Hill House, Not Sane: Shirley Jackson's Subversion of Conventions and Conventionality in The Haunting of Hill House

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Hill House, Not Sane:
Shirley Jackson’s Subversion of Conventions and Conventionality in The Haunting of Hill House

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirement
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by

Ryen Christopher Rasmus

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Williamsburg, VA
April 28, 2009
“Let us have a little more brandy . . . and I will tell you the story of Hill House.”

- Dr. John Montague, in Shirley Jackson’s *The Haunting of Hill House*
Hill House, Not Sane: Shirley Jackson’s Subversion of Conventions and Conventionality in *The Haunting of Hill House*

Upon its release in 1959, Shirley Jackson’s novel, *The Haunting of Hill House*, instantly became a bestseller. Reviewers praised the work as “a novel [that] has distinctiveness and genuine power,” and its author was widely lauded as “the finest master currently practicing in the genre of the cryptic, haunted tale” (Oppenheimer 227). In the years since its publication, *Hill House* has not only remained Jackson’s most popular and widely-read novel, it has also inspired two Hollywood films, colored the work of such authors as Stephen King and Anne Rivers Siddons (King 271), and even been hailed by some as “the finest horror book in history” (Reinsch 109). Ironically, perhaps, the book’s runaway success has also largely led to its being critically “sidelined” as “too commercial, too generic,” and, indeed, simply “too popular” for serious academic study (Murphy 2005a 19, emphasis added). Jackson’s husband, the seminal literary theorist Stanley Edgar Hyman, often commented upon the disdain with which his wife’s work was treated during her lifetime; “She received no awards or prizes, grants or fellowships,” he lamented in the preface to her short story collection, *The Magic of Shirley Jackson*, “her name was often omitted from lists on which it clearly belonged, or which it should have led” (Oppenheimer 276).

This same disdain for Jackson’s work has persisted in the years since her death in 1965 (Wiswell v-vi). Harold Bloom, for instance, wrote of Jackson with thinly disguised condescension in 2001, characterizing her work as charming, but unsophisticated – much
like the contrived gothic works with which it has for so long been linked: “Jackson always had too palpable a design upon her readers,” Bloom writes; “her art of narration stay[s] on the surface [and] her affects are as calculated as Poe’s” (9-10). Today, only a few essays, two slim volumes of criticism, and an amateur’s annotated bibliography deign to mention *The Haunting of Hill House* at all, and even then it is most often made out to be nothing more than a clever successor to the classical gothic tradition, the literary progeny of *The Castle of Otranto, The Mysteries of Udolpho*, and *The House of the Seven Gables.*

This study will seek to reveal Jackson’s novel for what it truly is: a subversive masterwork that mounts a multi-pronged attack against the gothic genre itself and the conservative ideological constructs that it has tacitly sought to reinforce since its birth in 1763. Unlike the classical works that the author draws upon in constructing *Hill House,* Jackson’s novel cannibalizes the form of the gothic and turns many of its most recognizable tropes and conventions against themselves – effectively subverting the genre’s characteristic tendency to uphold the status quo and to demonize those who dare to deviate from the norm. By presenting her readers with an abomination’s victory over the forces of orthodoxy and, even more tellingly, with its so-called victim’s pleasure at being allowed to leave behind the rigid world of propriety for a new, aberrant, and thoroughly unfettered existence, Jackson manages to strike a number of decisive blows against the ideological constructs that governed the society in which she lived and wrote. Of course, in order to appreciate the genius of Jackson’s subversion, it is first necessary

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1 Throughout this paper, the term “classically gothic” is used to differentiate what Susan Sontag might call “innocently” gothic works from more overtly self-conscious and self-mocking texts like Oscar Wilde’s “The Canterville Ghost,” Jane Austen’s *Northanger Abbey,* Neil Gaiman’s “Forbidden Brides of the Faceless Slaves in the Secret House of the Night of Dread Desire,” and *The Haunting of Hill House* itself.
to outline, if only briefly, which social precepts the author was choosing to rebel against by means of her novel.

Following the Allied victory in World War II, a generation of American men returned home from foreign shores seeking to settle down, rebuild their lives, and enjoy the fruits of their wartime labor (Friedan 18). After nearly five years of conflict, these men wanted peace, quiet, and calm – a morning paper, steady work, and faithful wives to bring them their slippers and pot roasts in the evening. Accordingly, reactionary conceptions of femininity swiftly came to be fetishized in the American consciousness, with narratives praising the virtues of the industrious housewife and nurturing mother being progressively brought to the forefront in popular cultural texts (Hague 2; Friedan 34, 43; Riesman 280-1). Insistently and insidiously, society began to mandate that women’s lives should no longer be focused upon personal advancement or outside careers – as they could have been during the 1920’s, 30’s, and 40’s – but rather on the insular pleasures of raising children, finding and gratifying husbands, and running orderly households (Hague 2-3; Friedan 15-16).² “Few women would want to thumb their noses at husbands, children, and community and go off on their own,” Redbook told its readers during the 1950’s; “Those who do . . . rarely are successful women” (Friedan 25, emphasis added). To this end, Rosie the Riveter was strapped into an apron and transmogrified into June Cleaver, the archetypical “happy housewife heroine” (Friedan 33; Riesman 282), and “the suburban housewife” herself, Betty Friedan writes, was set up

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² Jackson herself often felt this pressure to conform quite strongly: “In North Bennington in the fifties,” Judy Oppenheimer writes in her excellent Jackson biography, “there were town mothers and faculty-wife mothers – and then there was Shirley, who fit no mold whatsoever” (18). Many of Jackson’s most comical short stories are built upon the flabbergasted reactions of more conventional women to Jackson’s unorthodox life- and parenting styles.
as “the dream image of [y]oung American women and the envy of women all over the world” (18).

Unsurprisingly, many of those who yielded to these societal demands and attempted to model themselves after the mythical “happy housewife heroine” became increasingly “bored” with their monotonous daily routines (Hague 2; Friedan 17). “Lonely, isolated, dissatisfied, and depressed,” many literally began to feel like “prisoners” trapped within their own homes (Hague 7) – a mindset that led some to exhibit symptoms of madness, including inexplicable tiredness, mysterious psychosomatic sores and boils, and even a loss of the will to live (Friedan 30-1). As the condition known as “housewife’s fatigue” became more and more prevalent across the country, the keepers of the dominant ideology realized that something had to be done before their reactionary fictions began to crumble. To this end, women afflicted with housewife’s fatigue were instructed to seek psychiatric help for their malady and to begin taking medication to “correct” their “condition” (Friedan 30-1). Thus, the claustrophobic madness of housewives – a natural response to a stiflingly oppressive patriarchal social structure – was re-imagined as something shameful, a bodily failure on the parts of the women who suffered at its hands, a disease to be swept under the mat and treated with pills rather than investigated and addressed; victims were handily transformed into perpetrators, and the myth of the “happy housewife heroine” lived on. After all, as Friedan points out, “how could [any woman] believe the voice inside herself, when it denie[ed] the conventional, accepted truths by which she ha[d] been living?” (31). Before long, unhappiness with the status quo became so strongly stigmatized that – “as she made the beds, shopped for groceries, matched slipcover material, ate peanut butter sandwiches
with her children [and] lay beside her husband at night” – the average housewife “was afraid to ask even of herself the silent question” that fueled her madness: “Is this all?” (Friedan 15).

The stuffy and constricting social atmosphere of the 1950’s thus all but cried out for a reemergence of the gothic genre, a literary mode that first arose in response to similar social conditions just under two centuries before. Like the women of post-WWII America, wives and mothers in the England of the 1760’s found themselves living in an increasingly quiet, stable, and morally restrictive era as well (Day 83). A war had just ended on the continent, business was booming, and the cult-of-reason ideals of the Enlightenment had come to dominate nearly every facet of culture and society, including literature. As such, the most popular novels of the day were those authored by a school of writers called the Realists, who spurned fanciful plots, elements of the supernatural, and exotic settings in favor of simple characters and believable storylines that “made [no] appeal to the imagination that went beyond rational causes” (Clery 23; Fiedler 135). Outlandish chivalric romances written in the vein of *Amadis de Gaul* and *Cassandre* faded away, and in their place arose works like Samuel Richardson’s *Pamela*, Henry Fielding’s *Tom Jones*, and Daniel Defoe’s *Robinson Crusoe*, stories whose plots, while often incredible, were nonetheless considered plausible exhibitions of “life in its true state, diversified only by accidents that daily happen in the world” (Clery 23; 22). Many such texts, in addition to thus praising rationality implicitly by means of their form, were overtly pedantic as well and actively sought to educate their predominantly female audiences about proper and reasonable social behavior, reminding them, via *Pamela* for instance, that in the real world virtue would always be rewarded and, via *Clarissa*
*Harlowe*, that transgression would just as consistently lead to unhappy ends. By producing such works, the Realists felt that they were helping fiction to “carry out its true function”: to instruct the populace in the ways of goodness and rationality (Clery 23; Kilgour 6-7).

This near-worship of reason in the Enlightenment-era novel makes it easy to understand why Horace Walpole caused nothing short of an uproar when, on Christmas Eve in 1764, he unceremoniously hurled *The Castle of Otranto* into the center of England’s literary marketplace. His book, which is today widely acknowledged as the “first gothic novel,” was a far cry from the sickly-sweet, morally-uplifting works of the Realists, for in *Otranto*, a medieval Italian castle becomes the setting for ghostly apparitions, prophesies delivered by bleeding statues, and the horrors of polygamy and filicide (Norton 90). Unsurprisingly, perhaps, many early reviewers turned up their noses at the novel’s gory and phantasmagoric excess and accused its author of using “rotten materials” to produce a work of “gothic devilism” (Norton 90).

Originally, this “gothic” designation was intended to be taken as an offensive and dismissive insult, linking Walpole’s work to that which came before the advent of the Enlightenment and, by extension, to all that was “uncouth, ugly, barbaric, [and] archaic” (Beyer-Berenbaum 19; Clery 21; Fiedler 137). Far from being offended, though, the ever-brazen Walpole embraced this derogatory term for its theatricality, and when the second edition of *Otranto* was released in April of 1765, the author “flippant[ly]” subtitled his work “A Gothic Story” (Clery 21). The popularity of Walpole’s book subsequently persisted through a good many editions, and over the next several decades works written
in what eventually became known as the “gothic” style were perennially amongst the most widely read in Europe (Clery 24; Fiedler 127).

The reasons for the genre’s instant and explosive popularity are not difficult to fathom. Gothic novels offered their readers something that the pedantic, laced-up works of the Realists could never give: a chance for a deviant, frightening, sexuality-laden, and otherwise excessive “id’s night out – a temporary release from civilized constrictions” (Clemens 11; 2; Nash 154; Kilgour 14-5). At the same time, though, it is important to note that the new genre’s escapist quality also made it instrumental in the continued maintenance of the status quo. Although the gothic allowed its consumers to indulge their more animal instincts, it did so in a way that was entirely contained and socially non-threatening. Further, while readers were indeed permitted to revel in a temporary carnivalesque escape from the constraints of everyday life, classically gothic authors unfailingly found ways to end their novels with a reestablishment and reinforcement of these very same conservative social strictures (Kilgour 7; Lloyd-Smith 5; Fiedler 139; Clemens 6); the gothic loop was always closed, with violent literary stimulation inevitably being followed by carefully calculated detumescence (Fiedler 134).

Consider, for instance, one of the most beloved and popular gothic tales, Bram Stoker’s *Dracula*. Toward the front of his novel, Stoker’s deviant horror, a vampire, is allowed to run amuck, sucking blood and creating minions to his heart’s content. As the book nears its conclusion, however, the minions begin to die off one by one at the hands

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3 As Rosemary Jackson has noted, it is no coincidence that the gothic has a tendency to rise to prominence in societies characterized by intense social and sexual repression, as in Puritan New England (Nathaniel Hawthorne’s *The House of the Seven Gables*), the Victorian Era (Bram Stoker’s *Dracula*), and, of course, the suburban America of the late 1950’s (Shirley Jackson’s *The Haunting of Hill House*) (Clemens 5; Tracy 2).

4 As such, Leslie Fiedler helpfully characterizes the gothic genre as “horror pornography” (140).
of those who represent the forces of propriety and order, and in the end the gothic horror himself is ultimately stabbed, exposed to the sun, and reduced to dust. Appropriately, Stoker’s work then proceeds to close with a consummately conventional portrait of the horror-killer’s happy married life. Thus, the loop of stimulation is effectively closed: evil is vanquished, and orthodoxy ultimately emerges victorious. This same conventional structure can be seen to underlie any number of great gothic novels with a deviant horror at their centers, among them Matthew Lewis’s *The Monk*, Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein*, and Robert Louis Stevenson’s *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*. Like Dracula, each of the transgressive figures in these tales is allotted a certain amount of time during which they may transgress the status quo, but it is only a matter of pages before each is ultimately destroyed by the avatars of propriety.

Similarly, those classically constructed gothic works that prominently feature what Stephen King has called the “Bad Place” – the *unheimlich* home or diseased castle – always seem to end with the horror of the edifice being defeated or dispelled (266). An enormous amount of turmoil breaks out in the days following the youthful and virtuous Isabella’s and Emily’s respective arrivals at Otranto and Udolpho, for instance, but by the conclusions of their stories each woman’s contaminated castle has been exorcised of its real or imagined ghouls, their monstrous would-be seducers have been tamed, and a comfortable marriage looms on the horizon. Of course, not all gothic tales of the Bad Place end so happily as Walpole’s and Anne Radcliffe’s. Roderick and Madeline fall to the floor in death just before their contaminated mansion crumbles down on top of them in Edgar Allen Poe’s “The Fall of the House of Usher,” and the convent in Lewis’s *Monk* and houses in Charlotte Bronté’s *Jane Eyre*, Charles Brockden Brown’s *Wieland*, Daphne
du Marnier’s *Rebecca*, and Stephen King’s *The Shining* all go up in flames. Nevertheless, the deviance represented by and perpetrated within each of these doomed structures is dispelled by their destructions, and in each case characters representing conventional morality are allowed to escape from the rubble. Here again, then, the status quo is returned to and preserved at the end of the novel; the gothic loop is closed tightly once more.

For this reason, all classically constructed gothic texts might rightly be seen as self-edifying tools of the dominant social order (Ellis xv). In them, that which threatens the status quo (violence, sexuality, and deviance in general) is “monster-ized,” while that which defends it is characterized as thoroughly pure and heroic (D’Haen 287; 290-1; Beyer Berenbaum 23, 39). As such, in an inversion of the goals of the Realists, who sought to instill in their readers an admiration for what society felt to be good and acceptable, the aim of the gothicist can best be described as the creation of a set of “conventions to represent what is not supposed to exist” (Ellis 7, emphasis added), a series of “cautionary” tales that exalt adherence to dominant social norms by providing chilling “examples of what happens when the rules of social behaviour are neglected” (Botting in Helyer 726; Dabundo 204-5; Day 118-9). It may be useful, then, to conceptualize the gothic novel as a kind of societal safety valve – its basic literary form at once permitting readers to indulge a natural interest in violence and physicality, but also containing and checking such interests by demonstrating that all who transgress unfailingly meet with unhappy ends (Lloyd-Smith 5; Day 72).

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5 It is also no accident that gothic tales have a tendency to reemerge during historical eras characterized by the threat of social upheaval - the revolutionary 1790’s, for instance, or the Jacksonian 1830’s and 40’s.

6 To this end, Alok Bhalla’s 1991 study of the gothic novel in late eighteenth- and early nineteenth century England is appropriately entitled *Cartographers of Hell*. 
Upon a first reading, one might very well mistake *Hill House* for just another successor to this gothic tradition, one that employs the genre’s characteristically reactionary narrative structure in order to shore up the ideological precepts of conventional 1950’s society. In it, a sheltered heroine transgresses the moral and social dictates of the world in which she lives and comes to find herself ensconced within a classically gothic contaminated castle, a Bad Place in which she is repeatedly frightened nearly to the brink of insanity. Despite being warned time and again to get away from Hill House as quickly as she can, the heroine refuses to listen to reason and, as a result, eventually becomes infected by the paranormal elements that infest the mansion (41, 53, 99, 156). Like Stoker’s Lucy, Jackson’s once-pure heroine is turned into a gothic horror herself, a monstrous madwoman who terrorizes her housemates and casually puts her own life in danger. In the book’s final pages, the unfortunate horror/heroine is driven to commit suicide as a result of her being contaminated – thereby effectively, if tragically, preserving the status quo at the novel’s end (Cleveland 230; Kahane 342). As ever, the monster is destroyed, transgression is punished, and those who remained true to what is conventionally thought of as good and reasonable throughout the novel are allowed to walk away unscathed.

Ostensibly, then, Jackson’s work invites one to believe that it is constructed according to the standard gothic “recipe” (Gamer 55), for it certainly seems to employ a number of conventional gothic ingredients to pull its audience into a closed textual loop of controlled sensual stimulation and careful de-escalation toward a societal victory over
the deviant. In fact, this façade completely misled a number of Jackson’s earliest reviewers. Just after its release, for instance, Orville Prescott characterized *Hill House* as “a conventional, even an old-fashioned ghost story” full of “familiar-to-trite elements” (1), a sentiment echoed by Edmund Fuller, who was similarly taken in by Jackson’s liberal employment of “the classic paraphernalia of the spook story” (4). In yet another contemporary review, Harvena Richter called Eleanor “a tormented soul who needs desperately to be saved” by her fellow ghost hunters (1), while George Stade went so far as to describe Jackson’s novel as a “classic ghost story” whose “characters learn that sufficient fear will overthrow logic, reason, good will, and anything else that civilization provides as insulation against the power of the blackness within” (4; 2).

Many more 1950’s-era reviewers, however, were hopelessly confused by Jackson’s work. One writer for the Winnipeg *Free Press* was manifestly irritated that *Hill House* refused to conform to the standards of the classical ghost story: “After about a hundred pages of buildup, we *finally* get to the shake, rattle and roll of a haunted house, complete with cold chills and all that sort of stuff” (1, emphasis added). The “tone” of the novel, wrote an even more annoyed *Newsweek* journalist, “is blithe, sometimes comic, sometimes even cute” (1), something that Margaret Ragsdale characterized as being “about as appropriate as Mickey Mouse in a Greek tragedy” (1). “I can’t figure out what she wants to do with the story,” one of Jackson’s own early editorial readers wrote, “Spoof? . . . Gothic horror? She’d better soon make up her mind” (LoC 21).

Jackson herself was no stranger to classically gothic fiction and was thoroughly familiar with its constituent elements. In fact, her short story, “Lord of the Castle,” represents as traditional a work of the gothic as one is likely to encounter in the contemporary era. Because they are not numbered nor organized in a logical fashion, various scholars have utilized a variety of different systems when citing from the author’s unpublished notes upon and drafts of *Hill House*, which are maintained by the Library of Congress and are colloquially known as “The Hill House Files.” These citation systems range from the overwhelmingly intricate (Tricia Lootens, for instance, identifies eight

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This perplexity springs from the fact that, like so many who came after them, these contemporary reviewers mistook Jackson’s novel for a work of what Raymond Williams generally calls “residual” fiction, something that dredges up old literary forms in order to recall a style of writing that is firmly rooted in the past (171, 6). As Harold H. Watts put it while trying to draw the attention of contemporary audiences to the book’s psychoanalytic subtexts, the familiar elements of the gothic paraphernalia that Jackson chooses to weave through *Hill House* “hover around” casual readers’ “head[s] like the helmet in *The Castle of Otranto,*” distracting them from the novel’s true themes and preventing them from appreciating its complex literary “depths” (1). Blind to the book’s deliberate play with the gothic tropes of old, they are unable to appreciate the fact that *Hill House* is, in actuality, an “emergent” work, one that purposefully roots through the junk heap of the past, finds the spare parts that it needs, and uses them to build something entirely new and different (Williams 171). Indeed, in cannibalizing the gothic and appropriating many of its most characteristic elements, Jackson manages not only to construct a novel that differs from its gothic ancestors, but one that openly rejects their primary ideological assertion: that the forces representative of the dominant social order are inherently good and righteous and will therefore triumph eternally over the monstrous forces of the deviant.⁹

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⁹ As such, Williams himself might label *Hill House* as an “oppositional” rather than an “alternative” work of emergent literature, for it is a text which not only seeks to differentiate itself from what came before it, but also actively rebels against the social strictures that the gothic elements of its framework have traditionally been used to reinforce.
Consider, for instance, what seems to be an indisputably gothic element of Jackson’s text: her heroine. At first glance, Eleanor Vance appears to fit the classically gothic mold beautifully (Cleveland 229); like *Udolpho’s* Emily St. Aubert, *Otranto’s* Isabella and Matilda, *Monk’s* Antonia, and “Usher’s” Madeline, Nell is “perfectly chaste, dutiful, obedient . . . useful, orderly,” and consummately passive (Hoeevler xv). In addition, she finds herself toward the front of Jackson’s novel in the most stereotypical of gothic scenarios: she has been imprisoned – twice over in fact. On the surface, then, she seems to recall any number of the classically gothic heroines who came before her. Upon a close reading of Jackson’s text, however, a number of inconsistencies with this surface characterization quickly begin to present themselves.

To begin with, unlike every one of the heroines mentioned above, Nell’s imprisonment comes not at the hands of some depraved or deviant character – a madman, greed-driven opportunist, or religious zealot – but is instead engineered by a pair of avatars of the dominant social order itself, each of whom acts to enchain Eleanor’s mind as well as her body. The first of these two is her mother. For the past eleven years, Nell has spent her every waking hour devoting the whole of her existence to the care of this domineering invalid. She has done so, she says, not because of some deep-seated sense of love or affection (indeed, Jackson states explicitly that Eleanor “genuinely hat[es]” her mother [11]), but rather because it is what is expected of her as a single, unmarried daughter living in the 1950’s (Cleveland 229; Shinn 54); “I *had* to stay with Mother, of course,” she tells Theo on their first night in Hill House (114, emphasis added).

Sadly, Nell’s dutiful conformity has come with a heavy price, for over time her entire life has devolved into nothing more than an progression of “small reproaches,
constant weariness, and unending despair” (11); as Jackson states in the second draft of her novel, Nell’s single “joy was – after years spent caring for her mother – only a sense of freedom from guilt” (LoC 36). To have left her mother’s house for any period of time, either to get an education, find outside employment, or pursue romance would, as Jackson writes in her notes, have equaled a “betrayal of mother” (LoC 26), and so her protagonist has spent the most potentially promising and exciting decade of her life indoors, alone, and terribly lonely.10 As such, Nell’s situation closely mirrors the predicament of those women about whom Friedan and David Riesman wrote in their respective sociological studies of the 1950’s; like housewives all over America, Nell has been caged within her home just as surely as her gothic sisters were in their cells, chambers, and towers (Hague 7). The more modern Eleanor, however, is bound in place not by physical restraints, but rather by “chains in her own mind and spirit,” bonds forged by an unceasing ideological barrage of “incomplete truths and unreal choices…not easily seen and not easily shaken off” (Friedan 31).11

Yet although her imprisonment at the hands of the dominant social order may not be physical, Jackson goes to great lengths to illustrate that Nell’s incarceration is just as horrible as any found within the pages of a classically gothic text (Friedman 113). Perhaps the most striking expression of this sentiment occurs during Eleanor’s second night in Hill House, when she and Theo encounter the mansion’s haunting for the first time. After determining that the pounding sound that she hears in the hallway is being made by the entity that infests the house and not by her dead mother, Nell amazedly finds

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10 Eleanor’s loneliness so thoroughly permeates her life that Jackson referred to her as “my lonely girl” when discussing her with others (Jackson 1968 252).

11 Significantly, even Nell’s few stolen minutes of free time are spent in consummately solitary pursuits: “There never was much excitement for me,” she tells Theodora, “when [Mother] was asleep I kind of got used to playing solitaire or listening to the radio” (114).
that she is less disturbed by the idea of confronting a phantom than by her initial frenzied misperception that she had somehow been transported back to her former life of incarceration and servitude. "Now," Eleanor thinks, overwhelmed by a pervasive sense of "calmness" after having her first impression proven wrong,

Now . . . It is a noise down the hall, far down at the end, near the nursery door . . . not my mother knocking on the wall . . . Not at all like my mother knocking on the wall . . . is this what I was so afraid about? . . . it sounds like something children do, not mothers knocking against the wall . . . .

(170, emphasis in original)

Here, then, Jackson rather directly indicates to her audience just how abhorrent her protagonist’s former conventionally acceptable life was for her: the prospect of dealing with a ghost frightens Nell less than being imprisoned once more as a mother to her mother, a slave to the dominant social order. In an inversion of the goals of the classically gothic text, therefore, duty and domesticity, the cornerstones of 1950’s femininity (and, for that matter, conventional femininity throughout history), are cast as nothing less than wellsprings of terror in Jackson’s subversive novel.

It is perhaps appropriate, then, that Nell’s escape from her socially-constructed prison is effected not by means of rescue by a dashing, masculine exemplar of the status quo – as is true in Udolpho, Otranto, Monk and several other classically gothic works – but rather by means of what would traditionally be regarded as the repugnant height of deviance: a matricide. Late in Hill House, Jackson has Eleanor state quite matter-of-factly: “It was my fault my mother died . . . I ought to have brought her the medicine; I always did before. But this time she called me and I never woke up . . . I’ve wondered ever since if I did wake up,” she goes on, “If I did wake up and hear her, and if I just went back to sleep. It would have been easy . . . ” (278-9). By means of this self-accusation, Jackson consciously invokes yet another major gothic trope: the killing of a
family member (Tracy 199, 201-2). Classically, as in *Otranto, Monk, Wieland,* and “Usher,” such deaths are represented as major catastrophes and are often severely punished (Fiedler 131). In *Hill House,* though, Nell’s indirect matricide sets her free from the prison in which she has lived for more than a decade (279). This being the case, one could say that Jackson sets up a sort of anti-gothic loop at this point in her novel: the dominant – in the form of her controlling mother – imprisoned the heroine, and a deviant act sets her free. Here again, then, the genre is undermined and the ideological precepts that it has historically supported are deliberately destabilized.

Although freed from the prison of filial duty, however, Nell is quickly forced into yet a second cage forged by the dominant ideology and guarded by another avatar of conventionality: her overbearing elder sibling. Following her mother’s death, Nell is left friendless, homeless, and nearly penniless, and with no marketable skills or romantic prospects to speak of she is forced to take up residence with her hated sister, Carrie, her dim-witted brother-in-law, and her young niece, Linnie. These three, but particularly her sister, keep Jackson’s protagonist in a cocoon of overprotection and enforced infantilism, relegating her to a cot in “the baby’s room” (313), refusing her the right to drive the family car without permission, and fretting obsessively over her maidenly virtue (16). Truly, it is almost as if her suffocatingly controlling mother has been somehow reincarnated in the form of Nell’s overprotective sister. In fact, in doing all that she can

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12 Carrie’s husband is never named in *Hill House,* but he is called either John or Jerry in several of Jackson’s drafts.

13 Originally, it seems as though Carrie herself was intended to represent a veritable embodiment of the status quo. “Certainly,” Nell says in an early draft of *Hill House,* Carrie “liked to think of everything in the world paired neatly off two and two…certainly, no one took greater pleasure than my sister in melting herself into a clearly defined background, gathering snugly about her all the little safeguards and reassurances of platitude and identity . . . ” (LoC 11). Just a few lines later, Eleanor reveals that, more than anything else, Carrie wants to transform her sister into a copy of herself, and is forever sending Nell out on
to stifle the protagonist’s desire to participate in Dr. Montague’s experiment – which, Carrie worries irrationally, may involve Nell being compromised sexually – the protagonist’s sister herself states that she is only thinking of what their “Mother would have” wanted for her daughter (19): a normal life much like Carrie’s own, centered around the home and entirely devoid of the kind of danger and unorthodoxy inherent in the virginal, unmarried Nell’s proposed stay in a strange and isolated house with a man she does not know.

Finding herself jailed once more within a dismal cell fashioned from the mores of the society in which she lives, it is fitting that Eleanor’s second escape in Jackson’s text is also engineered by the employment of deviant behavior (Newman 264; Downey and Jones 215). This time, though, Eleanor’s transgressions involve not matricide but the more minor sins of disobedience and theft. Yet notwithstanding the form that it takes, what is most significant about Nell’s second flight is the fact that it is entirely her own doing: Dr. Montague may have been the one who provided Nell with an excuse to break free from her sister, but (in a departure from the classically gothic escape plot) he is not the one who actually does the rescuing. Instead, in Jackson’s subversive novel, her heroine saves herself. Thus, Eleanor’s second escape, like her first, invokes a conventional element of the gothic form while at the same time implicitly illustrating how strict adherence to the codes and dictates of the dominant social order (in Nell’s case, the 1950’s predilection to keep women securely locked within the confines of respectability) can often times result in incarcerations just as fearsome as those blind dates, hoping that she will eventually fall into a life identical to Carrie’s own (LoC 11). These facts make the idea of Carrie as a second controlling mother figure even more compelling.

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14 One might, however, make the argument that Nell commits a kind of displaced matricide in throwing off the woman who professes to do what Mother would have wanted in keeping the heroine infantilized.
engineered by the horrors that manifest themselves over the course of the classically
gothic text. Indeed, it is only after Jackson’s infantilized protagonist toddles out of her
socially-constructed cage and out into the wide, “unknown” world that Nell truly begins
to feel happy and free (LoC 45).15

The author is not yet ready to liberate her heroine entirely, however. To the
contrary, by means of Eleanor’s journey to Hill House, Jackson lulls her readers into the
false belief that the traditional gothic plot structure may endure through her work after
all, with Nell’s transgressive escapes inevitably leading to her being punished for her
insubordination. Early on in her drive, Jackson has Eleanor continue on in her new and
transgressive pattern of behavior, fantasizing recklessly as she makes her way down the
road (26-30), and, after spotting a sign for “daredevil drivers,” registering only the words
“DARE” and “EVIL” (28) – “dare to be evil,” to do what you are not supposed to, to
resist the status quo, to act independently. Later, while eating lunch at a roadside
“country restaurant,” she writes of Nell impishly encouraging a little girl sitting near her
to follow her own transgressive lead and to disobey authority by refusing to drink her
milk unless it is brought to her in her special “cup of stars” (31). This maneuver having
resulted in success, Jackson allows Nell one more dream while on the road, in which the
protagonist casts herself as the very antithesis of the “happy housewife heroine,” an
embodiment of all that is deviant: a witch (33). After only a few pages, however, Jackson
summarily checks the chain of rebelliousness that began after Eleanor’s illicit departure
from the city earlier in the day. After arriving in the little village of Hillsdale and

15 To this end, it is no accident that the author has Eleanor depart for Hill House on June 21, the pagan feast
of Midsummer. As a devoted student of the occult, Jackson would doubtless have known that this date, the
longest day of the year, represents for practitioners of witchcraft a turning toward “Litha,” the gentle or
navigable. In choosing to have her heroine set out on this date, the author implies that Nell herself is
turning, by means of her escape, from a time to strife to a time of peace.
deciding to stop for coffee in the town’s run-down café – something against which Dr. Montague has explicitly warned her in his letter – Nell almost immediately repents of her flagrant disregard for authority, for the people of Hillsdale turn out to be rude and even somewhat hostile, to the extent that, for a moment, Nell even wonders whether the waitress has put poison into her coffee (35). Chastened, the transgressing heroine returns to her car and prepares to drive the last few miles to Hill House, silently vowing that “next time, [she] will listen to Dr. Montague” (35).

This narrative feint, which allows the author to string her readers along with the promise that Hill House will ultimately conform to classically gothic conventions, is drawn out even further as she describes her protagonist’s approach to Hill House itself, which seems to exhibit all of the symptoms of what is perhaps the most widely recognizable and deliciously disturbing of all gothic tropes: the exotic “Bad Place” (King 266; Parks 246; Tracy 4). At first, the few disconnected glimpses that Eleanor is able to catch of the mansion’s characteristically gothic architecture strike her as charming and remind her of the plots of several classically gothic novels. Indeed, as Nell advances Jackson playfully begins to conflate Hill House with the houses in Radcliffe’s Udolpho by having her protagonist wonder whether this edifice will also have a tower, a secret chamber, and an underground tunnel constructed by smugglers (46). Upon being confronted with the mansion full on, however, Nell is overwhelmed by the house’s tangible aura of evil, and in setting down her protagonist’s reaction, Jackson quite consciously ties Hill House to the Castle of Udolpho itself (Schneider 6; Alesso 15).

16 An earlier draft of Hill House cast this brief, rebellious pit stop as an even more unpleasant and traumatic event – with one of the locals pelting Eleanor with a barrage of undisguised insults (LoC 13-4).
Consider these two passages introducing Radcliffe’s and Jackson’s respective “Bad Places”:

Silent, lonely, and sublime, it seemed to stand the sovereign of the scene, and to frown defiance on all, who dared to invade its solitary reign. As the twilight deepened, its features became more awful in obscurity, and Emily continued to gaze, till its clustering towers were alone seen, rising over the tops of the woods . . . .

(Radcliffe 216)

Hill House seemed awake, with a watchfulness from the blank windows and a touch of glee in the eyebrow of a cornice . . . This house, which seemed somehow to have formed itself, flying together into its own powerful pattern under the hands of its builders, fitting itself into its own construction of lines and angles, reared its great head back against the sky without a concession to humanity.

(47)

“The two descriptions are remarkably similar,” Charlene Brunnell notes, “and their sinister and foreboding effect upon character and reader is disturbing” (in Reinsch 192). Strangely, although Nell herself experiences this disturbing feeling, she is unable to say precisely from whence it comes. In the end, the only thing she can be sure of is “the sick voice inside her which whisper[s], get away from here, get away . . . Hill House is vile. It is diseased. Get away from here at once” (48, 6). Later, after ignoring this internal warning and being left alone in her bedroom by Mrs. Dudley, the mansion’s dour housekeeper, Eleanor steadily grows so inexplicably frightened of the mansion that she cannot even muster the courage to move across the carpet.

Upon a first reading, then, it might appear as though Jackson is simply continuing to follow the classically gothic recipe in her construction of Hill House; certainly, the protagonist’s horrified descriptions of the mansion seem to cast it as the unimpeachable heir of Otranto, Udolpho, Bly, and the Houses of Usher and the Seven Gables, “an image

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17 Jackson may thus be drawing upon a similar passage from Poe’s “Usher” in these lines as well, whose narrator, when speaking of the eponymous edifice, states: “I know not how it was - but, with the first glimpse of the building, a sense of insufferable gloom pervaded my spirit . . . What was it - I paused to think - what was it that so unnerved me in the contemplation of the House of Usher? It was a mystery all insoluble; nor could I grapple with the shadowy fancies that crowded upon me as I pondered.” (Poe 137-8).

18 Notably, in the first several drafts of Hill House, the mansion itself is called either “b-- house” or “monstrose house,” implying that both literally and figuratively, Hill House was “born bad” (94).
of power, dark, isolated, and impenetrable” (Parks 25). However, one cannot help but wonder whether Hill House conforms a little too closely to the familiar archetype. In fact, the more one reads, the more the mansion, which on the surface seems to be so classically “Otranto-ish,” as one contemporary reviewer put it (New York Times 1), begins to look less like a serious setting and more like a self-conscious pastiche of classical gothic elements. As Theodora and Eleanor observe on their first day in Hill House, the building seems to have been put together by someone who has watched one too many horror films. Nell even muses about whether Count Dracula might be the true owner of the imposing old pile, to which Theo replies: “I think he spends all his weekends here; I swear I saw bats in the woodwork downstairs” (65). Before long, everyone in Hill House (apart from the Dudleys, of course) begins to make jokes about the mansion’s ostentatious, even campy, atmosphere on a regular basis. “It’s altogether Victorian,” Theodora observes, “they simply wallowed in this kind of great billowing overdone sort of thing” (68); “a little hideaway,” she calls it later, “where I can be alone with my thoughts. Particularly if my thoughts are about murder or suicide . . . ” (59). As the novel progresses toward its conclusion, Nell and Theo recurrently make fun of the mansion’s faux-spooky aura, casting it variously as the subject of a picture-postcard (201) and the castle in a fairy-story (187). Even the normally humorless doctor cannot resist getting a jibe in, calling Hill House’s library a place “more suitable for suicides, I would think, than for books” (137). Seen rightly, then, Hill House is not meant to be read as the dark, foreboding successor to Usher and Udolpho, but rather as a “caricature” of these classically gothic buildings (Egan 48), one so thoroughly steeped in the trappings of the genre that it becomes almost charming – amusing in its own gothic pretension.19

19 In fact, Jackson deliberately removed a line from an early draft of her novel that stated that there was “no
When they hear of Hill House’s consummately gothic history, the ghost hunters cannot resist mocking the house all the more, for the mansion’s sordid story is overstocked with elements of the gothic paraphernalia, almost to the point of ridiculousness. There is, for instance, the whiff of a family curse about the estate: each of the three wives of Hugh Craine, the vain, pretentious man who designed Hill House, died in various unnatural ways either shortly before or shortly after setting foot in the mansion. Later, the ghost-hunters learn, the house also brought misery down upon Crain’s two daughters, who inherited the residence as children upon their father’s death. Because the elder sister eventually grew old without marrying, it was agreed that she would take up residence in the mansion along with a young companion from the nearby village of Hillsdale, but in a typically gothic turn this companion purportedly ended up betraying her mistress by “dally[ing] in the garden with some village lout” while “Old Miss Craine” lay dying upstairs (104). The curse of Hill House eventually destroyed this young woman’s life as well – for although she inherited the mansion in turn, she was hounded until the day that she died (appropriately, once more, by her own hand) by Old Miss Crain’s deranged younger sister, who felt that she had been cheated out of her rightful patrimony.

Here again, it may seem at first that Jackson is simply following the gothic recipe in constructing her Bad Place’s past: the history of Hill House certainly “looks” and “feels” incredibly gothic. However, by throwing so many familiar elements of the paraphernalia together into a single convoluted saga, Jackson deliberately constructs Hill House’s history, like the mansion itself, as a rather self-conscious pastiche. In addition, the crude cause-and-effect downfalls of her story’s victims (“don’t do anything strange or ridiculousness” about the house’s malevolent face (LoC 2).
unorthodox or your family will die off, person by person”; “illicit sex leads inevitably to death”) function as satirical darts that highlight the transparency of the genre’s characteristically conservative meta-textual activity and inflate these quiet ideological nudges to the realms of the overblown and heavy-handed. As such, what seems to be a simple nod to the gothic genre can more rightly be viewed as a kind of literary “attack,” one that “exaggerates gothic storytelling conventions and ground rules” in order to reveal them for the melodramatic and inane techniques that they truly are (Egan 49). It is, therefore, no accident that the terrible tale of Hill House ends with a joke (110), nor that the remainder of Jackson’s text is studded with other narrative jabs that make light of the mansion’s sordid past (113, 118, 160), for “the convention at work” in her ostensibly gothic novel “is,” as J.S. Rubenstein puts it, “that of the Transylvanian horror movie – but in burlesque” (25).

It is appropriate that the lovely Theodora is most often the person who points out the aporia of Hill House’s conservative gothic atmosphere, for more than anyone else she is the character who stands, as Jackson puts it in her notes, “against the world and convention” (LoC 19; 59, 64, 76, 262; Egan 34). Note, for instance, Theo’s intense and unabashed selfishness (114, 127, 205, 284), her tendency to literally interrupt the discourse of the dominant by butting into the doctor’s pompous lectures with jokes and questions (98, 101-4, 138-9, 145), and the fact that, out of all of the doctor’s assistants, only Theo is inept at bridge (111) – that omnipresent, convention-laden staple of upper-middle class 1950’s society. Further, there is the barest hint that Theodora’s sexuality may not be entirely orthodox: Jackson cagily informs her readers that Theo lives with a

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20 Indeed, Nell compares Theo time and again to an animal, a creature entirely outside of the social system that applies to human beings (63, 80, 4, 125, 30, 66).
carefully un-gendered “friend” – a friend that one of her drafts explicitly reveals to be a woman (LoC 15). This companion is repeatedly referenced as if she were a romantic attachment (and did, in fact, once receive from Theo a volume of Alfred DeMusset bearing a “loving, teasing inscription” [15]), so much so that Nell asks whether Theo is married during one conversation of which her flatmate is the subject (117). This textual ambiguity has led some to speculate that Theo might be a lesbian (Haggerty 141; Kahane 341; Wise 0.30.33). Others, perhaps due in part to Theo and Luke’s obvious attraction to one another toward the end of Jackson’s novel, have chosen to view Theo as bisexual (King 284; de Bont 0.18.21). In any case, Theo’s blatant sexuality – whatever form it may be said to take – sets her off all the more sharply against the virginal Eleanor, who has spent eleven years “alone, with no one to love” (11).

Indeed, it might be said that Theodora stands as Eleanor’s total opposite – her classically gothic “dark doubl[e]” (Hattenhauer 164; Lootens 162; Markley 196-7). For more than a decade, Nell has dwelt in a world of dirty laundry and darkness, while “Theodora’s world was one of delight and soft colors” (14). Further, whereas Nell has always obeyed the ideological demands of society, even at the expense of her own freedom and happiness, Theo believes firmly that “duty and conscience” are “attributes

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21 It is also worth noting that in addition to invoking romance by nature of the topics of his poetry, Jackson may also be referencing the fact that DeMusset’s great love was George Sand, the Baroness Dudevant – a woman who herself blurred gender boundaries by smoking tobacco and sporting men’s clothing.

22 When citing from a film, the hour, minute, and second at which particular scenes or quotes occur is set down as the citation. Thus, a quote that occurred in the third second of the sixteenth minute of the first hour of the film is cited as (1:16:03).

23 The term “dark double” is used throughout this paper to differentiate this particular gothic convention from another type of double – the more superficial “uncanny similarity”-style doppelgänger – which can also be seen to crop up in many classically gothic texts (Markley 196).

24 Interestingly, this clothing metaphor functions nicely as an illustration of just how different Jackson’s two major female characters are from one another. Early in Hill House, just before she meets Theo for the first time, in fact, Nell feels that the brightly colored tops and slacks that she has purchased for her journey are an affront to propriety and regrets having bought them, whereas Theo revels in her own garish clothing and hits her lowest point in the novel when the haunting – perhaps sensing her great love of her garments – covers them with blood in an attempt to split her and Eleanor apart (Haggerty 145).
which belon[g] properly to Girl Scouts” (14). Thus, Theo is the Yang to Nell’s Yin; she represents everything that is deviant, unorthodox, and therefore, at least in the eyes of the dominant, “bad.” This being the case, Theo is both wonderful and frightening to Eleanor. On the one hand, she represents the kind of intellectual freedom and sensual hedonism that Nell has been denied. “Looking at Theodora,” the narrator says, “it was not possible for Eleanor to believe that she ever dressed or washed or moved or ate or slept or talked without enjoying every minute of what she was doing; perhaps Theodora never cared at all what other people thought of her” (127); like so many gothic heroes and heroines before her, Eleanor develops a “fascination with the illicit,” as Jackson puts it in her notes, and finds it difficult to look away (LoC 19). On the other hand, Theo terrifies Nell because she is a veritable incarnation of the deviant, a walking slight against everything that Nell has been brought up to regard as sacrosanct. As such, she is also an affront to Eleanor’s dead mother, a woman who, it is hinted, despised the otherness and ostentation that Theo herself sings and celebrates (56, 155). Thus, Nell’s conflicted attitude toward Theo, one characteristic of the stereotypical relation between gothic protagonist and gothic dark double, seems to represent yet another example of Jackson’s adherence to the traditional gothic formula (Hattenhauer 168).

Here as elsewhere, however, Jackson is only using the residual trope of the dark double as raw material for an emergent attack upon the dominant. The traditional shadowy doppelgänger, while fascinating to the classically gothic novel’s protagonist, nearly always stands as an object of fear and revulsion; it is decidedly “other,” and represents the “self” for the classical hero or heroine only in that it bears similarity to the self; certainly, no one in a classically gothic text wants to be or become more like his or
her dark double (Day 20; Markley 196, 200). Consider, for instance, the grotesque
doppelgänger figures presented in such works as *Frankenstein* (a malformed monster),
*Dorian Gray* (a horrible portrait), *Jekyll*, *Otranto*, and *The Hounds of the Baskervilles*
(murderous madmen), *Screw* (a shamed and miserable ghost), and even Jackson’s own
classically gothic “Lord of the Castle” (a demon). Each of these doppelgängers is made
out to be fascinating, yes, but each is simultaneously terrible and repellent as well.
Conversely, Nell not only admires her own dark double, she actively tries to imitate and
emulate her. In an early draft of *Hill House*, Jackson’s protagonist speaks of her desire to
become more like Theodora quite explicitly, stating that she would

> give a great deal to be the intoxicating creature whose every glance drives men wild, who
> smiles, and wins a world, who nods, and foils the devil – I would give a great deal to be
> that creature. Well, who wouldn’t? They always come to bad ends, but at least they come
to some *kind* of end; not like the rest of us, who smile, and nod, and just go on.

(LoC 40)

In the finished text, however, Nell’s longing is expressed somewhat more obliquely,
touched upon only by means of indirect statements and half-joking remarks. During the
parlor game that the ghost hunters play on their first night in Hill House, for instance,
Eleanor fashions her imaginary alter-ego after her newfound friend: “I am by profession
an artist’s model,” she says, just as Theo is for her flatmate in her spare time (82; 15). “I
live a mad, abandoned life,” Nell continues, again indirectly referencing her double
(82).25

Yet despite managing to screw up enough courage to masquerade as Theo during
this game, Nell almost immediately feels embarrassed by her brazenness; “Dear me,” she
thinks, after mentioning that her “affairs” (pun intended, no doubt) are the talk of the
cafes, “Dear me” (82). Later, after having her toenails painted for the first time (again in

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25 Notably, Nell concludes by stating that she “rather think[s she has] a heart of gold” (82), a first
impression of Theo that will be altered dramatically by the end of Jackson’s novel.
imitation of Theo), Nell is surprised by her own audacity and feels the urge to wash the polish off. The dominant ideology, given form in Jackson’s novel by the insistent memory of Nell’s mother’s voice, has taught the protagonist that cosmetics (and, indeed, all forms of showiness or “foolishness”) are “wicked” (155). Thus, while she might long to be like Theo early in Jackson’s novel, to be free from and disdainful of convention, Eleanor simply cannot shake off the mental shackles that have been tightly fastened around her since her youth, no matter how ridiculous they may seem to her at the age of thirty-two (91, 155, 166). Yet her inability to break with propriety and fully embrace the deviance that characterizes Theodora does not negate the subversive subtextual message conveyed by Jackson’s appropriation and use of the trope of the dark double. In showing that inherited ideological inhibitions are the only things keeping Nell from enjoying the same personal sense of freedom that her glamorous and self-assured doppelgänger does, Jackson once again manages to make propriety itself seem evil and excessively restrictive, much as she did in constructing Nell’s imprisonments within and escapes from her socially-constructed ideological cages earlier in *Hill House*.

 Appropriately, the chief foil to Theo’s deviancy in Jackson’s novel is Doctor Montague, a veritable embodiment of conventionality and propriety. In the vein of the classically gothic “man of science” (9-10) – a tradition that includes Frankenstein, Jekyll, Moreau, and even Faust (Fiedler 133) – the doctor wishes to fill in the blank spaces on the map and to bring the unknown out of the darkness and into the light, where it can be examined, explained, and fixed with a neatly-typed identifying label (184). This

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26 Nell’s obsession with her personal hygiene (115, 55) and her compulsive, almost religious desire to do everyone’s dishes on their second night in Hill House (162) are tied to this same ideological fettering. 27 Ironically, the shortsighted Montague never recognizes his power-seeking tendencies. In fact, he quite unselfconsciously condemns those fools who would say anything to gain power over what they do not
Rasmus 30

scientific impulse, however, is representative of a much more basic conservative ideological drive (one that was alive and well in the 1950’s) to tame the transgressive, whatever form it may take, and to force it back into line; after all, as William Golding pointed out in his contemporary review of Jackson’s novel: “If you can understand a thing, you can control it, and if you can control it, you have beaten it into a system and rid it of the power to terrify” (14; Barthes 1973 28; D’Haen 287). To this end, Montague is obsessed with investigating and elucidating the nature of the mysterious Haunting of Hill House. As Paul Reinsch observes, Montague “thrives on mystery but strives equally to end it” (16), much like a hunter chasing down his prey. This sentiment is mirrored in the doctor’s diction throughout Jackson’s work; he is forever referring to Hill House as a “wilderness,” which he intends to map out and to tame (83; 84, 112; Hattenhauer 156). Indeed, Montague seems to view his quest for knowledge as a kind of divine undertaking. During the group’s introductory parlor game, for instance, the doctor chooses to introduce himself as “a pilgrim,” one seeking the sacred (83). In attempting to find out what makes the house tick, the doctor fervently hopes to render one of life’s great mysteries a cold and practical matter of science – just as Frankenstein did with life and Jekyll did with the dual forces of human good and evil. This being the case, Montague acts as what Jackson calls her “anti-magic” character, a person who moves her

understand: “People,” he says “sadly” at one point, “are always so anxious to get things out into the open where they can put a name to them, even a meaningless name, so long as it has something of a scientific ring” (94).

28 It is significant that the first things that the ghost hunters collectively express interest in doing after they arrive at Hill House all involve processes of naming. There is, for example, their protracted “naming game,” initiated by Luke, which takes place as soon as they have a chance to sit down together for the first time (81-2), and Theo’s almost immediate interest in naming the rooms of Hill House, which crops up just after the naming game’s conclusion and is discussed at length the following morning (83, 13). Just as the doctor is attempting to exert control over the deviant unknown by seeking out a proper label for the Haunting of Hill House, then, his assistants – particularly Luke and Theo – attempt to get their bearings (that is, to get control of themselves) upon their arrival by applying names to the people and spaces around them.
plot along by working against the elements of the fantastic in her text and seeking to expose them as explainable phenomena (Jackson 1968 254; Parks 246-7).  

To achieve these basically self-aggrandizing aims (Montague states directly that “success” in Hill House primarily depends not simply upon the ghost hunters’ enjoyment of their sojourn at the mansion, but also on his synthesis of their experiences into a book that will “rock [his] colleagues back on their heels”), the doctor sets up his expedition through Jackson’s Bad Place as a sort of science fair project (78). He begins by selecting a carefully controlled group of test subjects that has been systematically culled of those with “subnormal intelligence” and those unsuitable because of their “clear tendency to take the center of the stage” (9). Once he has his materials assembled, the doctor then does all that he can to keep his subjects “ignorant and receptive” (92) – much like strips of litmus paper ready to change when introduced into volatile environments. At the same time, Montague sets himself up as a sort of omnipotent God figure, one who knows all and keeps his underlings in awe of his knowledge by hoarding it (90; LoC 20).

In a parodic twist, though, it turns out that Jackson’s seemingly classically gothic man of science does not even have enough power to get his supplies in order. Unlike the dead pieces of meat that yield blindly to Frankenstein’s needle or the chemicals that dutifully combine just as Jekyll intends them to, the subjects of Montague’s heavy-handed patriarchal experiment literally rebel against him. Despite his attempts to keep them blissfully uninformed, his assistants clamor for knowledge and pester him into

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29 How appropriate, then, that Dr. Montague reads only the works of the Realist, Richardson, during his stay in Hill House.

30 It is interesting that the doctor, a purveyor of the dominant ideology, uses this particular combination of words, “ignorant and receptive,” as they are enormously reminiscent of similar phrases used to describe the pawns of the ruling classes in the writings of Marx & Engels and Adorno & Horkheimer.
telling them all that he knows about Hill House (88-92). Their collective “mutiny” (90) defeating his attempt to define his relationship with his subjects as one between master and vassal, the doctor then tries to restructure his relationship to them as one between a father and his children (93, 153, 168, 187, 197), yet this dominant-inflected activity is also subverted: although the doctor constantly seeks to ruin Luke’s, Theo’s, and (in more ways than one) Eleanor’s play in Hill House, the three of them collectively come to view him as something of an annoying, if lovable, bumbler (79, 82, 88, 320), much like the fathers in such popular 1950’s sitcoms as *The Life of Riley* and *My Three Sons*. Late in the novel, Nell (perhaps at the prodding of Hill House itself) goes so far as to describe him as “simple” and “transparent” (195). Even Jackson herself jots down a brief barb against the doctor in her notes: “doctor – foolish” (LoC 23). Thus, the doctor and the patriarchal Enlightenment-esque hegemony that he represents are – like the traditionally dangerous gothic elements of the dark double and the contaminated castle – de-fanged and made ridiculous in Jackson’s text.

Montague’s ineptness is highlighted even further when he begins attempting to apply scientific methods of study to Hill House itself. At first, it seems as if his schema might actually turn out to be successful. His study of a map allows him to navigate the mansion rather comfortably during his first night inside – something that has repeatedly frustrated others in the past (84; 139). Later, just as Montague predicts, the ghost hunters’ first evening turns out to be a relatively uneventful one: “There is a pattern to these things,” he says with a touch of smugness, “as though psychic phenomena were subject to laws of a very particular sort” (89). Similarly, when he discovers a cold spot that

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31 Clearly, his attempt to exclude from his subject pool those with overbearing and self-centered personalities was wildly unsuccessful.
corresponds to the one found at the reputedly haunted Borley Rectory, he “pat[s] his hands together with delight,” and happily muses that he has found “the heart of the house” (158). Before long, though, the doctor’s complacency begins to slip away along with his ability to control the events going on around him. Try as he might, his study of the mansion’s frozen heart proves fruitless. In fact, the spot seems to actively resist the doctor’s study, chilling his hands beyond use, and he later finds that “a thermometer, dropped in the center . . . refuse[s] to register any change at all,” a fact that causes him to “fume wildly against the statisticians of Borley Rectory, who had caught an eleven-degree drop” when studying their own cold spot (198). Similarly, the doctor’s theories that the disturbances in Hill House may result from some kind of natural phenomena are invalidated wholesale when the mansion begins to speak to one of his assistants by name. This unpredictable behavior on the part of the house only exacerbates Montague’s initial disdain for its overall unorthodoxy, and as a result his attitudes both toward both the edifice itself and the entity inhabiting it become increasingly hostile as Jackson’s novel progresses.

Montague’s attitude is, of course, understandable, as everything about Hill House flies directly in the face of the dominant ideological precepts that he both espouses and embodies in Jackson’s novel. For this reason, one might posit that the hating, brooding Hill House represents a sort of anti-Montague in the author’s text, and, therefore, the anti-dominant (316). On the most basic level, the form of the mansion itself defies reasonableness. It is repeatedly described as an abomination in space, a place without the

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32 Ironically, the doctor is most likely referring in this passage to the team of ghost hunters assembled by Harry Price – a group whose work is now widely regarded as utter hokum. Thus, Jackson has her heroine make an all-too-accurate observation when she dismisses the doctor midway through Hill House with the words: “He believes every silly thing he has ever heard” (195).
right angles and level planes that characterize what the doctor calls “sensible, squared-away houses” (140). Every angle is – at least in the traditional sense – “slightly wrong,” a fact that results in “a fairly large distortion,” as the doctor puts it, “in the house as a whole” (141, emphasis added). Eleanor makes a similar observation earlier in the novel, when she describes her bedroom as having “an unbelievably faulty design which left it chillingly wrong in all its dimensions, so that the walls seemed always in one direction a fraction longer than the eye could endure, and in another direction a fraction less than the barest possible tolerable length” (55, emphasis added). Significantly, neither of these conventionality-fettered characters is able to appreciate Hill House as its creator or his daughters did – that is, as a refreshing architectural departure from the norm (100-2, 140, 157). Instead, the doctor tends to speak of Hill House with distaste; “‘It is’” he says at one point, his voice “saddened – ‘a masterpiece of architectural misdirection’” (141-2).

If the irregularities of the “wood and stone of Hill House” are enough to set the doctor on edge, one can only imagine how irksome the stubbornly inexplicable paranormal aspects of its haunting must be to him when they begin to manifest themselves during his second night in the house. Apart from the aforementioned cold spot, which not only defies study but seems to have no discernable source, there is also the haunting’s more general capacity to vary the temperature in any room or on any part of its grounds at any time, as it does during nearly every one of the manifestations that take place in the novel (170, 213, 231, 265, 283, 304). Further, there is the house’s ability to “dance,” to literally shudder whenever it chooses to, as it does following Nell and Theo’s experience in the garden and just after Nell’s surrender to the haunting on the first night of Mrs. Montague’s visit (235, 266). Even more disturbing is the fact that the house
can cause these “earthquake[s],” as Jackson calls them in her notes, to be felt by one person or set of people and not another – something that is also true of the various sounds that the mansion is able to produce (LoC 54; 179). In addition, Hill House has the abilities to write and speak, faculties that are normally reserved to human beings. The house can choose to communicate what it has to say via a number of different physical mediums as well; it uses chalk to spell out its first written message and blood to scribble its second. This fact represents an even more fundamental assault upon reason, for one cannot help but ask, as Montague himself does, Where did the house get its blood? After examining the giant message that appears above Theo’s bed and the substance that drenches her clothes, the doctor says astonishingly: “I would swear that it is blood, and yet to get so much blood one would almost have to . . .” (204). Although he stops himself from finishing his thought one can safely presume that he originally intended to observe that “one would almost have to” drain an entire corpse to manufacture such a scene.33 Finally, there is the haunting’s ability to make its writing, and indeed all of its handiwork, disappear whenever it wishes; Theo’s clothing and walls are pristine and blood-free on the day that Eleanor leaves Hill House (312).34

And then, of course, there is the basic fact that the mansion is “haunted” to begin with; that anything supernatural is going on in Hill House represents a de facto assault upon reason. It is important to note, however, that Jackson’s haunting is even more

33 In arguing that Hill House was never haunted to begin with, Hattenhauer chooses to ignore just how much liquid is splashed around Theo’s room, and instead posits the rather bizarre theory that Eleanor painted the message on Theodora’s wall using her own menstrual blood. Not only would such an act be physically impossible (recall that the letters above Theo’s bed are massive), a non-ghost reading of Jackson’s work was explicitly debunked by the author herself during a 1961 interview with the screenwriter for Robert Wise’s The Haunting, who also believed the disturbances in the book to be figments of Nell’s imagination (Wise [commentary track] 0.16.06).

34 Jackson herself indicates that this cleaning was not done by Mrs. Dudley both by allowing Mrs. Montague – a confidant of the housekeeper – to observe that the domestic was kept from her duties by a locked door and by informing her readers that the room – although blood-free – is indecently dusty (312).
aberrant than most. Indeed, when compared with the entity that inhabits Hill House, many of the ghosts that crop up in classically gothic texts appear to be positive paragons of rationality. Consider, for instance, the spirits that appear in Clara Reeve’s *The Old English Baron*, *Screw*, *Otranto*, and *Seven Gables*. Each is intrinsically connected to a single, discrete, deceased human person. Put differently, every ghost is indexical of a dead human being; you can’t have a ghost without a dead person – they are inexorably linked with one another (Fiedler 132). As such, the classically gothic ghost is a creature firmly tied to the knowable domains of both humanity and history. Furthermore, classically gothic ghosts usually have concrete reasons for returning to earth, and when their purposes are either fulfilled or thwarted, thereby rendering their continued terrestrial presence unnecessary, they disappear. Thus, the standard gothic ghost is a creature of cause-and-effect: it begins as a person, it dies with unfinished business, it returns to the world of the living as a ghost in order to finish its business, and when its business is finished it departs from earth once again. In spite of its supernaturalness, it can be situated historically, understood in the present, and described easily by means of language. For all of these reasons, one can argue that the construction of classically gothic hauntings serves as yet another strategy to effect the preservation of an ideological system that rests upon order and rationality: even its most fantastic literary creations act according to logical systems and precepts.

Conversely, the Haunting of Hill House utterly defies this classically gothic pattern. To begin with, it is not the manifestation of some person who was once alive and has since come back to perform a fixed task. To the contrary, Jackson’s narrator states that Hill House “seemed somehow to have formed itself, flying together into its own
powerful pattern under the hands of its builders, fitting itself into its own construction of lines and angles” and now “rear[s] its great head back against the sky without a concession to humanity” (47, emphasis added). In other words, the haunting is not only not the residual spirit of a human being, it is outside of humanity altogether; there is no reason for this haunting’s existence, it simply is. As Jackson puts it in her notes: “House is Haunting – can never be un-haunted” (LoC 20). Its various manifestations are entirely arbitrary and wholly disconnected both from history and reason. The haunting can appear as a dog one night and a picnicking family the next; it has no fixed physical referent, and so it can signify itself in whatever way it wishes. Clearly, then, Hill House and its haunting are entities that disrupt the rational, scientific ideology of cause-and-effect espoused by both Enlightenment-era and contemporary keepers of the status quo and reinforced by the classically gothic haunting (Barthes 1970 193; Derrida 1); unlike the ghosts portrayed in Otranto or Seven Gables, the Haunting of Hill House is not a unified and definable “structure of signifieds,” but rather a plural and unstable “galaxy of signifiers” – an “intentional cacography,” as Roland Barthes might put it (Barthes 1970 5).

This being the case, it is also important to observe that the origins, characteristics, and motivations of Hill House’s haunting cannot be described by means of language, the

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35 This point is lost upon a number of prominent Jackson scholars, several of whom propose variably that the haunting represents the residual psychic energy of Hugh Craine (Lootens 157), Nell’s mother (King 292, Smith 152, and Time – which went so far as to title it’s review of Hill House “Mom did it” [110]), or Eleanor herself (Cleveland 229, Hattenhauer 163, Bleirer in Reinsch 108).

36 Ironically, Jackson originally intended to infest her haunted house with a number of incredibly conventional ghosts (she was particularly excited about the idea of “a veiled lady moaning”) before making the decision to write a more subversive work (LoC 22).

37 To this end, Jackson might be said to have created a ghost to “suit her mind” much as Hugh Craine built a house to suit his (140). “My children and I,” she was fond of saying, “do not any of us subscribe to the pat cause-and-effect rules which so many other people seem to use, and which work so ineffectually and unreliably” (Oppenheimer 139).
tool which the dominant (and, appropriately enough, its avatar John Montague) so often employs in order to explain and, by extension, control the world around it (D’Haen 98; Barthes 1973 28; Derrida 1, 4, 7). In fact, Hill House and its authorial creator seem to revel in the disruption of that semiotic structure that Theo D’Haen calls “the last refuge of reason” (D’Haen 290; Botting 173; Eagleton 142-3). Early on in her work, for instance, Jackson has her characters state explicitly that they cannot put into words what precisely they find so horrible and disturbing about the mansion. One of Nell’s first observations upon looking up into the face of Hill House for the first time is her frustrating inability to “locate” the source of the “badness” that immediately overwhelms and sickens her (48). Theo expresses similar feelings of unease with the indefinability of the house and its infestation later that same night: “I just don’t understand,” she says, “It’s a horrible old house, and if I rented it I’d scream for my money back after one fast look at the front hall, but what’s here? What really frightens people so?” (98, emphasis in original). Faced with this question, the heretofore self-assured doctor comes up short. “I will not put a name to that which has no name,” he says dejectedly; like everyone else in his party, he must answer Theo’s question about the nature of Hill House’s infestation with a string of words that are surely bitterer to him than any others: “I don’t know” (98).

As Jackson’s novel progresses, this same emasculating inability to trap Hill House’s haunting within the net of language crops up again and again (Schneider 9). After the first set of manifestations that the party experiences within the mansion, for instance, Luke finds himself unable to speak confidently about what precisely had led him and Dr. Montague on their wild goose chase across Hill House’s grounds: “We were chasing a dog,” he says, before correcting himself: “At least, some animal like a dog”
Theo exhibits a similar inability to describe what she herself saw during the picnic apparition that takes place just before Mrs. Montague’s arrival toward the end of Jackson’s book. After turning to look behind her and seeing something that frightens her nearly to death, Theo forces Eleanor to run back to the house, where Luke and the doctor are waiting. When Luke asks what has happened, Theo can only exclaim, “I looked back – I went and looked behind us . . .” before collapsing into Nell, unable to say anything more than “Eleanor . . . Eleanor . . . Eleanor” (234-5). Finally, in every case, the party finds it all but impossible to write what they have experienced down on paper (197, 274). “What are you saying about those noises last night,” Theo asks at one point, looking up from her notes, “I can’t describe them” (274, emphasis in original).

Notably, it is not only Hill House’s non-physical attributes that elude the ghost-hunters’ attempts to fit them into the structure of language. Indeed, even the most solid objects in the mansion manage to subvert the party’s desire to name and – by extension – to gain control over them. Perhaps the best example of this subversion of language takes place as the ghost hunters are making their way through Hill House for the first time, exploring its unknown reaches and attempting to bring the mansion within the realms of the reasonable and the knowable. Following the lead of the doctor, they march through the labyrinthine house rather like civilizing conquistadors, giving arbitrary names to rooms, propping open doors, and opening draperies as they go (135-52). Whenever they encounter something strange or unfamiliar, they make plans either to domesticate it (as Luke does with the house’s tower [138]) or to destroy it (as Theo proposes they do when they pass the taxidermied deer’s head in the game room [136]).

To this end, Mrs. Montague is entirely correct when she observes that there are “foreign elements present in” Hill House (247): they are the ghost hunters themselves. Indeed, as Roberta Rubenstein observes, the
One aspect of the mansion, however, entirely resists their conquering attempts; “It’s not there,” Theo says upon catching sight of the giant marble statue that sits in Hill House’s drawing room, “I don’t believe it’s there” (143). Indeed, “aghast and incredulous,” the entire party must take turns guessing at what the statuary piece is meant to represent, yet in the end they simply cannot agree upon a common reading. Ironically, this simple iconic sign – the kind that is supposed to point most directly and obviously to its signified – sends the entire group of ghost hunters into linguistic shock, with various members proposing such disparate descriptions as “Venus rising from the waves,” “St. Francis curing the lepers,” and Nell’s own fantastic suggestion: “a dragon” (144). In the end, their pitiful attempt to imprison the statue’s subject within the structure of language collapses into yet another cacography of nonsensical signifiers – one that is suspiciously reminiscent of the similarly indefinable Haunting of Hill House itself (144). Thus, *Hill House*’s subversive sculpture represents the antithesis both of the classically gothic statue presented in Walpole’s *Otranto* and the equally gothic family portraits mentioned toward the end of Hawthorne’s *Seven Gables*, which not only stand as signifiers of a specified signified (specifically, a number of deceased family ancestors), but also act to connect events taking place in the present directly to those which took place in the past (Botting 121; Ellis 58). Contrarily, the statue in Jackson’s work cannot definitely be said to represent *anything at all*, and actually manages to cause major slippage between the past
and the present, as evidenced by Theo’s wild suggestions that both Mrs. Dudley and Old Miss Crain’s companion are represented in the piece (despite the fact that neither had yet been born when the statue was constructed) and that Hugh Crain’s younger daughter’s lawsuit is alluded to in the work (even though this event also took place long after the statue had been installed within Hill House) (144). Again, Jackson in this episode takes up a typical piece of gothic paraphernalia and turns it inside out, using what traditionally served as a wholly knowable connection to the past as a tool to destabilize the reason-based systems of both language and history.

She repeats this subversive strategy of inversion further on in her novel when she has her characters stumble upon the written messages left for them by Hill House’s haunting – messages that invoke yet another accoutrement of the gothic: the trope of the discovered manuscript. In the classically gothic text, this literary element, much like the ancestor’s statue or portrait, most often works to elucidate and link the present to a knowable and understandable past, as it does in Screw, Udolpho, and Seven Gables (Heller 4; Kilgour 15). To this end, the classically gothic discovered manuscript can be viewed as yet another conventional plot device that assists with the containment of the strangeness of the classically gothic work within a reasonable chain of causes and effects. Jackson’s own discovered documents, however, serve only to complicate and obfuscate. Consider, for instance, the haunting’s first message to its guests: “HELP ELEANOR COME HOME.” Written as it is, in exclusively capital letters and without punctuation, this simple combination of words could be taken to mean a variety of different things. Is it, one wonders, a plea addressed directly to Eleanor herself – “Help, Eleanor! Come home!” – as Theodora assumes that it is (194), or is the message instead an imperative
addressed not to Nell, but to her fellow ghost hunters, a command to “help Eleanor come home”? The uncertainty inherent in this first cryptic message is compounded when a second “document” is “discovered” written in blood on the wall above Theodora’s bed. This missive, “HELP ELEANOR COME HOME ELEANOR” (204-5), is even more transgressively ungrammatical, as there can be no doubt that it comprises at least two distinct phrases. Again, one is left to wonder whether the statement should be understood as “Help, Eleanor! Come home, Eleanor!” as “Help Eleanor come home. Eleanor!” or even as “Help! Eleanor! Come Home! Eleanor!” The possibilities are legion, and neither Jackson nor her haunting provide any definitive answers; both are happy to keep the messages’ recipients – and the readers of Hill House itself – in the dark and linguistically off balance. Thus, Jackson constructs both her contaminated mansion and its haunting as literal representations of the failure of language and, by extension, rationality itself.

This being true, it is rather easy to understand why Dr. Montague, for whom these subverted precepts constitute something close to religious dogma, wastes little time in casting their destroyer as a dangerous and, even more significantly, villainous entity with nothing but sinister intentions toward its guests. It is he who makes the first explicit link between Jackson’s haunting and the villain of a classically gothic novel, when, during the party’s first night in Hill House, he makes the observation that “when Luke and I are called outside and you two [Eleanor and Theodora] are kept imprisoned inside, doesn’t it begin to seem that the intention is, somehow, to separate us?” (179). The doctor wonders further in this passage whether the haunting may be making plans to abduct one or both of his female assistants, action that is typically (one might even say stereotypically) associated with the classically gothic villain (Heller 4; Day 79; Tracy 197).
At first glance, the doctor’s conflation may seem justified. After all, the Haunting of Hill House stands, for most of Jackson’s novel, in diametric opposition to Eleanor, the text’s gothic heroine: whereas she is largely innocent, passive, and conventional, the haunting, like most gothic villains, is most often represented as calculating, active, and deviant (Lootens 167; Murphy 2005b 116; Rubenstein 136). Further, the haunting is frequently described by Jackson’s narrator as being “mad” (75) or “not sane” (7) – yet another characteristic attribute of the classical villain (King 291). Finally, there is the fact that the entity that infests Hill House seems to have effected the deaths of several of its tenants over the years (90, 100-10). Bearing all of this in mind, it is perhaps unsurprising that when Hill House’s hauntingconcertedly begins reaching out to Eleanor – the character who is, next to the doctor, perhaps most in thrall to the ideology of the dominant social order in the beginning of Jackson’s book – it encounters a good deal of initial resistance. Having lived so conventionally for so long, Nell instinctively conflates the house’s unorthodoxy, its overwhelming different-ness, with wrongness (55), and, therefore, with “evil” (47, 9) – hence her reflexive denunciation of Hill House as “vile” and “diseased” upon catching sight of the mansion for the first time (46).39

Nonetheless, despite this initial sense of revulsion at the sight of Hill House, Nell cannot stop herself from silently humming a popular song called “O Mistress Mine” as she forces herself to walk through the door of the imposing edifice – a song, oddly enough, whose subject is the consummation of love: “Trip no further pretty sweeting.”

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39 In an early draft of her novel, Jackson makes it somewhat clearer that Nell’s initial recoiling from Hill House springs from its intrinsic difference from the conventional by having her observe that “very probably the local ladies would burn their white gloves before they would set foot within the gates of Hill House” (LoC 3).
she thinks, “journeys end in lovers meeting” (49). As this song plays through her mind, the author writes that Nell temporarily loses her feelings of fear and trepidation, “laugh[s]…put[s] her feet down firmly and [goes] up to the veranda and the door,” at which point “Hill House c[omes] around her in a rush” (49), language which suggests that Nell’s first physical encounter with Hill House can be read as a rather romantic one – a meeting redolent of one between long-lost lovers reuniting with one another at last (Lootens 153). The fact that this characterization is immediately followed by a description of Eleanor’s utter fear at being forced to walk through the house’s hallways to her room further suggests that, although the protagonist’s socially constructed super-ego may be telling her that Hill House is rotten and evil, she knows on a much more basic, instinctive level that she and the mansion are somehow meant for one another. Such a reading is supported by this passage’s final sentence, which describes Nell “watching the wavering reflection of her hand going down and down into the deep shadows of [Hill House’s] polished floor” (51; Hattenhauer 160). This telling line also seems to foreshadow the nature of Eleanor’s ultimate relationship with the mansion: they will not only be happy together, they will fuse with one another, with the protagonist herself “going down and down into the deep shadows” of the house’s very consciousness.

In addition to pointing toward the conclusion of her novel, this literal reflection of Jackson’s heroine in the substance of Hill House also recalls, once again, the residual gothic trope of the dark double, suggesting that Theo may not be Nell’s only (or even her primary) doppelgänger in Jackson’s work. Such a suspicion is confirmed by the author

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40 This song’s lyrics are taken from Shakespeare’s *Twelfth Night*, and were set to music in the early 1900’s by a number of popular composers, including Arthur Sullivan and David Amram.
41 After all, Jackson writes pointedly that Eleanor “c[omes]” to Hill House, she does not “go” (11). Her diction thus suggests that Hill House has always been Nell’s home, and that the haunting has been waiting for her to come to it.
herself, who, in her handwritten notes, explicitly pairs her protagonist and her gothic horror with one another: “Eleanor is House,” Jackson writes (LoC 23).\(^\text{42}\) Obviously, though, the similarity between Nell and this, her second double, is not a physical one, as it was with her first. Rather, Jackson’s protagonist is similar to Hill House’s haunting in essence rather than form (Hattenhauer 159). More specifically, both Nell and the entity that inhabits the mansion are epitomic outsiders, misunderstood oddballs who do not fit in comfortably – at all, in fact – with the mainstream. Both are scorned by the avatars of the dominant social order (Nell by her sister, and Hill House by nearly everyone, but mostly Dr. Montague) for their divergences from the norm and are compelled, therefore, to stand utterly alone at the start of Jackson’s novel. By its end, however, these doubles will meet and mesh with one another in a scene that represents the subversive climax of Jackson’s thoroughly subversive work.

Early in the author’s book, however, any idea of such a fusion with the Haunting of Hill House utterly repulses Jackson’s protagonist, who wants little more than to be accepted by her fellow ghost hunters and to adopt them in turn as the loving friends and family members that she never had (192, 4, 211-2). Indeed, Nell is initially disgusted by Hill House’s attempts to separate her from her newfound companions, even as she cannot help being intrigued by its strangeness and unconventionality – an ambivalence that evokes once more the traditionally gothic fear-fascination relationship between dark doubles (180-5). Over time, however, Nell’s attitude toward the house begins to move further and further away from active dislike and more toward outright infatuation as she comes to the bitter realization that, unlike the haunting, which seems obsessed with her,

\(^{42}\) Significantly, this note is enormously reminiscent of another of Jackson’s handwritten comments upon Nell’s other, more fleshly gothic double: “Theo is Eleanor” (LoC 25).
Luke, Theo, and Dr. Montague are much more concerned about themselves than anyone else. They constantly downplay her fear of separation from them, and patronizingly characterize her very real dread at Hill House’s repeated attempts to reach out to her as the self-aggrandizing tantrums of a prima donna: “Vanity,” Luke says, following one of her terror-drenched outbursts, to which Theodora adds, “Always have to be in the limelight” (213). Faced with this constant derision at the expression of her fears, Nell gradually learns that in order to maintain any kind of attachment to those around her, she will need to keep her true feelings hidden away. Not even in Hill House, she discovers, will she be allowed to be herself, a unique individual who does and says as she pleases without regard for others. Instead, just as she was forced to do in the outside world, Eleanor will have to conform to her housemates’ expectations, maintaining decorum at all times lest she be disparaged and ostracized (195, 212).

With her initial naïve hopes of finding unconditional love and acceptance with her new housemates thoroughly shattered, Nell’s attitude toward the once-terrifying and villainous Haunting of Hill House undergoes a rather extreme transformation. With everyone else in the ghost-hunting party having abandoned her, Nell begins to feel “flattered” by the deviant haunting’s continuing attentions (Lootens 164; Cleveland 230). In contrast to her fear at the sight of the house’s first message, for instance, Nell views the haunting’s second beckoning as an expression of its attraction to her (Lootens 164). In fact, as she reads the bloody words she rather surprisingly “f[inds] herself” silently repeating the words of the love song that popped into her head the first time that the house embraced her on its veranda: “O stay and hear, your true love’s coming, that can sing both high and low. Trip no further, pretty sweeting; journeys end in lovers meeting.”
Here, then, in yet another subversion of the gothic, Jackson manages to transform the terrible image of a wall dripping with blood into nothing less than a love letter that intrigues rather than frightens her protagonist (204-7). By the end of this scene, Nell has begun to distance herself from her more conventional human connections and to take her first small steps toward accepting the strange and seductive power that inhabits Jackson’s haunted mansion (Haggerty 145).

Still bound by her desire to do what is expected of her, however, Nell staves off her increasing attraction to her dark double and resolves to give a more orthodox lover a try before reciprocating the decidedly unorthodox romantic advances of the Haunting of Hill House. With this end in mind, Nell turns, perhaps naturally, to Luke, whom Jackson sets up as a sort of prototype of the classically gothic hero. Like Otranto’s Theodore, the very first such hero, Luke is young, single, and the heir to the novel’s infected castle (15). This being the case, Carol Cleveland notes that if Hill House were, in fact, a typical gothic ghost story, it would almost inevitably end with Luke and Nell’s engagement (229-30; Smith in Reinsch 128). Indeed, upon catching sight of Luke for the first time, even Nell herself wonders whether they will eventually end up paired with one another (75). In Jackson’s subversive text, however, this dominant trope is entirely undermined. Her protagonist’s first exchange with Luke on Hill House’s veranda, for instance, is entirely anti-climactic, and Nell quickly ascertains that, quite unlike Otranto’s Theodore, Luke is “really kind of silly” (75). Subsequently, throughout the couple’s intimate encounter in the mansion’s summerhouse, Luke is amazingly self-absorbed, egoistic, “vain,” and shallow (217). Time and again, he simply “leads [Eleanor] on,” as Jackson puts it in her notes, telling her precisely what she wants to hear in order to induce her to
continue flirting with him (LoC 20). Nell is not taken in by Luke’s act, though, and ultimately arrives at the definite conclusion that “he is simply not very interesting” (220), and that his conventional courtship in general pales in comparison with the overwhelming attentions being paid to her by the supernatural monster that haunts Hill House (217; Shinn 52). 43 In having Nell reach this conclusion, Jackson once again manages not only to parody the gothic genre itself by lampooning one of its most basic constituent elements – the dashing and passionate young hero – but also to undermine the dominant ideological precept that this trope has traditionally reinforced, and which has persisted through Jackson’s 1950’s and even into the present day: namely, the idea that the only thing that a young woman needs to be happy is a man (Friedan 32, 4).

Perhaps sensing that Eleanor’s resistance has begun to fade, the haunting capitalizes upon the protagonist’s rejection of Luke and chooses the day after her encounter with him to significantly ramp up its seduction. When the ghost hunters gather together in the doctor’s bedroom after the doctor’s visiting wife and her dimwitted assistant Arthur have gone to sleep, they again experience “the unreal cold” followed by the sounds of pounding upon Hill House’s many doors (263). This time, however, Eleanor is able to predict what will happen in sequence, and when (263-5); in fact, it is almost as if the protagonist has gained the ability to read Hill House’s mind. As the manifestation continues, Nell eventually comes to feel as if the whole of her being is fusing with the entity causing the noises that she hears outside in the hallway. “I will never be able to sleep again with all this noise coming from inside my head,” she thinks,

43 One suspects that Nell was subconsciously aware of this fact all along. Indeed, the whole summerhouse episode is prefigured much earlier in the novel on Nell’s third day in Hill House when, after watching him depart from the room, Theo sighs, “Lovely Luke;” to which Eleanor responds, entirely unprovoked, “Lovely Hill House” (190).
and then asks herself amazedly: “How can these others hear the noise when it is coming from inside my head?” (264). The answer, she intuits, is that she is no longer simply an individual human person: “I am disappearing inch by inch into this house,” she thinks, “I am going apart a little bit at a time” (265). As the manifestation nears its climax – the noise in the hall intensifying, the house quaking – Eleanor makes the decision to stop being afraid, to cease resisting the house’s strenuous advances and to give herself over body and soul to the suitor who seems to want her so badly. “We’re going, we’re going” (267), Nell thinks, recalling the words she spoke at the beginning of her journey to Hill House: “I am going, I am going” (23). “I will relinquish my possession of this self of mine,” she decides now; she will “abdicate, give over willingly what [she] never wanted at all,” that is, her seperateness, her individuality. “Whatever it wants of me,” Eleanor says, “it can have” (268).

It is notable that Jackson chooses to end this scene with the words “I’ll come” (268). Certainly, the entire episode is linguistically couched in terms of a reluctant sexual encounter, something present in a number of prominent gothic novels. There is, for instance, the haunting’s insistent physical “pounding” on the walls of the house and its metaphysical pounding upon the door of Nell’s mind (262), each of which is reminiscent of the repetitive thrusting of a phallus. Further, there is Theo’s use of the term “dancing” to describe the house’s actions toward the climax of the manifestation, a term that has been used colloquially as a metaphor for sex (e.g., “the horizontal dance”). There are also, of course, Eleanor’s virginal feelings of fear, confusion, and uncertainty throughout the episode. It is important to note, however, that this incident comes in due course to mirror not a rape, but rather something more akin to what Linda Williams has called a
“ravishment,” with Nell eventually making the decision to give over willingly to her seducer (164-5). This being the case, Jackson manages to subvert yet another gothic trope in this scene – that of the unwilling sexual encounter – making it into something initially distressing, but (as will be seen) ultimately good and empowering. In this way, Nell’s ravishment is the inverse of, for instance, the literal rape that takes place in Lewis’s *Monk* and the metaphoric rapes that take place in Stoker’s *Dracula*, each of which is exclusively traumatic and victimizing.

Following Nell’s own unwilling sexual encounter, however, she notices that she has taken on some of Hill House’s superhuman abilities: she can hear, incredibly, “everything, all over the house” (271; Kittredge 234). Although this newfound skill is never explained in Jackson’s text, she attributes it in her notes to a “sharing of power” (LoC 19), a move on the part of the house to gift its mate with some of its own unique capabilities. Here therefore, Jackson presents her readers with yet another turn on the traditional trope of the meeting of dark doubles, for unlike Frankenstein, Dorian Gray, and “Usher’s” Roderick, Jackson’s heroine is not destroyed by her doppelgänger but rather (as she was in her meeting with Theo) empowered by her opposite, this time by the acquisition of abilities that go beyond the bounds of normal human sensation. On top of this, Nell’s horror/lover, far from bringing her to harm, goes to great lengths to remind her of its affection for her on the day after her ravishment. While standing alone by the brook, Nell is visited by the haunting, which calls to her from “inside and outside her head” (282). “This was the call,” the narrator states, “that [Eleanor] had been listening for all her life” (282), the call of someone (or, perhaps more rightly, something) who truly loves and desires her. As the voice continues to call out, “Eleanor, Eleanor,” the
protagonist finds herself being “held tight and safe,” as if by a lover (283). Thus, while Theo and Luke, the representatives of traditional romantic love and friendship, have each in turn utterly rejected Nell’s attempts to bond herself to them, Jackson’s unorthodox haunting welcomes her (quite literally) with open arms, thereby destabilizing the classically gothic notion that all transgression and unorthodoxy is necessarily frightening and evil by revealing the most conventionally monstrous figure in her novel to be the one with the most empathy and love for Jackson’s fragile heroine.

Following this display of the haunting’s desire for her and the feelings of fulfillment that accompany it, Nell finally gives herself over to a total fusion with Hill House. No longer does she feel the need to pander to those around her in order to gain the love that she has been craving for so many years. Having found total and unconditional acceptance in the person of the Haunting of Hill House, Eleanor decides, for the first time in her life, to drop all pretense, all accoutrements of propriety and ladylike behavior, and to become a wholly deviant creature – a creature very much like her dark double, her newfound paranormal paramour (77, 122). Significantly, Nell begins to be characterized at this point in Jackson’s novel not as a lover, as she was during her ravishment and her experience at the brook, but rather as a child. While observing Theo and Luke in the summerhouse, for instance, Nell “put[s] her hands over her mouth to keep from speaking to let them know she was there,” rather odd behavior for a thirty-two-year-old woman (286), as is her open-mouthed eavesdropping at the dining room door (291). Once more, then, Nell finds herself infantilized in Jackson’s work, but this time the regression takes place of her own free will: it is not forced upon her by her domineering sister or the patronizing doctor, as it was before, but is rather embraced and accepted as a means of

44 Or, as will become important shortly, perhaps by a mother.
escaping the strictures of the civilized adult world and of returning to a conscience-less, almost animal state – to a time before she was forced to abide by the dominant social order’s conceptions of right and wrong, proper and improper.

The author’s representation of her (at last) socially unrestrained and therefore transgressive protagonist as an intrinsically childish figure in this penultimate portion of her novel is no mere coincidence, for Jackson, much like Emerson before her, always thought of children as being outside of the dominant social order, existing in a sort of “magic” state that preceded the adolescent fall into knowledge, guilt, and civilized pretension and conformity (Oppenheimer 209). Far from decrying this youthful waywardness, however, Jackson often reveled in it, as is evidenced not only by her own true-life mothering techniques (she always encouraged her children to think for themselves and greatly resented those who pressured them to conform [Oppenheimer 139, 143, 203, 46]), but also by the contents of many of her poems and short stories. This stanza from the author’s undated poem “Portrait” stands as a nearly perfect example of the way that Jackson most often portrayed pre-adolescents in her work:

There was a child dancing in the garden and I went out and spoke to it. “Child,” I said, “you are stepping on my flowers.” “Yes,” said the child, “I know.” “Child,” I said, “you are stepping on my garden.” “Yes,” said the child, “I know.” “Why?” I said. “I am dancing,” said the child, “can’t you see?”

(Jackson 1998 126)

In fact, Jackson chose to recycle the text of the nursery rhyme that provides that frame for “Portrait” when constructing her account of Eleanor’s first evening spent in harmonious union with Hill House: as Nell sits on the floor of the parlor, experimenting with her new powers (she finds that, in addition to being able to hear noises being made all over Hill House’s grounds, she can also read the minds of those gathered around her) she picks up
on the sound of an invisible person singing the children’s song “Go Walking Through the Valley” from the center of the room (292-3; 218, 271, 318). Amorphous and indefinable as ever, the haunting has changed its voice, which is only audible to Nell, to suit the needs of its chosen one. No longer is the house’s call the impassioned sigh of a lover; now, it is “a child’s voice, singing sweetly and thinly, on the barest breath” (297).

Later that same evening, after everyone has gone to sleep, Nell responds to the haunting’s call and sets off in a mad frolic through Hill House, pounding on each of the ghost hunters’ doors and rushing up and down the hallway, mimicking the manifestations that she herself experienced on her second and fifth nights in Hill House (170, 261-2, 300). Jackson consciously has Nell imitate the haunting yet again as she “dance[s]” through the ballroom and out onto Hill House’s veranda, just as the house itself did during the ravishment episode (303). In true gothic fashion, the sheltered heroine – now having succumbed to the seductions of the deviant – has come to resemble the horror that she herself once feared. Yet unlike, say, Lucy’s metamorphosis in Stoker’s Dracula, this transformation is not framed as despicable in Jackson’s novel, but rather as something desirable and empowering; the mimicking of Hill House’s haunting allows Nell to take delightful revenge upon those who have hurt her, which she does both by rending Theo’s

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45 Ingeniously, Jackson transforms the words of this nursery rhyme into a kind of a coded invitation from the haunting to the heroine to explore and possess every part of Hill House. “Go walking through the valley, / Go walking through the valley, / Go walking through the valley, / As we have done before….” the child’s voice sings, indirectly inviting Nell to play upon and relish the green hills and babbling brooks of the mansion’s grounds (296). “Go in and out the windows,” it tells her next, encouraging her to frolic within the house’s walls as well – an invitation she will gleefully accept only a few pages later (297). “Go forth and face your lover,” the voice says last of all, a command that Nell will follow not only during her ensuing romp through the mansion, but also in the final pages of Jackson’s book, when she consummates her relationship with Hill House once and for all at the novel’s climax (297). Tellingly, in the game that goes along with this nursery rhyme a number of children stand in a circle while other children weave and duck around them trying not to be touched by their linked hands. Those who are touched must run around the center of the circle while those that form the living ring sing, “Go round and round the village.” Later in Jackson’s novel, after Nell has been caught by her fellow ghost hunters, this is precisely what they attempt to force the heroine to do – go back to civilization, the “village,” and live out a dull and empty life, spinning round and round while ultimately getting nowhere at all.
scarf and provoking and then laughing at her housemates’ fear and confusion as she scampers up and down the mansion’s corridors (300-1). Her “infection” by Hill House also lends Nell a good deal of very real physical power: she can now open the mansion’s huge front door effortlessly, something which she was incapable of doing on her first day at the house (66; 301, 3). Nell also becomes increasingly aligned with Hill House on a mental level. When she hears her name being called by Theo, for instance, she makes a rather puzzling statement: “I had forgotten Eleanor” (300). From this, one can infer that, while pounding on her companions’ doors, Nell’s individual sense of self became entirely fused with the consciousness of the mansion’s haunting.46

As connected as she is to Hill House by this point, though, Nell has studiously continued to avoid the mansion’s library, which is housed at the base of its tower, growing “sick” when she approaches it and whispering “Mother, Mother…Mother” (301; 303). In fact, from her first encounter with it, she has found the library to be utterly repulsive and frightening: “I can’t go in there,” she says during the ghost hunters’ first tour of the house, for from within the room, the narrator says, “the cold air of mold and earth…rushed at her” (137), carrying with it a smell that Judie Newman equates with the tomb of Eleanor’s dead mother (Newman 175). Certainly, Nell herself makes this association: “My mother –,” she says, as the odor washes over her (137). After the others, oblivious to any smell, have gone in to explore the room without her, Nell finds that her hands have become cold and that she “want[s] to cry” (138). Naturally, Eleanor – who

46 It is important to note that the relationship between Nell and the haunting both here and later in Jackson’s work is not characterized as being the same as the relationship between a master and a slave, a possessor and a possessed (as Jodey Castricano has suggested [87]), but rather as a union of two halves into a whole. This more sensitive interpretation will be key in interpreting and understanding of the final lines of Jackson’s work.
feared and hated her mother – finds this space repulsive at first; for her, the idea of motherhood has only ever been associated with filth, guilt, and disappointment.

Nevertheless, Nell continues to long desperately for a mother who loves her, a desire first evidenced in the two mother-fantasies that occur early in Jackson’s text while the protagonist is on her way to Hill House (Rubenstein 136; Newman 172). There is, for one, the “dainty old lady” who “[takes] care” of Nell in the house with the Stone Lions (27). There is also the queen who tells Eleanor that they will live “happily ever after” after she has passed through the wall of oleanders (29). This same longing is reflected later in the answers that Nell’s unconscious gives to Mrs. Montague during the latter’s planchette reading (252-4). During each of these episodes, the ideas of “home” and “mother” are conflated into a single desirable object: a holistic sense of comfort and acceptance, something that Nell has been missing all her life. Now, in the novel’s penultimate scene, the Haunting of Hill House – an entity that, in a classically gothic story, would be regarded unquestionably as an unorthodox abomination fit for nothing but revulsion and destruction – seeks to provide her with what she has for so long desired.

To achieve this end, the cacographous Haunting of Hill House unfixes itself once more, becoming not a lover nor a playmate, but rather a new – and vastly improved – mother figure (Cleveland 230). When Nell arrives at the library on her final night in the mansion and is once more repulsed by its “odor of decay,” the haunting calls out to the protagonist with the soothing maternal words “Come along” (299). Intrigued, Nell says questioningly, “Mother?” and is answered by “a soft little laugh” which “float[s]” toward her down the house’s staircase (299). Almost like a child playing hide and seek, Nell
follows the disembodied voice to the nursery, from whence she thinks the maternal calls may be coming. Nell miscalculates, though, for the voice is coming not from within the nursery, but from a spot just in front of it: the location of the house’s cold spot – the place that Dr. Montague earlier called “the heart of the house” (158). Significantly, this heart spot is now cold no longer, at least not for Nell. Just a few minutes later, when the threat of being caught by the ghost hunters forces Eleanor to lay aside her old fears and to run back to the library, she discovers that the old, “cold” tomb redolent of “mold and earth” has somehow metamorphosed into the womb of her new “housemother” (278) – a place “not cold at all, but deliciously, fondly warm,” where “the stone floor move[s] caressingly, rubbing itself against the soles of her feet” (304). From this passage, then, one can see that the concept of motherhood has clearly been redefined in Nell’s mind, the old fear of her biological mother having been supplanted by the acceptance of this new and loving housemother.

Thus, yet another classically gothic convention is subverted in Hill House: the trope of the discovered relation. Traditionally, this discovery would come after an interrogation of the past, an illumination of long-hidden historical truths, relationships, and secrets, as it does in Otranto, Udolpho, Monk, and Jackson’s own “Lord of the Castle” (Heller 4, Tracy 203). Conventionally, brothers and sisters, parents and children would uncover their connections with one another, thereby reinforcing once again traditional ideological concepts of a past causally connected to the present and of the family unit as sacred and enduring. In Jackson’s subversive work, however, the

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47 Yet another stanza of Jackson’s “Portrait” comes to mind during this chase episode: “Far off among the trees there was a little girl sitting, and when I came to her she looked at me and frowned . . . ‘Who are you hiding from?' I said. / ‘Everybody,’ she explained. / ‘Why?’ I asked. / ‘They want me to comb my hair,’ she explained.” (Jackson 1998 128). Like Jackson’s little girl, Nell is also running from the conformity-peddling avatars of the dominant social order.
discovered relation turns out, incredibly, to be not a long-lost human being, but an entirely unfixed haunting – one that only takes on the characteristics of a relative of the heroine in order to further its own ends. What is more, the fear of incest (another gothic staple) is played upon in this scene as well; in addition to presenting itself now as her mother, remember that the Haunting of Hill House had previously unfixed itself to act as Nell’s lover and ravisher. Yet here, the specter of incest serves not as “a violation” that threatens the stability of the family – that basic self-perpetuating unit of the dominant social order – but rather as the means by which the supernatural entity that inhabits Jackson’s mansion manages to provide its chosen one all that she has ever wanted by acting at once as both mother and lover (Day 120; Tracy 201). For her own part, far from feeling “corrupted” by her at once amorous and filial relationship with the Haunting of Hill House (Day 120), Eleanor is positively delighted with her incestuous situation: “I am home,” she thinks gleefully, as she twirls in delight at the feel of her mother/lover’s light, airy caresses on her skin, “I am home, I am home” (304).

Having so recently been granted her life’s greatest wish, Nell’s next thought – “now, to climb” – might at first appear to be a strange one (304). Surely, as she begins to ascend the tower’s rickety iron stairs, Eleanor knows that she may be heading to her death. One must understand, however, that for Jackson’s protagonist death no longer stands as something to be feared (as it does in nearly every classically gothic text), but rather something utterly desirable, the last hurdle standing in the way of her complete union with Hill House – an act that, naturally, cannot take place until she has been freed of her physical body (Newman 180).48 This being true, Nell’s climb to the top of the

48 Hattenhauer likens Nell’s willingness to “die for love” to the willingness of a martyr to die for his or her faith (LoC 40; Hattenhauer 157). He calls her age, for instance (Nell is thirty-two), “appropriate for one on
mansion’s tower can be seen not as a march toward oblivion, but rather as a kind of passage through a birth canal, one that leads up out of her housemother’s womb and toward the dual conclusion of Nell’s old life and her simultaneous rebirth into a new one. Appropriately, as Eleanor grows steadily closer to her goal, all of her mundane, fleshbound thoughts begin to drop away entirely: “time is ended now,” she thinks, “all that is gone and left behind” (305, emphasis in original). In fact, when her fellow ghost hunters finally do track her down and begin calling for her to stop pounding against the trapdoor that leads up onto the turret outside (the site of Old Miss Craine’s little companion’s own suicide), Nell finds that she “[can]not” even “remember who they [are]” (305).

Perhaps understandably, the heroine’s suicidal behavior in this scene seems quite strange to the men and women who look up at her from the base of the tower, for to them her abandonment of the worldview most commonly agreed upon as the “normal” one marks her out as a certifiable lunatic (185, 210). Notably, however, Eleanor’s overt display of psychotic behavior in this scene puts Dr. Montague himself back upon firmly familiar ground, for by reflexively ascribing Nell’s unorthodox, self-destructive impulses to her having gone out of her mind, the doctor allows himself the pleasure of fixing the heroine’s unfamiliar behavior with a convenient semiotic label that allows him once more to reduce apparent unorthodoxy to the realm of the knowable and, by extension, to regain a comforting degree of control (however illusory it might be) over the world around him.

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the verge of martyrdom (137). While this particular connection may be somewhat tenuous, it is a fact that Jackson herself seems to have had ideas of martyrdom in the back of her mind as she wrote Hill House, for an early draft both locates a portrait of the martyr St. Sebastian in the house’s womb-tower and has Nell’s car “burst[ing] into flames” after it hits its tree, thereby tying her death to those of the martyrs in the Foxe illustration that Montague finds in Hugh Craine’s Book of Memories. Although this explicit martyr-imagery may have been removed from the final draft, Jackson’s writing continues to imply heavily that “Hill House’s only victim is a volunteer” (Reinsch 122).
Thus, like many members of the real-world 1950’s-era patriarchy that he represents, the doctor facilely manages to explain Nell’s eccentric behavior away as a symptom of insanity and is subsequently able to rally his fellow ghost-hunters to effect the “salvation” of the “mentally ill” Eleanor from herself.

In pursuit of this end, the ghost hunters begin to play out a series of stereotypical gothic rescue plots. Luke, ever the incipient hero, guides Nell away from the tower’s trapdoor (and her own death/rebirth) and back down toward the world she has endeavored for so long to escape (308). The doctor, meanwhile, resolves to bind Nell to that world by salvaging her sanity and sending her back “home” to the city (313), where she can “be herself again” (315). In yet another subversion of the gothic genre, however, Eleanor herself exhibits no desire to leave Jackson’s prototypically gothic Bad Place and the horror that dwells within it: “It’s the only time anything’s ever happened to me,” she says of her stay in the haunted mansion, “I liked it . . . I won’t go away” (317-8). The prospect of returning to her stifling, mundane life, “sleep[ing] on a cot at [her] sister’s, in the baby’s room” (313), is, for Nell, no different from being literally “walled up alive” (315) like the victims in *The Monk* and Poe’s “The Black Cat.”

Disregarding her desire to escape the living death of conventional 1950’s society, however, Nell’s two gothic “saviors” stoically usher her into her automobile the morning after her near-miss with death/rebirth, much like prison guards returning a recalcitrant

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49 This point is underlined in an unpublished first-person passage written by Eleanor herself, which, in an earlier draft of *Hill House*, was to have acted as a preface to Jackson’s novel. In it, Nell speaks to the world that she has left from beyond the grave: “my god, am i going to have to come back to this [sic] world again? foul, rotten, beastly -- what of me belongs here? let me tell you what i think of you, you and your world. I think you are liars and thieves and murderers and filthy [sic] with disbelief; i think you live in a squalid place of horror; i think you have dirtied yourselves beyond understanding. i would not willingly live among you, hear your cynicism, see your sores, touch your fleshly hands; you are monstrous; you are people -- what of me belongs to you?… i left you the day i went to monstrose house and now i am going to tell you why…i will tell it perfectly sensibly because i hate you so much i want to see you suffer when you hear where i have been (LoC 39).
inmate to her cell: “The doctor took her by the arm,” the narrator says, “and, with Luke
beside her, led her to her car and opened the door for her” (319). Once inside the car,
though, Jackson has her protagonist play out what she considers to be the proper ending
to any well-told story. In her address, “Experience in Fiction,” Jackson states that every
work should be made up of a series of interconnected “incidents,” each “paralleling the
final one” (Jackson 1968 207). To this end, the phrase “I am going” is once again
invoked (321), tying Nell’s final automobile ride (like her surrender during the
ravishment scene) to her initial escape from the prison of her sister’s apartment and,
indeed, the conventional world itself. Now, as then, the “car works fine” and Nell is
“going off into the unknown” (LoC 45). This time, however, the phrase “I am going” is
immediately followed by yet another snippet of text that crops up time and again
throughout Jackson’s novel – the same one, in fact, that came into Nell’s head the first
time that Hill House caught her up in its embrace: “journeys end in lovers meeting”
(321). By juxtaposing these two recurring lines in her lead-up to Nell’s suicide, Jackson
thus indicates that her heroine must now undertake yet another escape, this time from her
earthly life itself. “They can’t make me leave,” Eleanor tells herself, “not if Hill House
means me to stay” (321), and with a deliberate “turn of the wheel” that “send[s] the car
directly at the great tree at the curve of the driveway” (322), Nell finally manages to find
what she (and every other claustrophobic housebound woman in the 1950’s) has always
longed for: a way out (Hague 7; Friedan 15).

50 In allowing her to embrace her death in this way, Jackson has Eleanor double the actions of the
protagonist of another of her shorter works, itself entitled “Lovers Meeting,” wherein a young woman
much like Nell can only find peace in the act of killing herself. The lovers’ “meeting” referred to
throughout this short story is ultimately revealed to refer to the coming together of the heroine and an
anthropomorphic personification of death itself. Thus, it is no coincidence that its protagonist also hums
Mozart’s “La Chi Darem La Mano” as she moves toward her earthly demise.
In choosing to end her novel with Eleanor’s flight from the constrained life that awaited her back in the city, Jackson subverts the gothic genre one final time by undermining two of its most conventional endings at once: the wedding of the hero and heroine, and the defeat of the gothic horror. Not only does Nell not marry Luke, the closest thing that *Hill House* has to a classically gothic hero, she happily spurns him (and conventionality in general) in favor of a lovers’ meeting with a horror, one that – unlike those in *Otranto*, *Screw*, *Shining*, and *Seven Gables* – remains decidedly alive and haunting at the end of the novel (323). Moreover, it is implied that this meeting results in a lasting relationship between the pair, for while it is true that Jackson both opens and closes her work with the words “silence lay steadily against the wood and stone of Hill House, and whatever walked there walked alone” (323), a close look at the text reveals that the line “Hill House, not sane, stood by itself against its hills” (7, emphasis added), which appears in the novel’s first paragraph, has been changed to “Hill House itself, not sane, stood against its hills” in its last (323, emphasis added) – thereby suggesting that the haunting is no longer “alone” or “by itself” in the same way that it was earlier, but has become fused with Eleanor.⁵¹

Thus, the traditional gothic loop remains unclosed at the conclusion of Jackson’s novel; there is no detumescent return to the status quo, no tidy marriage of the hero and heroine, no decisive vanquishing of the unconventional. To the contrary, it is John Montague – the author’s embodiment of all that is normal, proper, scientific, and sane – who stands defeated and mocked by his scholarly peers on the final page of her work, while her gothic horror (itself “not sane”) continues to stand “against its hills holding

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⁵¹ Robert Wise seems to have picked up on this same nuance in Jackson’s text, for he chooses to end his 1961 adaptation of the novel with Eleanor’s voice speaking the line “and we who walk here walk alone” (1.51.20).
darkness within,” just as it has for eighty years and might for eighty more (323, emphasis added). Concomitantly, *The Haunting of Hill House* itself continues to stand as a rebuke to the conservative ideology both of the gothic genre and of 1950’s America: within its pages transgression and unorthodoxy are consistently celebrated in their most subversive forms, while conventional concepts of propriety, familial dutifulness, and scientific and linguistic authority are represented as the true sources of terror.
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