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Gothic Literature

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Hill House as a Projection of Trauma in *The Haunting of Hill House*

Shirley Jackson admirably embeds ambiguity in the layers of the haunting encounters at Hill House. Eleanor is the main character through which we experience the house, leaving the audience with questions of whether it is through a veil of insanity that we see the occurrences, or whether Hill House is as “alive” as her perceptions might indicate. Haunting here is a collective experience as the four adults live in this new, fear-inducing environment together. However, it is also an individual journey, importantly. My paper strives to explore Eleanor’s pain and baggage as the reason she is haunted by (and, arguably, haunts) this intriguing space. It is her newfound home, a place she ties her sense of self and expression of hardship to. Her background and journey going into this endeavor outlines the idea that she is different from the three other characters. She experiences a more direct haunting and interaction with the house than they do, and is more dangerously and irreversibly bound to this place. After investigating these Gothic layers of *The Haunting of Hill House*, my standing is that Hill House’s seemingly haunting, frightening characteristics are products of Eleanor’s trauma, insanity, and desperate quest to establish herself.

The character of Eleanor Vance has particular trauma and turmoil that stands out in comparison to the other characters, and an inevitable reason for this is that we experience the story through her, but beside this, she is still singled out in significant ways. Eleanor has a lack of sense of self that we don’t see, at least as prominently, in the other adults around her. Her decades as a caregiver, confined to only interacting with her mother and then living under her sister’s nuclear family, both of whom she claims to hate, have contributed to this. The losses she’s suffered, including her mother’s death while in her care, evidently impacted Eleanor. There is the additional loss of self-nurturing and self-establishment. Her nurturing was neglected in order to accommodate her mother’s needs—“parentification”, as Michael T. Wilson calls it in his exploration of Eleanor’s delayed social adolescence (223). As Brittany Roberts states in her reassessment of the novel, “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” (85). This demonstrates how Eleanor’s adulthood was characterized by the act of repetitive giving, with no nudge towards exploring her soul, desires, or sense of home. Such a crucial part of being human is this interaction with ourselves and how we move through the world, so it stands out that this process was cut off for Eleanor so early on, which is something we don’t see signs of in the others.

Furthermore, this sort of emptiness and desperation for a feeling of belonging leaves Eleanor’s mind “vulnerable enough to be haunted” (Vinci 55). She is the traumatized subject that Tony M. Vinci describes in his articulation of a spectral consciousness where the phantom world and present, “real” world collide. Her internal turmoil places her in a position where insanity, fear, and imagination can creep in. Ayesha Ejaz Khan discusses the “underlying anxieties” that “manifest the dark atmosphere that [...] engulfs the female” (46). Deep-rooted, suppressed despair in a woman intensifies her inner vulnerability and attracts ghostly presences. This is very applicable to Eleanor, particularly in conjunction with Vinci’s idea of a traumatized, haunted, ghost identity. In terms of imagination, we already see her entertaining vivid daydreams of her ideal life, such as the cottage, oleanders, stone lions, and so on. She creates these with an excitement and eagerness that can only be ascribed to someone who has been lacking in a true home. So, it’s not difficult to see that her mind may have constructed the “footsteps coming clearly along the path and faint mocking laughter” that she experiences, for example (Jackson 176).

These multiple gothic experiences of horror, the hand-holding of an unknown creature being another example, seem to only happen to Eleanor to this extreme. Theodora, Luke, and Dr. Montague do interact with the haunting sometimes, but never quite to the frequent, terrifying extent of Eleanor’s interactions. Theodora does, at one point, see something unknown outside at night that makes her scream and start running, and it is her clothes covered in what seems to be blood. However, Eleanor has multiple sole hauntings in the span of only a little over a week. And during the first instance that I described for example, Luke and Theodora were “leaning against a tree trunk and talking softly and laughing” (Jackson 177). Their relaxation and calm, regular enjoyment contrasts the idea that Eleanor is being actively followed and spoken to by what may be interpreted as ghosts. The fact that it is her name on the writing on the walls is also on its own very telling of the direct and eerily close relationship Eleanor has with whatever haunts the House (whether it is her or different beings).

In discussing Eleanor’s particular creepy encounters, I find it important to incorporate the idea of Hill House as a predatory maternal figure, especially in relation to whether the house is a living creature. Both her years of sacrificing her needs for her mother and her mother’s absence haunt Eleanor’s inability to establish a sense of self. She has a difficult time “resolv[ing] the conflicting impulses of earlier stages within her fragile adulthood” (Wilson 226). According to the predatory figure view, Eleanor’s suicide is an unfortunate return to her original trauma, the mother-and-daughter connection that seems to have been embodied in her relationship with the house as well. Hill House preys on her, using her desires and weaknesses to trick her into eternally merging with it. Her tragedy brings her right back to where she started, her first so-called “home”—with her mother. This is significant because Eleanor seems to identify herself now as aligned with Hill House, deeming it her new home and source of belonging. Knowing how desperate she is for such a place, Hill House enables the terror and tragedy that follows Eleanor’s arrival. She is a victim of her fantasy. This analysis reads Eleanor’s final attempt at autonomous adulthood as a failure or tragedy. She doesn’t actually gain freedom, instead, the story presents the sobering conclusion that she will never be separate from the oppressive trauma from her mother. This ending to the journey, the concept of Eleanor and the House becoming one forever, would not have been possible without Eleanor’s history. Therefore, the House may be a living maternal creature, but it is that way because of the parental baggage Eleanor carries into it.

An analysis of the maternal symbolism would be incomplete without turning to instances of what I perceive to be direct connections between the hauntings and Eleanor’s past. When reading through the passages where Eleanor could hear little giggles, babbling, and soft crying, I couldn’t help but be reminded of the noise children make. Eleanor confirmed this idea herself: “It is a *child*, she thought with disbelief” (Jackson 134). These sounds of childhood may very well be representative of the roots of her trauma. Right after the seemingly innocent, almost pitiful sounds, Eleanor is struck with horror at the realization of the possible existence of other (spectral) beings. This is interesting because childhood trauma holds a similar sentiment—terror or horror combined with innocence and purity. It seems as if they are meant to contradict each other, but when childhood is tied to the source of pain for a person, this is the outcome. Within this we find the intriguing idea of the intersection of psychology and the supernatural, particularly arising in “ineffable moments” (Wilson 115). Eleanor is finally coming to terms with her trauma, something that has always been eerily following her around but is now directly confronting her. Once again, we turn to the Gothic characteristic of the past haunting the present.

An additional pertinent detail is the constant calling of her name that Eleanor experiences at Hill House. Not only is she called to come home by the writing on the walls, whether that’s done by her own suppressed pain or another spirit, but she is vocally summoned or called out to multiple times. This vocal usage of her name is an important relation to her past, especially the fact that she is haunted by it. Whatever follows her down the hill outside the house eerily speaks to her in this way. Its significance lies in the fact that when Eleanor was a caregiver, every time her mother needed her, she would call out Eleanor’s name. She would also knock on the wall to get her daughter’s attention, which interestingly could be linked by the terrifying knocking that occurred at night at Hill House. These ideas are tied to the weight of her mother’s death, and Eleanor’s self-blame that she feels with it.

The theme of the future casting an inescapable shadow on the present is also worth pointing out here, including in combination with the past colliding with the present. According to Mona Gad Sayed Gad Ali, Eleanor’s familiarity with death (losing both her parents and her awareness of her mortality) creates the uncanniness in the novel. The pitiful circumstances that have made up her life and the depressing limits pressed onto her adulthood and self seem to predict that she will not achieve the goal to live a fulfilling, flourishing life. She is tragic from the very beginning, and the future provides us with signs of where this journey might take her. Even in her daydreams in the beginning, she finishes them with acknowledgements of her death. The fact that she never steps foot in the staircase that leads to where someone historically committed suicide, until the night where her sanity fully unravels, is revealing too. It is this “repressed protagonist” in states of “denial, hysteria, and sadness” who possesses the house (Ali 507).

I turn now to a further expression of my thesis, that Hill House is a physical representation of Eleanor’s turmoil, longing, and desperation. We often hear the saying ‘ghosts of your past’ to describe the haunting of someone by their history and past negative experiences. Jackson’s story is the epitome of such a concept, because it is the presence and suppression of Eleanor’s trauma that does the haunting. On her quest to find her self and home, her “personality disintegrates into the House” (Wilson 223). Even the physical nature of the house, with its confusing, endless turns, hidden tower, and ever-closing doors, is representative of the main character. Roberts articulates the intimate relationship between human and house when she states that “Eleanor, then, like the house she is loved by, may be thought of as a series of distorted passageways, a selfhood divided and compartmentalised” (86). The nursery at the heart of the building, cold and isolated, reflects a buried, secluded childhood self within Eleanor. It is inaccessible to her, albeit embedded in who she is. The house then imitates the compartmentalization of her identity. Such similarity and connection as shown here may be part of why Eleanor feels so strongly that this is her home. The ambiguity and complexities surrounding her manifest in the disorienting experience of moving through Hill House.

Jackson’s readers are witnesses of how Eleanor falls apart as she continues to project her anxieties onto the house. She speaks on this in a way that connects to spectral consciousness when she says “‘I hate seeing myself dissolve and [...] separate so that I’m living in one half, my mind, and I see the other half of me helpless and frantic and driven” (Jackson 132). Her suppressed pain can only make itself known through this separate identity that transcends humanness and rationality, becoming dangerous and haunting as it confronts sublime reality. Her pain and emotion overwhelm the rest of her, and it becomes unbearable to survive or experience it in any other form. In this conversation above in the story, Eleanor brings up the idea of surrendering. It seems as though this other side of herself, her ghost, her additional consciousness, does end up surrendering to the House and what it represents. She is forever tied to this place, where her trauma stains the walls and questions endlessly arise.

The detailed analyses and investigations of Eleanor and the role the house plays in her story come together to inform the audience that there are deeper meanings, deeper roots in this piece of literature. Shirley Jackson employs the Gothic in a way that brings readers face to face with anxieties surrounding trauma, the self, and sanity. Through her protagonist, we explore a desperate attempt to reconcile the troubling feelings that culminates in an unravelling of security. Eleanor’s repressed pain and desire to feel belonging leads her to project onto Hill House, or rather, Hill House begins to reflect and mold itself into her shattering sense of self. Eleanor haunts and is haunted. I conclude, after the presented insights into this work, that Hill House may be seen as a shifting, living being on account of Eleanor’s perceptions, past, and pain that she brings into the house when she first arrives.

I pledge that I have neither given nor received any unauthorized aid on this assignment.

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