old buildings, such as castles and houses, have played an important role in Gothic novels since the beginning of this genre with the publication of British author Horace Walpole's *The Castle of Otranto* in 1764. From that moment, the Gothic tradition spread throughout England and to the United States, where the American Gothic was developed. The American Gothic, despite sharing the main characteristics of the English tradition, uses themes that are more specific to the culture and tradition of the United States, such as "the frontier experience (...); the Puritan inheritance; fear of European subversion and anxieties about popular democracies which was then a new experiment; the relative absence of developed "society"; and, very significantly, racial issues concerning both slavery and the Native Americans" (Lloyd-Smith, 2004: 4). Although the American Gothic peaked during the 19<sup>th</sup> century, with authors such as Washington Irving, Nathaniel Hawthorne, Edgar Allan Poe or Charlotte Perkins Gilman, it was not left behind in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, during which important authors such as William Faulkner, Toni Morrison or Shirley Jackson contributed to the genre with several novels and short stories.

Shirley Jackson (1916-1965) was an American author well-known for her Gothic horror stories, such as the short story "The Lottery" (1948), and the novels *The Haunting of Hill House* (1959) and *We Have Always Lived in the Castle* (1962). Among her production, *The Haunting of Hill House* may be her most widely known work, and it has been adapted three times into two movies called *The Haunting* (1963 and 1999) and a Netflix TV show with the same title as the novel (2018). As I will develop later, the book has also sparked much interest from several academic circles, despite Jackson not being considered part of the literary canon, because of the complex psychology of her characters and the themes that appear in her stories, especially in the aforementioned.

The novel focuses on Eleanor Vance, a young woman who is living with her sister after their mother's death. She one day receives an invitation from Dr. John Montague to join him and his other guests in the investigation of the paranormal phenomena that surround Hill House, which is thought to be haunted. In Hill House she meets Luke Sanderson, the heir of the house, and Theodora, a woman with unspecified special abilities, and throughout the novel their relationships develop as they delve into the mysterious nature of the house.

Since the narrator follows Eleanor's point of view throughout the novel, scholars have mostly focused on her psychology, especially on the topic of family trauma (Baker, 2017; Evans, 2019; Nungaray, 2019; Pascal, 2014), which is one of the main themes of the novel, although there is also room for queer readings of her relationship with Theodora (Haines, 2007; Lootens, 2005). Most analyses that focus on the house interpret it as a reflection of Eleanor's subconscious (Rubenstein, 1996; Parks, 1984) and, although there is definitely a connection between the two, I argue that Hill House plays a more active role in the shaping of her psyche, as I believe that the house is alive and is another character of the novel. Although some scholars, such as Matek (2018) and Rasmus (2009) have already analyzed Hill House as possessing human attributes, this analysis will have a more in-depth focus on the details that personify it as well as how its relationship with Eleanor develops throughout the novel. These two aspects, the physical and the psychological sphere of the house, form the two parts of this dissertation.

Spaces, particularly architecture, play a very important role in literature. In the case of American Gothic fiction, there is a particular connection with the house, considered one of the main tropes of the genre. Described by Gaston Bachelard in *The Poetics of Space* as a "psychic state" (Bachelard, 1994: 72), it is not surprising that houses have been used as allegories for the character's psyche and are one of the main elements



of the atmosphere of the story. In many Gothic stories, the house is the source of uncanniness, related to Freud's concept of the Unheimlich (i.e., unhomely), which refers to something that is unfamiliar and familiar at the same time. Hill House is the perfect example of this concept, because, in a way, it feels familiar, but there is also something wicked about it, something wrong.

As I have mentioned, Hill House is characterized as another living character, and it takes the role of the mother, a presence that is lacking in Eleanor's life. The analysis will focus on how this role is developed throughout the book and why Eleanor forms such a strong bond with it, as well as discussing several instances in which the ending of the novel is foreshadowed.

## **2. HILL HOUSE'S PERSONIFIED CHARACTERIZATION.**

Houses in Gothic literature are usually of ominous nature due to many reasons, such as their age or a sinister history attributed to it, normally about the deaths of the previous owners. The house becomes an "oppressive, claustrophobic space and the nexus of secrets, sins, and crimes" (Matek, 2018: 407), thus "subverting our ideals of domestic tranquility and security" (Eggener, 2013: n/p) because it is not an ideal house anymore as the characters are not safe as long as they stay within its walls. These spaces are an essential element of the story and, therefore, the way they are described will be relevant to how we interpret the text.

The first thing we know about Hill House is that it is "not sane, (...) holding darkness within" (Jackson, 2008: 3). Since its introduction, the house is personified, which will be relevant later in the analysis of Hill House as a living character. The narrator, moreover, lets the reader know that the house is not safe to approach, and this fact is confirmed by Eleanor when she sees it for the first time: "The house was vile. (...) Hill House is vile, it is diseased, get away from here at once" (33). This image of the

house is a shock to Eleanor, who, during her trip to Hill House, had been daydreaming about living in an ideal home by herself, basing her fantasies on the houses she passes by as she drives towards Hill House. This ideal home is described by Bachelard as a place that “shelters daydreaming, (...) protects the dreamer, (...) allows one to dream in peace” (Bachelard, 1994: 6); Hill House subverts Bachelard’s ideal, because Eleanor, the daydreamer, is not protected, and she knows from the first moment that her safety is at risk as long as she remains there. However, Hill House will end up being, in a way, Eleanor’s ideal home, as will be analyzed later.

There are several elements which contribute to Hill House’s vileness. The first thing that the reader associates with Hill House’s uncanny atmosphere is its darkness: from Eleanor approaching the main gate to her walking its hallways for the first time, the narrator is constantly repeating how dark it is: the road to the house is “shadowed on either side by the still, dark trees” (28), the hall is made of “dark wood and weighty carving, dim under the heaviness of the staircase” (37), Eleanor’s room’s walls are also made of “dark woodwork to shoulder height” (49), and she feels like she is “enshadowed” (36) by the house. Overall, the dark and heavy atmosphere produces a claustrophobic feeling that does not make Hill House feel welcoming.

After this first impression, Eleanor notices another unsettling element: the silence Hill House is drowned into. She realizes that she has been “trying to move as silently as possible, as though stillness were vital in Hill House; she remembered that Mrs. Dudley had also walked without a sound” (41), thus creating an unnatural atmosphere, almost as if Hill House belonged to another part of time or reality. It could be argued that Eleanor moves silently because of her traumatic experiences with her mother, as she says later that this is the first place she does not have to “worry about making a noise at night”

(227); however, the fact that Mrs. Dudley walks without a sound as well implies that silence is not a response to Eleanor's trauma, but an inherent characteristic of the house.

Altogether, the unnerving and strange characteristics of Hill House lead to it being described by Eleanor as "diseased" and, later, by Dr. Montague as "leprous" (70). Hill House, thus, is "unclean and forbidden", a house that has been "born bad" (70). It is also worth noting how Hill House is constantly compared to death, whether it be by Dr. Montague in the aforementioned scene, in which he also compares the house to "Homer's phrase for the underworld: *aidao domos*, the house of Hades" (70), or by Eleanor, who jokingly states that her room "used to be the embalming room" (43). This constant presence of death could be considered a foreshadowing device, because the novel ends with Eleanor's death, as well as a representation of the house's past; however, it also reflects the lack of humanity, lack of connections, and isolation that characterize Hill House.

The house, therefore, is not an inviting place. As Bachelard states, "all the spaces of intimacy are designated by an attraction" (Bachelard, 1994: 12); however, the characters are not attracted to Hill House, but repulsed, and want to either run away or burn it down. Since there is nothing attractive about Hill House, it is impossible for intimacy to develop within its walls.

Moreover, it is also said that "Hill House has a reputation for insistent hospitality; it seemingly dislikes letting its guests get away. The last person who tried to leave Hill House in darkness (...) was killed at the turn in the driveway" (67). The house, in fact, ends up trapping Eleanor at the end, when, in the middle of her breakdown, she goes on top of the tower and tries to exit through the trapdoor, which has "been nailed shut" (234). This allows Luke to bring her back to safety; however, Dr. Montague and the other guests

force Eleanor to leave against her wishes, which will lead to her death and will both repeat the story that Dr. Montague had explained and trap Eleanor in Hill House forever.

Adding to the feeling of death and unreality, the house also gives its visitors a sense of entrapment, mainly because of the doors. As Eleanor notices at the beginning, “all the doors she could see in this house were closed” (37), and later they notice how “every door in this house swings shut when you let go of it” (65). The doors are also part of what makes the house a disorienting place. Even if they try to leave the doors open to know their way inside the house, they will close again, making it more difficult for them to orient themselves because the floorplan is confusing and makes little sense. As Dr. Montague says to Luke, “if we let you go off wandering by yourself we’d very likely never find you again” (84), because the house is a “masterpiece of architectural misdirection” (106). Hill House, then, leads everyone who sets foot in it to feel disoriented, get lost inside its chambers and, probably, get trapped inside it forever, which seems to be the building’s main intention.

The doors, however, are not the only element which contributes to this “fairly large distortion in the house” (106). What makes the characters realize that “everything is a little bit off center” and “that’s why it all feels so disjointed” (107) is, precisely, the veranda roof:

“The veranda roof is what misleads us. I can look out my window and see the veranda roof and because I came directly into the house and up the stairs I assumed that the front door was right below, although really—”

“You see only the veranda roof,” the doctor said. “The front door is far away; it and the tower are visible from the nursery, which is the big room at the end of the hallway; we will see it later today. It is”—and his voice was saddened—“a masterpiece of architectural misdirection.” (106)

The characters, upon their realization, compare Hill House to the feeling of coming off shipboard, when “your sense of balance could be so distorted that it would take you a while to lose your sea legs, or your Hill House legs.” (107). Therefore, they are aware that their sense of disorientation comes from the house’s distortion, but they

have grown so used to it that it only feels slightly wrong, and they are aware that it will take them a while to lose that sense of imbalance present in Hill House once they get out.

Although it is important to note that Eleanor is the most affected by Hill House's structure and claustrophobic aura, anyone who comes close to it will feel its effect. In fact, it is stated that "every person who has spent any length of time in this house urged [Dr. Montague] to stay as far away from it as possible" (72). The feeling that there is something wrong with the house, therefore, precedes any paranormal activity and starts right at its creation: when Eleanor is still the first person in the house, "she realize[s] that she [is] afraid to go back across the room" (42), and she is relieved to find Theo and realize that, finally, "somebody's here" (42). Theodora also has that same feeling of being in danger and tells Eleanor that "all [she] could think of when [she] got a look at the place from outside was what fun it would be to stand out there and watch it burn down." (45)

As readers, we are left to wonder what exactly went wrong with Hill House and the reason for its vileness. The tragic story of the Crain family, who were the ones responsible for its construction, is not the reason why the house is distorted, since it is implied that the wickedness of Hill House comes from the time it was being built: "[Eleanor] had a quick impression of the builders finishing off the second and third stories of the house with a kind of indecent haste, eager to finish their works without embellishment and get out of there" (38). However, it is never specified exactly when this vileness began, if something went wrong during the construction of the house or if it comes from the place in which it was built itself.

The reason for its unnerving nature is never specified either, but it appears that the house "all but built itself and determined its own evil nature, independent of human intent or action" (Egger, 2013: n/p), which leads us to believe that it "willed itself into existence by manipulating people to build it according to scales unknown, and that it

continues to ensure its survival by killing anyone who threatens its existence” (Matek, 2018: 420). This idea contributes to the interpretation of Hill House as another living character, as an evil being whose essence is already dangerous.

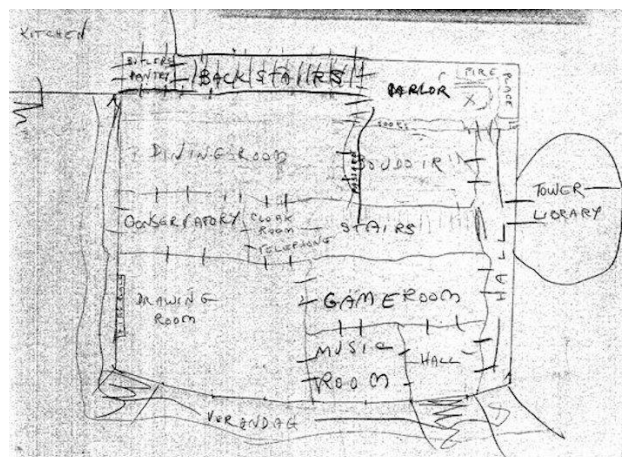
The idea of a house “whose ominousness is not the result of a curse or possession by an unseen, alien presence, but stems instead from its very own self” (Hock Soon Ng, 2015: 2) is deeply unnerving, and it gives both the readers and the characters “the sense of ultimate defeat and the realisation of human weakness and inadequacy in the face of the Unknown” (Matek, 2018: 421). What ultimately makes Hill House so disturbing is the fact that it is still a mystery: we know that it is distorted, but we do not know when or why it happened, we do not know its motives or how Hill House works.

Interestingly, though, not every part of Hill House is completely disturbing or makes the characters want to escape or burn it to the ground. There is one place in which they feel relatively safe: the parlor, a room in which the main characters meet, their “center of operations, a kind of common room” (62). The presence in the parlor of a fireplace that Luke lights is very important, since “the very notion of home seems to have grown round the hearth” (Rykwert, 1991: 51), which was, “until very recently, still the focus of family life in England” (Bachelard, 1994: 142). Although Bachelard focuses on England, this is relevant in other western cultures such as the US. This fact gives the impression that there is a kind of familial bond between the characters, and that they use this room as a way to strengthen it, thus mirroring what could be interpreted as a family dynamic.

Despite the slight comfort that it may bring, the parlor is still a victim of Hill House’s distortion: it has an “unpleasantly high ceiling” and a “narrow tiled fireplace”, as well as “rounded and slippery” chairs (62). Overall, the room is described as “overwhelming” (62), but that does not stop the protagonists from making it their

common room and a safe space. It is worth noting that throughout the novel there is no paranormal activity or unexplained happenings in the parlor, which makes it easier for the sense of safety and community to outweigh the uncanniness.

Moreover, the placement of the parlor in Shirley Jackson's blueprint of Hill House is worth considering. The center of the house is important; as Bachelard explains, it is "a center of magnetic force, into a major zone of protection" (Bachelard, 1994: 31). For that reason, it would be logical for the parlor to be in the center of the building; however, it is located at the top right corner. This location breaks the idea of the hearth as a central place and adds to the disorienting feeling of Hill House's floorplan: all the rooms are connected, but they are in strange places and their distribution is confusing, which is the main reason why it is so easy to get lost inside the house.



**Figure 1. Shirley Jackson's floorplan for Hill House.**

It is also worth mentioning that the parlor as a representation of family life has an opposed relationship with another room: the nursery. The parlor has the warmth of the fireplace, whereas the nursery is the coldest spot in Hill House. The fact that it is also described as being "the heart of the house" (119) makes the heart-hearth dichotomy more evident.

The nursery has two "grinning heads" whose "separate stares, captured forever in distorted laughter, met and locked at the point of the hall where the vicious cold centered"

(120). The heads being focused on the heart of the house has the implication that they “represent parental spirits whose insinuating stares are psychologically all-seeing, all searching. The two presences function as familial despots who are both conspiratorial and competitive, terrible mother and terrible father jostling for possession of vulnerable child souls”. (Pascal, 2014: 473). Therefore, whereas the hearth represents warmth and the strengthening of family bonds, the nursery represents coldness, the controlling and abusive parents.

The fact that the nursery is described as the heart of the house should not be ignored, because, as I have mentioned before, Hill House is characterized throughout the novel as having human attributes. It is not unusual in literature for houses to be personified, and the fact that we use words such as “austere, welcoming, friendly” (Cooper, 1974: 17) show that we have “invested the house with human qualities” (Cooper, 1974: 17). While this has usually been done to show the house as a psychic state, in *The Haunting of Hill House* these characteristics both show the house as a representation of Eleanor’s psyche and introduce it as another living character in the novel, a character that encompasses and has control over everything.

Most of these humanizing descriptions are given the first time Eleanor sees the house, when she describes it as being “vile” and “diseased” (33), a “house without kindness” (35), and calls it “arrogant and hating” (35). Eleanor feels an immediate repulsion toward the house and says that it is difficult for her to set foot on the steps because she feels that “it [is] waiting for her, evil, but patient” (36), because it is “looking down over her”, “never off guard” (35). This is another instance in which Shirley Jackson subverts Bachelard’s ideal home, because “evil intrudes into domestic space, perverting safety inside ‘the space we love’ and bringing alienation from what is seen as good or acceptable.” (Matek, 2018: 412).



At the beginning, Eleanor thinks that “maybe [Mrs. Dudley] thinks [Hill House] can hear [them]” (43), and later dismisses the thought, “sorry she had thought it” (43), because she believes it cannot be possible. However, as the story progresses, she starts thinking like the housekeeper: Eleanor is troubled by Theodora calling Hill House by its name, and wonders if “telling the house she knows its name, calling the house to tell it where [they] are; is it bravado?” (123). She also notices that Dr. Montague “does not name it” (124) and describes a moment of silence “as though the house listened with attention to her words, understanding, cynically agreeing, content to wait” (131). The characters seem to be aware of the fact that Hill House is alive, and they do not feel safe knowing that it is listening to their conversations, waiting for the most appropriate moment to trap them within its walls.

We see, thus, that the house is not only given human attributes, but also human senses. It can hear them, and it can locate them, and both of those things are a danger to the visitors’ safety. Hill House is a building that “watches, threatens and consumes”, a “parasite that sucks the life from its occupants” (Egger, 2013: n/p), and it quickly becomes another main character of the novel who will adopt the role, as will now be discussed, of Eleanor’s mother figure, and will become a character into which Eleanor will eventually melt.

### **3. HILL HOUSE AS A MOTHER FIGURE**

One of the recurring elements in *The Haunting of Hill House* is the presence of Eleanor’s mother, who passed away a few months before the beginning of the novel. Her memory follows Eleanor throughout the book, and we as readers slowly see the kind of relationship that mother and daughter had and the effects that it has had on Eleanor.

From the beginning, we know that her mother is “the only person in the world [Eleanor] genuinely hated” (6), because she mistreated her for years even when she was

taking care of her. The relationship they have gives the impression that Eleanor has been forced to adapt to the role of “both mother and child” (Newman, 1990: 126), or that the roles have been reversed, since the caring only goes one way. Because of the mothering role that she has been forced to assume, Eleanor has “[lost] her own youth” (Newman, 1990: 126), one of the reasons for her resentment for her mother.

After her mother’s passing, Eleanor does not feel at home anywhere. She is living with her sister, but she is not wanted there: she is completely on her own, without freedom, and this is the reason why she accepts Dr. Montague’s invitation. Hill House, which could be seen as Eleanor’s desperate attempt to find a place to belong, takes the role that she has needed for so long: a mother figure. It is not uncommon to use the “house as symbol of mother or the womb” (Cooper, 1974: 137), and Hill House has an “oppressively maternal atmosphere” (Pascal, 2014: 481). It is important to remember where the heart of the house is: in front of the nursery, which immediately connects Hill House to motherhood and, in a way, to Eleanor’s mother. Throughout the novel, there are other elements in Hill House that remind Eleanor of her, such as the library:

Eleanor stood away from the wall; her hands were cold and she wanted to cry, but she turned her back to the library door, which the doctor propped open with a stack of books. “I don’t think I’ll do much reading while I’m here,” she said, trying to speak lightly. “Not if the books smell like the library.” (104)

Interestingly, it appears that the other characters present “hadn’t noticed a smell” (104), whereas Eleanor feels like crying without even having to enter the room. This reaction is influenced by her traumatic experiences with her mother, who had forced her to read romantic novels out loud every afternoon while she was taking care of her, and makes the connection between the smell of books and her.

It would seem, therefore, that Eleanor connects Hill House with her traumatic experiences; however, ignoring the first negative impression of Hill House as diseased and her refusal to go into the library, Eleanor does not feel as out of place as one would

be in her situation, and she even thinks, surprised, that “the first good night’s sleep she had had in years had come to her in Hill House” (93). Hill House is far from being ideal, but for Eleanor it feels, in a sense, like a safe place in which she can sleep peacefully. Arguably, this first moment of comfort is what makes Eleanor trust Hill House and think of it as her home, or somewhere that could potentially be. For a character as traumatized as Eleanor, sleeping well or not having to “worry about making a noise at night” (227) make her lower her guard and become more vulnerable to the house.

Since Hill House is a personified character, it appears that it considers itself as well to be Eleanor’s home and safest place, or at least it wants to make her believe so, as it writes “HELP ELEANOR COME HOME” (146) on the wall. Although after finding Hill House’s message she has a breakdown about the house knowing her name, Eleanor seems to internalize this feeling of safety and belonging that Hill House wants her to feel, as at the end, when she is losing herself into the house, the house’s wishes are met: “I am home, she thought, and stopped in wonder at the thought. I am home, I am home” (232); she repeats this sentence almost as if it was unbelievable, as if she had been waiting all her life for this moment. Even as she enters the library, the only room she had refused to enter, she feels “fondly warm” (232), and she is not scared of Hill House anymore.

This process is possible because Hill House adopts a mother role whereas Eleanor becomes the child. Eleanor has a predisposition for this, as because of her traumatic experience with her mother and the loss of her childhood, she has given up “all hope of mature individuation, welcoming the role of child” (Newman, 1990: 132). Since the beginning of the novel, Eleanor relates to children struggling. The first instance we see that is during her trip to Hill House, when she finds a girl who refuses to drink because she wants her “cup of stars” (21), to which Eleanor thinks “so do I” (21) and proceeds to think that “once they have trapped you into being like everyone else you will never see

your cup of stars again” (22). She also feels a connection with the child that she hears during one of the nights at Hill House:

She heard a little soft cry which broke her heart, a little infinitely sad cry, a little sweet moan of wild sadness. It is a *child*, she thought with disbelief, a child is crying somewhere (...).

I can't stand it, Eleanor thought concretely. This is monstrous, this is cruel, they have been hurting a child and I won't let anyone hurt a child. (162)

Eleanor has been hurt throughout her life, and her traumatic experiences have made it harder for her to mature and become an adult like the rest of the characters. She is what is called a “*bildungsroman* in reverse” (Pascal, 2014: 480) because she does not become an adult, she progressively becomes more of a child. She relates more to children than to adults her own age, and thus adopts this role in relation to Hill House.

Although this mother-child relationship is ultimately established at the end of the novel, when Eleanor has a breakdown and runs around the house, becoming one with it, there are instances throughout the book in which Hill House feeds on Eleanor's vulnerability and loneliness that subtly hint at the ending of the book.

When she first arrives at Hill House, she feels “like a small creature swallowed whole by a monster” (42), and later both Eleanor and Theodora have the impression that Hill House “wanted to consume [them], take [them] into itself, make [them] a part of the house” (139). In the first scene, Eleanor is still alone in the house, and she feels vulnerable because there is nobody else by her side, and in the second scene, Eleanor and Theodora explain the paranormal happenings they experienced the previous night, but neither Luke nor Dr. Montague believe them. Both moments are relevant, because loneliness and alienation, as well as the other characters ignoring her traumatic experiences, will be what will eventually make Eleanor's psyche slip into Hill House.

As the story progresses, Eleanor's mental state worsens, and she has smaller breakdowns before the final one that will lead to her death. One of them comes after they discover the writing on the wall that says, “HELP ELEANOR COME HOME” (146). Eleanor

panics at seeing her own name being used by the house and confesses that she is “always afraid of being alone” (160), and that she thinks “there’s only one of [her], and it’s all [she has] got” (160). Throughout her life, she has been the only one that has taken care of her, and the alienation from her peers she has suffered because of having to take care of her mother has taken a toll on her mental health.

In such a vulnerable moment, Eleanor becomes an easier target for Hill House: “I *hate* seeing myself dissolve and slip and separate” (160), she says. We can assume that her psyche and sense of self were unstable before going into the house, but the choice of words is interesting as that is, precisely, what happens to her at the end. The doctor stops her speech at the worrying confession that Eleanor thinks, “if I could only surrender” (160), and Luke voices his concern as well; however, neither of the protagonists’ preoccupation lasts long, because they give her a glass of brandy and start mocking her breakdown:

The doctor laughed. “Stop trying to be the center of attention.”  
“Vanity,” Luke said serenely.  
“Have to be in the limelight,” Theodora said. (161)

This is not the only instance in which Eleanor tries to share her traumatic experiences and finds little to no support in her peers. Later in the novel, she tells Luke and Theodora that “it was [her] fault [her] mother died” (212), and then insists on the fact that “no matter when it happened it was going to be [her] fault” (212). Eleanor has been made to believe by her mother, and then by her sister, that she is responsible for all that goes wrong, and instead of being treated with compassion and understanding, Theodora tells her that “[she] should have forgotten all that by now”, and that she “probably just *like[s]* thinking it was [her] fault” (212). Although Eleanor is clearly traumatized and acts according to the patterns she has been used to, the other protagonists do not offer her their support; instead, they only make remarks about how she is exaggerating or victimizing herself. This is, evidently, very harmful for a traumatized subject, and will be part of the

process through which Eleanor's mental health will deteriorate until she slips into Hill House. As psychologist and trauma researcher Dori Laub explains,

it is not until the traumatized subject narrates her perception and reaction to her story that she comes to know its remainder and "experience" it more fully. The dynamic engagement between listener or "secondary witness" and the traumatized subject gives birth to the putative traumatic event. (Vinci, 2019: 58)

This means that until Eleanor is allowed to talk about her traumatic experiences, she will not be able to accept what happened to her and, therefore, will not be able to heal. However, nobody in Hill House (or outside) takes her seriously or actually cares about her well-being: Theo and Luke ignore her attempts at opening up about her experiences, Dr. Montague shows "little compassion for Eleanor's loss of sanity" (Parks, 1984: 25) and would rather send her away than address her problems; even Mrs. Montague cares little about her, as, in the middle of Eleanor's final breakdown, she asks "what on earth is the creature doing?" (233), comparing her to a child condescendingly but also implying that she is inhuman, which contributes to the idea of Eleanor as the Other.

Since Eleanor's trauma is left "untold" (Vinci, 2019: 58), she develops an "austere sense of absence, loss, and uncanny potentiality" (Vinci, 2019: 58), so she is forced to keep living in a traumatic state, unable to heal or move on from her traumatic experiences to live a healthy life.

From this point onwards, Eleanor's mental health only gets worse, as she feels lonelier than ever and left out of the group. Before her final breakdown, there is a "slipping of object into subject" (Jackson, quoted in Hattenhauer, 2003: 3), and it appears that she "becomes" the house. Even though she is still relatively stable, at this point the damage is almost unfixable, and her connection to Hill House will follow her until her death.

At first, she feels herself "disappearing inch by inch into this house, (...) going apart a little bit at a time" (201), and her fusion with it allows her to hear "everything, all

over the house” (206). For a while, she “slips in and out of her body” (Vinci, 2019: 53), wondering if what she hears is her own doing: “Am I doing it? She wondered quickly, is that me? And heard the tiny laughter beyond the door, mocking her.” (202) Even in a state of derealization, Eleanor feels hurt by the rejection and mockery she faces, even if, or maybe because, she does not know who is making the sounds.

Despite her mental fragility, she still needs Theodora’s acceptance, because, at that point, “her sense of personhood is contingent upon [it]” (Vinci, 2019: 69), so she observes her and Luke from the shadows, wondering “when [they are] going to talk about [her]” (219). Eleanor is, again, obsessed with the perception others have of her, a need that stems from having been uncared for and neglected for so long. When everyone fails her, she is “erased from the category of human” and “perceives the world through a profoundly non-anthropocentric optic” (Vinci, 2019: 71), in this case, a point of view that mixes her perception and the house’s. Her final fusion with the house, therefore, blurs the lines between what is human and what it not until it is “impossible to differentiate the character from the house” (Hattenhauer, 2003: 4), which is the culmination of what had been hinted at throughout the novel.

This breakdown also means that Eleanor fully accepts her role as a child in contraposition to the motherly role of the house. “We trick them so easily” (230), she thinks while she is hiding from the other characters, which feels like she is treating the situation almost like a game of hide and seek. At this point, the house has managed to separate Eleanor from the other characters, and not only physically, by making her believe there is a difference between “we” and “them”.

Hill House, therefore, does not adopt the mother role that Eleanor was lacking but becomes another abusive mother. Hill House takes advantage of her loneliness and trauma, forcing her to stay with it, trapping her “not only in space but also in time”

(Hattenhauer, 2003: 4). When she finally goes to the tower, she is “held so tightly in the embrace of the house, in the straining grip of the house” (231), which gives Hill House an oppressive nature, and then, for the first time in the entire book, she enters the library, the only room she had refused to enter.

She does not feel scared, but “fondly warm” (232) because the library treats her gently: “under her feet the stone floor moved caressingly” (232), which makes Eleanor feel, for the first time, safe: “I am home” (232), she thinks. However, this is only a façade: Hill House is not the loving, caring mother that she needs, but as abusive and destructive as her biological mother, as it leads her to the top of the staircase, where she could easily fall. The tower is also the place where the villagers believe the younger Crain sister’s companion “hanged herself” (81), so the chances that Eleanor was led there as a coincidence are slim.

Eleanor’s rescue from the top of the tower is the other protagonists’ last chance at showing her support and, thus, starting the journey towards healing from her past. However, they would rather send her away than deal with her trauma, and Dr. Montague tells her that they are sending her “home, of course” (239), to which Eleanor replies that “[she hasn’t] any home” (239). She insists on the fact that she does not want to leave: “I want to stay here” (239, 240). However, she is “happy” (241), because she knows that “they can’t make [her] leave, not if Hill House wants [her] to stay” (245). Although the worst part of her breakdown is finally over and she feels more like herself, her connection with Hill House remains, and she is still moved by its will. As she is driving towards the tree, Eleanor has one final moment of clarity: “Why am I doing this?” (245), but it is too late for second guesses or stopping: she crashes the car and dies, imitating thus the story that Dr. Montague had previously explained (67), creating a kind of cycle and, more importantly, fulfilling Hill House’s wishes of trapping Eleanor within its walls.



Eleanor's story is a tragedy: she accepts the invitation to Hill House because she wants to run away from an abusive situation, so desperate that she "would have gone anywhere" (8) as long as she could get away from her sister, but falls again into an abusive relationship with the house which, this time, costs her life. As Russell (2006) explains, trauma can lead to a repetition compulsion, which comes from the feeling that "that's the way it feels" (Russell, 2006: 612). Eleanor falls from one toxic or abusive relationship to another, not fully aware of the effect it will have on her because she is used to it: "I've never been wanted *anywhere*" (209), she tells Theo; she is used to being considered a nuisance and not being loved, which is why Hill House's fake love and acceptance are so attractive to her.

Eleanor, as many of Jackson's protagonists, is "emotionally violated and must struggle desperately to overcome [her] estrangement and dislocation" (Parks, 1984: 16). Since she does not have the support she needs, she ultimately fails. However, Eleanor is not weak, she is in a vulnerable state and has been for a long time due to the abuse that she has been subjected to throughout her whole life, first by her mother and then by her sister. She is not used to forming deep connections with other humans, and the other characters' dismissive and condescending attitudes toward her and her trauma are dangerous.

As Russell explains, "repetition compulsion is suicidal" (Russell, 2006: 611), and that is exactly what happens to Eleanor: as the story progresses, she progressively takes the role of the child; she needs to be taken care of and, because of the lack of support she finds in her peers, she connects with Hill House, which takes the role of her mother. Being forced to leave Hill House for Eleanor means losing her mother and her home once again, which is unbearable for her. At the end, though, the safety she feels in her relationship with the house is an illusion because it is not a loving and caring mother, and knowing

that she has to give everything up once again leads to her running her car into a tree and staying in Hill House forever.

Eleanor's character arc, thus, explores the "violations of the human self—the aching loneliness, the unendurable guilt, the dissolution and disintegrations, the sinking into madness, the violence and lovelessness" (Parks, 1984: 28), although that "madness" is actually evidence of her unhealed trauma created by her mother and reinforced by the lack of support of her sister and peers.

#### **4. CONCLUSIONS AND FURTHER RESEARCH**

Hill House is not only the setting of the novel but another living character. Throughout the novel it is constantly given human attributes that contribute to the feeling that the building is actually alive. The characters, despite not knowing exactly what is wrong with the house, do not feel safe inside and want to either burn it down or run away. However, despite Hill House being dark, confusing, and distorted, Eleanor ends up being drawn to it and considers it her home as it progressively takes advantage of her trauma by adopting the role that is lacking in Eleanor's life, that is, the role of the mother, as can be seen by its heart being in the nursery and all the elements in the house that remind Eleanor of her mother, such as the library. Eleanor shows from the beginning a predisposition towards the role of the child and by the end of the story she finally adopts it by slipping her consciousness into Hill House.

This is a progressive process that could have been avoided had Theodora, Luke, and Dr. Montague been more caring and understanding of her trauma. Eleanor is a deeply traumatized character who has been mistreated her whole life, first by her mother and then, after her passing, by her sister. As she states, she has been made to think she is not wanted anywhere, and as she forms a bond with the other characters, especially with Theodora, she develops the need to be accepted and loved by them. However, she is met

with mocking and lack of understanding, so she cannot start the healing process she needs to recover from her trauma, which will lead to her falling into what is familiar: the dynamic she had with her mother, this time represented by the house.

Although at the beginning she is terrified by Hill House's attempts at making her feel at home and dreads being alone inside its walls, as her mental health worsens because of the lack of support, she starts to consider Hill House appealing, and she progressively slips her consciousness into it until it is practically impossible to tell one from the other. For once in her life, Eleanor feels at home, safe; however, Hill House does not have good intentions, as it ends up being as abusive as her birth mother since its attempts at making Eleanor feel like she belonged there have only one objective: trapping her forever within its walls.

We could argue that Hill House is a place that is stuck in time, or a place where time is cyclical, because Eleanor's story follows the same pattern that the story Dr. Montague had explained about the last person who had tried to leave Hill House and was killed at the driveway. Moreover, the last paragraph mimics the beginning of the novel with the exact same words, making the reader feel that everything in Hill House remains unchanged and will do so as long as it stands.

Hill House is a very complex space and, although this dissertation has mainly focused on its inside and architecture, it could also be interesting to analyze the outside, because the paranormal activity is not confined within its walls. It could also be worth investigating how Eleanor is Othered throughout the novel, as she is infantilized and treated as less than a human by everyone around her. Finally, even though the main focus of the analysis has been Eleanor, it could be interesting to develop the relationship that the other characters have with the house and how they interact with it.

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Figure 1. <https://allarts.org/2018/10/woman-of-halloween-writer-shirley-jackson/> (Access date: 11 June 2021)

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