

## Journeys End in Loneliness

Victoria Bloodworth

17 March 2020

Shirley Jackson's "The Haunting of Hill House" acts as a cautionary depicting emotionally unstable women as destructive and impulsive. Eleanor, the main character, represents the archetype of the fragile female; this literary figure tends to appear naïve, physically and mentally sensitive, and helpless. Eleanor and Mrs. Montague, another one of the inhabitants of Hill House, seem like children, acting on emotional whims and superstition. The men of the novel, on the other hand, act on scientific curiosity and indifference. They even belittle the emotional outbursts of the women. The characterization perpetuates the idea that women who do not act out emotionally are healthy, reliable women. Theodora, the woman who keeps her emotions under control, lives at the end of the novel, while Eleanor, the emotional, disturbed woman, commits suicide by running her car into a tree. These established stereotypes enforce misconceptions about women's mental health and autonomy and result in doctors performing harmful procedures on them.

Eleanor is characterized as a weak, fearful woman who is overwhelmed by her own emotions. She does not experience any character growth throughout the novel. This shows that the author did not intend for her to overcome her situation through emotional maturity. Her options were limited to either acting on her emotions or to stay in place. Eleanor's story begins with her arguing with her brother-in-law over the car she helped pay for. This represents Eleanor's dependence and lack of autonomy because even though she partially owns the car, she doesn't show evidence of ownership of the vehicle. She tells him, "'Carrie [her sister] drives it all the time, and I never even take it out of the garage'" (Jackson 6). Eleanor doesn't appear to

have a job, an active social life, or any particular interaction with society outside of her home. This is not due to wanting to be apart from society. Eleanor is physically sensitive and socially inept, leading to her taking on the archetype of the fragile female. Because Eleanor has these traits, she is perceived as inadequate to interact with those outside of her house and make a position for herself in society. Physical and social weakness can make a woman seem like a child that needs protection rather than a person learning how to be self-reliant and mature. Eleanor's decision to go to Hill House is hindered by opposition from both her brother-in-law and her sister. Carrie and her husband both tell Eleanor that she is not allowed to use the car, treating her as a young child rather than an adult woman. Carrie even addresses her relationship with her sister as such, telling Eleanor, "I'd never forgive myself, Eleanor, if I lent you the car and something happened. How do we know we can trust this doctor fellow? You're still a young woman, after all, and the car is worth a good deal of money'" (Jackson 7). Carrie and her husband place themselves as rational, adult-like characters over Eleanor. This establishes Eleanor as a weak character with no independence.

Eleanor's character is further juxtaposed by the other characters to emphasize her ineptitude and tendency to react impulsively and irrationally. Eleanor steals the car to run away from home. She is motivated by an adventure to shake her from the confines of her old life. She is naïve, unaware of how the "real world" works and apathetic to what could happen to her. Her sister makes vague allusions about the possibility of Dr. Montague using women for "experiments", refraining from saying directly what the experiments are. Eleanor doesn't show concern. Eleanor's character isn't motivated by rational thought, but by the desperation of removing herself from her current situation. She is a heroine living in a dark fantasy, representing women giving in to emotional impulsiveness.

The most emphasized feature of the characters living at Hill House is how their gender relates to their roles as they live in Hill House together. Dr. Montague, the host of the Hill House visit, is a man of science and fact. He works to discover evidence of supernatural manifestations in Hill House and disregards the emotional and psychological consequences of the incidents. “Fear, the doctor said, ‘is the relinquishment of logic, the *willing* relinquishing of reasonable patterns. We yield to it or we fight it, but we cannot meet it halfway” (Jackson 117). The doctor has a clinical, unaffected response to every spiritual manifestation. His sole motivation is to work on his book. His counterpart is Mrs. Montague, a superstitious woman prone to dramatic annoyance anytime she feels offended. Mrs. Montague can even act as comic relief because she is proud of her planchette, a tool to commune with spirits. Lenemaja Friedman, author of “Shirley Jackson”, writes: “The annoyance that Mrs. Montague [and Arthur] complain of may have been the work of the spirits, who wish not to commune with but to heckle them” (131). Mrs. Montague believes entirely that spirits are like children and simply need motherly love to ease their restless spirits. She tells the doctor, “I am here to *help* these unfortunate beings—I am here to extend the hand of heartfelt fondness, and let them know that there are still still *some* who remember who will listen and weep for them; their loneliness is over...” (Jackson 145). Yet, she never has any spiritual manifestations happen to her. Like Eleanor, she comes off as naïve and silly, not being able to distinguish her delusions from reality. She mistakes Eleanor knocking on her door and thinks it’s a ghost. She responds by calling out to it to return by assuring the “spirit” that she is their friend. This is seen as comical because she is blind to the malevolence of the spirits and the disinterest they have in her.

While superstition is often represented as a woman’s behavior, the way it is presented in “The Haunting of Hill House” was meant to emphasize silliness. Novels sometimes show that

superstition comes from connection to a culture or belief deeply central to the woman. In “The Kitchen God’s Wife” by Amy Tan, a Chinese mother living in America follows spiritualistic practices and implements the use of gods and altars in everyday life. She shows an earnest connection to her Chinese heritage. She’s genuine about keeping up the customs even though her Christian husband disapproves of them. He is vocal about it when he tells his daughter “that the only ghost was the Holy Ghost, and He would never try to scare [her]” (Tan 41). Superstition is shown more as a backdrop to cultural identity and, to an extent, gender identity, making their daughter have to struggle to identify with one or the other. Gender is performed differently in both of those identities, giving the mother’s respect for spirits and gods more depth.

This same struggle also shows up in a novel much earlier than “The Haunting of Hill House”. Victor Hugo uses Esmeralda from “The Hunchback of Notre Dame” as a female archetype of the dark, mysterious woman that’s objectified by every man she comes into contact with. Her spiritual fervor differs from Claude Frollo’s in that his is more education based; Esmeralda’s belief only manifests in her carrying around her baby shoe and maintaining her chastity because she believes it will reunite her with her mother. She is perceived as a witch, accused of magic simply on impression and not on any witnessed event, and she is later sentenced to hanging for it. She is, spiritually, opposite of the learned man.

This doesn’t translate the same way in “The Haunting of Hill House” because the superstition that surrounds the woman is connected to her maternal instincts, furthering the degradation of how women are perceived. Mrs. Montague uses something tied to the feminine persona as her power. Childcare and birthing are a part of women’s health, as women experience postpartum depression and other anxieties in relation to their traditional role in a household. Angela Hague in “‘Anatomy of Our Times’: Reassessing Shirley Jackson” writes, “Betty

Freidan...articulated the loneliness, boredom, and psychic emptiness of women whose roles were strictly limited to those of wife and mother. Freidan most frequently used the word 'emptiness' to characterize the psychological condition of the women she studied, arguing the lack of a 'private image' or internalized sense of self-created the identity crisis she documented among the women she interviewed, women who, lacking a 'hard core of self', suffered the 'bored, diffuse feeling of purposelessness, non-existence, non-involvement with the word'..." (75). Mrs. Montague ties her power as a woman purely to her maternal instincts, almost parodying women's identity. Where women have genuine mental health concerns because of their gender, Mrs. Montague is a harmful representation of a woman who wants to utilize her feminine qualities in vain because of her ignorance.

Theodora is the docile woman who keeps her emotions in check. She earns the men's respect and gets to return home at the end of the novel. When Eleanor and Theodora discover what they think is blood dripping on Theodora's walls and on her clothes, both of them are shocked and terrified by it. Eleanor describes Theodora's reaction by thinking, "Theodora was making very little of a fuss, actually. One of these times, she thought, one of us is going to put her head back and really howl, and I hope it won't be me, because I'm trying to guard against it..." (Jackson 113). Theodora is characterized by her ability to keep her emotions under control. When Eleanor is struggling to keep her emotions and mentality under control, Theodora joins in with Luke and the doctor in talking down to her. Like Carrie, they see Eleanor's desires and impulses as child-like and unreasonable, making light of her feelings. When Eleanor voices her fears and thoughts, they each respond by teasing her.

"The doctor laughed. 'Stop trying to be the center of attention.'

"'Vanity,' Luke said serenely.

“‘Have to be in the limelight,’ Theodora said, and they smiled fondly, all looking at Eleanor.” (Jackson 119).

They do not embrace or give over to the dark parts of their fears and impulses, setting them apart from Eleanor. They conform to their part of society and enforce those rules, leaving Eleanor as an outlier.

The resolution of Eleanor’s story ends with the nightmare at the end of the dark fantasy: violence. Eleanor has become so restless and erratic, putting herself and Luke in harm’s way, that the group decides she must go home. This devastates Eleanor so much she runs her car into a tree in order to never leave Hill House. This is an example of the fear of women acting out and needing to be “fixed”. From the book “American Lobotomy: A Rhetoric History”, author Jenell Johnson writes, “mental illness has become the quintessential ‘female malady’ reflected both in representations of madness as feminine as well as women’s disproportional rates of psychiatric diagnosis” (50). Women were considered unconventional if they acted out in any way, be it overactive sex drive, substance abuse, unsatisfied marriage, aggression, lesbianism, and domestic negligence. The remedy for these behaviors was found in either lobotomy, where an incision is made in the frontal lobe of the brain, or clitoridectomies, where a cut would be made in the female genitalia. The procedure is not directly reference in the novel, but Carrie alludes to “procedures done to women” early in the novel. In the 1950’s, doctors would perform lobotomies on women if the women had some unconventional behavior concern. According to Johnson, “a 1951 study of the nation’s hospitals found that nearly 60% of patients subjected to lobotomy were women” (50). The sensitivity Carrie shows to the procedure is a subtle warning to women who, like Eleanor, want to diverge from the heteronormative, docile, domestic life that was expected of women. The results of these lobotomies were harmful to women, hindering their

ability to do simple tasks. Johnson's book reports that a positive result, according to Walter Freeman, a lobotomy physician, could be "a lack of attention to household duties" and "greater freedom from tension in the household...things that would have made a finicky housekeepers uncomfortable before the advent of mental trouble" (54). A loss of cognitive skills would result in the ability to household chores and speaking skills being impaired.

The anxiety of living this way is shown in "The Haunting of Hill House" when Eleanor says, "Look. There's only one of me, and it's all I've got. I *hate* seeing myself dissolve and slip and separate so that I'm living in one half, my mind, and I see the other half of me helpless and frantic and driven and I can't stop it, but I know I'm not really going to be hurt and yet time is so long and even a second goes on and on and I could stand any of it if I could only surrender—" (Jackson 118). A woman losing the ability to make decisions and stand to be in her own mind is compromised because the goal is to suppress women to societal norms. This "solution" to women's unconventional behavior leads to destroying their ability to be completely active in their own lives.

Eleanor acts as a representation of what women were meant to represent and a warning of what would happen if they stepped out of line. Eleanor is given over to the darkness of her own mind and commits suicide, showing women as the unstable and reckless female that needs to be managed. Hague explains Jackson's characters as, "lacking a core of identity forces them to seek meaning and direction in the world outside themselves, but their inability to relate to and communicate with others and their fears of unfamiliar environments create panic and paranoia that descend upon them when they venture beyond the dubious safety of their domestic environment" (76). Women were presented as dependent and fragile, needing to conform to conventions. Because of this, there are misconceptions about women's mental health and

behaviors. The goal for feminine health and independence in light of that is to leave the narrative of the “fragile female” and the “solutions” to “wild women” behind in its dark past.

#### Reference Page

Friedman, Lenemaja. “Novels of Setting: The House as a Personality”. *Shirley Jackson*. Twayne Publishers, 1975, Print.

Hague, Angela. “‘A Faithful Anatomy of Our Times’: Reassessing Shirley Jackson.” *Frontiers: A Journal of Women’s Studies*, Vol. 26, No. 2, 2005, pp. 73-96

Hugo, Victor. *The Hunchback of Notre Dame*, 1831, Bantam Books, 1981, Print.

Jackson, Shirley. *The Haunting of Hill House*. 1959. Penguin Books. 2006. Print.

Johnson, Jenell. “Chapter 2. Domesticated Women and Docile Boys: Lobotomy and Gender in the Popular Press, 1936–1955.” *American Lobotomy: A Rhetorical History*, University of Michigan Press, 2014, 42-71.

Tan, Amy. *The Kitchen God’s Wife*, G. P. Putnam’s Sons, 1991, Print.