

Peace at Last: Grappling with Ghosts and the Family Structure in *The Sixth Sense* and *The Haunting of Hill House*

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Sigmund Freud describes the uncanny as an unwilling revelation of what is private and hidden. *The Haunting of Hill House* novel and *The Sixth Sense* film both exhibit many aspects of the uncanny, but their main characters end up embracing this uncanniness to defy haunting narrative norms by accepting, in different ways, the ghosts that plague them. To this end, the characters either adhere to (in the case of *The Sixth Sense*) or diverge from (in the case of *The Haunting of Hill House*) the nuclear family structure.

When reading, listening to, or watching ghost stories, an unexplainable feeling overcomes us. It is not fear or disgust outright, but instead has some unique, innate quality. Sigmund Freud describes this feeling as “the uncanny.” The uncanny exists as a crossroads of familiar and unfamiliar, or, in German, *heimlich* and *unheimlich*. *Heimlich* means homey or familiar, but it also means private and hidden. In Freud’s interpretation, if something is *heimlich*, it can also be hidden from the self. *Unheimlich* means strange or unfamiliar but can also be defined as “the name for everything that ought to have remained... hidden and secret but has become visible” (Freud 4). The

uncanny combines these interpretations as an unwilling revelation of what is private and hidden, despite our desire to keep that revelation hidden. *The Haunting of Hill House* novel and *The Sixth Sense* movie both exhibit many aspects of the uncanny, but their main characters end up embracing this uncanniness, defying haunting narrative norms by accepting the ghosts that plague them, and do so by adhering to (in the case of *The Sixth Sense*) or diverging from (in the case of *The Haunting of Hill House*) the nuclear family structure.

In *The Haunting of Hill House*, Eleanor Vance, the main character, embraces ambiguity by becoming the haunting, blurring the line between living and dead, just as she occupies an ambiguous space in society, not having a solid home, family, or role in the world. *The Sixth Sense*, however, rejects this ambiguity as Cole helps ghosts come to terms with their death and resolves their trauma so they can move out of the transitional space. This mirrors the story's adherence to structure ideas of gender roles and family structures, shying away from ambiguity. To prove these points, a deeper analysis of family dynamics and its connection to ghosts and the uncanny in both narratives proves necessary.

The Uncanny and Ghosts

A variety of images evoke a feeling of the uncanny, including gouged-out eyes, disembodied limbs, doubling, and repetition. An aspect of the uncanny that is particularly relevant to ghost stories, however, is uncertainty. Freud posits that uncertainty drives uncanniness, especially in literature. Since fairy tales exist in a clearly fictional world removed from reality, the idea of uncanny does not apply to them. A sense of the uncanny, however, creeps in when the fictional world begins to mimic our own without showing signs of "normalcy." When a story does this, it settles in that uncertain space of familiar but also unfamiliar, which seems similar to the world we live in but also strangely foreign. *The Haunting of Hill House* and *The Sixth Sense* exist in worlds that seem quite similar to our own until we begin to notice aspects of these worlds that diverge from what we expect. This deviation is made apparent when automatons conjure a sense of the uncanny and uncertainty about the animation of objects. They appear "normal," giving us a sense of familiarity, but that familiar feeling is undermined by a sense of strangeness or wrongness—this is the uncanny.

Ghost stories evoke a sense of the uncanny because spirits reside in a liminal space, a space of uncertainty. Ghosts are neither fully dead or alive. They manifest themselves in the physical forms of their once-living selves, such as in *The Sixth Sense*, or they imitate human voices and mannerisms (like knocking or writing) as seen in *The Haunting of Hill House*. In this way, they remind us of humans—of ourselves, even—and so they bring us a sense of familiarity and perhaps even comfort. Because ghosts are not fully living humans, however, they reside in a space of uncertainty where they mimic humanity, but cannot fully be human, and are therefore uncanny. As Julia Kristeva establishes, abjection comes into play when we want to protect ourselves from the uncanny and things that make us uncomfortable. She further specifies that abjection can be prompted by "[w]hat does not respect borders, positions, rules. The in-between, the ambiguous,

the composite" (4).

Abjection is important in the case of ghosts because it allows us to solidify boundaries between what we are and what we are not. If ghosts are dead, unreal, and separate from us, then we can be sure that we ourselves are real, alive, and separate from them. As previously mentioned, ghosts disrespect borders—they shift between life and death while occupying an ambiguous space that scares us. Because this ability is unsettling, characters want to abject ghosts and distance themselves from both the uncertainty of ghostly existence and the cold reality of mortality. In fact, Noël Carroll writes in "The Nature of Horror" that "[i]n works of horror, the humans regard the monsters that they encounter as abnormal, as disturbances of the natural order," and even react with "revulsion, nausea, and disgust" (52-53). This reaction is consistent with many examples of ghost stories in popular media, where main characters often feel the need to run from a haunted house or exorcise the ghost that plagues them.

In some unique stories, however, characters learn to accept and even embrace ghosts rather than run from them. In these cases, we must ask what compels these characters to overcome their natural urge to abject. The two main examples discussed here are Shirley Jackson's 1959 novel *The Haunting of Hill House* and M. Night Shyamalan's 1999 film *The Sixth Sense*. While these stories appear to have little in common on the surface, as they are more closely examined, it becomes apparent that the characters in both stories embrace hauntings and ghosts in unique ways in order to grapple with gender roles and the structure of the nuclear family. *The Haunting of Hill House* features Eleanor Vance, who eventually descends into madness and becomes part of the haunting in Hill House after the house goads her to insanity by referencing her unstable place in the family structure and society as a whole. In *The Sixth Sense*, Cole is a young boy haunted by violent visions of dead people and an unstable family unit in the wake of his father's leaving. Cole becomes a shepherd for ghosts, guiding them into the afterlife and out of the uncanny liminal space of ghostliness. Eleanor, alternatively, embraces the haunting by becoming it, occupying the uncertain space between human and inhuman herself.

Elements of the uncanny exist in both *The Haunting of Hill House* and *The Sixth Sense*, but rather than abject the hauntings to distance themselves from the uncanny, Eleanor and Cole embrace them. From the beginning of the novel, *The Haunting of Hill House* evokes the uncanny by describing the house in a lifelike manner. The uncanny can be evoked by blurring the line between animate and inanimate, creating a sense of uncertain reality, and Jackson's description of the house certainly does this. The first page of the novel describes the house as "not sane," and later Eleanor describes it as "vile" and "diseased," words befitting a person rather than a house

(Jackson 1, 23). When she enters the house, she notes that it feels as though the house was “waiting” for her, “evil, but patient” (25). Making the house’s animacy uncertain puts the reader in an uncomfortable position as the house—typically an inanimate entity—comes alive to torment Eleanor and the other house guests. The book later describes the house as maternal or motherly, further giving it human characteristics. This observation becomes particularly chilling when we consider Eleanor’s fraught past with her own mother. This evil, almost human house should drive Eleanor out, but we ultimately see her fighting to stay there despite the house’s horrifying and uncanny elements. Moreover, these examples show us the essential role that uncertainty and its connection with the uncanny play in Eleanor’s experience at Hill House.

The Sixth Sense also features uncanny elements throughout. Although set in a world that seems similar to our own, in the story strange events keep occurring around the main character, Cole Sear, causing our sense of reality to become more and more precarious. Toward the beginning of the film, Cole eats breakfast with his mother in the kitchen. His mother leaves briefly and returns only a few moments later to opened cabinets and pulled-out drawers, even though it appears Cole never moved. This odd occurrence plants the idea in the audience’s minds that something uncanny exists in this universe. As the line between reality and fantasy blurs, we are launched into a realm of uncertainty. Once Cole reveals to Malcolm that he “see[s] dead people,” the sense of the uncanny grows even stronger (*The Sixth Sense* [1999], 0:20-0:21). The ghosts fail to understand that they are dead despite the graphic and horrifying wounds that many of them sustained. This puts the ghosts in a liminal space, making them neither dead or alive, human or inhuman. Based on this evidence, we cannot argue that a lack of the uncanny is the reason that the characters in both stories eventually accept the ghosts. In fact, *The Haunting of Hill House* and *The Sixth Sense* link uncertainty and the uncanny, and Eleanor and Cole’s negotiations with these elements reflects a larger struggle with their own uncertain places in society.

Based on this assertion, Eleanor and Cole see that ghosts are strongly linked to familial structure, family bonds, and familial trauma. The main characters in both narratives defy their urge to abject instead accept their respective ghosts, choices that are inextricably tied to their own roles in the family structure and society at large. *The Sixth Sense* conservatively advocates for adherence to the traditional family structure, whereas *The Haunting of Hill House* radically asserts that those who refuse to adhere to gender roles and the “correct” familial structure, like Eleanor, possess no defined place in the family or in society. Jackson is not placing blame on Eleanor for not conforming to these standards, but rather criticizing society for not creating spaces for those who dislike conforming to social norms. To further support these claims, these next sections will

analyze each narrative for themes about the family and its structure, gender roles, and uncertainty.

Ghosts in *The Sixth Sense*

In *The Sixth Sense*, ghosts haunt Cole and drive him away from his mother, peers, and child psychologist Malcolm Crowe, but the absence of his biological father haunts Cole the most. He clings to memories of his father (and perhaps the hope of his father's return) by wearing his father's overly-large glasses and watch. We see the connection between ghosts and the family structure in Coral Houtman's article "Questions of Unreliable Narration in *The Sixth Sense*," in which she views the film through a Lacanian framework, reinterpreting the Oedipus complex through a slightly more modern lens. Houtman argues Cole misses the "structural intervention" of the father figure because of his father's absence, which prevents Cole from accepting the loss of his absolute relationship with his mother and keeps him from moving successfully into society (5). Houtman describes Cole as suffering from "telepathic conversion hysteria," which essentially means that "his symptoms of distress and anxiety" caused by the Oedipus complex "are expressed through him seeing real ghosts" (6). The ghosts, according to Houtman, embody the "unconscious hostile wishes of the adult world," which Cole cannot interpret because of his improper development (6). Here, then, we see how "improper" development and a "broken" family structure directly connect to ghosts and hauntings.

Ironically, Cole is stuck in a transitional stage just like the ghosts he fears. He oscillates between acting as an adult, as when he visits his mother "during her nightmare," and acting as a child, as when he "sleep[s] in her bed" (Houtman 6). In this narrative, Cole occupies an uncertain, transitional space stuck between child and adult, unknowingly mimicking the ghosts that terrify him. This struggle sends a message to the viewer that they, too, should be scared of occupying this uncertain space where difficult definitions of gender roles and family exist. After all, Cole is so affected by his family trauma that child psychologist Malcolm Crowe makes it his personal mission to help Cole. Everything begins to change, however, when Cole meets Malcolm, who "provides the surrogate father figure that Cole has been lacking" in order to interpret those enigmatic messages (Houtman 6). Houtman argues that when they play a game where Malcolm must guess things about Cole, Cole sees how Malcolm accepts his own fallibility or "symbolic castration," which makes Cole less terrified of Malcolm (6). Though Cole hesitates to trust Malcolm at first, he eventually divulges his secret that he sees dead people. Because Malcolm himself is dead, it is even more telling that Cole shares this information, as it shows how Cole overcame his revulsion

to ghosts enough to trust a ghost with this secret, something he never shared with his mother. Cole even goes so far as to take Malcolm's advice about listening to the ghosts and trying to help them.

Once he receives the advice from Malcolm and confides in him like a father figure, Cole assumes his "place" in the family and acts as a shepherd for ghosts to help them cross the line into the afterlife. He completes his own transition and now helps ghosts complete their own, including Malcolm. *The Sixth Sense* conservatively adheres to ideas about what constitutes a "proper" family. The story promotes the idea that if you develop "properly" and have the "proper" family structure—in this case, one with a strong father figure—you can pull yourself out of the transitional space and help others as well, just like Cole. This is especially striking considering Cole, a child, helps adults through their transitions to the afterlife. Cole even helps Malcolm, a child psychologist and someone who helped him through his own development, to transition out of the uncertain realm of ghostliness. The moral of the story, then, is that we can only make peace with our ghosts—literal or metaphorical—if we adhere to the process of proper development. Further, the story argues that we can only fully integrate into society if we follow these same guidelines; essentially that normalcy becomes achievable and people become happy, integrated citizens of society only when they adhere to these specific guidelines. It is important to note that both main characters—Cole and Malcolm—are white, presumably straight men. Perhaps this formula only works so effectively for these characters because of positions of privilege. It begs the question: would this method work as well for someone not occupying that status? Ultimately, however, Cole only accepts ghosts in order to push them out of their uncanny transitional space and into one of certainty in the afterlife, effectively abjecting them in that way.

The article "The Mourning of Loss in *The Sixth Sense*" by Marguerite La Caze takes a slightly different stance on the situation, proposing that Cole cannot make peace with the ghosts until he resolves his personal grief. Being suspended in grief resembles being stuck in a transitional space; Cole is again trapped in limbo, unable to transition properly. La Caze writes, "On Freud's account, the work of mourning cannot be finished until reality is accepted," so if "[t]here has been no proper grief or recognition of the wrong that was done," then the reality of the death is not accepted. Here, the "death" that La Caze speaks of represents a few possibilities: Cole's father's absence in his life and/or the deaths of the ghosts that haunt him, and the trauma surrounding these hauntings. Essentially, peace cannot come about until the pain and grief are acknowledged, but as we see from earlier in the movie, Cole chooses to ignore pain and suffering (both his own and that of the ghosts), instead running into churches for protection because the ghosts are

unable to torment him there. Cole, however, eventually reveals his secret to Malcolm and acknowledges the trauma his “sixth sense” caused him.

Opening up to Malcolm allows Cole to finally begin the healing process and help the ghosts and his mother heal as well. Just as Malcolm helps Cole transition into adulthood in the Lacanian reading, in La Caze’s reading Malcolm helps Cole transition out of grief and into a space of healing. In that way, this reading still ends up reinforcing the idea that Cole needs a fatherly figure to confide in. Cole relies on Malcolm to act as a guide so that he can then replicate that role and act as a guide for ghosts. This reading still adheres to Lacanian ideas about Cole attempting to be like the father (or in this case, his surrogate father Malcolm), by trying to replicate his actions. Ultimately, *The Sixth Sense* confirms gender roles and a heteronormative, patriarchal family structure; by adhering to these norms, the story insists, one can transition out of an uncanny, uncertain space and assume a traditional, stable role in society.

Ghosts in *The Haunting of Hill House*

In *The Haunting of Hill House*, ghosts and familial trauma also haunt Eleanor Vance, but her uncertainty is not so easily resolved. Eleanor comes to Hill House as part of a study conducted by Doctor Montague, who specially chose Eleanor because of her past experiences with the paranormal, though she seems to repress these memories. When she arrives at Hill House, she flees the overbearing grasp of her older sister as well as her deceased mother who, though dead, “continues to haunt Eleanor” (Evans 5). Eleanor seeks her unexperienced freedom, romance, and an agency over her own life. As Lynne Evans notes in “‘Help Eleanor Come Home’: Monstrous Maternity in Shirley Jackson’s *The Haunting of Hill House*,” “Eleanor’s entrance into the realm of sexual maturity has been delayed by the eleven years she spent tending to her invalid mother” (2). Similarly to Cole, Eleanor suffered delayed development due to an unbalanced family structure and therefore never properly developed, leaving her unwilling to fulfill the role of a heterosexual adult woman. Like Cole, Eleanor suffers from a variation of the Oedipal complex, due to her relationship with her overbearing mother.

Evans points out that when Eleanor fantasizes a scenario of grandeur as she drives to Hill House, she imagines herself as a princess “who discovers a magic garden in which a ‘queen waits, weeping, for the princess to return’” (4). Here, Eleanor desires a loving mother heartbroken over her missing daughter, rather than a prince coming to sweep her off of her feet. Eleanor’s longing for a healthy, stable, loving family becomes apparent through this daydream. We can see how Eleanor’s traumatic family situation has stunted her development—she cannot yet move into the

realm of romance (heterosexual or not) because she is missing essential support and love from her own family. Just like Cole, Eleanor is trapped between child and adult because of this “improper” development, not fully one or the other.

Eleanor has been unable to establish appropriate boundaries within her own family, especially with her mother, meaning that she feels uncertain of her family role as well as her role in larger society. We see how Hill House manipulates those issues as we move further into the story. As Tricia Lootens notes in “‘Whose Hand Was I Holding?’ Familial and Sexual Politics in Shirley Jackson’s *The Haunting of Hill House*,” the house is a “vicious travesty of a family home,” and a “nightmare embodiment of the nuclear family” (175). By mimicking the nuclear family structure, Hill House cruelly and crudely preys on Eleanor’s own familial trauma, making her more susceptible to the haunting and later drives her to madness at the end of the novel. Because Eleanor wants desperately to attain the family she never had, she is more susceptible to the House’s predations, and ultimately more willing to accept the haunting. It is important to note that Lootens classifies Hill House as a “brutal parody of a family home,” so none of the other houseguests actually constitute a healthy family dynamic for Eleanor (175). We can contrast this to Cole’s situation in *The Sixth Sense* where Malcolm Crowe genuinely wants to help Cole and act as a guide and father figure for him. Eleanor has no such support system in the house.

Richard Pascal echoes this sentiment in his reading of the story in the article, “Walking Alone Together: Family Monsters in *The Haunting of Hill House*,” noting that “the allure of the house, and also its horror, is bound up with the sense that it wishes to envelop [Eleanor] in a maternal embrace so comprehensive that her newly won independence and all vestiges of her individuality will be subsumed utterly” (469). Eleanor, like Cole, is trapped in a sort of pre-pubescent state due to her lack of “proper” development and perhaps also her struggle with her own sexuality. It is important to note, however, that Eleanor is actually older than Cole. Cole is still a child when he is led through his transition into adulthood, whereas Eleanor, despite her sometimes child-like behavior, is an adult. She struggles to transition into her place in adulthood because she has somehow missed an essential threshold and is now too far out of the window of development to make this essential transition. We see this struggle in the scene where Theodora paints Eleanor’s nails red. Eleanor at first seems to enjoy the interaction, almost falling asleep, but when Theodora points out her feet are “dirty,” Eleanor flies into a panic, exclaiming, “It’s horrible,” and “it’s wicked” (Jackson 85). Painted nails point to a mature woman, and the red color specifically calls to mind passion and sensuality. Eleanor’s horror is brought on by seeing herself as a mature, sexual woman when she feels so underdeveloped in this area. She cannot fully occupy this role, as

she has not moved through the essential earlier stages of development, leaving her trapped in an uncertain, uncanny space, just like Cole.

As a physically mature woman, Eleanor feels as though she should fit a certain role, perhaps being more like Theo, the single, beautiful houseguest who wears trousers that scandalize Eleanor. As an adult woman, Eleanor feels as though she has no place in a family, in a home, or in society as she struggles to fit any of the roles deemed appropriate by society. When she tries to convince Theo to live with her after they leave the house, Theo brushes her off. Eleanor is trapped in an uncertain space between childhood and adulthood, unsure of her place in the world—a space occupied by the uncanny. It thus makes sense that the house's "maternal embrace," which she sees as a promise of certainty and family, draws Eleanor to it.

It also makes sense for Eleanor to embrace the haunting to the point of becoming part of it. Lootens writes, "...Ultimately, in a sort of reverse birthing, Eleanor is absorbed into Hill House" (158). When Eleanor chooses to become a part of the haunting at the end of the book, she begins to occupy the same uncertain, transitional space that the ghosts in *The Sixth Sense* occupy. When she enters the library, she experiences it as being "deliciously warm," like the womb, despite it often smelling like decay and rotting to her before (Jackson 171). The center of the house has both qualities of life and death, and Eleanor occupies this uncertain, uncanny space as she enacts the haunting in the library, climbing the rickety staircase. Eleanor feels as though her place in the family structure and society is uncertain, and she physically enacts this by becoming a part of the house's haunting—becoming a part of the thing that terrified her. She is no longer scared, repeating over and over "I am home," even as she endangers her life climbing the staircase (171). This is the only place Eleanor feels at home because it is such an uncertain contradictory space—it embodies the uncertainty that she feels in her own life. At the same time, the library's maternal environment assuages her fears of never having a family or the trauma of never having a "proper" mother. This is why she chose to climb the rickety stairs in the library—to return to the womb by ending her own life. Though the library represents both life and death, Eleanor finds this uncertain space comforting; she feels like it is the only place she can properly exist. The library also provides the essential maternal "love" that she never received from her own family. She does not actually go through with this self-destructive impulse, of course, as she is interrupted by Luke and the other house guests and coaxed down from her own peril.

After this near disaster, Dr. Montague reveals to Eleanor that they are planning on sending her away from the house to live with her sister. Whereas in *The Sixth Sense*, Malcolm's character only leaves the narrative when Cole successfully transitions into the world and develops properly,

Eleanor is being sent away still damaged, back out into a world where she feels she does not fit. Dr. Montague is not a loving father looking out for a child. Rather, he tries forcing Eleanor back into society, into a role she is unwilling or unable to occupy. She is being sent away from the only place she ever felt home in, causing her to feel devastated, despite the fact that living in the house often makes her miserable and terrified. The house plays to Eleanor's weaknesses and trauma so well that she therefore feels she only exists in this space of transition and uncertainty because she is metaphorically stuck in that same space herself in society. This drives Eleanor to crash her car into the tree rather than leave Hill House, pointing to the fact that she believes she cannot exist anywhere else besides Hill House. She makes the final statement she tried to make in the library—a return to the womb, a sign that she cannot exist in society as an adult or at all.

We can contrast this tragic ending to that of Cole's, where he makes peace with his gift, Malcolm, and mother. With Eleanor's tragic demise, Jackson insinuates that Eleanor is unable to reenter society because she does not adhere to the ideas of the heterosexual, nuclear family prescribed by society. She did not have the advantage of having a loving mother as Cole did, nor did she have a father figure, like Cole eventually has with Malcolm. By giving Eleanor this ending, Jackson comments on the fact that society rejects people who do not follow the "proper form" of development, a criticism of societal expectations rather than Eleanor's inability to fill certain roles and experience "proper" development. Jackson shows how these societal pressures eat away at Eleanor because she knows that she either cannot fulfill them or does not want to fulfill them, ultimately forcing her to remain in the uncertain, transitional space of Hill House because she feels society has no concrete space for her. Eleanor regresses back into the womb where she does not have to play a role which she feels doesn't fit, embracing ambiguity by becoming the haunting, blurring the line between living and dead, just as she occupies an ambiguous space in society. It's equally important to note that this ambiguity is rejected in *The Sixth Sense*—Cole helps ghosts come to terms with their death and resolves their trauma that forces them to remain in this transitional space. I argue that Cole abjects the ghosts as he ushers them into the afterlife by bringing them close only to then send them back to where they "belong." This mirrors the story's adherence to structure ideas of gender roles and the family structure, as it shies away from spaces of ambiguity and uncertainty. It seems that the narrative of *The Sixth Sense* demands a certain answer: that ghosts are dead and should stay that way, that families are nuclear and need to remain that way, and that only traditional gender roles and a traditional family structure can bring us peace.

Conclusion

The protagonists of both *The Haunting of Hill House* and *The Sixth Sense* grapple with family trauma, which leaves them developmentally stunted and feeling lost, unsure, and unable to occupy a defined place in society. Both characters are unable to let go of the past, with Cole keeping his father's watch and glasses and Eleanor feeling as though the house brings up memories of her mother to haunt her. Additionally, both protagonists defy genre norms to accept the ghosts that plague them. With the help of Malcolm and "proper" development, Cole becomes a shepherd/guide to listen to the ghosts and bring them out of a transitional state. Alternatively, Eleanor embraces the ambiguity of the haunting by becoming a part of it, effectively blurring the line between living and dead.

These outcomes speak to larger societal issues that structured gender norms and the effects of those norms are a haunting that plagues our culture. Cole occupies a defined space in society because he adheres to traditional gender norms and ideas about family. Eleanor, however, occupies a liminal space of uncertainty when she becomes the haunting because she does not adhere to these same norms and therefore feels as though she does not have a place in society—she must retreat into the house because she feels she has nowhere else to go. She ultimately commits suicide because she feels as though she cannot return to society since she is either unwilling or unable to fill the role it has created for her. Jackson's story, therefore, is a more radical critique of how limiting ideas about "proper" gender roles, development, and family can be. *The Sixth Sense* is much more conservative in the fact that it shows the protagonist prospering because those rules were adhered to and led to "proper" development.

What do these stories tell us, then, about gender roles, the development process, and the restrictions of society? *The Sixth Sense* prescribes certain roles to its viewers, encouraging them to constrain themselves to traditional ideas of gender, family, and development in order to be successful in society. While the movie does eventually humanize its ghosts, it still portrays Cole doing the "good work" of sending ghosts into the afterlife to find peace, reinforcing the idea that uncertainty, ambiguity, and the uncanny are ultimately things to abject (and reject). This message may drive people who do not fit these roles to make choices that ultimately do not make them happy, simply because they feel they must fit a certain mold.

The Haunting of Hill House, on the other hand, does much more complex and interesting work, as it portrays the challenges (and, perhaps, consequences) of not occupying a defined, traditional space in society. Eleanor's descent into madness and eventual suicide is a warning for us not to conform, but rather to challenge the ideas about gender and family that, especially in 1959,

seem so set in stone. Jackson is calling us to think critically about what the family, gender roles, and relationships “should” be; why conform to roles and ideas that are not authentic to our lives? The lesson here is not that there is a right way and a wrong way to exist—dead or alive, single or married, mother or barren—but rather that we should explore those spaces of uncertainty further, and dive into what makes us uncomfortable. Perhaps embracing our ghosts means embracing the uncertain, no longer limiting ourselves to what we have been told is right. Maybe then, we can find peace.

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