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Book Review

by

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Novel: *The Haunting of Hill House*

Author: Shirley Jackson

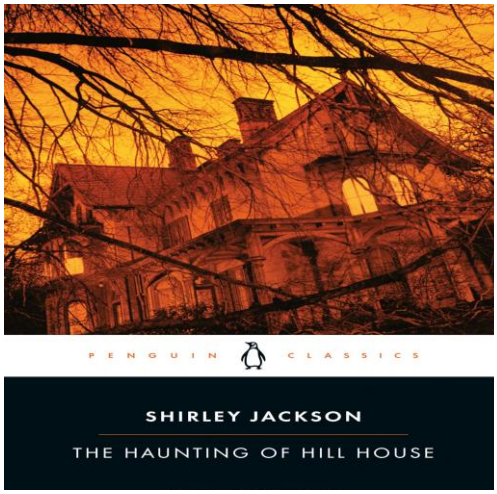
Publisher: Penguin Classics

Publication Date: November 28, 2006

Pages: 208 (First edition)

ISBN: 978-014-303-998-3

Genre: Psychological Horror



1. Introduction

Shirley Jackson and her *The Haunting of Hill House* occupy a special place within the canon of the twentieth century horror literature. The novel, first published in 1959, prefigures the trend of the so-called New-Horror which would reign in the 1980s and 1990s, though its influence can be undoubtedly traced in later writers like Stephen King, Clive Barker, and Henry James (in his later years). The storyline challenges the psychological boundaries of its protagonists in a context that also acts as a protagonist and an antagonist at the same time. In the effort to efforts to reveal the horrific mechanics, the International Journal of Horror Studies, this review is a narrative strategy that explores theatrical horror in examining the subtle mechanisms of text that bring forth a longer, claustrophobic dread that, nevertheless, still reverberates in modern times.

2. Synopsis

There are three main protagonists in the story:

Protagonist	Description	Role
Eleanor Vance	A repressed, shy house-keeper who has childhood abuse flashbacks.	Thoughtful but doubtful, A researcher of the supernatural.
Theo Mellors	A bold dashing young lady with implied psychic sensitivity and a rebelled heart.	This is his contrast to Eleanor; her modernity and bead eying make the tension more intense.
Dr. John Montague	Anthropologist and researcher of the supernatural.	The mastermind behind the Hill House experiment; is symbolic of the rational thought that is gradually being eroded by the irrational.

The three friends rent mansion, Hill House, a dilapidated mansion in Yorkshire moors to research on whether the house is really haunted. The confined space in the house starts distorting reality over a month that increases the internal fears of each of the occupants. The course of the entire novel is that it leaves the main character in a mental breakdown, thus indicating that the actual horror of the house is an externalization of human weakness.

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3. Methodological Lens

1. **Narrative Structure** - Jackson creates a third-person limited omniscient point of view that switches between the three main characters and, as a consequence, helps the reader to enter the mind of each of the characters but keeps the perspective detached.
2. **Atmosphere & Setting** - Hill House is conceptualized, as a sentient being. Weather, architecture, and repetitious motifs are described descriptively in a dense manner, creating the atmosphere.
3. **Thematic Motifs** - Thematic motifs summarize to isolation, repression, the Other and the Uncanny (defined by Freud) (Freud 219).

4. **Pacing** - It needs to build up to a climax and provide suspense, but here, Jackson uses a so-called slow burn technique: hint at a plot twist, then the reality start exploding.

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4. Horror-Specific Analysis

4.1. The House as a Character

The depiction of the home, featuring *Hill House*, as being not just a setting but actually an everywhere, almost living, antagonist is also one of the characteristics of Jackson. The architecture is characterized as having walls that breathe, doors that close themselves, etc. The house has its power through manipulations of sound: creaking of boards, echo of the footsteps that are not related to any real person. The unnatural influence of the house, the ability of reading and enhancing the latent fears of protagonists, adds to the psychological effect of the described setting the phenomenon known as the uncanny (Freud 225).

Evidence from the text:

> "The doors were closed. The room was dark. It gave her the impression that she was under surveillance because there was something in the air." (Jackson 71)

4.2. Psychological Terror Applied versus Physical Horror.

Contrary to the numerous horror stories of the mid-century that focus on gore or other supernatural elements, Jackson is focused on inner fear. Her horror is psychic:

- **Mimicry of Reality** -The power of the house is buried inside the characters in a way that the border of the environment and the characters becomes like a wax paper thin.
- **Non-linear Time** -Temporal distortion confuses the readers alongside the protagonists.
- **Sensory Deprivation** - The repressive nature of the hushpuppies of the house makes the silence per se frightening.

The horror is built up in bits: minor yet disturbing details (a cold draught, flickering light) break the peace, and at one point, builds to a climax when reality shatters.

4.3. Intertextuality and Cultural Situation.

The novel by Jackson converses with traditions of early Romantic and Gothic literature (e.g., *The Fall of the House of Usher (Poe)*), whereas it serves with modernist sensibilities. By making an intellectual question degenerate to a more universal human horror, she is playing around with the conventional man vs supernatural plot, but with the female protagonist in the center. The text also foreshadows subsequent psychological horror by making the house represent the mind.

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5. Literary Devices

Device	**Performance of Horror Effect**	**Performance in the Novel**
Foreshadowing	Early mute scenes in the home are forerunners of something evil.	Gruesome accounts of the geometry and the atmosphere of the house create a feeling of inevitable terror even prior to the explicit events taking place.
Repetition	Produces a hypnotic, obsessive pattern that reflects the inescapable sway of a house, as well as, mind projected by a character.	I have never seen a house that was getting whatever it was getting with me (Jackson 85).
Imprecise Narration	The style used blurs the line between objective reality and subjective horror: it makes the reader doubt all the events and see how unstable the mind of the main characters is.	Jackson had taken the inner monologue of the narrator and the characters together.
Symbolism	The physical objects and spaces are utilized to represent the internal psychological state, which drives the thematic horror further.	The stair and black boxes are symbolic of psychological crossing points.

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6. Strengths

1. **Atmospheric Mastery** - The setting of the novel is described in careful touchy details that would keep the readers immersed in the novel.
2. **Character Development** - Strong Character Eleanor Vance is a progressive psychotic; her mind is as haunted as the house.
3. **Minimalism** - Subtlety is given the room in Jackson sparse prose, which is the characteristic of successful horror.
4. **Thematic Depth** - The theme of Repression and isolation plus the interaction of the environment and identity give it an eternal character.

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7. Criticisms

1. **Pacing** - One reason it can be considered slow burn is because the slow build up is used on purpose and not flawed like the sometimes pace is seen as tedious by some readers.
2. **Resolution** - -The ending of the novel is ambiguous; some readers feel that it is not conclusive but this ambiguity is an important part of horror.
3. **Diversity** - in the Characterization of the protagonists) -Both the heroes are men and women, however, they are all white, which is also a current constraint; the modern audiences may find a lack of diversity problematic.

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8. Applicability to Scholarship of Contemporary Horror.

The novel by Jackson is still a founder of the research of psychological horror. Its influence is evident in:

- **Adaptations** - *The Haunting of Hill House* (Netflix 2018) and *The Haunting* (1963), both film adaptations of the novel, prove the flexibility of the story (Flanagan; Wise).
- **Narrative Theory** – It is the use of unreliable narration and the change of perspective that informs the modern-day subjectivity analysis of horror.

- **Cultural Studies** - It can also be approached in feminist and psychoanalytic terms because the text deals with the female body, mental illness, and social alienation.

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9. Conclusion

The Haunting of Hill House is a masterpiece ode to the power of the psychological horror. Jackson cleverly transforms architecture into a breathing menace thus turning the house into a reflection of the fears that the characters have themselves. The novel is so advanced it exceeds the rules of its era, having used a formula which forms the basis of modern horror, with the emphasis on the vibe and the mental imbalance of its characters, as well as the unclear menacing ending. The fact that it has remained popular over the years in literature and cinema makes it a very important piece of work and thus a book that scholars of horror cannot do without (King 43).

Recommendation: This is one book that deserves to be read, reread and taught in classes and used to teach the lesson of psychological horror, how silent, insidious fear can shadow the more dramatic supernatural oppression. It is, by all means, a landmark involving the discipline.

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