

Response Paper Three

*The sentient presence of Hill House in Shirley Jackson's*

*Haunting of the Hill House*

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*“No live organism can continue for long to exist sanely under conditions of absolute reality; even larks and katydids are supposed, buy some, to dream. Hill House, not sane, stood by itself against its hills, holding darkness within; it had stood so for eighty years and might stand for eighty more. Within, walls continued upright, bricks met neatly, floors were firm, and doors were sensibly shut; silence lay steadily against the wood and stone of Hill House, and whatever walked there, walked alone.”*

Shirley Jackson's "The Haunting of Hill House" stands as a pinnacle in the genre of psychological horror, skillfully weaving a narrative that unravels the intricacies of a haunted mansion and delves into the profound mental and emotional tribulations faced by its inhabitants. The novel revolves around Eleanor Vance, a young woman, who along with a small group of individuals participates in a paranormal investigation led by Dr. John Montague, exploring the peculiar and disquieting nature of the house.

In the following excerpt, taken from the opening lines of the novel, Jackson employs evocative language to imbue Hill House with an eerie sentience, suggesting that it is more than just a lifeless structure through the lens of these lines, this essay will explore how Jackson characterizes Hill House as a sentient being, drawing attention to the haunting nature of its existence.

The opening lines wherein the Hill House is described as “not sane” suggest an abnormality that defies the typical qualities associated with an inanimate structure, establishing to the reader that Jackson characterizes the Hill House as a living organism that exists in absolute reality for the

sole purpose of haunting, tricking, and traumatizing its inhabitants. By assigning psychological traits to the dwelling, Jackson permeates it with a mystical essence letting her readers know that the hill house is not what it seems.

The phrase 'stood by itself against its hills' lends a sense of isolated awareness to the house, highlighting its detachment from the nearby environment. The notion that it 'holds darkness within' suggests a sinister, intentional containment, as if the house actively harbors shadows. Additionally, the anthropomorphic description of the house as 'sensibly shut' implies that its construction was undertaken with a conscious discernment, endowing the structure with a semblance of awareness. The personification continues with the depiction of silence as a tangible presence 'steadily against the house,' furthering the impression of the house as an animate entity. The final remark, 'whatever walked there, walked alone,' reinforces the image of Hill House as a solitary and sentient being. The use of 'whatever' here injects a degree of uncertainty, amplifying the mysterious aura and leaving us questioning the exact nature of the presence within.

Jackson portrays the Hill House as an extension of its inhabitants, an analysis of the novel proves that the main reason behind the mansion's ghastliness is its origin. Hill House isn't just hostile in terms of the energy it exudes; the structural elements of the house are built to perplex and alienate its occupants and leave them in a state of psychological disarray. It was constructed by a madman, Hugh Crain whose insanity is mirrored in the architecture of his house. Nothing about the house adheres to normal conventions, "every angle is slightly wrong" distorting the house. Doors close at random on multiple occasions, rooms are missing windows and there is an overall

presence of numerous irregular angles and disproportions significantly complicating its livability.

However, It is not just what happens inside the mansion that makes it seem like a living, breathing entity, throughout the novel, the house in question is anthropomorphized through its physical characteristics as well. Chapter two opens with a vivid description of the Hill House's exterior. The assertion that "No Human eye can isolate the unhappy coincidence of line and place" implies a mysterious and supernatural convergence of elements within the house's architecture, hinting at an unsettling connection between its physical features and an unseen malevolence.

The description of Hill House as a place of despair is a poignant personification as if the very essence of the house exudes a palpable aura of hopelessness. The suggestion that "the face of Hill House seemed awake" imparts sentience to the building, endowing it with a watchful awareness that intensifies the haunting atmosphere. The mention of "blank windows" conveys a sense of emptiness and soullessness, emphasizing the eerie and lifeless quality of the house.

The final details, describing a "touch of glee in the eyebrow of a cornice," add a chilling layer to the anthropomorphism. By giving the house physical human features such as face, eyebrows and eyes Jackson depicts Hill House as mutation of sorts. The house seems to exert control over its structural dimensions, altering its interior in ways that subvert its intended purpose as a shelter and create an alien, disorienting environment. This malevolent dwelling, fueled by its pride and

animosity, seemingly takes a life of its own. It operates independently, without regard for human desires, with the ominous goal of harming those who dare to cross its threshold.

This explains why the mansion tends to single out Eleanor and why she feels a strong attraction to the house—it serves as a reflection of her psyche. Despite the house causing a sense of alienation in all other characters, it induces an eerie sense of familiarity in Eleanor, because it embodies a representation of her mental state. The house becomes a carrier of her internal struggles, aligning with Tony Magistrale's description in his book "Abject Terror: Surveying the Modern and Postmodern Horror Film." Magistrale characterizes haunted houses as animate entities, contending that in many horror films and Gothic novels, these domiciles function as conduits for the psychological states of their occupants. The characters become entrapped inside, particularly as the home "awakens" and begins to exhibit demonic biology of its own.

Jackson constantly uses Eleanor to conflate and blur the boundary between the self and the gothic space and make it seem alive. Eleanor becomes obsessed with the Hill House, depicted by a shift in the novel's narrative perspective. Every paranormal phenomenon and occurrence begin to be narrated from Eleanor's point of view. The absurdity of the events along with her always being in the center stage of every mishap drives the reader to wonder if she and the house have merged to become one single entity. Hill House, serving as a living representation of madness, reflects the shadowed recesses of the character's psyches. It feels the movements of those who live inside it almost like a maternal womb. By seducing Eleanor to be a part of it forever, it isolates her from both society and the external world, compelling her to traverse solitary paths.

The idea of a house that appears to think and feel is a complex and often ambiguous one, lacking a straightforward definition or role in horror stories. Typically, such a house displays characteristics we might expect of ghosts, yet these traits often manifest in an inherently sinister way, rooted in the house's very form rather than in spectral apparitions. In the realm of contemporary horror, this concept evolves further; the house not only embodies life-like qualities but also seems to influence and warp its own structure and interior design in unsettling ways, even seeming to actively cause distress or harm to those who enter it. The most unsettling aspect of "Haunting of Hill House" therefore is unlike traditional tales where phantoms or spirits are the sources of terror, here it is the house itself that seems to be the progenitor of the eerie disturbances.

Much like Jackson's Hill House, Edgar Allan Poe's House of Usher seems to be alive and endowed with anthropomorphic characteristics. In one of Poe's most famous short works, an unidentified narrator tells us the story of his visit to his childhood friend Roderick Usher in his gothic manor. The house has an eerie atmosphere to it, enhanced by the visible cracks and tears that surround it seems to instill a sense of "insufferable gloom" in its visitors. Over the course of the narrator's stay, Roderick Usher gets more uneasy by the day, haunted by the belief that his sister Madeline has been buried alive in the house's tomb and is trying to escape. His fears ultimately come true when one day the door suddenly opens, and Madeline walks in covered in blood. She attacks Roderick and pulls him to his death. Poe intricately conflates the term "house" to signify not just the physical structure but also the lineage of its inhabitants. The degradation of the structure mirrors the declining vitality of the Usher siblings, suggesting a

symbiotic relationship between their well-being and the integrity of the mansion. This duality culminates when the death of the last Usher coincides with the mansion's destruction. It's as if both the family and the building were interdependent, living entities, whose existences were inextricably linked.

The haunting nature of both these books depends more on psychological terror rather than explicit, gory horror. Rather than being haunted, both these houses are uncanny in nature. This concept of the uncanny is further deepened when viewed through the lens of Julia Kristeva's theory of abjection. Kristeva posits that the abject is what does not respect borders, positions, or rules, and it disturbs identity, system, and order. It is what is rejected by the self but is also intimately tied to what defines the self. The abject in these narratives is the house itself, a space that is supposed to represent security and order, yet here it becomes a source of horror and chaos, destabilizing the characters' sense of self and reality.

This understanding is in line with Freud's thought process around "the uncanny" as well. "the 'uncanny' is that class of the terrifying which leads back to something long known to us, once very familiar." For an object to be labeled as uncanny, an individual needs to be both familiar and unfamiliar with it, and it is the tension between those two feelings that defines the uncanny. Poe and Jackson both challenge this common belief by portraying their houses as dangerous, self-aware, and alive. Because these structures do not adhere to a familiar notion of "houses," they can be understood as uncanny spaces. The manifestation of the houses as sentient entities embodies Kristeva's abject, confronting the characters, and by extension, the readers, with the

primal anxieties about the fragility of the self and the boundaries that define our place in the world.

Conclusively, Shirley Jackson's "The Haunting of Hill House" transcends the traditional boundaries of the haunted house trope within the gothic genre. The depiction of the house as a sentient entity capable of influencing and reflecting the psychological states of its inhabitants challenges the reader's preconceived notions of safety and stability within domestic spaces. By endowing these structures with life-like, often malevolent, characteristics, the author ingeniously merges the physical and the psychological, the supernatural and the familiar, inviting us to consider the deeper implications of the spaces we inhabit.



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