

## The Twisted Mirror in The Green Room: Abjection in Shirley Jackson's *The Haunting of Hill House*

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### I

The Female Gothic genre has been the target of many acclaimed critics of British and American Gothic fiction in the past few decades. The upsurge of interest in the Female Gothic has resulted in a diversity of views and approaches and has relocated this neglected genre in the center of academic discussion. Female authors such as Anne Radcliffe and Mary Shelley popularized the Gothic genre in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century. It helped women contextualize their anxiety of domesticity and sexuality that later snowballed into a “twisted” expression of finding female identity in the patriarchy, gender dysphoria, the topic of postpartum depression and many other issues that women still face to this day. Female gothic stories dwell into how the female experience is not just limited to the ability of reproduction but also to the gender-based oppression of women; the heroines of such stories are often tasked to face their mothers whose internalized misogyny creates a monster. The female gothic also differs from its male counterpart in that the narration is always voiced from a female point of view. Other than female-centric motifs, the Female Gothic differs in the paranormal and supernatural theme as well in which the threatening, unexplainable horror is deemed explainable. It can be argued that the most outstanding author of the last century within the genre was Shirley Jackson. She is probably the most significant author of the American Female Gothic fiction, and one of her most famous novels, *The Haunting of Hill House* (1959), is the focus of this paper.

The novel merits academic inquiry, not merely because of its graceful treatment of heavy topics such as gender roles, psychological aspects of contemporary society, dysfunctional families, and the role of mother-daughter relationships in everyday life, but also because of its artistic capacity to keep readers intrigued and terrified to this day. Her literary accomplishments, especially in the horror genre, are still considered to be one of the greatest that was produced in the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century and her works enjoyed a revival and have been the target of interest ever since, *The Haunting of Hill House* was adapted on screen in 1999 and in 2018 when Netflix launched a series adaptation.

## II

The novel follows a group of individuals who enter the allegedly haunted Hill House through the invitation of Dr. Montague, an anthropology professor, to find evidence for the existence of some paranormal phenomena. The omnipresent narrator tells the story through the point of view of Eleanor Vance, a young woman whose goal of the journey to Hill House is to find her place in the world and belong to a group of people whom she can consider a family. Eleanor faces the vacuity of her own life and is struggling to reestablish her own identity, which was suppressed by the emotional tyranny of her mother. Her relationship with her mother casts a shadow on Eleanor throughout the story even after the death of her mother because it was a co-dependent relationship between a narcissistic mother and a childish, naïve, young woman.

Eleanor's attempts to break from this abusive relationship are slowly sabotaged by Hill House which mirrors this relationship while creating an environment where Eleanor is gaslighted, confused and vulnerable which is the direct opposite of what she envisioned the house to be – to be the place where she finds personal freedom and gets comfortable with herself. The house does not offer safety and a home, it is the enemy that entraps women like Eleanor and holds them inside its walls for all eternity.

Julie Ann Baker notes the following, "Eleanor's mother, and by extension Hill House, have infiltrated Eleanor's own psyche and despite her best attempts to escape—whether that be through stories or through seeking out a relationship with Theodora—Eleanor will never be freed from life as she knows it" (35). Upon reading the novel, Julia Kristeva's theory of the abject can be clearly applied to analyze it. Kristeva is a prominent twentieth-century psychoanalyst and literary critic and in *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection* (1982), she theorizes that the abject is a factor in one's identity formation and a part of one's subjectivity. The abject is everything that is repulsive and poses a threat to our identity; it is meant to create borders between self and the other.

Kristeva also argues that all mothers are abject since without the symbolic separation of infant and mother, identity formation cannot start. She writes extensively about the role of the mother in early developmental stages which is also present in the novel. Kristeva believes that this phenomenon is perfectly presented in literature and the present study aims to explore how Shirley Jackson's *The Haunting of Hill House* is a piece of literature where the theory of the abject can be applied to it. The analysis foregrounds anxiety over the limitations and excesses of the female protagonist's subject construction not just because of the troubled mother-daughter relationship but also because of the deeply rooted confinement of gender roles and identity in

contemporary society. The focus of this paper is to analyze the relationship between Eleanor and Theodora and how the abjection of the self is manifested in the novel through their interactions.

Eleanor's abjection of herself implies her fear of maturing into a grown woman with sexual desires and accepting her role in society that is either becoming a wife/mother or becoming an outcast. This is clearly illustrated by her relation to the character of Theodora who possesses the femininity, sexual liberation and confidence that simultaneously attracts and repulses Eleanor. Theodora is described as an easy-going, bohemian, independent, beautiful, and highly feminine character. She is invited to Hill House by Dr. Montague because of her alleged clairvoyant powers. For her, Hill House is considered a vacation from her roommate whom she had a fight with prior to the journey. The roommate is unnamed and does not have a specified gender but is suggested that the person is another woman whom Theodora possibly shared a romantic or sexual relationship with, as presented in the following description about Theodora:

Things were said on both sides which only time could eradicate; Theodora had deliberately and heartlessly smashed the lovely little figurine her friend had carved of her, and her friend had cruelly ripped to shreds the volume of Alfred de Musset<sup>11</sup> which had been a birthday present from Theodora, taking particular pains with the page which bore Theodora's loving, teasing inscription. (Jackson 7)

Eleanor is drawn to her from the moment they meet and are inseparable throughout the story. It is clear from the beginning that their relationship is much deeper than with the other characters, it may seem like a sisterly bond, but a few critics argue, such as Graley Herren in his "Shades of Shakespeare in the Queering of Hill House" (2020), and Brittany Roberts in her "Helping Eleanor Come Home: A Reassessment of Shirley Jackson's *The Haunting of Hill House*" (2017), that it is a forbidden romantic and sexual relationship. As mentioned before, Eleanor is yet to develop an independent identity which is partly indicated by the fact that she has not come to terms with her own feminine side, on the contrary, she deliberately represses it. Theodora is the tainted mirror for Eleanor in this sense because Theo's flirty nature and open-minded approach to her is what makes Eleanor realize that she also possesses a feminine side.

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1 Alfred du Musset was a French writer who was rumored to have published *Gamiani, or Two Nights of Excess* (1833), a lesbian erotic novel in which the heroine was modelled after his lover, Amandine Aurore Lucile Dupin, whose pen name is also a masculine one (George Sand), just like Theodora's.

Theodora is also to be understood as the Gothic Double, who is the long-lost other half of Eleanor's identity. In one of the early drafts of the novel Jackson included the following passage: "Theo against Nell, of course: to each of us – if we are fortunate – is given one other person, the true doppelganger, the other half of the self, and the union here is sometimes star-crossed, sometimes illicit, always deadly; it is the moment of perception when the victim sees his murderer, the brother discovers his sister, beauty destroys [embraces] the beast" (qtd. in Lootens 163).

Theodora is the fragment of Eleanor's identity that focuses on femininity and womanhood, and she is also the self that Eleanor has never been allowed to become. Theo is determined to help Eleanor embrace this part of herself, but Eleanor rejects this sort of femininity. Eleanor's only form of connection to womanhood was through her mother whose views on femininity were based on conservative and Puritan ideology. Eleanor was not allowed to express or explore her feminine side because her mother denied all sorts of attempts. She was forbidden to wear colorful – especially bright – clothing, it is implied that she was only allowed to appear natural and express her identity in the least eye-catching way. Therefore, Theodora regards Eleanor as "woman of no color" (127) since she is not practicing her womanly powers as Theodora thinks she should: "Nail polish and perfume and bath salts,' Theodora said, as one telling the cities of the Nile. 'Mascara. You don't think half enough of such things, Eleanor'" (127).

Theodora, on the other hand, is the exact opposite; she wears brightly colored clothes and embraces every form of being a woman. Andromachi Kokkinou argues that "[i]n fact, Theodora and Eleanor exemplify the conflicting images of the era about femininity. Theodora has disaffiliated herself from her family, does not use her last name anymore and signs her artworks with "Theo," a gender ambiguous version of her first name. She laughs at Eleanor's question whether she is married and lives with her companion" (20). However, due to her upbringing, Eleanor is repulsed by Theodora's femininity as it can be seen in the following quote: "Shocked, Eleanor sat up and looked; her feet were *dirty*, and her nails were painted bright red. 'It's *horrible*,' she said to Theodora, 'it's *wicked*,' wanting to cry" (127).

Their differences in femininity are also presented through their alleged psychic abilities – it is only the two of them to possess such powers – demonstrated in Theodora's clairvoyancy and Eleanor's telekinesis. Both these powers are deeply connected to emotions, clairvoyancy is sensitivity to other people's emotions and telekinesis is the manifestation of different emotions. In the subtext of the novel, it is implied that Theodora understands Eleanor's anxiety over her past and loneliness but for her own selfish reasons, she refuses to engage with Eleanor more

than she is supposed to. Due to this, their relationship is a turmoil of yearning for each other's company and an utter denial of the other.

Theodora's queerness is also a key element of her character since she is presented as a potential lover for Eleanor. Theodora's sexuality is so much foregrounded that in almost all the adaptations of *The Haunting of Hill House*, she is presented as a queer woman. She is not openly recognized as a love interest, but the subtext clearly presents a queer coded character. Theodora lives alone with a roommate who is possibly a woman, and she decides to leave for Hill House after a fight or a "lover's quarrel" as quoted above. She is an artist who also signs paintings with a masculine version of her name. She playfully flirts with Eleanor and since Eleanor has never experienced romantic love before - not even by a man, let alone a woman -, her repressed sexual desires are awakened.

As mentioned before, Eleanor's upbringing was based on religious beliefs that did not allow women to explore their sexual desires and during the 1950s, scientific theories entertained the idea of lesbianism as an extension of female friendships, but it was expected to be outgrown and later develop into heterosexuality. Quoting Laura De La Parra Fernández from her MA thesis of "Blowing Up The Nuclear Family: Shirley Jackson's Queer Girls In Postwar US Culture" (2020): "As [Crista] DeLuzio indicates [in *Female Adolescence in American Scientific Thought, 1830-1930* (2007), early twentieth-century scientific theories about normative sexuality claimed that a healthy sexuality in adolescent females included a "homosexual" period that girls would grow out of when heterosexuality was established (172)" (38).

Eleanor's repressed sexuality is represented in the story through some of the paranormal events. The two women spend an afternoon together where they care for each other; Theodora paints Eleanor's toenails with a bright red – which is understood as the color of desire and passion – nail polish to which Eleanor's reaction is fear and disgust. Shortly after this event, Theodora walks up to her room being covered in blood which is explained by Tricia Lootens in the following way: "The menstrual imagery seems unmistakable here: Hill House echoes and amplifies Eleanor's hatred of "dirty" female bodies, including her own. Theodora's bright clothes are trampled and soaked in blood. Even more significantly, she herself is bloodied — literally rendered a scarlet woman', as though Hill House has passed judgment on Theodora's bright clothing" (96).

The menses imagery collides with Kristeva's theory on the abject where she argues that the abject is most notable when it regards food or textures or bodily functions, which in this case is menstruation blood. Eleanor's visible disgust towards menstruation is a clear abjection against femininity and womanhood. In addition, the comparing

of proper bodies and dirty bodies — the subject and the abject —, figuratively and literally are a common focus in horror. In *Powers of Horror*, Kristeva explains that:

Along with sight-clouding dizziness, nausea makes me balk at that milk cream, separates me from the mother and father who proffer it. “I” want none of that element, sign of their desire; “I” do not want to listen, “I” do not assimilate it, “I” expel it. But since the food is not an “other” for “me,” who am only in their desire, I expel myself, I spit myself out, I abject myself within the same motion through which “I” claim to establish myself. (3)

Jackson is also known to have borrowed elements in the story from Shakespeare – “Journey’s end in lovers meeting” which is a quote from his *Twelfth Night* comedy that explores aspects of gender identity and homosexuality. Eleanor ultimately chooses Theodora as a lover, but Theo gently rejects her advances which later contributes to Eleanor’s downfall: “I never had anyone to care about,’ Eleanor said, wondering where she had heard someone say something like this before. ‘I want to be someplace where I belong.’ ‘I am not in the habit of taking home stray cats,’ Theodora said lightly” (229). Theodora is the Gothic Double of Eleanor, and her idealized self.

The Gothic Double is a part of the uncanny – the return of the repressed, something which was familiar returns in an unfamiliar way. Ilana Shiloh in *The Double, the Labyrinth and the Locked Room* (2011) states that “[t]he term ‘double’ primarily evokes a duplicated self, the existence of two individuals similar to the point of identity. Identity is an ambiguous concept, which may denote either a state of being the same as someone or something, or a state of being oneself or one thing, and another. Identity thus conflates the notion of sameness and of difference” (27). The purpose of doubling in the Gothic genre is also to highlight moral transgression. Brian DeMars remarks that “[t]he invocation of uncanny doubling signifies that the character or situation has gone awry somehow, or that a familiar psychological or social convention is no longer functioning properly, because a set of doubles are able to simultaneously cohabitate a space that should only accommodate one individual” (10).

During their first time meeting each other, Theo echoes Eleanor’s thoughts: “It’s the home I’ve always dreamed of,’ Theodora said. ‘A little hideaway where I can be alone with my thoughts. Particularly if my thoughts happened to be about murder or suicide or’” (45). Their undeniable similarity is only heightened after Theodora’s room found to be covered in blood when Theodora must wear Eleanor’s clothes and she jokingly refers to herself as Eleanor: “I am Eleanor,’ Theo said,

‘because I am wearing blue. I love my love with an E because she is ethereal. Her name is Eleanor, and she lives in expectation’” (245).

This only reinforces Eleanor’s abjection towards herself since she can now see herself in Theodora like she is looking into a mirror. “Theodora was wearing Eleanor’s red sweater” (262), the same red sweater in which Eleanor arrived at Hill House. On the one hand, Theodora possesses every trait that Eleanor wishes she would; she is independent, she has embraced her femininity, she is socially poised, and she is confident in her identity. Eleanor, upon realizing that Theodora plays her self-idealized version and how she could never “play” herself as such, descends into madness. She completely gives up on becoming her true-self, she reverts into a child-like woman, and she embraces Hill House; the house that welcomes her as a monstrous mother and the house that will hold her in a warm tomb.

### III

To conclude, Eleanor’s attempts at identity formation, more importantly, her struggles to accept the societal expectations of her gender can be examined through the lens of the abject. Eleanor’s inability to accept her own sexual desires and femininity, explored through Theodora and their various interactions, resulted in rejecting herself. The nature of the abject is to simultaneously attract and repulse the subject which has been proven to be true in the case of Eleanor as well as she desired to be a confident woman, yet she was repulsed by the female body and the female experience. Her troubled relationship with her mother reflected in her relationship with Theodora as well in which we can see how her view of femininity and womanhood was shaped by the mother and this caused conflict within Eleanor because she admired Theodora and her femininity but at the same time, she has felt repulsed every time Theodora has expressed her womanhood. Hill House becoming a monstrous mother for Eleanor also falls in line with the abject and the literary representation of it; the relationship of the House and Eleanor is the literary representation of how the failure of separation of the self and the other affects the subject. Shirley Jackson is undoubtedly a unique writer who offers complex stories and characters that are timeless. The story of “The Haunting of Hill House” does not differ from the previous statement, however, the theory of the abject is just one approach to analyze it. Hopefully, the interest in her works continues to grow and enriches both the female gothic genre and academic circles as well.

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