

“Outside the Gate”: Family, Selfhood, and Post-Traumatic Growth in Shirley Jackson’s *The Haunting of Hill House* Dillon O’Nail, *Ball State University*

Shirley Jackson’s novel *The Haunting of Hill House* emerged during a period of familial reimagination. Indeed, the predominantly white, nuclear, and patriarchal family structure demanded by society now faced new scrutiny as people began considering the destruction these dynamics imposed on the individual. Jackson’s novel particularly attends to this debilitating relationship between controlling parental figures and daughters. By reading through the lens of trauma theory more broadly, this essay argues that Jackson’s text illuminates the complexities of familial trauma as well as the nuances of post-traumatic growth (PTG).

As Eleanor Vance, the timid protagonist of Shirley Jackson’s 1959 novel *The Haunting of Hill House*, approaches the titular building, an unyielding gate and cantankerous caretaker named Dudley prevent her from reaching her destination. Eleanor, after an unsuccessful attempt to convince Dudley to open the gate, remarks that “she knew, of course, that he was delighting in exceeding his authority, as though once he moved to unlock the gate he would lose the little temporary superiority he thought he had—and what superiority have I? she wondered; I am *outside* the gate, after all” (20). Jackson’s novel continuously returns to these themes of isolation and exclusion, of autonomy and power. As Eleanor attempts to escape the traumatic, debilitating family she left behind and forge a new sense of community

and selfhood, she consistently remains outside the gate, just within the reach of new friends and independent individualism yet barred from truly adopting either. The trauma she carries from her abusive mother and selfish sister functions as the metaphorical gate that prevents her from

attaining happiness. Indeed, Jackson's novel is concerned with the enduring ghost of trauma and how, if improperly handled, the damaged self becomes ensnared within a cycle of neglect, suffering, and stunted individualism. *The Haunting of Hill House* ultimately engages with the discussion surrounding the midcentury family structures of Jackson's times by scrutinizing the ways in which these structures both traumatize and entrap the self. By reading the novel through the lens of trauma theory more broadly, a better understanding emerges of how post-traumatic growth (PTG) can be achieved in the wake of the psychological damage caused by the aforementioned family structures.

At the time of *The Haunting of Hill House's* publication in 1959, cultural discourse surrounding the white, nuclear family had emerged in the wake of World War II. As the men embarked overseas, women filled the spaces they left behind, exiting the domestic sphere to work traditionally masculine jobs. The men, however, inevitably returned, fully expecting life to return precisely to the way it was before the war: women staying at home while men navigated professional careers. Susan J. Douglas explains in her book *Where the Girls Are: Growing Up Female with the Mass Media* how the nuclear family structure was irrevocably disturbed and that this return to "normalcy" would not be easy:

By the end of the war, most of these women had discovered that they liked working outside the home—they liked the money, the sense of purpose, the autonomy...Women also wanted to be reunited with their husbands or sweethearts, and they wanted to start families. This was a very real desire, but they didn't want to give up everything for it. Poor, deluded souls...the war was over, and they were supposed to sashay back to the kitchen and learn how to make green beans baked with Campbell's cream of mushroom soup. (46-47)

The war necessitated a change in traditional family structure, enabling millions to envision and briefly adopt alternative models outside of a strictly nuclear, patriarchal one. Women, despite desiring their families, had tasted autonomy; the submissive housewife could no longer peacefully exist. Even though the patriarchal society forced a return to the nuclear model, culture began thinking about families in new ways.

Family structures, especially white, patriarchal ones, faced scrutiny. If society began addressing the failures, misogyny, and limitations of the white, nuclear model that dominated culture, what would this mean for the future of family structures, parenting, and childhood development? Moreover, if the patriarchal structure failed, could a matriarchal structure function as a successful alternative? Richard Pascal, writing on a similar topic in his article "Walking Alone Together: Family Monsters in *The Haunting of Hill House*," observes that "as the century progressed,

the familial dominance of the patriarch was becoming a shared and even contested privilege, as the widely reported spectre of the obsessively manipulative mother became prominent" (466). This fledgling discussion challenged the nuclear status quo which, in turn, produced cultural anxieties. Pascal reveals that one such fear was that children harbored "the disruptive energies of individualism" (466). As Pascal notes, "Nothing less than the future of America as a society hung in the balance" (466). Jackson's novel, however, counters the presiding belief that children, not parents, were the harbingers of societal destruction, suggesting rather the inverse; the suppression of individualism rather than the promotion of it held these "disruptive energies." Eleanor, a product of the matriarchal family structure, endured years of abuse while caring for her sick, despicable mother, stunting her sense of autonomy and general selfhood. The Eleanor readers meet at the beginning of the novel is immediately presented as pitifully meek without a shred of confidence or sense of self-worth. Eleanor's traumatized, damaged self demonstrably resulted not from a nurtured and encouraged selfhood but rather from her inability to reconcile her mother's selfish needs and her own desire for autonomy. The constricting demands family structures had for women failed Eleanor, not vice versa.

Throughout the novel, Jackson dissects and criticizes the aforementioned familial structures. The novel scathingly attacks the ghostly presence of Hugh Crain, Hill House's deranged creator. While Crain's morality appears dubious from the outset, the true depth of his depravity is revealed later in the novel. The group, clustered within the library, all analyze a book Crain created for his two daughters that Luke Anderson, the heir to the home and a member of the group occupying the house with Eleanor, had discovered. Amongst a myriad of disturbing imagery, Crain orders his children to "'honor thy father and thy mother, Daughter, authors of thy being, upon whom a heavy charge has been laid, that they lead their child in innocence and righteousness along the fearful narrow path to everlasting bliss, and render her up at last to her God a pious and virtuous soul'" (124). Crain's book echoes the requested obedience demanded of nuclear family structures, particularly patriarchal: men, whether in the religious or family sphere, act as gatekeepers that determine women's ability to enter the gate of familial acceptance or religious salvation. The group, finding Crain's archaic diction and syntax, religious fervor, and imagery disconcerting, ultimately functions as a critique of those commanding masculine figures as vile, oppressive, and destructive to their children. Despite fatherhood now being a "contested privilege," however, the haunting presence of the patriarch nevertheless lingers within our culture; the controlling, domineering father may be dead but not yet moved on. As Eleanor attempts to leave at the end of the novel, the narrator reveals that "light glittered on the marble eyes of Hugh Crain,"

suggesting the marble statue commemorates a time past that nevertheless clings to a degree of life (179).

Despite criticizing the father figure, *The Haunting of Hill House* remains focused on the destructive, detrimental nature of the matriarchal family structure on children. The house, a product of a father, is now described by Luke as “a mother house,” effectively shifting the focus from fatherhood to motherhood by suggesting the force of the house now originates from the matriarch rather than patriarch (156). The correlation between the house itself and Eleanor’s own abusive mother bolsters the criticism of the matriarchal, nuclear model. Early on, Jackson describes the house as “disturbed, perhaps. Leprous. Sick,” all traits that similarly apply to Eleanor’s sickly mother (51). Upon first meeting Eleanor, the readers learn that she “had been waiting for something like Hill House. Caring for her mother, lifting a cross old lady from her chair to her bed, setting out endless little trays of soup and oatmeal, steeling herself to the filthy laundry, Eleanor held fast that someday something would happen” (4). The similar diction used in describing both Eleanor’s mother and the house unites the two, transforming the house into a symbol of deranged motherhood and trauma. While depraved matriarchy was originally intertwined with depraved patriarchy, both beasts that consume their children, Jackson’s novel suggests motherhood has now become a different disease altogether that deserves as much scrutiny as fatherhood.

If both of these unhealthy nuclear models inflicted trauma on the children they were meant to protect, the novel presents a pessimistic view towards a creation of new structures that could substitute or replace the current ones. Dr. Montague, Theo, Luke, and Eleanor—the group studying the paranormal activity of Hill House—speedily form an intimate, albeit superficial, bond that functions as a new, makeshift family structure. After just one night in the house, the guests “had met morning in Hill House, and they were a family, greeting one another with easy informality and going to the chairs they had used last night at dinner, their own places at the table” (71). This blissful family dynamic quickly erodes, however, and the guests start lashing out at one another—particularly Eleanor and Theodora. All of the guests escape momentarily from toxic family structures with their trip to Hill House—Dr. Montague from his arrogant wife, Luke from a distrusting family, Theo from an argument with her partner, and Eleanor from her mother and sister—yet find no solace in new community. The group eventually disbands at the end of the novel, with Eleanor dying and the others individually spanning the globe, suggesting an enduring, effective, and healthy family structure or sense of community are not yet available.

Considering these destructive, traumatic family dynamics, the inability to forge necessary new ones ultimately stunts selfhood. In her article “House Mothers and Haunted Daughters:

Shirley Jackson and the Female Gothic,” Roberta Rubenstein explores this complex relationship between mother and child. Rubenstein acknowledges the dependency on parental figures for healthy childhood development, despite the child yearning for autonomy, contending that “the tensions between ‘mother/self’ and between ‘home/lost’ connote a young child’s ambivalent desires and fears: both to remain merged with the mother...and to separate from her” (309). Without a motherly presence, “the mother’s absence becomes a haunting presence that bears directly on the daughter’s difficult struggle to achieve selfhood as well as to express her unacknowledged rage or her sense of precariousness in the world” (311). Rubenstein’s article demonstrates the danger of lacking an efficient family structure: without a mother, and by extension any parent in general, an independent self cannot develop. The child remains “lost” without a “home,” an individual without an identity. Eleanor, trapped between wanting complete severance from her mother but unable to evade her haunting presence, finds herself stuck just outside the gate, frustratingly close to independence but without an accompanying strong selfhood, free from abuse yet plagued by trauma, and finally owning her own agency yet gripped by a dependency on community.

Eleanor’s mother remains hauntingly active in her daughter’s life long after dying, and long after Eleanor says good riddance. The novel makes apparent Eleanor’s trauma early on, evidenced by her inability to “remember ever being happy in her adult life; her years with her mother had been built up devotedly around small guilts and small reproaches, constant weariness, and unending despair” (3). Late in the story, right before her untimely demise, Eleanor confesses “‘it was my fault my mother died,’ [she] said. ‘She knocked on the wall and called me and called me and I never woke up. I ought to have brought her the medicine; I always did before. But this time she called me and I never woke up’” (156). Curiously, Eleanor’s word choice of “woke” rather than “got” suggests she merely was unconscious during the knocking, but her guilty, confessional awareness indicates otherwise: she simply did not get up to go save her mother. Eleanor evokes Rubenstein’s “home/lost” conflict in that this act functions as Eleanor’s first true act of autonomy. No longer an obedient servant to her mother, Eleanor defies the woman who abused her for years and finally “leaves the home.” Her resultant guilt, as well as the relationship she leaves behind, ultimately traumatizes Eleanor. Awakened by a mysterious knocking, Eleanor reminds herself that “it is only a noise...it is a noise down the hall, far down at the end, near the nursery door, and terribly cold, not my mother knocking on the wall” (94). Knocking occurs in other moments of the novel, and while the other house guests notice the noise, Eleanor’s history suggests her trauma and guilt have followed her, forcing her to reenact the traumatic event interminably. Eleanor remains stuck

outside the gate, unable to pass through and escape her trauma or prevent it from following her.

The dependency on kinship, despite stunted, weak independency, remains and is seemingly unavoidable. Tricia Lootens, in her article “‘Whose Hand Was I Holding?’ Familial and Sexual Politics in Shirley Jackson’s *The Haunting of Hill House*,” explores the various drafts of the novel and how each speak to the fantasy of harmonious domesticity. Lootens contends that by the final draft, Jackson had created “a house that entraps its inhabitants with fantasies of domestic bliss even as it forces them to recognize such fantasies as delusions” (172). This quote perhaps highlights the tragedy of family and selfhood best: humanity inextricably depends on kinship, regardless of the dangers it poses on the individual. Eleanor’s self-growth continues being stunted by both the lingering presence of her mother and the absence thereof. Without efficacious alternatives, her selfhood remains lost without a home, present but unformed—perhaps even deformed.

The novel offers no solutions, suggesting that a future cannot be forged without a reconciliation to the past; a gate to escape familial trauma exists somewhere, but the past must be bridged with the present to reach it. Eleanor faces the most harm from this lack of reconciliation, barring her from any chance of post-traumatic growth. Lootens continues analyzing the character in her article by exploring Eleanor’s sexuality and trauma. She suggests that Eleanor’s strained relationship with Theodora, and her reactions in response, suggest a longing both for a loving sister and romantic partner, both of which she has been denied. Lootens contends that Eleanor’s reactions “crystallize...her hopeless attempt to assert a new sexuality and sense of self without questioning the family structure and morality that have governed her life before Hill House” (182). Eleanor’s mistake lies not in striving for reconstructed selfhood but in ignoring the trauma she attempted to leave behind. Her character thus functions as a warning, embodying the concept of haunting best: abandoning trauma will not, cannot, eliminate it. Rather, the specters of our pasts float ever present around us until we properly give them burials and the open gates of trauma can finally be closed. Hill House, analogous to trauma, is no exception. Just as Ruth Franklin writes in her biography of Jackson entitled *Shirley Jackson: A Rather Haunted Life*, “Like an abusive relationship—or an ineluctably entangled marriage of nearly twenty years— [Hill House] is both impossible to remain in and impossible to escape” (416). Toxic family structures are inextricably connected to trauma, as this paper and *The Haunting of Hill House* have demonstrated. Exploring the ways in which the novel addresses both themes thus illuminates the complexity of the novel in ways previous scholarship has neglected.

The above discussion regarding family structures has a direct connection to the field of trauma study, given the negative impact they have on children—particularly young women. *The*

Haunting of Hill House fails to provide any explicit explanation for Eleanor's trauma, but the answer lies within the novel's exploration and criticism of family structures. As mentioned earlier, women were torn between a desire for family and a need for autonomy following the disruption World War II had on the nuclear family model. As Wyatt Bonikowski argues in his essay "'Only one antagonist': the demon lover and the feminine experience in the work of Shirley Jackson," women were forced "either to conform to a passive position within rigidly defined gender roles or be abjected into a permanent state of anxiety, insecurity, and even madness" after the war. In other words, women were traumatized by the tension between society's expectations and personal fulfillment. Moreover, women often remained silent about this tension lest they risk social ostracization, a struggle Betty Friedan addresses in her famous book *The Feminine Mystique*. Friedan asserts, "[I]f a woman had a problem in the 1950's and 1960's, she knew that something must be wrong with her marriage, or with herself. Other women were satisfied with their lives, she thought.... She was so ashamed to admit her dissatisfaction that she never knew how many other women shared it." Silence, therefore, was intertwined with trauma, much like the "silence [that] lay steadily against the wood and stone of Hill House" (Jackson 1). Eleanor's, and by extension the novel's, silence on this matter indicates her trauma originates from this tension caused by traditional family structures. The Netflix show of the same name (a reimagination of Jackson's novel rather than a faithful adaptation) literalizes the ways in which this tension inflicted trauma in the episode "Steven Sees a Ghost" when Steven Crain, a character who borrows his name from the aforementioned Hugh Crain, argues that "a ghost can be a lot of things. A memory, a daydream, a secret. Grief, anger, guilt. But, in my experience, most times they're just what we want to see. Most times, a ghost is a wish" (00:41:53). The term "ghost" may function as a substitute for "trauma," or the way certain events, emotions, and desires linger with us long after they are gone. Eleanor indeed has a wish that has traumatized her and continues haunting her: a wish for individualism that is prevented by a wish for family and community. If Eleanor finds herself inside the gate, inside the home and family, she finds herself outside of individualism. If she embraces autonomy, she finds herself outside of the home, of family. No matter where this tension pulls her, Eleanor remains tragically outside the gate. How, then, can children, especially young women, survive the suffocation of family models? As Jackson's novel demonstrates, middle-class, white women in the late 1950s were contemplating individualism in ways previously not done.

If the family unit cannot be abolished, and if alternative structures had yet to be imagined, reading *The Haunting of Hill House* through the lens of trauma theory more broadly illuminates how the self can be salvaged. In her article "Healing and Post Traumatic Growth," Suzanne

LaLonde leads “an exploration of the possibilities and limitations of the literary arts and imagination to promote healthy post-traumatic growth” (197). Synthesizing decades of research from dozens of healthcare professionals, LaLonde refers to the psychiatrist Judith Herman’s three-step process for PTG and then explores the ways in which they connect to literature. Herman’s process first involves establishing a sense of safety for trauma survivors, which “entails attention to and control of the body” (197). The second step of PTG involves the survivor using their “own intellect and emotional resources to comprehend the events of the traumatic event. During this stage of remembrance and mourning, the survivor tells her story” (198). The reconstructed story, however abstract, must be created “in a factual way” (199). As this paper will later discuss, Eleanor indeed engages in reconstruction but with a largely dishonest approach. PTG culminates with the third step, “which is that of restoring connection” (201). This essay, and by extension *The Haunting of Hill House*, is concerned primarily with this idea of connection and the lack thereof. LaLonde’s article serves as a particularly useful framework in which to analyze Eleanor by revealing her failures within this process and demonstrating how her death could have been prevented.

Superficially, Eleanor appears to engage with each of these three steps. Why, then, does she seem to only spiral further into dissociation? Throughout the novel, Eleanor remains attentive and in tune with her body and others, often focusing on dirtiness—a Freudian desire to distance herself as far as possible from her sickly, “dirty” mother. In one of her many scenes with Theodora, Eleanor subjects herself to the blazon trope:

Eleanor found herself unexpectedly admiring her own feet. Theodora dreamed over the fire just beyond the tips of her toes, and Eleanor thought with deep satisfaction that her feet were handsome in their red shoes; what a complete and separate thing I am, she thought, going from my red shoes to the top of my head, individually an I, possessed of attributes belonging only to me. I have red shoes, she thought—that goes with being Eleanor; I dislike lobster and sleep on my left side and crack my knuckles when I am nervous and save buttons. I am holding a brandy glass which is mine because I am here and I am using it and I have a place in this room. I have red shoes and tomorrow I will wake up and I will still be here. (60)

While this scene suggests an assertion of self, an attention to the body, it rather reveals a profound doubt in Eleanor’s selfhood. Her attention to her body strives not towards security but to reassure Eleanor that there is indeed a self that can be made safe. Eleanor, in an attempt to construct a healthy image of herself, deconstructs her various elements, ultimately cementing a self that is fragmented, disjointed, and broken.

Despite unsuccessfully engaging with the first step of PTG, Eleanor proceeds to the second to reconstruct her past. She professes some honesty, including her mother's death and overall dissatisfaction, but ultimately avoids true confrontation with her past. Eleanor tells Theo, "I have a little place of my own.... An apartment, like yours, only I live alone. Smaller than yours, I'm sure.... I had to look for weeks before I found my little stone lions on each corner of the mantel'" (64). Eleanor, obviously evoking the alluring home she found during her commute to Hill House, completely lies about her life she left behind, defying LaLonde's emphasis on reconstructing the story "in a factual way." Her reconstruction demonstrates avoidance, rather than ownership, of her traumatic past. Moreover, Eleanor derives the description of her imagined apartment from homes she had seen beforehand and from Theo's description of her apartment, revealing her lack of creativity. While one may conclude Eleanor simply lacks vision, her unoriginality rather suggests an inability to think independently, ultimately emphasizing her total lack of individualism.

The inability to productively approach the first two steps of PTG ultimately bars Eleanor from reaching the point survivors depend upon the most: reconnection. Lootens, in analyzing a scene in which Eleanor, thinking she was holding Theo's hand, awakens to realize she never was, argues that "the horror behind Eleanor's scream is not that she was alone in the dark, but that she believed herself to have someone there" (179). Eleanor's inability to find connection demonstrates the linear nature of the PTG process. For reconnection, one must reconstruct one's trauma, and to achieve that, one must have the security necessary to return to the traumatic event in the first place. As Lootens suggests, perhaps the true horror of *The Haunting of Hill House* lies not with ghostly apparitions or even traumatizing events themselves, but with finding oneself truly alone amongst family, friends, and colleagues—communities a gate of trauma prevents one from truly entering. Thus, without successful PTG and reintegration into a healthy family unit or alternative community, the novel warns of the destruction that will result. As Eleanor attempts to escape the house, her trauma lingers, leading to her ambivalent suicide: "I am really doing it, I am doing this all by myself, now, at last; this is me, I am really really really doing it by myself. In the unending, crashing second before the car hurled into the trees, she thought clearly, Why am I doing this?" (182). Eleanor's ambiguity about what precisely "it" is suggests she herself does not know and is simply carrying out the demands of external agents: Dr. Montague forcing her to leave and Hill House (or her trauma) refusing to allow that. Quite simply, Eleanor is doing what she is told, torn between wanting to escape the trauma that governs her life and being wholly incapable of doing so. Thus, Eleanor cannot escape Hill House but also cannot remain alive within it; her suicide was ultimately not of her own choosing. Moreover, the shift from a first person perspective to

an omniscient third person one removes any agency Eleanor may have had, emphasizing her lack of individualism and autonomy. Her final moments evoke a story from her childhood where mysterious falling rocks crashed into her home, suggesting the trauma endured during childhood will invade selfhood, or homes, and carry affected individuals to death unless properly put to rest. Until then, the specter stays.

Shirley Jackson's novel leaves the reader with a sense of unease and a lack of closure. The novel ends abruptly after Eleanor's death, suggesting the story was not, in fact, ever about the haunting of Hill House but rather of Eleanor Vance. *The Haunting of Hill House* relentlessly critiques the existing and fluctuating familial structures of Jackson's times, highlighting the damage dominating cultural attitudes towards parenting inflicted on children. While the novel acknowledges the need for community, it does not shy away from lambasting the rejection of selfhood by the collective group. Reading the novel through the lens of trauma theory thus illuminates the subtle nuances of PTG and forewarns the damage neglected familial trauma creates.

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