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**Shirley Jackson's Female Characters:  
Insanity and the Female Gothic**

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## Introduction

Shirley Jackson is probably best known for her 1948 short story *The Lottery*, which caused a lot of controversy among its publication in *The New Yorker*<sup>1</sup>. But her work has been getting more and more attention in the recent years, not only in the academic sphere, but also among general public. This is partly due to recent TV show and movie adaptations of her works – notably the 2018 Netflix TV show *The Haunting* (first season) and the movie adaptation of her novel *We Have Always Lived in the Castle*, also from 2018. There is also a 2020 movie called *Shirley* based on the 2014 novel (of the same name) by Susan Scarf Merrell, which employs some aspects of Shirley Jackson’s biography in a fictional story. The increased interest in Shirley Jackson’s work also implies that what she had to say is still relevant today, more than fifty years later.

The aim of this bachelor’s thesis is to analyze Shirley Jackson’s female protagonists from three of her novels – *The Haunting of Hill House*, *We Have Always Lived in the Castle* and *The Bird’s Nest*) with regard to the Female Gothic features found in Jackson’s work. The female protagonists that will be analyzed (Eleanor Vance, Mary Katherine Blackwood and Elizabeth Richmond) have many similarities – they are all young women who have a complicated relationship with their mothers (and this complicated relationship haunts them even after their mothers’ death) and their homes / houses. The protagonists’ troubled relation to their mothers / homes / houses is often manifested in their uncertain identity, or in their eventual loss of sanity and escape from reality, or in the creation of an idealized version of their own reality.

The term “female gothic”, first used by Ellen Moers in her work *Literary Women*, is often used to describe Jackson’s work. The female gothic differs from the traditional gothic by the focus on the pre-oedipal conflict, rather than the oedipal one, as e.g. Claire Kahane or Judie Newman point out. The pre-oedipal stage of development is defined by the child’s attachment to their mother. This mother-child (or more specifically, mother-daughter) bond is in a certain way found in most of Jackson’s novels, but is especially prominent in the three mentioned above. In close relation to the female gothic is also the theme of domesticity, which also pervades all of Jackson’s work, including even her humorous memoirs depicting her life as a mother of four children (*Raising Demons* and *Life Among the Savages*). Many of the personal traumas of Shirley Jackson are reflected in her fictional work – from the

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<sup>1</sup> Ruth Franklin, *Shirley Jackson: A Rather Haunted Life*, (Liveright, 2017), 1.

complicated relationship with her mother Geraldine, to her struggles as a successful writer and mother/housewife during the 1950s. The complicated role of women in society during the 1950s and 1960s (as famously recounted by Betty Friedan in *The Feminine Mystique*) echoes through the characters of Eleanor, Merricat and Elizabeth, and many others as well.

This thesis will also briefly focus on the analysis of the narration style in the three novels, each of them distinct. No matter the distinct features of each narration, the story is always provided through the point of view of the female protagonist. Viewing the novel's reality through the protagonist's perspective contributes to the better understanding of the characters' psyche and their eventual descent into madness.

# 1 Life and Works of Shirley Jackson

## 1.1 Life

Shirley Jackson was born in 1916 in San Francisco, California, to her parents Geraldine and Leslie Jackson. When Jackson was 16, her family moved to Rochester, New York, where she studied at The University of Rochester, where she had a hard time – she “experienced a mental unraveling during the first two years of college...Between 1934 and 1936, her writings indicate that she may have made at least one halfhearted attempt at suicide. No particular event appears to have sent her into this downward spiral.”<sup>2</sup> Some of these anxieties of a lonely young girl just starting college are reflected in her 1951 novel *Hangsaman*. After this difficult period she transferred to Syracuse University, where she met Stanley Edgar Hyman, who would later become a professor and literary critic. They married in 1940, and together they had four children. Their marriage was complicated – Jackson struggled with Hyman’s infidelity (often with his students), which caused her to suffer not only mentally, but also physically: “It’s not clear whether Hyman failed to understand how hurtful his actions were to Jackson or whether he simply did not care.”<sup>3</sup>

Shirley Jackson also had a complicated relationship with her mother Geraldine, who was very critical of Shirley, especially of her appearance and her weight, and she also favored her son Barry over Shirley. Shirley was not conventional enough for Geraldine’s liking, who was a very conventional woman herself. As Ruth Franklin notes, “Jackson’s awareness that her mother had never loved her unconditionally – if at all – would be a source of sadness into adulthood.”<sup>4</sup> Jackson transformed this sadness into writing: “All the heroines of her novels are essentially motherless – if not lacking a mother entirely, then victims of loveless mothering. Many of her books include acts of matricide, either unconscious or deliberate.”<sup>5</sup> And indeed, in all three of the novels discussed in this thesis, all of the protagonists’ mothers are dead, and their daughters, to a certain degree, contributed to their mothers’ deaths, and the guilt seems to haunt them for their entire lives.

The place where Jackson lived also had an impact on her work. Not long after their marriage, Jackson and Hyman moved to a small village of North Bennington in Vermont. The

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<sup>2</sup> Ruth Franklin, *Shirley Jackson: A Rather Haunted Life*, (Liveright, 2017), 45.

<sup>3</sup> Franklin, *A Rather Haunted Life*, 343.

<sup>4</sup> Franklin, *A Rather Haunted Life*, 25.

<sup>5</sup> Franklin, *A Rather Haunted Life*, 25.

closed-off small-town environment does not seem as a great place to live for two creative individuals as Jackson and Stanley were, and it is true that they were always seen as outsiders: "...she and Stanley could never truly integrate themselves into the community," and their visitors, "friends who were likely to be Jewish, homosexual, or African-American...also set Shirley and Stanley apart from the homogenous community of North Bennington."<sup>6</sup> The cruelty of the small town/village people is reflected in many of her works – from her famous short story *The Lottery* to her last completed novel *We Have Always Lived in the Castle*.

An important aspect of Shirley Jackson's life is her 'double identity' – that of a successful writer and that of a mother/housewife. Jackson is not only the author of gothic horror fiction, but also an author of humorous recollections of her everyday life as a mother of four children, which she published in women's magazines, and which were later published as collections titled *Raising Demons* and *Life Among the Savages*. But not everyone had an understanding for her two distinct types of writings. In her famous work *The Feminine Mystique* (1963), Betty Friedan documented the complicated role of women in the 1950s society, which dictated for women to be housewives, a role which left many women feeling unfulfilled, a phenomenon which Friedan calls "the problem that has no name". Betty Friedan also mentions Shirley Jackson in this work, but it is not, as one might expect, to praise her success as a woman writer, but rather to criticize her:

Shirley Jackson, who all her adult life has been an extremely capable writer, pursuing a craft far more demanding than bedmaking, and Jean Kerr, who is a playwright, and Phyllis McGinley, who is a poet, picture themselves as housewives, they may or may not overlook the housekeeper or maid who really makes the beds. But they implicitly deny the vision, and the satisfying hard work involved in their stories, poems, and plays. They deny the lives they lead, not as housewives, but as individuals.<sup>7</sup>

Friedan here talks mostly about Jackson's writing for women's magazines. But, as Angela Hague notes, Shirley Jackson, in her fiction, depicts exactly the kind of women Betty Friedan talks about in *The Feminine Mystique*, "...women who, lacking any sense of self or ability to function in the world outside the home, begin to fragment and dissociate when forced to act independently."<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Franklin, *A Rather Haunted Life*, 202-203.

<sup>7</sup> Betty Friedan, *The Feminine Mystique* (W. W. Norton & Company, 2013), 52.

<sup>8</sup> Angela Hague, "'A faithful anatomy of our times': Reassessing Shirley Jackson," *Frontiers: A Journal of Women Studies*, 26, no. 2 (2005): 76.



Shirley Jackson's life was troubled by her deteriorating health, both physical and mental. Struggling with mental health, she often took anxiety medication, and she was also a smoker and drank a lot of alcohol, which, combined with the fact that she was overweight, resulted in her early death in 1965, at the age of only 48 years. In the last years of her life, she also struggled with agoraphobia and as a result was unable to leave her house, being essentially imprisoned there. This part of her life is echoed in the character of Constance, from her last novel *We Have Always Lived in the Castle*, who is also imprisoned in her house, due to her anxiety of the outside world.

## 1.2 Works

Shirley Jackson wrote six complete novels and left one unfinished upon her death. Her first novel, *The Road Through the Wall* (1948) tells the story of a close-minded suburban neighborhood, whose true face is unveiled after a wall which sheltered the street from the outside world is destroyed. Her second novel, *Hangsaman* (1951), is about the lonely and anxious Natalie Waite, who just started studying college and who meets Tony, whom, as it turns out, Natalie, in her loneliness and deteriorating mental health, had only imagined. Her third novel, *The Bird's Nest* (1954), centers around Elizabeth Richmond, whose mysterious illnesses are finally uncovered to be caused by multiple personalities. Following *The Bird's Nest* was *The Sundial* (1958), a story about the Halloran family, who start to believe that the world is ending and the only safe place to hide is their family's mansion. Finally, her last two novels, *The Haunting of Hill House* (1959) and *We Have Always Lived in the Castle* (1962), each tell a story about their protagonist's entrapment in a house, but with quite different implications. Jackson's last three novels – *The Sundial*, *Hill House*, and *Castle*, are sometimes put together as her most 'gothic novels.'<sup>9</sup> For this thesis, however, I chose *The Bird's Nest* for analysis along with *Castle* and *Hill House* because of the many similarities of the female protagonists – all young women with troubled identities and complicated relationships to their dead mothers.

Shirley Jackson also wrote over 100 short stories, some of which were published in the *New Yorker* (apart from *The Lottery* it was also e.g. *When Things Get Dark* or *Afternoon in Linen*). Her short stories were also published in collections – *The Lottery and Other Stories*

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<sup>9</sup> Roberta Rubenstein, "House Mothers and Haunted Daughters: Shirley Jackson and Female Gothic," *Tulsa Studies in Women's Literature*, 15, no. 2 (1996): 311

(1949) or the posthumous collection *Come Along with Me* (1968), which also included her unfinished novel. The features of the female gothic and domesticity which I aim to analyze in this thesis, can also be found in many (if not most) of her short stories. For example, in her short story *Trial by Combat* (first published in the *New Yorker* in 1944), Jackson explores the issues of the female identity. It follows Emily Johnson, a young woman, whose husband is at war. Emily starts to notice that some of her possessions are missing from her room, and suspects her neighbor, Mrs. Allen, an old widow, of stealing them. Emily does not want to confront the old Mrs. Allen directly, but when she goes to visit her room, she is struck by the similar look of both of their rooms. Gradually, Emily starts to identify herself more and more with the lonely widow, and when she secretly sneaks into Mrs. Allen's room and finds her missing things there, she is caught by Mrs. Allen, and so both of the women, aware of what each of them is really doing, say nothing.

The theme of women imprisoned in their own homes is dramatically portrayed in Jackson's short story *The Renegade*. The story follows Mrs. Walpole, a young and busy housewife, who is horrified when she receives a call from her neighbors saying that their dog Lady has been killing the neighbor's chickens. She is mostly horrified at their suggestion that they want her to do "something" about the dog, suggesting the dog should be killed. The other people she encounters during the day also suggest cruel ways of dealing with the dog. But what horrifies Mrs. Walpole the most is when she hears her own children fantasizing about how they would like to punish the dog, and put a spiked collar on her neck. Upon hearing this, Mrs. Walpole seems to identify with the dog, stating how she could feel "the harsh hands pulling her down, the sharp points closing in on her throat."<sup>10</sup> Like Lady, Mrs. Walpole too feels constrained in the small town with its judgmental people, as she also feels constrained in her housewife role. These two short stories illustrate that Jackson's preoccupation with the issues of female identity and domesticity (characteristic of the female gothic), are not just features of her novels, but of her shorter fiction as well.

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<sup>10</sup> Shirley Jackson, *The Lottery and Other Stories* (Penguin Classics, 2009), 83.

## 2 Shirley Jackson and the Female Gothic

The term 'Female Gothic' was first introduced by Ellen Moers<sup>11</sup> in her 1976 work *Literary Women*. Here, Moers defines the term Female Gothic as "...the work that women writers have done in the literary mode that, since the eighteenth century, we have called the Gothic."<sup>12</sup> She also acknowledges that defining 'the Gothic' is not easy, "except that it has to do with fear."<sup>13</sup> With regards to the Female Gothic, Moers talks about the works of writers such as Ann Radcliffe, Mary Shelley and Emily Brontë. In their works, she points out the uniquely female aspects of the Gothic, such as that "the central figure is a young woman who is simultaneously persecuted victim and courageous heroine"<sup>14</sup> (as in Ann Radcliffe's *The Mysteries of Udolpho*), as well as the preoccupation with creation/birth, destruction and parental abandonment (as in Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*). The Female Gothic narrative is one "where woman is examined with a woman's eye, woman as girl, as sister, as mother, as self."<sup>15</sup>

Moers also talks about the less overtly gothic female writers, such as the Victorian poet Christina Rossetti and her narrative poem *Goblin Market*. Moers observes that *Goblin Market* touches upon another typical feature of the Female Gothic, the bond between two sisters. In *Goblin Market*, "Two little girls, two sisters Laura and Lizzie, seem to be living alone together as *Goblin Market* opens, and running their own household without parents. Their relationship is one of spiritual and physical affection..."<sup>16</sup>. This theme of the bond between two sisters who live alone, without their parents, is reminiscent of Jackson's novel *We Have Always Lived in the Castle*, in which two sisters, Constance and Merricat, also live alone, in their family's house, their "castle", almost entirely self-sufficient and independent of the patriarchal society. And as in *Goblin Market*, where the two sisters defeat the male intruders (here the goblins), in *Castle* too, the two sisters succeed in driving out the evil male force (their cousin Charles).

Moers also links the specifics of the Female Gothic to the visual representation of the fear of self. As she notes, "...nothing separates female experience from male experience more sharply, and more early in life, than the compulsion to visualize the self...From infancy,

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<sup>11</sup> Ellen Moers (1928-1979) was an American literary critic, who focused on feminist criticism.

<sup>12</sup> Ellen Moers, *Literary Women* (New York: Doubleday & Co., 1976), 90.

<sup>13</sup> Moers, *Literary Women*, 90.

<sup>14</sup> Moers, *Literary Women*, 91.

<sup>15</sup> Moers, *Literary Women*, 109.

<sup>16</sup> Moers, *Literary Women*, 101.

indeed from the moment of birth, the looks of a girl are examined with ruthless scrutiny by all around her, especially by women, crucially by her own mother.”<sup>17</sup> Shirley Jackson herself, as was mentioned in the previous chapter, had a complicated relationship with her own mother, who, despite Jackson’s great literary achievements, was still more concerned with her daughter’s looks, as is clear from their correspondence – after receiving a harsh letter criticizing her daughter’s appearance and weight on a picture of her in *Time* magazine, Jackson wrote to her mother “...surely at my age i have a right to live as i please, and i have just had enough of the unending comments on my appearance and my faults.”<sup>18</sup>

Another scholar, Claire Kahane,<sup>19</sup> looks at the issue of Female Gothic in her study *Gothic Mirrors and Feminine Identity* from a feminist and psychoanalytical perspective. Kahane distinguishes between traditional Gothic and Female Gothic narratives. Of the traditional Gothic she notes that “Most interpretations, written primarily by male critics, attribute the terror which the Gothic by definition arouses to the motif of incest within an oedipal plot.”<sup>20</sup> Kahane argues that what is characteristic of the Female Gothic is not an oedipal plot, but a pre-oedipal one. In the pre-oedipal period, “mother and infant are locked into a ‘symbiotic relation’, an experience of oneness, characterized by a blurring of boundaries between infant and mother – a dual unity before the emergence of a separate self.”<sup>21</sup> The issues of the female identity (and the woman’s relation to her mother) is one of the key characteristics of the Female Gothic. Kahane notes that “For women...the struggle for a separate identity is not only more tenuous, but is fundamentally ambivalent, an ongoing battle with a mirror image who is both me and not me.”<sup>22</sup> This mother-daughter identity confusion is a frequent motif in Shirley Jackson’s work (most notably in *The Bird’s Nest*, where the protagonist, Elizabeth, shares even the same name with her mother).

Roberta Rubenstein,<sup>23</sup> focuses on the features of the Female Gothic in Jackson’s work specifically. In her study, she proposes a series of “pairs of strongly marked elements that

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<sup>17</sup> Moers, *Literary Women*, 107-108.

<sup>18</sup> Shirley Jackson to Geraldine Jackson, unsent letter, (September 25, 1962) in *The Letters of Shirley Jackson*, ed. by Laurence Jackson Hyman (New York: Random House, 2021), 527.

<sup>19</sup> Claire Kahane (\*1935) is an American feminist and psychoanalytic literary critic.

<sup>20</sup> Claire Kahane, “GOTHIC MIRRORS AND FEMININE IDENTITY,” *The Centennial Review*, 24, no. 1 (1980): 47.

<sup>21</sup> Kahane, “GOTHIC MIRROR...,” 48.

<sup>22</sup> Kahane, “GOTHIC MIRROR...,” 48.

<sup>23</sup> Roberta Rubenstein is professor emeritus of literature at American University, Washington, D.C.

occur in tension...*inside/outside, mother/self, home/lost, and 'eat or be eaten.'*"<sup>24</sup> She links the fear of "eat or be eaten" with the fear of consumption or incorporation, as she notes that the "...predatory 'consume or be consumed' relationship...exists between several mother-daughter pairs in Jackson's fiction."<sup>25</sup> It is not always directly a mother who is threatening to 'consume' her daughter, but oftentimes a house (which is sometimes supposed to represent a maternal figure, as in *The Haunting of Hill House*). The houses which imprison the women living in them is also a frequent topic of Jackson's work, not just in her novels but also in her short stories. L. N. Rosales refers to this aspect of Shirley Jackson's work as 'the domestic gothic': "A true domestic gothic narrative places the action in settings as recognizable to readers as their own homes, subverting the ordinary by uncovering the possibility of terror within the everyday domestic sphere."<sup>26</sup> In domestic gothic, the space of the home is often endangered by the threat of possible intruders, as it is in Jackson's *Castle* novel.

The role of the domestic space, or home, which is so closely related to mothers, is in the Gothic narrative overturned – what is supposed to be safe and familiar, turns out to be strange and dangerous. Shirley Jackson's work has many features of the Female Gothic – in the three novels analyzed in this thesis it is particularly the ambivalent mother-daughter relationship, as well as the struggles of female identity and the need to escape/stay forever in an imprisoning house.

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<sup>24</sup> Roberta Rubenstein, "House Mothers and Haunted Daughters: Shirley Jackson and Female Gothic," *Tulsa Studies in Women's Literature*, 15, no. 2 (1996): 309.

<sup>25</sup> Rubenstein, "House Mothers and Haunted Daughters..." 309.

<sup>26</sup> L. N. Rosales "'Sharp Points Closing in on Her Throat': The Domestic Gothic in Shirley Jackson's Short Fiction" in *Shirley Jackson and Domesticity: Beyond the Haunted House*, ed. Jill E. Anderson and Melanie R. Anderson (Bloomsbury Academic, 2020), 59.

### **3 The Haunting of Hill House**

Although Shirley Jackson's 1959 novel *The Haunting of Hill House* gets praised as a ghost story, calling it as such would greatly reduce all of the themes it explores. Jackson's work is much more subtle – no ghosts actually ever appear within the pages of the novel, and every paranormal incident is left ambiguous. The seemingly unoriginal storyline about a woman losing her sanity in a house believed to be haunted provides space for exploring some more complex issues – loneliness, guilt, individuality, (the lack of) identity, and motherhood, to name a few. The 'haunting' suggested in the title then does not happen so much in the house itself, but rather in the characters' minds, and especially in the mind of the most vulnerable one – the novel's protagonist, Eleanor. This chapter is going to focus on the analysis of the female gothic features in the novel, represented by the complicated relationship Eleanor has with her mother. This is reflected in her lifelong search for a home and eventually in her attachment to Hill House. Seeing it almost as a mother figure, this relationship between Eleanor and the house (or what she believes to be her home) does not fulfill her wish for a mother/home, but rather it drives her mad, causing her death in the end.

#### **3.1 Eleanor and her Mother**

The novel's protagonist, Eleanor Vance, is a 32-year-old woman, who had spent the last 11 years caring for her ill mother, who recently died. Spending so much time trapped in a house that does not feel like home, with only her irritable mother to keep her company, Eleanor became very anxious, timid and perhaps a bit naïve, and she struggles to form deeper connections with other people. That all changes when she receives an invitation from Dr. Montague, who is interested in the study of paranormal events in the so-called haunted houses, to help him, along with other people, in his research. The invitation comes just at the right time for Eleanor – being rid of the obligation to take care of her mother, she eagerly accepts the invitation, even despite her older sister's (and also hypothetically her mother's) disapproval. At Hill House, she almost immediately bonds with another woman who came to help Dr. Montague – the artistic and free-spirited psychic Theodora (or just Theo). The other person there apart from Dr. Montague is Luke, the future heir to Hill House, who is somewhat of an outcast in his family. The four of them seem to share the same sense of humor, and they connect rather quickly. Eleanor, for the first time in her life, feels like she fits in, thinking "I

am the fourth person in this room; I am one of them; I belong.”<sup>27</sup> Her sense of belonging with the others however gradually transforms into the sense of belonging in the house itself, and Eleanor begins to distance herself from her companions, devoting herself to the house fully.

Eleanor’s complicated relationship with her mother is outlined right from the beginning. When Eleanor is first introduced to the reader, her character is depicted as being inherently tied to her mother (both literally – having to stay at home with her, and metaphorically – being unable to escape her mother’s influence even after her death): “The only person in the world she genuinely hated, now that her mother was dead, was her sister.”<sup>28</sup> What is clear from this introduction is the fact that much of Eleanor’s identity is defined by her relationship to her mother. Eleanor’s relationship to her mother is ambivalent; yes, she might have despised her mother because she had to take care of her, spending eleven years essentially imprisoned in her house, but she still longed for her love and attention. The word “mother” echoes throughout the whole novel, such as when Eleanor tries to confess something which is difficult for her to even utter: “My mother–”<sup>29</sup>, she says as an explanation for why she cannot enter the library at Hill House; or when she loses her sanity and dances barefoot through the halls of Hill House, whispering “Mother, Mother...Mother”<sup>30</sup> as a wish that never came true. Despite her mother being dead, Eleanor is still haunted by the idea of her presence.

By leaving for Hill House, Eleanor hopes to break free from her mother’s influence; it is almost an act of defiance against her mother. Eleanor’s older sister does not encourage her plan to leave for Hill House and says: “I am sure Mother would have agreed with me, Eleanor.”<sup>31</sup> Her mother’s implied disapproval is one more reason for Eleanor to go. But instead of finding freedom at Hill House, Eleanor ends up being trapped yet again, by a house that acts as some kind of a mother figure to her: “A mother house...a housemother”<sup>32</sup>, remarks Luke about Hill House. In her study, Judie Newman<sup>33</sup> looks at the novel through the lens of the “reproduction of mothering” theory by Nancy Chodorow (as she formulated it in her 1978 work *The Reproduction of Mothering: Psychoanalysis and the Sociology of Gender*) which, simply put, argues that women are always seen as the caretakers, and it is difficult for

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<sup>27</sup> Shirley Jackson, *The Haunting of Hill House* (Penguin Classics, 2009), 60.

<sup>28</sup> Jackson, *The Haunting of Hill House*, 6.

<sup>29</sup> Jackson, *The Haunting of Hill House*, 103.

<sup>30</sup> Jackson, *The Haunting of Hill House*, 229.

<sup>31</sup> Jackson, *The Haunting of Hill House*, 12.

<sup>32</sup> Jackson, *The Haunting of Hill House*, 211.

<sup>33</sup> Judie Newman is professor emeritus of American literature at the University of Nottingham

them to escape the role of the mother. Newman notes that Eleanor had to take on the role of the mother, in order to take care of her own mother, while she herself lacked the motherly love and nurturing when she was a child: “Eleanor has been both mother and child. On the one hand, she detests the mother’s dominance, resenting the loss of her own youth in the forced assumption of the ‘mothering role’. On the other, she feels guilt at not having mothered adequately.”<sup>34</sup> Eleanor confesses that she feels guilty over her mother’s death, being afraid that she might have somehow prevented it – her mother supposedly knocked on the wall for help and Eleanor did not wake up; it is then significant that most of the paranormal events that happen at Hill House are in the form of someone/something knocking on the doors – and Eleanor often at first confuses this with her mother knocking for help.

Eleanor’s troubled relationship with her mother is also reflected in her relentless search for a home that she feels she never truly had: “I haven’t any home, no place at all,”<sup>35</sup> Eleanor admits towards the end of the novel. The everlasting search for home mirrors Eleanor’s biggest fear – loneliness: “I am always afraid of being alone,”<sup>36</sup> she once confesses to the others. Losing her mother, no matter how complicated their relationship was, is still a traumatizing experience for Eleanor and it leaves her completely alone in the world. She does have a sister, but she has her own family, and it is clear that she does not care for Eleanor much at all. Believing that she finally found friends, or perhaps even a family at Hill House, Eleanor finds herself almost desperately clinging to them, especially to Theo. However, when she finds out that Theo does not reciprocate her feelings, declining Eleanor’s offer of living together, her sanity, already fragile, shatters completely. Not being able to find family or home amongst the human companions at Hill House, she turns to the house itself, completely submitting herself to its power – rather than leave Hill House, she drives her car into the tree on her way out in a hopeless attempt to stay there forever, not alone anymore.

This loneliness is also echoed in the identical opening and closing lines of the novel: “...silence lay steadily against the wood and stone of Hill House, and whatever walked there, walked alone.”<sup>37</sup> Eleanor, offering her own life to Hill House, could still not be shielded from the eternal loneliness; she never finds the home/mother that she always longed for. It is interesting to note that one of the adaptations of this novel, the 2018 Netflix TV show called

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<sup>34</sup> Judie Newman, “On the Haunting of Hill House”, in *Gothic Horror*, ed. Clive Bloom (Palgrave Macmillan, 1998), 160.

<sup>35</sup> Jackson, *The Haunting of Hill House*, 239.

<sup>36</sup> Jackson, *The Haunting of Hill House*, 160.

<sup>37</sup> Jackson, *The Haunting of Hill House*, 3, 246.



*The Haunting*, although differing from the original in many aspects, kept the opening and closing lines similar, but changed the closing one to: “and those who walk there, walk *together*.”<sup>38</sup> This might be because one of the central themes in both the novel and the TV show adaptation, the bond between a mother and her daughter, is a bit different in each – while in the novel, Eleanor despised her mother, Nelly in the TV show loved her. Although the mother in the TV show adaptation (Olivia, or Liv Crain) was by no means perfect (she got frequently angry with the children since she suffered from frequent headaches), she was nonetheless still a mother that took care of her children the best she could, something that the novel’s Eleanor always lacked. Jessica R. McCort in her study comparing the novel with the Netflix adaptation, states that “Coming home in the Netflix series means something different than it did in Jackson’s novel. The return home seems to be something that is desired by the creators of the series (in the end both Nell and Hugh Crain [Liv’s husband] commit suicide in the house in order to remain with Olivia).”<sup>39</sup> The novel’s Eleanor sacrificed herself to Hill House for a chance to have a home/mother that she *never* had; the TV show’s Nelly sacrificed herself to Hill House to stay forever with the mother/in the home she *once* had.

### 3.2 Eleanor and Hill House

Apart from having an ambivalent relationship with her mother, Eleanor also has an ambivalent relationship to Hill House. Hill House acts as one of the characters in the story; even when being referred to, either by the narrator or the characters, it is almost always capitalized, a “House”, as if it were its name. Some characters, like Eleanor and Dr. Montague, feel a sense of respect towards the house, being hesitant to actually refer to it by its name: “*He* does not name it, Eleanor noticed.”<sup>40</sup> The others, including Theodora, are not afraid (or at least pretending not to be afraid) to call the house by its name: “Her insistence on naming Hill House troubled Eleanor. It’s as though she were saying it deliberately...telling the house she knows its name, calling the house to tell it where we are; is it bravado?”<sup>41</sup> The house is also personified in many instances, giving off the impression that it is alive, watching their every move; there are often descriptions of its *face*, of its *eyes*:

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<sup>38</sup> *The Haunting*, season 1, episode 10, “Silence Lay Steadily”, created by Mike Flanagan, aired October 12, 2018, 1:08:17

<sup>39</sup> Jessica R. McCort, “Flipping Hill House: The Netflix Renovation of Shirley Jackson’s Landmark Novel, in *Shirley Jackson and Domesticity: Beyond the Haunted House*, ed. Jill E. Anderson and Melanie R. Anderson (Bloomsbury Academic, 2020) 236.

<sup>40</sup> Jackson, *The Haunting of Hill House*, 124.

<sup>41</sup> Jackson, *The Haunting of Hill House*, 123.

No human eye can isolate the unhappy coincidence of line and place which suggests evil in the face of a house, and yet somehow a maniac juxtaposition, a badly turned angle, some chance of meeting roof and sky, turned Hill House into a place of despair, more frightening because the face of Hill House seemed awake, with a watchfulness from the blank windows and a touch of glee in the eyebrow of a cornice.<sup>42</sup>

The House can be interpreted as a kind of reflection of Eleanor's troubled mind, mirroring both her desires and her anxieties, and echoing the change in her personality. This change can be observed in Eleanor's attitude towards the house as the novel progresses. Upon arriving at Hill House, Eleanor finds the building "vile" and "diseased",<sup>43</sup> but when she leaves (or rather when she is *forced* to leave), she calls it her home, perceiving it as beautiful: "The sun was shining on the hills and the house and the garden and the lawn and the trees and the brook; Eleanor took a deep breath and turned, seeing it all."<sup>44</sup> Her view on the house changes because she herself changes – when she sees the house for the first time, she has not fallen under its spell yet and can still think rationally; at the end, the atmosphere of the house has completely consumed her mind and she becomes identified with the house. Eleanor being one with the house is especially noticeable after she renounces her own self to it in the midst of one of the most unbearable manifestations of the supernatural: "It is too much, she thought, I will relinquish this possession of this self of mine, abdicate, give over willingly what I never wanted at all; whatever it wants of me it can have."<sup>45</sup> After this incident, Eleanor is suddenly in tune with the house; she feels and hears even the most miniscule sounds of the house: "Somewhere upstairs a door swung quietly shut; a bird touched the tower briefly and flew off. In the kitchen the stove was settling and cooling, with little soft creakings...She could even hear, with her new awareness of the house, the dust drifting gently in the attics, the wood aging."<sup>46</sup>

In her healthy state of mind, however, she is distancing herself from the house rather than becoming one with it. This initial oppositeness between Eleanor and the house is visible through the contrast between Eleanor's excessive daydreaming and the house's "absolute reality". Only when Eleanor is not herself anymore, and loses the control of her mind does her behavior become horrifying to the others and the reader. If the house plays the role of "the

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<sup>42</sup> Jackson, *The Haunting of Hill House*, 34.

<sup>43</sup> Jackson, *The Haunting of Hill House*, 33.

<sup>44</sup> Jackson, *The Haunting of Hill House*, 241.

<sup>45</sup> Jackson, *The Haunting of Hill House*, 204.

<sup>46</sup> Jackson, *The Haunting of Hill House*, 223.

mother” to Eleanor, she in turn assumes the role of the daughter, which can also be viewed as opposing stances. If the house was one with Eleanor from the very beginning, she would not fear the disintegration, as she at first does: “I am like a small creature, swallowed whole by a monster, she thought, and the monster feels my tiny little movements inside....’No,’ she said aloud.”<sup>47</sup> Here she still actively tries to defend herself from the house’s influence, but the longer she spends there, the weaker her resistance is.

Eleanor’s only protection against the powers of Hill House are her daydreaming tendencies. From the very beginning, Eleanor is depicted as a character who spends a lot of time in her imagination. This is especially noticeable on her way to Hill House, during which she imagines her life in some of the houses she passes. In a matter of seconds, she has lived an entire lifetime “in a house with two lions in front. Every morning I swept the porch and dusted the lions, and every evening I patted their heads good night...”<sup>48</sup> It is not a coincidence that what she dreams of is a house, or more specifically, a home, because the whole novel can be read as Eleanor’s unrelenting search for home. Creating such daydreams seems to be somewhat of a defense mechanism for her to be able to merely cope with her otherwise tiring, monotonous life. Imaginations, dreams and fantasies act as a defense mechanism against the uneasy atmosphere of Hill House as well, which is described as existing “under conditions of absolute reality”.<sup>49</sup> It might then seem as though Eleanor should be safe from the perils of Hill House, as she dreams almost excessively, but the opposite is actually true – finally experiencing something exciting, she no longer feels the need to escape into her imaginary world, that she so often visited during her endless days when she took care of her mother: “Eleanor had been waiting for something like Hill House... [she] had held fast to the belief that someday something would happen.”<sup>50</sup>

The theme of dream versus reality is closely related to the theme of sanity versus insanity. Hill House, existing within “absolute reality” is deemed not sane, and sanity is maintained by escaping, even if briefly, into the realm of dreams. In his study on “the ineffable” and “absolute reality” in *The Haunting of Hill House*, Michael T. Wilson argues that the conditions of absolute reality have different effects on different characters – namely

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<sup>47</sup> Jackson, *The Haunting of Hill House*, 42.

<sup>48</sup> Jackson, *The Haunting of Hill House*, 18.

<sup>49</sup> Jackson, *The Haunting of Hill House*, 3.

<sup>50</sup> Jackson, *The Haunting of Hill House*, 7-8.

Eleanor and Theodora.<sup>51</sup> Wilson describes Theodora as a “psychic visionary” and Eleanor as “the wounded dreamer”<sup>52</sup>. While Theodora is able to pretend that she never actually experienced anything supernatural at Hill House, which helps her to protect herself from the dangers of the “absolute reality”, Eleanor accepts the House’s reality fully, without questioning it.<sup>53</sup> Wilson links the “absolute reality” with the idea of “the ineffable” – meaning that whatever the characters saw of the “absolute reality” is so horrifying, that they are unable to describe it in words.<sup>54</sup> He also notes that “Hill House’s relentless opposition to such ameliorative dreaming is made clear through its relentless attempt to seduce and then destroy Eleanor, a character *defined* by her dreaminess just as the House is defined by its lack of dreaming, although it does so, in a supreme act of cruelty, by encouraging her dreams until the last moment of her life.”<sup>55</sup>

In a sense, Hill House is Eleanor’s dream come true – at Hill House, she does not feel the need to escape into her imagined world, because Hill House provides her with everything she ever dreamed of – she finds friends for the first time (or at least she thinks of the others as her friends), and she also experiences the comforts of a home, of being taken care of. She still has moments of escaping into her imagination at Hill House (such as imagining holding Theodora’s hand), but she spends more and more time in the reality as the story goes on. Towards the very end of the novel Eleanor has a moment of epiphany: “No stone lions for me, she thought, no oleanders; I have broken the spell of Hill House and somehow come inside. I am home, she thought, and stopped in wonder at the thought.”<sup>56</sup> Eleanor’s reality before – the unending and debilitating care for her mother, having no friends, no social life at all – was quite unpleasant and prompted her to escape that reality into her comforting daydreams. But upon arriving at Hill House, Eleanor does not feel the need to escape anymore; the reality of Hill House is *perfect*. The others had something to come back to, they felt the need to somehow escape that “absolute reality”, which ultimately saved them, but Eleanor had everything she ever wanted right there, and she accepted that “absolute reality”, which is what killed her in the end.

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<sup>51</sup> Michael T. Wilson, “Absolute Reality” and the Role of the Ineffable in Shirley Jackson's *The Haunting of Hill House*. *The Journal of Popular Culture*, Vol. 48, No. 1 (2015): 114-123.

<sup>52</sup> Wilson, “Absolute Reality” and the Role of the Ineffable..., 118.

<sup>53</sup> Wilson, “Absolute Reality” and the Role of the Ineffable..., 119.

<sup>54</sup> Wilson, “Absolute Reality” and the Role of the Ineffable..., 115.

<sup>55</sup> Wilson, “Absolute Reality” and the Role of the Ineffable..., 116.

<sup>56</sup> Jackson, *The Haunting of Hill House*, 232.

The house's evil force can also be interpreted as symbolizing women's entrapment within their own houses (or homes), where they have to take on the role of the caretaker/mother/housewife. In a study fittingly titled *House Mothers and Haunted Daughters*, Roberta Rubenstein points out that in this novel, "...the mother is dead and the daughter is confined within a house that functions figuratively as the externalized maternal body, simultaneously seductive and threatening."<sup>57</sup> Rubenstein also highlights the important role of food in the novel: "...the confusion between inside and outside that structures this novel...is additionally represented through food as literal and symbolic substance... food signals both desire and fear: both the longing for sustenance and the predatory "consume or be consumed" relationship between mother and daughter."<sup>58</sup> Eleanor welcomes the reversal of the mother/daughter role when she comes to Hill House – having taken on the role of the mother for many years in the form of taking care of her mother, she longs to be cared for, to be in the role of the daughter/child once again. At Hill House, Eleanor can finally sit back and do nothing – the food is always prepared by Mrs. Dudley, who does all of the housekeeping chores as well. Hill House in a way takes care of Eleanor, which is something that she has been missing for a very long time.

Unlike for example the character of Constance (from Jackson's later novel *We Have Always Lived in the Castle*), Eleanor does not wish to be in the role of the housewife/caretaker, while simultaneously feeling that in order to be a respectable member of society, she needs to take on this role. The importance of being a housewife/mother in Shirley Jackson's time (the 1950s), is hinted at when Eleanor wants to take her car to get to Hill House. Although the car is supposed to be shared equally between Eleanor and her sister, the older one, Carrie, suggests that she has more rights to use that car; she is, after all, a married woman, she has a daughter and a household to take care of; in other words, she is the perfect housewife, a valuable member of society. Eleanor is the complete opposite; at 32, she is single, has no children or a place of her own – why should someone like *her* be entitled to use the car? Eleanor has to assert multiple times that "It's half my car...I helped pay for it."<sup>59</sup> But no one listens to her, so she ends up having to steal the car, half her own car, in order to even be able to use it. No one listens to a woman like Eleanor, because in the eyes of the 1950s society, she has failed in her role as a mother and a wife, although, as mentioned above, as a woman, she cannot ever escape those roles completely.

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<sup>57</sup> Rubenstein, "House Mothers and Haunted Daughters...." 317.

<sup>58</sup> Rubenstein, "House Mothers and Haunted Daughters...." 317.

<sup>59</sup> Jackson, *The Haunting of Hill House*, 10.

In this respect, Eleanor is unconventional for her time, but so is Theodora – she is an artist, and like Eleanor also unmarried and childless – it is mentioned that she lives with another person, whose gender is never explicitly stated, but it is implied that it is a woman (as Ruth Franklin notes, “In early drafts of the novel, she is openly lesbian.”<sup>60</sup>) But the difference between Theo and Eleanor is that Eleanor is very unhappy in her stereotype-defying lifestyle, while Theodora fully embraces it. The message then is that no matter how a person chooses to live one’s life, whether traditionally or unconventionally, it does not have to determine their happiness.

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<sup>60</sup> Ruth Franklin, *Shirley Jackson: A Rather Haunted Life*, (Liveright, 2017), 412.

## 4 We Have Always Lived in the Castle

*We Have Always Lived in the Castle*, first published in 1962, is Shirley Jackson's last completed novel, and also her shortest one. It is in many ways different from all of her other novels, while still exploring some of the themes that are found across almost all of Jackson's work – most notably the troubled female protagonist's search for her place in the confusing world. *Castle* is the story of two sisters – the older, anxious and homely Constance and the younger, rebellious and perhaps a bit odd Merricat, who live together with their invalid Uncle Julian in the Blackwood mansion, their family house for many generations. They live a secluded life, isolated from the neighboring village and its people, who, as Merricat says, “have always hated us.”<sup>61</sup> This hatred is mutual, which is established from the very beginning when Merricat ventures into the village to buy groceries – but it is not just an issue of class. The Blackwoods have always been a wealthy and snobbish family, who keep their estate safely locked up from strangers, which makes them, understandably, not popular among the poorer villagers. There is, however, another issue which creates tension between the Blackwoods and the villagers – six years ago, the rest of the Blackwood family (Merricat's and Constance's father, mother, younger brother and Uncle Julian's wife) had been poisoned. Constance was the one arrested for the murders, and, although acquitted of the crime, she and her sister and the whole remainder of the Blackwood family (which is now only their uncle) is ostracized by the villagers; not only that but the villagers seem outright hostile towards them, implying that they want to get rid of them. As one of the villagers (not so) jokingly says: “A village loses a lot of style when the fine old people go. Anyone would think...that they wasn't wanted.”<sup>62</sup> The Blackwoods disliking the villagers is then also understandable, as they try to do what they can to make the Blackwoods feel unwelcomed. This chapter aims to explore two key themes of the novel, both of which are in some way related to the Female Gothic – first, the tensions in the Blackwood family (especially the tensions between patriarchy and matriarchy), and also the theme of domestic magic, which is very closely tied to Jackson's own life.

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<sup>61</sup> Shirley Jackson, *We Have Always Lived in the Castle* (Penguin Books, 2006), 4.

<sup>62</sup> Jackson, *We Have Always Lived in the Castle* 13.

## 4.1 Familial Tensions

Just as in *The Haunting of Hill House*, in *Castle* too, the theme of the mother/daughter/house relationship plays an important role. Here, however, are two daughters, sisters, living in the same house where they lived since childhood, and for the past six only with their uncle. Roberta Rubenstein aptly calls the three of them “an ironic nuclear family: an incapacitated and dependent male figure, a housebound maternal figure who soothes anxieties and provides literal and figurative nurture, and a child who lives in a fantasy world sustained by magical thinking.”<sup>63</sup> The house is not an evil force as it is in *Hill House*; it is a true home to its inhabitants, a safe and emotional space. Belonging to their family for generations, the Blackwood house serves as a kind of shrine to all of the people (most importantly of all the women) who had lived there: “Blackwoods had always lived in our house, and kept their things in order; as soon as a new Blackwood wife moved in, a place was found for her belongings, and so our house was built up with layers of Blackwood property weighting it, and keeping it steady against the world.”<sup>64</sup> Despite the parents being dead, there is a mother figure present – it is not the house itself as in *Hill House*, nor does the presence of the dead mother haunt the house, but it is the older sister Constance, who assumed the role of Merricat’s mother, cooking for her, cleaning the house and overall taking care of her and of Uncle Julian. The house as a home is then not much identified with Merricat’s mother, but with her sister Constance – they both (Constance and the house) create that safe and welcoming space for Merricat.

Merricat (Mary Katherine), the 18-year-old narrator of the story, is definitely not a typical girl for her age. From her introduction on the very first page, it is obvious that she acts and thinks as a much younger girl. She often views the world around her through a magical, fairy-tale like lens, envisioning her weekly grocery trip to the village as a board game, and escaping the villagers’ hostile looks and comments into her own perfect little world, which she calls ‘the moon’: “I liked my house on the moon, and I put a fireplace in it and a garden outside...and I was going to have lunch outside in my garden on the moon.”<sup>65</sup> Although it was Constance who was accused of murdering her family (by putting arsenic into the sugar bowl) six years ago, the reader definitely suspects that Merricat is actually the one responsible for this deed – but this speculation is not confirmed until much later in the story. This suspicion

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<sup>63</sup> Rubenstein, “House Mothers and Haunted Daughters...,” 319.

<sup>64</sup> Jackson, *We Have Always Lived in the Castle*, 1.

<sup>65</sup> Jackson, *We Have Always Lived in the Castle*, 15.



has its source in Merricat's malicious thoughts – walking through the village, she imagines the people dying in pain: "I was never sorry when I had thoughts like this; I only wished they would come true."<sup>66</sup> Once she also mentions killing animals without feeling any remorse: "I found a nest of baby snakes near the creek and killed them all; I dislike snakes and Constance had never asked me not to."<sup>67</sup> But calling Merricat some sort of antisocial person would be untrue, since she is capable of feeling love, albeit only towards one person, her sister Constance.

Adored by Merricat, the ten years older Constance is described by her sister as some kind of angel (she even plays the harp): "When I was small I thought Constance was a fairy princess...even at the worst time she was pink and white and golden, and nothing had ever seemed to dim the brightness of her."<sup>68</sup> Constance feels most secure at home, especially in her kitchen (which is here referred to as the heart of the house, in contrast to the nursery in *Hill House*) and her garden. She spends her days preparing food for Merricat and Uncle Julian, gardening and tidying the house. Presumably being afraid of the villagers' hateful judgment, Constance "never went past her own garden."<sup>69</sup> She is then tied to the house both metaphorically (a kind of a housewife, with her place in the kitchen), but also literally, not being able to leave the house because of her debilitating anxiety (but unlike Eleanor of *Hill House*, Constance does not seem to mind being the caretaker). This arrangement is to Merricat's liking, as she would prefer to have Constance all to herself, and in an ideal world, it would just be the two of them living together. When one of their mother's old friends, Helen Clarke, visits them and tries to persuade Constance to "come back into the world,"<sup>70</sup> it causes a lot of anxiety to Merricat. As Rubenstein notes of the sisters, "on the literal level their relationship functions convincingly as a reciprocally affectionate sibling bond, psychologically it mirrors an idealized mother-daughter attachment, fantasized from the younger female's (Merricat's) perspective."<sup>71</sup>

Although the motivation behind Merricat's murder of her entire family besides Constance (Uncle Julian only survived by accident) is never clearly stated, it is hinted at in many instances. As a kind of wild child, Merricat never felt truly loved by her parents, who often punished her for her disobedience. On the evening of the incident, Merricat was "sent to

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<sup>66</sup> Jackson, *We Have Always Lived in the Castle*, 9.

<sup>67</sup> Jackson, *We Have Always Lived in the Castle*, 53.

<sup>68</sup> Jackson, *We Have Always Lived in the Castle*, 19-20.

<sup>69</sup> Jackson, *We Have Always Lived in the Castle*, 2.

<sup>70</sup> Jackson, *We Have Always Lived in the Castle*, 27.

<sup>71</sup> Rubenstein, "House Mothers and Haunted Daughters....," 320.

bed without her supper.”<sup>72</sup> Her desire to be loved by her parents is made clear in a scene where she imagines herself sitting at a dinner table with her parents, telling her how much they love her: “Mary Katherine must never be punished. Must never be sent to bed without her dinner. Mary Katherine will never allow herself to do anything inviting punishment.”<sup>73</sup> Merricat probably never heard these loving words from her parents, she only dreamed of it. But even when her parents were still alive, Merricat found her loving and caring person in Constance, who would still make sure that she had eaten: “I used to go up the back stairs with a tray of dinner for her after my father had left the dining room.”<sup>74</sup> Rubenstein points out this connection of the motherly love with providing food, stating that in Merricat’s world, there is an “emotional resonance between love (or its withholding) and food.”<sup>75</sup> And the food is, and always has been, provided to Merricat by Constance, who, as Rubenstein puts it “is explicitly identified with nurturance, not only emotionally but literally.”<sup>76</sup>

When talking about familial tensions, it is important to mention the relationship between the Blackwoods’ patriarchy and matriarchy. Back when Merricat’s parents were still alive, the head of the family was undoubtedly her father, John Blackwood. From Uncle Julian’s scattered memories, it is clear that he feared his brother John and always felt inferior to him, living in his house and eating his food: “My brother sometimes remarked upon what we ate, my wife and I; he was a just man, and never stinted his food, so long as we did not take much.”<sup>77</sup> Being a wealthy man, he always looked down on the villagers, and he passed this attitude onto his daughters – as Merricat reminisces about the times before the murders happened, she notes: “the villagers had not openly disliked us then although our father said they were trash.”<sup>78</sup> As Lynette Carpenter<sup>79</sup> observes in her study, by killing her father, mother and younger brother, Merricat exchanged the family’s patriarch, John Blackwood, by a matriarch – her beloved Constance.<sup>80</sup> Merricat’s mother was not fit for that role, since she was not the loving and caring mother she dreamed of, and she also presumably favored her son, Merricat’s younger brother, who was to inherit the majority of the family’s property. The issue

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<sup>72</sup> Jackson, *We Have Always Lived in the Castle*, 34.

<sup>73</sup> Jackson, *We Have Always Lived in the Castle*, 95-96.

<sup>74</sup> Jackson, *We Have Always Lived in the Castle*, 34.

<sup>75</sup> Rubenstein, “House Mothers and Haunted Daughters...,” 323.

<sup>76</sup> Rubenstein, “House Mothers and Haunted Daughters...,” 321.

<sup>77</sup> Jackson, *We Have Always Lived in the Castle*, 48.

<sup>78</sup> Jackson, *We Have Always Lived in the Castle*, 10.

<sup>79</sup> Lynette Carpenter is associate director of women’s studies and assistant professor of English at the University of Cincinnati

<sup>80</sup> Lynette Carpenter, “The Establishment and Preservation of Female Power in Shirley Jackson’s *We Have Always Lived in the Castle*,” *Frontiers: A Journal of Women Studies*, 8, no. 1 (1984): 32.

of the family's wealth being in the hands of women is also a theme discussed by Carpenter in her study – she argues that by getting rid of the rest of the family, Merricat ensured that the family's heritage would belong to her and to Constance, who were always seen as the second choice by their parents, given that they had a brother. This, according to Carpenter, created many issues – one of them is that the villagers' hatred was caused not so much by the fact that the Blackwoods were wealthy, but the fact that the wealth was now in possession of two women – this fact particularly angered the men of the village.<sup>81</sup>

Merricat's successful "transfer of power from from Blackwood men to Blackwood women",<sup>82</sup> as Carpenter calls it, is threatened by the arrival of their cousin Charles Blackwood. He is described from the beginning as strongly resembling their father (Uncle Julian even confuses Charles with his brother John in many instances). Under the excuse of wanting to visit his family (after his father Arthur, who resented John's family, had died) and help them, he is (not so) subtly trying to take hold of the family's money. Merricat sees through his motives, but Constance is somewhat oblivious to them, welcoming Charles as a guest and possibly having a romantic interest in him. Charles's coming disrupts Merricat's and Constance's everyday routine, much to Merricat's dislike, and he slowly begins to take on the role of the father – he sleeps in their father's bedroom, wears his clothes and sits in his chair at the table. He even gains sympathy among the villagers, which, as Carpenter explains, proves that "his family name is not as important as his gender. Their friendship signals approval of his plan to restore Blackwood wealth to masculine control."<sup>83</sup> But to Merricat, the greater threat that Charles represents, is that he might take Constance away from her, which she must prevent at all costs.

What Merricat does to get rid of Charles might seem extreme – she ends up setting the house on fire, destroying a great part of it. But Merricat burning the house down uncovers what she truly values – not the material objects which create the physical space of a home, but the emotional space that a loving caretaker provides, and she is willing to give up some of their family's prized possessions in order to get rid of Charles and live only with Constance, just as she always imagined. The fire does turn Charles away, since much of the family's wealth has been destroyed, and thus he drops his pretense of caring for the sisters and runs away. Unfortunately, Uncle Julian dies in the burning house – he was not the intended victim, but with his death, the Blackwood family lost the last male member, and now there are only

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<sup>81</sup> Carpenter, "The Establishment and Preservation of Female Power...", 34.

<sup>82</sup> Carpenter, "The Establishment and Preservation of Female Power...", 32.

<sup>83</sup> Carpenter, "The Establishment and Preservation of Female Power...", 35.

the two sisters left. The theme of domesticity, of creating a warm and loving home, is crucial to the story. If it was not, and this novel was just a chilling tale, the novel could have ended with Merricat's confession of the murders. She does this towards the end, after their house has been burned down and Merricat and Constance ran off to hide in the woods on their property. But the story does not end here – it goes on to describe how Merricat and Constance recreated their new, even more protected and secluded home. Although the fire (which Merricat started in her father's/Charles's room) destroyed the upstairs, and some of the ground floor rooms located at the front of the house were also damaged, the back side of the house is almost untouched. The back of the house, with Constance's kitchen and the cellar where they keep their food, remains habitable, and the sisters move in there, creating a new home, governed only by women. As Rubenstein notes, the sisters continue in their usual (although slightly altered) domestic routine, as they did before, when "Constance, undeterred by the demolished household, calmly reestablishes order and resumes her nurturant role, salvaging the most important room in the house, the kitchen..."<sup>84</sup> It is quite symbolic that the kitchen, a space associated strongly with women's work, does not burn in the fire, but persists, just as the two women do, living in Merricat's castle "on the moon", making her dream come true. The story ends with Merricat saying: "Oh Constance...we are so happy."<sup>85</sup>

## 4.2 Domestic Magic

Merricat is quite an unusual girl. Unlike other Shirley Jackson's female protagonists discussed in this thesis – Eleanor and Elizabeth (and also many others), Merricat cannot be thought of as someone who lacks their own identity. On the contrary, Merricat is quite eccentric, and she embraces it – from talking to her black cat to burying various valuable items around the Blackwood property, Merricat definitely stands out, even if it were not for her family's bad reputation. A character more resembling Eleanor and Elizabeth is the careful and domestic Constance, whose entire personality revolves around her house, or more specifically, her kitchen and her garden. The image of the two sisters as witches permeates the whole story, whether they call themselves as such jokingly (for example when Merricat notes that the two of them look "like a pair of witches"<sup>86</sup> with their brooms cleaning the house), or when tourists start visiting their burned down and barricaded house as some kind of attraction, and the

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<sup>84</sup> Rubenstein, "House Mothers and Haunted Daughters....," 324.

<sup>85</sup> Jackson, *We Have Always Lived in the Castle*, 146.

<sup>86</sup> Jackson, *We Have Always Lived in the Castle*, 69.

adults revel in frightening their children by saying things such as: “They’d hold you down and make you eat candy full of poison; I heard that dozens of bad little boys have gone too near that house and never been seen again.”<sup>87</sup> But even the adults and the local villagers seem to have some kind of fearful respect towards the house and the sisters, as Alissa Burger observes: “Merricat and Constance are hidden within their shattered home, and the villagers who helped destroy it now view them as akin to fairy tale witches, simultaneously terrified of and fascinated by the Blackwood sisters.”<sup>88</sup>

The destruction of the Blackwood house also has witch-like symbolic. The house was not only destroyed by the fire, but also by the villagers, who, gathered around the house to watch it burn, started to throw stones and destroy the Blackwoods prized possessions after the fire was put out. The burning of the house might be understood as some kind of witch burning, although, as Carpenter points out, the fact that “Merricat herself starts the fire complicates the symbolic reading of this scene as witch burning.”<sup>89</sup> What seems to be a better interpretation of why Merricat sets the house on fire, is that she saw it as a form of cleansing ritual, “to repudiate the material heritage of the Blackwood men and to exorcise her father’s ghost.”<sup>90</sup> The following stoning of the house also evokes “the ancient practice of stoning witches and the fictional stoning in Jackson’s own fable about a sacrifice ritual, ‘The Lottery’.”<sup>91</sup> Just like Tessie Hutchinson in ‘The Lottery’, Constance and Merricat too seem to be the scapegoats of spiteful villagers, the people onto whom they project their long repressed anger and hatred. Constance being accused of a crime she did not commit is also reminiscent of the Salem witch trials, a topic in which Shirley Jackson was very much interested, and while working on this novel, she even visited the city of Salem.<sup>92</sup> This theme of exclusion from society also reflects some of Shirley Jackson’s personal trauma of living in the small village of North Bennington, where she and her family were always seen as outsiders.<sup>93</sup>

Merricat has many witch-like characteristics: she has a black cat named Jonas that follows her everywhere and she also has extensive knowledge of poisonous plants and mushrooms. But perhaps the most witch-like thing about Merricat is her obsession with her

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<sup>87</sup> Jackson, *We Have Always Lived in the Castle*, 141.

<sup>88</sup> Alissa Burger, “Casting a Literary Spell: The Domestic Witchcraft of Shirley Jackson” in *Shirley Jackson and Domesticity: Beyond the Haunted House*, ed. Jill E. Anderson and Melanie R. Anderson (Bloomsbury Academic, 2020): 107.

<sup>89</sup> Carpenter, “The Establishment and Preservation of Female Power...”, 35.

<sup>90</sup> Carpenter, “The Establishment and Preservation of Female Power...”, 35.

<sup>91</sup> Carpenter, “The Establishment and Preservation of Female Power...”, 36.

<sup>92</sup> Franklin, *A Rather Haunted Life*, 436.

<sup>93</sup> Franklin, *A Rather Haunted Life*, 449.

'magical' rituals, which are mostly supposed to ensure the protection of their house from the villagers. Merricat likes to bury various valuable objects (such as jewelry and coins) around their property, which she sees as a form of offering and also a symbol of protection (what she calls her "safeguards"). Her weekly routine is filled with different ways of ensuring the safety of their home: "Always on Wednesday mornings I went around the fence. It was necessary for me to check constantly to be sure that the wires were not broken, and the gates were securely locked."<sup>94</sup> Merricat also has a system of internal rules that she must follow in order for her magic to work. Although at first it might seem that these rules are set by her sister, it is soon quite clear that Merricat is the one who puts these rules upon herself. As Burger notes, "It is necessary for Merricat to exert her influence and control on the house and the land which surrounds it in order to keep her and her sister safe."<sup>95</sup> All of these magical rituals that Merricat does can be interpreted as her wish to have power in a space where she does not feel all that powerful (living among villagers who hate them). Carpenter links this need for possessing at least some power with witchcraft, stating that "Her [Merricat's] magic words and charms constitute attempts to gain power over a world in which, first as the second girl child in a patriarchal family and then as a grown woman in a patriarchal society, she is essentially powerless."<sup>96</sup>

Constance too is associated with the so-called "domestic witchcraft", as Alissa Burger titles it in her study. She takes care of her garden, that provides the family a lot of fruits and vegetables, which she then prepares for them and preserves it, as many other Blackwood women did, and keeps it in the cellar: "The entire cellar of our house was filled with food. All the Blackwood women had made food and had taken pride in adding to the great supply of food in our cellar."<sup>97</sup> While Merricat's 'magic' is mostly concerned with the outside, and with protection, Constance's 'magic' is tied to the inside and the creation of a homely space. The sisters' approach to 'magic' is different, but they complement each other, as Merricat tells Constance: "You bury food the way I bury treasure,"<sup>98</sup>. Constance also has her own certain rules, although not as rigid as Merricat, but just as most Merricat's rules revolve around food, so do Constance's: "The food comes from the ground and can't be permitted to stay there and rot; *something* has to be done with it."<sup>99</sup> Burger also points out how Constance's cooking is

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<sup>94</sup> Jackson, *We Have Always Lived in the Castle*, 41.

<sup>95</sup> Burger, "Casting a Literary Spell...", 104-105.

<sup>96</sup> Carpenter, "The Establishment and Preservation of Female Power...", 34.

<sup>97</sup> Jackson, *We Have Always Lived in the Castle*, 42.

<sup>98</sup> Jackson, *We Have Always Lived in the Castle*, 42.

<sup>99</sup> Jackson, *We Have Always Lived in the Castle*, 42.

important to control Merricat's malicious behavior: "Just as on the night she poisoned her family, when Merricat is unhappy and unfed, she becomes dangerously destructive..."<sup>100</sup>, which explains Constance's exaggerated response when she learns that Merricat had no dinner after their house burns down: "Oh Merricat, poor baby,"<sup>101</sup>.

Just as in many of Jackson's works, in *Castle* too, she creates unusual female characters, that can be seen as 'mad'. What constitutes Merricat's and Constance's "insanity", or at least their "oddness", is their unconventionality – after all they spend the rest of their lives solely in each other's company, and most importantly, without any male presence. Carpenter confirms this claim, stating that Merricat has always believed "that heterosexual romance is a dangerous illusion, that patriarchy is an inherently destructive institution, and that no compromise is possible."<sup>102</sup> And she succeeds in proving this to Constance in the end, who in the beginning might have had some hopes of leaving the house one day. But just as other Jackson's female protagonists, the Blackwood sisters also suffer from some type of mental 'disturbances'. While Constance's anxiety of leaving the house might in the beginning seem extreme and unfounded, her worst fears of the villagers' rage against her prove to be true when they essentially destroy their house. But Merricat's strange and malicious behavior seems to be more ambiguous – it is not clear whether she acts the way she does as a result of some childhood trauma (perhaps mistreatment by her parents), or if she was born bad; this question remains unanswered.

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<sup>100</sup> Burger, "Casting a Literary Spell...", 107.

<sup>101</sup> Jackson, *We Have Always Lived in the Castle*, 112.

<sup>102</sup> Carpenter, "The Establishment and Preservation of Female Power...", 36.

## 5 The Bird's Nest

In the two novels discussed above, *The Haunting of Hill House* and *We Have Always Lived in the Castle*, which are the two last novels Shirley Jackson wrote, the houses play an important role in the characters' lives. In this respect, Shirley Jackson's 1954 novel *The Bird's Nest* diverts – there is no 'haunted house' or 'magical castle' that would confine its inhabitants. The protagonist – Elizabeth Richmond – works in a museum, which, at the novel's opening, begins to collapse on its foundations, and, at the same time, Elizabeth's personality starts to crumble: "It is not proven that Elizabeth's personal equilibrium was set off balance by the slant of the office floor, nor could it be proven that it was Elizabeth who pushed the building off its foundations, but it is undeniable that they began to slip at about the same time."<sup>103</sup> The museum building, however, does not play a very significant role in the story. Since the novel deals with multiple personality disorder (or what is now termed dissociative identity disorder<sup>104</sup>), it becomes clear that here, the imprisoning construction is not a physical one, like a house, but rather Elizabeth's own mind. As Kevin Wilson<sup>105</sup> points out in his foreword to the 2014 edition of the novel, "...the structure housing strange and fascinating characters is not the museum, but, rather, Elizabeth's own body."<sup>106</sup> But it was not just Shirley Jackson who was focusing on the topic of multiple personalities. Ruth Franklin points out that the increased interest in multiple personality disorder in the 1950s was strongly tied to women's position in postwar society, stating that "the particular focus on multiple-personality disorder may well have had more to do with the cultural anxiety surrounding the reorientation of women's lives around the domestic sphere."<sup>107</sup> This chapter aims to analyze the female gothic features of this novel – Elizabeth's fragmented identity and her ambivalent relation to her mother, as these aspects might help to explain Elizabeth's 'insanity'.

### 5.1 Elizabeth, Beth, Betsy and Bess

The novel's protagonist, Elizabeth Richmond, a 23-year-old woman, is described at the beginning as a lonely person who lacks any identity: "She had no friends, no parents, no associates, and no plans beyond that of enduring the necessary interval before her departure with as little pain as possible...She was not even interesting enough to distinguish with a

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<sup>103</sup> Shirley Jackson, *The Bird's Nest* (Penguin Classics, 2014), 2.

<sup>104</sup> As it is termed in the *The Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders*, Fifth Edition (DSM-5).

<sup>105</sup> Kevin Wilson is an American author, winner of the Shirley Jackson Award

<sup>106</sup> Kevin Wilson, "Foreword", in Jackson, Shirley: *The Bird's Nest* (Penguin Classics, 2014), x.

<sup>107</sup> Ruth Franklin, *Shirley Jackson: A Rather Haunted Life*, (Liveright, 2017), 332.



nickname...”<sup>108</sup>. In this respect, she is reminiscent of Eleanor from *The Haunting of Hill House*, who also seems to be this bland character. Elizabeth lives with her Aunt Morgen, since her mother had died four years ago. She lives a very routine-filled life, going to work every day at the museum, doing the same job there, and coming back home to have meaningless conversations with her aunt after dinner. The only things that seem to define her are her constant headaches and her orderliness: “If she took any pride in anything, it was in the fact that everything about her was neat, and distinct, and right in a spot where she could see it.”<sup>109</sup> Her dull life is disrupted when the museum where she works at starts collapsing. Her distress is intensified by the fact that during the reconstruction of the museum, the carpenters had to create a hole in the wall right next to Elizabeth’s desk, which seems to strangely lure her: “[she] looked down with a swift sense of dizziness and an almost irresistible temptation to hurl herself downward into the primeval sands upon which the museum presumably stood...”<sup>110</sup>. At the same time, Elizabeth starts receiving strange letters, which address her as “lizzie”, and seem to be threatening her: “your fools paradise is gone now for good watch out for me lizzie watch out for me”.<sup>111</sup> Strangely enough, Elizabeth thinks of the letters almost tenderly: “Someone...is writing letters to *me*.”<sup>112</sup> She hides the letters from her aunt and puts them in an old valentine’s chocolate box, as if they were some secret love letters. This seemingly strange behavior only underscores Elizabeth’s loneliness in the world.

Elizabeth’s behavior becomes increasingly strange – she sneaks off at night and is rude to old family friends, without remembering any of it. Aunt Morgen gets angry with her, accusing her niece of lying – this is the first instance when she mentions Elizabeth resembling her mother, Aunt Morgen’s sister, and it is clear Morgen despised her: “You’re like your mother, kiddo, a cheat, and a liar, and neither of you could ever get around me.”<sup>113</sup> But as Elizabeth’s condition worsens, her aunt takes her to their family’s physician, who refers her to a psychiatrist Dr. Victor Wright. Dr. Wright is an older man, who thinks very highly of himself and who disregards any “namby-pamby modern doctors, with all kinds of names for nothing, and all kinds of cures for ailments that don’t exist...”<sup>114</sup>. Believing at first that what causes Elizabeth’s condition is a past repressed trauma (which he believes is the death of her mother), he puts Elizabeth under hypnosis, but what he finds out is two other distinct

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<sup>108</sup> Jackson, *The Bird’s Nest*, 3-4.

<sup>109</sup> Jackson, *The Bird’s Nest*, 5.

<sup>110</sup> Jackson, *The Bird’s Nest*, 3.

<sup>111</sup> Jackson, *The Bird’s Nest*, 3.

<sup>112</sup> Jackson, *The Bird’s Nest*, 17.

<sup>113</sup> Jackson, *The Bird’s Nest*, 16.

<sup>114</sup> Jackson, *The Bird’s Nest*, 31.

personalities existing within Elizabeth without her awareness of them. One of them is sweet and charming, and the other wicked and rude. He comes to the conclusion that Elizabeth suffers from multiple personality disorder, a fact that he does not at first share with Elizabeth or her aunt. He names her other personalities as Beth (the pleasant and pretty one) and Betsy (the malicious and ugly one), inspired by the nursery rhyme which Betsy chants: “Elizabeth, Beth, Betsy and Bess, they all went together to find a bird’s nest...”<sup>115</sup>. Dr. Wright does not try to hide the fact that he prefers this Beth version over both the bland Elizabeth and evil Betsy, hoping at first that he can somehow make Beth take over the other two identities, since she best suits his idea of a nice young woman. In doing so, he thinks of himself as a “knight” who must rescue the “princess”<sup>116</sup> – who in this case, is Beth.

To his dismay, however, Betsy seems to be the strongest of the personalities, and gradually gains more and more power, eventually running away to New York, which Dr. Wright sees as Betsy kidnapping both Elizabeth and “his poor” Beth. In New York, Betsy finds herself alone and frightened, losing the confidence she had back home. It soon becomes clear that Betsy ran off to New York to find her mother, which she believes is still alive. Her efforts are however disrupted by a new identity coming forward, much stronger than Elizabeth, Beth and Betsy, and in a struggle to assume power between this new identity and Betsy, she injures herself terribly, ending up in a hospital, where Aunt Morgen and Dr. Wright come to take her home. Continuing her treatment with Dr. Wright, Elizabeth seems to be unaware of everything that had happened in New York. Again under hypnosis, Dr. Wright discovers that a fourth identity has been created, and names her Bess. This Bess seems to Dr. Wright to be even worse than Betsy, arrogant and concerned only with her money. Bess is also the strongest identity, being the only one who could somehow defeat Betsy.

Fearing that Bess might consume all of the other identities, Dr. Wright joins forces with Aunt Morgen. Both of them, wanting to somehow control Elizabeth and her personalities, witness a disastrous clash between all of the identities, resulting in a complete shut down of Elizabeth. After this incident, it seems that all of Elizabeth’s identities have been incorporated into one, although, as Angela Hague observes, there is “the implication that none of the women, including Elizabeth herself, continue to exist.”<sup>117</sup> This new, incorporated identity, although remembering everything that Elizabeth and her other identities experienced,

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<sup>115</sup> Jackson, *The Bird’s Nest*, 60.

<sup>116</sup> Jackson, *The Bird’s Nest*, 56.

<sup>117</sup> Angela Hague, ““A faithful anatomy of our times”: Reassessing Shirley Jackson,” *Frontiers: A Journal of Women Studies*, 26, no. 2 (2005): 80.

lacks any emotional attachment to anything that had ever happened to her. This leaves her, as Dr. Wright puts it, as a “vessel emptied”<sup>118</sup> and he and Aunt Morgen feel that they have the responsibility “to people this vacant landscape – to fill this empty vessel...enable the child to rebuild.”<sup>119</sup> This new identity does not even have a name, and, as though symbolically asserting their control over her, Dr. Wright and Aunt Morgen each want her to be named after them, “Morgen Victoria” or “Victoria Morgen”<sup>120</sup>. As Rubenstein notes, “the “nuclear family” is ironically reconstituted with the tyrannical Aunt Morgen as mother, the equivocal Dr. Wright as father, and Elizabeth...as the reintegrated but psychologically diminished, compliant daughter.”<sup>121</sup> This reconstruction of family is reminiscent of that in Jackson’s *Castle*, however here, it is not the daughter who reestablishes her power, but the ‘parents’.

## 5.2 Mother, Daughter, Aunt and Niece

Just as in *Hill House* and *Castle*, in *The Bird’s Nest* too, the mother, although now dead, had, and still continues to have an overwhelming influence on the daughter’s life. The details over the mother’s death are very sporadic at the beginning, because Elizabeth, who is conscious most of the time still, seems to forget much of what happened – she knows that her mother is dead, but the circumstances of her death seem to escape her memory. She does not want to discuss this matter, and every time Dr. Wright raises this issue, she dismisses him. But as the novel progresses and different identities start to have more and more power over the ‘original’ Elizabeth, disturbing details over the death of Elizabeth’s mother begin to surface. When Betsy takes over and runs off to New York to look for her mother, it becomes clear that this identity is not aware, or has not accepted the fact that Elizabeth’s mother is dead. This is also made obvious by the way Betsy thinks and behaves – like a child. Betsy’s development stopped at a certain point in her childhood, which is implied to be at a time when she was abused by her mother’s lover Robin. As Lynne Ann Evans notes, “Robin’s “molest[ation]” of Elizabeth, presumably at age eight when Betsy was “born,” ended Elizabeth’s coherence as a self and is directly linked to sexual trauma.”<sup>122</sup> When Betsy runs frantically through the streets of New York, looking for her mother, her traumatic memories of Robin resurface and her trauma is especially visible when she mistakes a stranger for Robin and runs away from him, thinking “not Robin again, it wasn’t fair, not after all she’d done, not after all she’d tried, not

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<sup>118</sup> Jackson, *The Bird’s Nest*, 248.

<sup>119</sup> Jackson, *The Bird’s Nest*, 249.

<sup>120</sup> Jackson, *The Bird’s Nest*, 256.

<sup>121</sup> Roberta Rubenstein, “House Mothers and Haunted Daughters: Shirley Jackson and Female Gothic,” *Tulsa Studies in Women’s Literature*, 15, no. 2 (1996): 314.

<sup>122</sup> Lynne Ann Evans, “A “brutal, unprincipled, drunken, vice-ridden beast”: Maternity in Shirley Jackson’s *The Bird’s Nest*,” *English Studies in Canada*, 43/44, no. 4 (2018): 37.

Robin again, it wasn't fair, no one could do *that* again, praying to move quickly enough to be safely out of it and away before he could touch her, to be safely out of it...".<sup>123</sup> Evan also notes that Betsy's insistence on repeating the nursery rhyme "all went together to find a nestegg elizabeth beth betsy and bess"<sup>124</sup> implies that "...all of Elizabeth's selves "went together to find a nestegg," which suggests that Elizabeth was a coherent self before the molestation: she had been "together." The nursery rhyme thus confirms the origin of Elizabeth's splintering as the moment of sexual conflict between herself and her mother in relation to Robin."<sup>125</sup>

While Betsy is oblivious to the fact that her mother died, Bess, the materialistic and arrogant identity who defeated Betsy in New York, is aware that her mother is dead; but she believes that she is nineteen years old, and that her mother has thus been dead only for three weeks. Her grief however comes off as pretentious, as her only interest seems to be in the money she is supposed to inherit. Bess also denies the existence of the other identities, especially Betsy, since she is the one who is powerful enough to compete with her. When Dr. Wright mentions Betsy, she takes a very defensive stance, saying "There isn't any such thing as Betsy, and you know it, you want to frighten me again and I won't have it!"<sup>126</sup> The only thing that seems to frighten Bess is Betsy and vice versa. The other two identities, Elizabeth and Beth, seem to be much weaker and do not pose a threat to Betsy and Bess, which compete together over their dominance of the person. Even when Betsy starts having partial control of the person while Bess is the one 'awake', she still denies her existence. This manifests as Betsy writing with Bess's right hand (Bess is the only personality who is left-handed); Bess thinks it is just a trick of Dr. Wright. Through Betsy's writing, Dr. Wright tries to communicate with Betsy, trying to join forces with her, as he sees Betsy as the only one who can help him defeat Bess, which he hates the most of all of the personalities, probably because she is the one over whom he has the least control.

Feeling quite powerless (although he would not admit that), Dr. Wright decides to finally tell Aunt Morgen the truth about her niece's case in hopes that with her help, he can integrate the dissociated personalities into one, as he tells her: "...it is within our power, my dear Miss Jones, to set her free," to which Aunt Morgen replies: "Work together, and bring a

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<sup>123</sup> Jackson, *The Bird's Nest*, 125-126.

<sup>124</sup> Jackson, *The Bird's Nest*, 162.

<sup>125</sup> Evans, "A "brutal, unprincipled, drunken, vice-ridden beast...," 37.

<sup>126</sup> Jackson, *The Bird's Nest*, 141.

new being into the world?”<sup>127</sup> From this interaction, their wish to have power over Elizabeth is quite clear. Aunt Morgen seems to feel quite uncertain about her role as Elizabeth’s mother, confessing at the beginning that “It’s a great responsibility...my own sister’s child, and yet it’s not as though I’ve been much of a *mother*.”<sup>128</sup> But later Morgen also confesses that “It was like my own child.”<sup>129</sup> Aunt Morgen, rather than Dr. Wright, is the one who eventually aids in Elizabeth’s integration. Although Dr. Wright is present at the moment when this happens, it is Aunt Morgen who makes Betsy remember and accept that her mother is dead. Lynne Ann Evans pays attention to this detail in her study on the theme of maternity in *The Bird’s Nest*, where she looks at the novel through the lens of Freud’s psychoanalysis.<sup>130</sup> Drawing on Freud, Evans identifies Aunt Morgen’s character as a “phallic mother”,<sup>131</sup> given that Aunt Morgen is described as “masculine”<sup>132</sup> in the novel. Posing as this phallic mother, Aunt Morgen, as Evans argues, causes that “Wright’s authority is usurped, or at least troubled, by Morgen’s authority.”<sup>133</sup> Morgen’s assertion of authority can also be seen when she says to Dr. Wright towards the end: “You can be her mommy, and I’ll be her daddy...”.<sup>134</sup> It can then be argued that the battle of the multiple personalities trying to gain power over Elizabeth ended, but it has in turn been replaced by the battle between Aunt Morgen and Dr. Wright over who gets to have bigger authority over Elizabeth.

With Aunt Morgen’s account of the day when Elizabeth’s mother died, the question of Elizabeth’s role in her mother’s death arises. Although Aunt Morgen reassures Elizabeth that “it was no one’s fault”,<sup>135</sup> Betsy blames Bess, yelling “Who shook her and shook her and shook her...who ran at her and hurt her?”,<sup>136</sup> implying that, although perhaps indirectly, Elizabeth contributed to her mother’s death, whose health was already poor. Elizabeth’s (or one of her other personality’s) motives for wanting to kill her mother are best interpreted through the lens of female gothic narratives, which revolve around “the central character’s troubled identification with her good/bad/dead/mad mother, whom she ambivalently seeks to kill/merge with...”<sup>137</sup>. Elizabeth, although perhaps unconsciously, wishes for both. Her

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<sup>127</sup> Jackson, *The Bird’s Nest*, 177.

<sup>128</sup> Jackson, *The Bird’s Nest*, 24.

<sup>129</sup> Jackson, *The Bird’s Nest*, 182.

<sup>130</sup> Evans, “A “brutal, unprincipled, drunken, vice-ridden beast...,” 26.

<sup>131</sup> Evans, “A “brutal, unprincipled, drunken, vice-ridden beast...,” 37.

<sup>132</sup> Jackson, *The Bird’s Nest*, 8.

<sup>133</sup> Evans, “A “brutal, unprincipled, drunken, vice-ridden beast...,” 38.

<sup>134</sup> Jackson, *The Bird’s Nest*, 249.

<sup>135</sup> Jackson, *The Bird’s Nest*, 229.

<sup>136</sup> Jackson, *The Bird’s Nest*, 228.

<sup>137</sup> Rubenstein, “House Mothers and Haunted Daughters...,” 312.

identification with her mother is encoded in the fact that they have the same name – Elizabeth. Her confusion over her own/her mother’s identity is visible in Betsy’s distorted thought process: “If I had a husband then my mother could marry him and we could all hide together and be happy. My name is Betsy Richmond. My mother’s name is Elizabeth Richmond, Elizabeth Jones before I was married.”<sup>138</sup> This mother-daughter confusion, as Claire Kahane calls it,<sup>139</sup> one of the prominent features of the female gothic, is caused by the fact that mothers and daughters share the same female body, which makes it more difficult for the daughter to see herself as separate from her mother.<sup>140</sup>

The wish to kill, or perhaps only hurt her mother, is connected to the fact that Elizabeth’s mother, although she loved her (as Aunt Morgen reassures her), she probably neglected her, as is clear from Aunt Morgen’s hateful remarks – Elizabeth’s mother was “a brutal, unprincipled, drunken, vice-ridden beast.”<sup>141</sup> The female gothic fear of annihilation, of consumption, is also tied to the individual personalities, not only to the mother-daughter relationship. Towards the end of the novel, during the last moments when her multiple personalities still existed, Elizabeth expresses her fear of annihilation: “He said I was one of them. Not myself, just one more of them...What he’s going to have when he’s through is a new Elizabeth Richmond, with *her* mind.”<sup>142</sup> After the integration of Elizabeth’s personalities, there is another type of ‘consumption’ that takes place – the consumption of Elizabeth’s identity by her new ‘parents’, which is foreshadowed in Dr. Wright’s speech: “Each life, I think,” he says, “asks the devouring of other lives for its own continuance...”.<sup>143</sup> This reintegration, or consumption, is also foreshadowed in a scene where the newly integrated Elizabeth visits her desk at the museum, and finds that there is no longer the hole in the wall. When this “new Elizabeth Richmond” announces at the end of the novel “I’m happy,”<sup>144</sup> it leaves the reader with a lot of questions – Is she really happy? And who even is she?

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<sup>138</sup> Jackson, *The Bird’s Nest*, 100.

<sup>139</sup> Claire Kahane, “GOTHIC MIRRORS AND FEMININE IDENTITY,” *The Centennial Review*, 24, no. 1 (1980): 48.

<sup>140</sup> Kahane, “GOTHIC MIRROR...,” 48.

<sup>141</sup> Jackson, *The Bird’s Nest*, 178.

<sup>142</sup> Jackson, *The Bird’s Nest*, 205-206.

<sup>143</sup> Jackson, *The Bird’s Nest*, 254.

<sup>144</sup> Jackson, *The Bird’s Nest*, 256.

## 6 Narration

This chapter aims to briefly analyze the narration in each of the novels discussed above – *The Haunting of Hill House*, *We Have Always Lived in the Castle* and *The Bird's Nest*. Each of the novels has a distinct narration style, which is closely related to each of the characters' unique personalities, and analyzing their voices is then helpful in understanding their complex and often troubled psyche. Although in some of the novels the female protagonist is not the narrator herself, the story is still provided through her point of view, in other words, she is the focalizer, “the represented colouring of the fabula by an agent of perception, the holder of the point of view.”<sup>145</sup>

### 6.1 The Haunting of Hill House

*The Haunting of Hill House* is told by an unspecified narrator, through the point of view of the female protagonist, Eleanor Vance. Eleanor's point of view is specified by the frequent use of the indirect interior monologue: “No stone lions for me, she thought, no oleanders; I have broken the spell of Hill House and somehow come inside. I am home, she thought, and stopped in wonder at the thought.”<sup>146</sup> Eleanor's point of view is also the only one provided in the story, which complicates the understanding of the ‘paranormal’ events that take place within the novel, and the reader is led to question whether anything actually happened, or whether it was just Eleanor's imagination.

Eleanor also contradicts herself multiple times in the story, as e.g. at the beginning, she tells Theodora: “I have a little place of my own...An apartment, like yours, only I live alone.”<sup>147</sup> But towards the end, after she loses her sanity, Eleanor contradicts herself by saying “I haven't any apartment...I made it up...I haven't any home, no place at all.”<sup>148</sup> The question then remains whether even this statement is true; one can never be sure with a character whose mind has been changed so drastically during the story. But this precarious point of view complements the whole idea of the story – this “distorted” point of view corresponds with the distorted atmosphere of the house, where “every angle is slightly wrong,”<sup>149</sup> and the distorted mind of Eleanor – as Shirley Jackson wrote in her notes that Eleanor is “ALL DISTORTED LIKE HOUSE”.<sup>150</sup>

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<sup>145</sup> Mieke Bal, *Narratology : Introduction to the Theory of Narrative* (University of Toronto Press, 2017), 12.

<sup>146</sup> Jackson, *The Haunting of Hill House*, 232.

<sup>147</sup> Jackson, *The Haunting of Hill House*, 88.

<sup>148</sup> Jackson, *The Haunting of Hill House*, 239.

<sup>149</sup> Jackson, *The Haunting of Hill House*, 105.

<sup>150</sup> Shirley Jackson quoted in Wilson, “Absolute Reality” and the Role of the Ineffable..., 120.

## 6.2 We Have Always Lived in the Castle

In contrast to *Hill House*, *Castle* is narrated by the female protagonist herself, which in this case is the peculiar and malicious Mary Katherine (“Merricat”) Blackwood. As in *Hill House*, here too is the female protagonist’s point of view the only one provided in the entire story. The fact that the story is told from Merricat’s point of view allows for the reader’s speculations that it was in fact Merricat who poisoned her parents. It is significant that Merricat herself never mentions the circumstances of the event, and so everything that the reader learns about the incident, is from other characters – usually from Uncle Julian, who, in contrast to Merricat, clings desperately to every detail of that night. This creates the suspense, that is not settled until almost at the end of the story, when Merricat confesses to the crime.

Rubenstein notes that the “brilliance of Jackson’s narrative arises from her success at presenting the story from Merricat Blackwood’s skewed perspective as the guiltless murderer who neither accepts responsibility nor feels remorse for her extreme action in the past.”<sup>151</sup> “Skewed perspective” is perhaps the most accurate description of Merricat’s point of view. Merricat’s oddness is also shown in her specific way of thinking from early on in the novel – she gives off the impression of a much younger girl, since she thinks in terms of fairy-tale like visions and children’s games. For example, she imagines her grocery trip to the village as a board game: “I played a game when I did the shopping. I thought about the children’s games where the board is marked into little spaces and each player moves according to a throw of the dice...The library was my start and the black rock was my goal.”<sup>152</sup> In the scene where Merricat starts the fire, it almost seems as if she was unaware of the consequences of such act – throwing the Charles’s pipe into the wastebasket, she thinks: “I was wondering about my eyes; one of my eyes – the left – saw everything golden and yellow and orange, and the other eye saw shades of blue and grey and green...”<sup>153</sup> As Carpenter notes, this scene is “the only point in Jackson’s novel when the reader is asked to believe that Merricat’s perceptions are limited, inadequate.”<sup>154</sup> This then leaves the question of whether Merricat was even fully aware of what she was doing when she put the arsenic in the sugar bowl.

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<sup>151</sup> Rubenstein, “House Mothers and Haunted Daughters...,” 319.

<sup>152</sup> Jackson, *We Have Always Lived in the Castle* (Penguin Books, 2006), 4-5.

<sup>153</sup> Jackson, *We Have Always Lived in the Castle* (Penguin Books, 2006), 99-100

<sup>154</sup> Lynette Carpenter, “The Establishment and Preservation of Female Power in Shirley Jackson’s *We Have Always Lived in the Castle*,” *Frontiers: A Journal of Women Studies*, 8, no. 1 (1984): 35.



### 6.3 The Bird's Nest

Unlike both *Castle* and *Hill House*, in *The Bird's Nest*, the reader is presented with multiple points of view, which, given the novel's theme of multiple personalities, seems quite fitting. *The Bird's Nest* is comprised of six chapters, each told from someone else's point of view. The first chapter, titled 'Elizabeth', is told by an unspecified narrator, but from Elizabeth's perspective – the same as it is in *Hill House*, and it can be said that both of the characters, Eleanor and Elizabeth, are quite similar, so it makes sense that their narrations feels similar as well. Like Eleanor, in Elizabeth's point of view is also the use of indirect interior monologue: "Bad old woman, Elizabeth thought, and then was surprised at herself; Aunt Morgen had been very kind to her."<sup>155</sup>

The second chapter, titled 'Doctor Wright', is narrated by Dr. Wright himself. It is narrated in the form resembling his memoirs; he recounts the case of "Miss R.", as he calls Elizabeth in his notes. He is quite pompous and thinks very highly of himself, not only as a doctor, but also as a writer: "And yet, along with Thackeray, I have my prides and my little passions, and perhaps fancying myself Author is not the least of them."<sup>156</sup> As Ruth Franklin notes, "Dr. Wright explicitly, though misguidedly, connects his role with that of the author; and on a page of notes for the novel Jackson scrawled DR WRITE."<sup>157</sup> It is also clear that this work that Dr. Wright is writing is meant to have an audience; in many instances, he addresses the reader directly: "My own practice has dwindled because most of my patients are dead – (that is another of my little jokes, and we'll have to get used to them, reader, before you and I can go on together; I am a whimsical man and must have my smile)..."<sup>158</sup>

The third chapter, titled Betsy, is again narrated by an unspecified narrator, but the novel's reality is viewed from Betsy's perspective. But there are instances where the narration shifts, and Betsy herself becomes the narrator, as e.g. when she recounts the day when she and her mother and Robin went together to the beach, the day when, presumably, Robin had abused her: "There was a green dress hanging on the bottom of my bed and I thought it would look funny with the blue blanket but it didn't. I heard my mother downstairs...I can't remember how she looked that morning because of the sun shining on her face."<sup>159</sup> The fourth chapter is narrated by Dr. Wright again, continuing in his memoir form. The following two

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<sup>155</sup> Jackson, *The Bird's Nest*, 12.

<sup>156</sup> Jackson, *The Bird's Nest*, 32.

<sup>157</sup> Franklin, *A Rather Haunted Life*, 336.

<sup>158</sup> Jackson, *The Bird's Nest*, 31.

<sup>159</sup> Jackson, *The Bird's Nest*, 91.

chapters are narrated by an unspecified narrator, the fifth one from Aunt Morgen's perspective and the last, sixth one from this 'new integrated' Elizabeth's perspective. The fact that out of all the characters in these three novels, only Dr. Wright – a self-centered man, and Merricat – a malicious child, got to narrate their own stories is quite significant. The characters who most struggled with their identity – Eleanor, Elizabeth and Constance – could only convey their story indirectly, through an unspecified narrator, as if their lack of identity also meant their inability to speak for themselves.

## Conclusion

The aim of this thesis was to analyze Shirley Jackson's female protagonists from three of her novels (namely *The Haunting of Hill House*, *We Have Always Lived in the Castle* and *The Bird's Nest*) with regard to the characteristics of the Female Gothic narratives, whose specifics include the young women's search for identity and her ambivalent relation to her mother and/or her home/house, and how these issues manifest in the characters' lack of identity or eventual insanity. The first chapter was focused on Shirley Jackson's life and works, and it also briefly discussed few of her short stories in order to show that the themes of female gothic are found in Jackson's short fiction as well.

The second chapter was focused on the term Female Gothic, as it was defined by Ellen Moers and later further specified by e.g. Claire Kahane or Roberta Rubenstein. This chapter also discussed the female gothic features most often found in Shirley Jackson's work – such as an ambivalent mother-daughter relationship and the female protagonist's search for her identity. These features were then analyzed in more detail in the following three chapters, each focused on one of the novels mentioned above. The final chapter briefly discussed some specifics of the narration style used in each of the novels, as these often correspond with each of the character's unique struggles.

The reason why I chose these three novels for analysis is because I found that their female protagonist's share some important similarities – as was already mentioned, they are all young women who struggle to find their own identity and place in society. All of them are in some way unconventional – not because of their distinct character, but rather because of their lack of it, and their desperate attempts to find their place in a society that has a clear definition of who a young woman should be only highlights their struggle. And it is this aspect of Shirley Jackson's novels that resonates with women readers even today, more than fifty years after their publication.

## Resumé

Cílem této bakalářské práce bylo zanalyzovat protagonistky z děl Shirley Jacksonové – konkrétně z jejích třech románů: *The Haunting of Hill House* (česky jako *Dům na kopci*, Argo, 2015), *We Have Always Lived in the Castle* a *The Bird's Nest*. Tři hlavní postavy – Eleanor Vance, Mary Katherine Blackwood a Elizabeth Richmond – byly analyzovány s ohledem na rysy „ženské gotiky“ v díle Shirley Jacksonové. Všechny tyto protagonistky jsou mladé ženy, které mají komplikovaný vztah se svými matkami (s matkami, které je pronásledují i po své smrti) a se svými domovy / domy / domácnostmi. Jejich problémový vztah k matkám / domovům / domům / domácnostem se často projevuje v jejich nejisté identitě, v krajních případech také „zešílením“ a útekem z reality či vytvořením vlastní idealizované verze reality.

Termín „ženská gotika“ („Female Gothic“) byl poprvé použit americkou feministickou kritičkou Ellen Moersovou v jejím díle *Literary Women*. Termín „ženská gotika“ je často užíván při popisu díla Shirley Jacksonové. „Ženská gotika“ se liší od té tradiční svým zaměřením na tzv. „preoidipální konflikt“, v kontrastu s „oidipálním konfliktem“. Tento rys „ženské gotiky“ shledávají v díle Shirley Jacksonové např. Claire Kahaneová (americká feministická literární kritička) či Judie Newmanová (britská profesorka americké literatury na Univerzitě v Nottinghamu). Ono preoidipální stadium vývoje je charakterizováno vazbou dítěte na matku, a tato vazba mezi matkou a dítětem (resp. mezi matkou a dcerou) je v určité podobě reflektována ve většině románů Shirley Jacksonové, ale nejvýrazněji se projevuje ve třech románech zmíněných výše. S tématem „ženské gotiky“ také úzce souvisí téma „domáckosti“ (domesticity), které prostupuje veškerou tvorbou Jacksonové. To se týká i jejích humorných memoárů, ve kterých popisuje svůj život jako matky čtyř dětí (*Raising Demons* a *Life Among the Savages*). Mnoho osobních traumat Shirley Jacksonové je reflektováno i v její beletrii – ať už se jedná o komplikovaný vztah Jacksonové se svou vlastní matkou Geraldine, či její problémy jako úspěšné spisovatelky a zároveň ženy v domácnosti v 50. letech 20. století. Složitá role ženy v americké společnosti 50. a 60. let 20. století (jak ji popsala americká feministická spisovatelka Betty Friedanová ve svém známém díle *The Feminine Mystique*) se ozývá skrze postavy Eleanor, Merricat, Elizabeth a mnohých dalších.

Tato práce se také soustředila na analýzu způsobu vyprávění v těchto třech románech, které se od sebe v mnohém liší. Nehledě na to, jakým způsobem je dílo vyprávěno, příběh je vždy zprostředkován skrze úhel pohledu hlavní postavy. Nahlížení na realitu románu skrze

perspektivu těchto protagonistek umožňuje lepší porozumění jejich psychiky a jejich eventuálního „zešílení“.

Tyto tři protagonistky jsem si vybrala ke své analýze z důvodu jejich mnohých společných rysů – jak už bylo zmíněno, všechny jsou to mladé ženy s nejistou identitou a nejistou rolí ve společnosti. Všechny jsou určitým způsobem nekonvenční, což ale nespočívá ani tolik v jejich osobitosti, ale spíše v tom, že se nějakou svou osobnost snaží marně najít, a to ve společnosti, která má jasně dané představy o tom, jaké mají mladé ženy být. Přestože od vydání těchto románů uběhlo více než padesát let, otázka ženské identity je stále aktuální, nejen v celospolečenském diskurzu, ale stále i v literatuře.

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## Annotation

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The aim of this bachelor's thesis is to analyze the female protagonists in three of Shirley Jackson's novels (*The Haunting of Hill House*, *We Have Always Lived in the Castle* and *The Bird's Nest*), with regard to features of the Female Gothic. The analyzed characters are all young women who share a difficult relationship to their mothers, homes, and to their role in the society, which is reflected in their uncertain identity and their eventual insanity (or what is viewed as insanity). The specific narration style will also be briefly discussed, as it often aids in the understanding of the characters' psyche.



## Anotace

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Cílem této bakalářské práce je zanalyzovat ženské postavy ve třech románech Shirley Jacksonové (*The Haunting of Hill House*, *We Have Always Lived in the Castle* a *The Bird's Nest*), s ohledem na aspekty žánru „ženské gotiky“. Všechny probírané postavy jsou mladé ženy, které mají složitý vztah ke své matce, domovům a ke svému postavení ve společnosti. Tyto problémy jsou reflektovány v jejich nejasné identitě či v jejich eventuálním šílenství (nebo v tom, co je považováno za šílenství). Krátce bude zmíněn i specifický způsob vyprávění v jednotlivých románech, který často přispívá k lepšímu porozumění psychiky postav.