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“I’ll Come Back and Break Your Spell”

Narrative Freedom and Genre in The Haunting of Hill House

Hilarie Ashton

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ABSTRACT: In *The Haunting of Hill House*, Shirley Jackson interplays repression and fear inside a “normal” world, reshaping the modern Gothic novel. In this article, I trace key moments in the text where the perceptions of her complicated protagonist, Eleanor Vance, appear without the mediation of the narrator, via verb tenses, punctuation/formatting choices, and quotation. Many of these moments, I argue, occur in narrative spaces that are more quotidian than Gothic (some not even chilling at all). With the periodic narrative freedom, which I call bare thoughts, this recalibrates the division between imaginary and reality while opening up possibilities for another, hybrid genre for *Hill House*. Eleanor’s entrapment by the quotidian Gothic and her occupation of the liminal space between reality and fantasy offer a new way to read Jackson’s novel as a narratologically revolutionary text.

KEYWORDS: quotidian Gothic, horror literature, narratology, genre, bare thoughts

The Gothic literary genre is fantastic in the deepest and darkest of senses: it pushes past the bounds of reality into the realm of nightmare. In that sense, it deposits both characters and readers into a world where social and personal protections are gone, rules are upended, and happy endings are usually obviated, or happiness has to be redefined. In this context, the virtuosic Shirley Jackson excels at pulling the rug out from under her readers, sometimes at a tale’s end—as in the famously ruthless “The Lottery,” frequently taught in many high school English classes—but often, and more interestingly, at different moments throughout the stories she constructs. Her function as author and (implied or otherwise) narrator is to accompany the reader on their journey not as a helper, but as a challenger. In this way, she cuts across the helpful distinction that Marie-Laure Ryan previously made in these pages in “Meaning, Intent, and the Implied Author” (2011) between the

implied author—a narrative function, as Ryan clarifies, originally defined by Wayne Booth and supported by American narratologists, and the real author—supported by European narratologists (29–30). Jackson, however, shatters this distinction, becoming both one with and separate from her protagonists. I will use these pages to probe her acceptance and rejection of the mantle of narrator via the narratologically freeing space she makes for one of her most fascinating and frustrating protagonists.

In *The Haunting of Hill House* (1959), her penultimate novel, Jackson illustrates her mastery of what I call the quotidian Gothic, a term I use to hint at the deep interplay of repression, fear, and disgust inside a more or less “normal” world as portrayed in a nonetheless indisputably Gothic text. Her melding of two different kinds of realities, filtered through an entirely unreliable narrator, is what has made the monstrous magic of contemporary authors like Victor LaValle and Joyce Carol Oates (among others) possible, melding the Gothic genre firmly with the postmodern. In *Hill House*, Jackson uses the traditions of the Gothic novel to trace the thoughts of a protagonist, Eleanor Vance, who desires above all things a kind of normalcy she has never known, making the daily rhythms of life that most of us take for granted even more poignant. The horror in the novel lies largely in the space between Eleanor’s mind and the external world (and the people in it) rather than in the direct appearance of horrific things, and those more classically monstrous things that do appear are pretty clearly arbitrated by that open space. Everything normal is upended in *Hill House*, both by the narrative voice and by the plot: Jackson leads her reader into a world where accepted, connective reality rapidly unravels as filtered through the lens of an unstable third-person omniscient narrator, what Darryl Hattenhauer, in his thoughtful study of Jackson’s work (2003), calls “a radically unreliable narrative point of view” (155). Jackson, as both author and (nameless, omniscient) narrator, refuses to let her reader or her protagonist settle comfortably within any of these gaps.

In this article, I trace key moments in *Hill House* where Jackson offers up Eleanor’s perceptions expressly *without* the mediation of the narrator, using a variety of narrative devices, from verb tenses to punctuation and formatting choices to quotation from other texts. In these moments, Eleanor exists in primary relation to the omniscient narrator behind her thoughts and actions rather than to the reader (or the author), although because of both her wiliness and Jackson’s, that relationship is never stagnant. Jackson explicitly defies predictability with her own authorial control over Eleanor,

exerting it and ceding it presumably when she wishes; as a result of this mercuriality, Eleanor defies predictability too, but in the way of someone caught up in a game not of their own making, in which they have little access to the rules. Jackson's narratological wiliness cracks open several ontological slippages for her protagonist to enter into, with the bare thoughts (as I call them) revealing intentional gaps between reality and fantasy, self and narrator, and consciousness and external world. Somewhat unexpectedly, as I argue in closing, many of these unmediated moments are placed in narrative spaces that are more quotidian than they are Gothic, and some not even gruesome or chilling at all, opening up possibilities for a whole other genre to be mapped onto this text alongside the Gothic.

NARRATIVE UNRELIABILITY AND PROTAGONIST FANTASY

In her introduction to the 2006 edition of *Hill House*, Laura Miller expands on Hattenhauer's reading, arguing that readers "experience the novel from within Eleanor's consciousness, and however unreliable we know her to be, we are wedded to her" (Introduction 2). I argue, though, that this unreliability is far more radical than Jackson gets credit for, from Miller or others, precisely because the reader is not always within Eleanor's focalization. Jackson reshapes the interplay of narrator, character, and reader via this periodic freedom from narrative control, which opens out a relatively closed understanding of the way narrative works and the kind of power narrative focalization can assert over characters and readers. Even within the realm of (free) indirect discourse, this narrative rule-reshaping draws out Jackson's border-crossing indebtedness to Virginia Woolf and recalibrates the role of the imaginary for the novel. I am interested in the way the text's narration performs this othering, and as a performative act of my own, I try to distinguish between the narrator and the author. By casting Jackson as an author behind the curtain, of sorts, I foreground as often as possible the relationship between narrator and character, although, true to Jackson's sneaky genius, the distinctions are never completely clear.

Hill House's celebrated, ominous opening sentence foregrounds the important roles of perception and fantasy in shaping an individual's conscious world: "No live organism can continue for long to exist sanely under conditions of absolute reality; even larks and katydids are supposed, by some, to dream" (3). Crucially, this formulation allows the omniscient

narrator to make perception a condition for living, since within the idea's logic, only the dead (i.e., no longer perceiving beings) are free from dreaming, and even animals (i.e., perceiving beings) can achieve it. Making dreams a partial condition of sanity by marking absolute reality as a condition for insanity prefigures the primary way with which Eleanor handles her shattered family life and attendant loneliness: deep, persistent, near-inextricable fantasy. Michael Wilson recently and usefully traced the role of the ineffable via this conception of the workings of reality, writing in "Absolute Reality' and the Role of the Ineffable in Shirley Jackson's *The Haunting of Hill House*" (2015) that "to perceive absolute reality, unfiltered by dreams, which we might define as physiologically and psychologically necessary and restorative states of inaccurate perception, is to go mad" (114). This moment of open, context-free narration in the opening line of the novel, then, free from and even prior to the focalization of the protagonist, immediately instructs the reader in the importance of the imaginary to this novel and to Eleanor.

Despite that importance, Eleanor herself does not even appear in the text at first; Jackson's narrator begins by setting out the project of Dr. John Montague, the anthropologist whose research on the supernatural is what brings Eleanor and the rest of the novel's core characters to Hill House in the first place: "It had cost him a good deal, in money and pride, since he was not a begging man, to rent Hill House for three months, but he expected absolutely to be compensated for his pains by the sensation following upon the publication of his definitive work on the causes and effects of psychic disturbances in a house commonly known as 'haunted'" (3). By beginning this way, Jackson and her narrator direct the reader's attention to a relatively muted character whose main importance, at the novel's beginning and at its end, is getting Eleanor where the novel needs her to go, with some faux-patriarch posturing in between. (Physical motion, as it will turn out, is the engine of this plot, in both literal and metaphorical/emotional senses.)

As befits a Gothic heroine wrapped in problematic familial connections, Eleanor is initially presented by *Hill House's* narrator as detached: "The only person in the world she genuinely hated, now that her mother was dead, was her sister. She disliked her brother-in-law and her five-year-old niece, and she had no friends" (6). Without further context, she comes off in this description as clearly unsympathetic and perhaps even misanthropic. Jackson is playing on our readerly sympathies here, challenging the reader's tendency to empathize with the protagonist above all other characters.

Her challenge goes further with the fact that Eleanor's disquieting feelings about her family are not immediately justified by the narration. The supposedly paranormal incident that brings her to the attention of Dr. Montague, indicating her sensitivity to the supernatural, is framed by the narrator as an angry mob scenario, reminiscent of the looming, freeform violence that climaxes "The Lottery": "After three days Eleanor and her sister were removed to the house of a friend, and the stones stopped falling, nor did they ever return, although Eleanor and her sister and her mother went back to living in the house, and the feud with the entire neighborhood was never ended" (7). Within this description, any problems internal to the family effectively recede, at least in the telling of the story, with the women's relocation and the stilling of the stones.

Ultimately, Eleanor's relationships with others throughout the novel range from nascent to deteriorating to nonexistent. The surrogate family she acquires upon arriving at Hill House, comprised of Luke and Theodora, the other participants in Dr. Montague's research, as well as Dr. Montague himself, as something of a father figure, does not live up to the hopes that sustain her before she arrives, hopes that unfurl primarily with regard to her movement away from her emotionally abusive biological family. Her world is suspended as close to the imaginary as she can sustain it, down to the singsong dialogues she carries on with herself in her head (moments that I will examine in depth as part of her bare thoughts and freedom from the narrator); this suspension is, paradoxically, what keeps her moving forward. In this respect, she is not unlike Merricat, the sociopathic, murderous heroine of Jackson's next and last novel, *We Have Always Lived in the Castle* (1960). The primary difference is that Merricat purposefully harms others, whereas Eleanor harms herself, and the narrative is less clear on the purposefulness of this harm.

From the claustrophobic glimpse we get of Eleanor's family and the freeing thoughts she articulates via the narration as she leaves them behind, a fuller picture emerges of Eleanor as an introspective, critical, shut down sort of person—one who, as stated earlier, openly hates a five-year-old (whom we never actually see), but also one who would love nothing more than, as the novel's first sentence suggests, to exchange her reality for a world of dreams. As the novel presents her to us, Eleanor barely exists within a social structure at all (and would definitely prefer not to). Almost validating these feelings, the two structures that entangle her throughout the course of the

narrative—her home life and her Hill House life—turn out to be equally destructive and cruel to her. Interestingly, we as readers are not privy to the places where she might have daily connections to other people in her pre-Hill House life; Jackson keeps that behind the narrative curtain. Even *We Have Always Lived in the Castle's* Merricat, sociopathic in a textbook sense and shuttered away in a classically Gothic house, has more interaction with her community, indicating that the Gothic in *Hill House* is mostly internal, as I will explore later. Eleanor's fractured family started the process of disconnecting her from the world, and that disconnection transfers over to the nightmarish moments in Hill House itself. However, those moments in the text that interest me the most are when the narrator gives Eleanor freedom to step away from the Gothic frame as well as from the frame of fictionality, foregoing mediation, and letting the quotidian reign.

FANTASTIC VOYAGES AND SPLIT SUBJECTIVITY

The first of these bare thoughts moments comes early in the novel, on Eleanor's drive to Hill House. It is a ride through a dreamworld, one with touches of traditional homeyness, and, crucially for the reader's developing sense of Eleanor's personality and history, the partial desire to be almost completely alone. The mix of verb tenses with which this ride is presented—by Jackson as writer but also by the character of Eleanor—makes this moment even more complex, and it marks the first major elision of the narrator that I am tracing. Eleanor's dream of a new life in the house with lions is narrated in the past tense: "Every morning I swept the porch and dusted the lions, and every evening I patted their heads good night, and once a week I washed their faces and manes and paws with warm water and soda and cleaned between their teeth with a swab" (18). This use of tense glosses the idea that it is easier to protect the dream by imagining already having done it: she is making her dreams a lived reality for herself—hearkening back to the slippery opening lines of the novel, to which even she doesn't have access—by recounting them as though they actually happened. It also centers the importance of the quotidian in another, more domestic sense of the word, as the emotional heart of a lonely woman's dream world: faces are washed and teeth are brushed even in her fantasy. In some sense, those basic forms of connection that most of us take for granted are just as important to Eleanor as her more elaborate (and pathos-drenched) fantasies to come,

even though (or perhaps because) the connection so often eludes her in her waking life.

Eleanor's next fantasy after the lions' toilette uses the future tense, which aligns with the literal journey she is taking, yet is also peppered with gerunds, signaling an oblique connection to the present: "coming down from the hills there will be a prince riding, bright in green and silver with a hundred bowmen riding behind him, pennants stirring, horses tossing, jewels flashing . . . She laughed and turned to smile good-by at the magic oleanders. Another day, she told them, another day I'll come back and break your spell" (20). Crucially and in a wily narratological way, the imaginary conversation with the oleanders is not offset from the text with quotation marks, a tactic that I will examine in more depth as it relates to entwined aspects of Eleanor's internal and external lives. It is marked as a conversation only by the phrase "she told them"; I will examine later the narratological effect of removing this frame of reporting entirely, which the text often does.

The unmediatedness of these moments does crucial work in revamping the more traditional narrative scheme on which most modernist novels are based. They work to set up the importance of the unmediated speech in the first place, as well as the effect that it has on the narrative. This is also one of the moments where Jackson allows Eleanor to enter into the narrative in the first person as opposed to the third. For a character whose abusive, detached childhood drives and damages so much of her adult life, and who is so often talked over in adulthood, these opportunities to speak for herself shine. Eleanor herself is the point of connection between the two divided realities that so obsess her,¹ which correspond to different ontological timescapes, and yet even then, she is only allowed control when Jackson as author *and* as narrator cedes it to her.

These beginning moments of bare thoughts also give Eleanor the chance to mark out those conditions for herself, setting the terms for many of the unmediated scenes to come. Crucially at this moment in the narrative, she signals her own awareness of the boundary between the world she imagines and the one she lives in, and more than that, some degree of desire to jettison the first for the second (albeit foreclosed from immediacy by the vagueness of "another day"). In addition, she quietly articulates a desire to return somewhere and, perhaps, to stay, a significant shift in the desire we have seen so far to move away. The fairy tale context that is woven through links to Jackson's own notes: "Eleanor is the 'voice of honor'" (Hattenhauer 157).

I read this comment as functioning in a doubled sense. First, it gives Eleanor a voice in the telling of her own story, something that the narrative effect of bare thoughts, which I examine further below, shores up. Jackson's prepositional phrase also links Eleanor's mode of being even more explicitly to the skewed but nonetheless courtly romance she is inventing, bringing the idea of honor in a world that appears to have shown Eleanor very little of it. Jackson's comment spotlights that it is not just *what* Eleanor dreams that is important; the *way* she thinks is actually imbricated in the act of dreaming. She is both anticipating princess and active liberator in this passage, waiting to be rescued by the prince *and* openly breaking a spell herself.

Eleanor returns to the future tense later in her fantasy narrative, sneaking it between an opening conditional mode and a closing nod to the present: "No one would ever find me there, either, behind all those roses, and just to make sure I would plant oleanders by the road. I will light a fire in the cool evenings and toast apples at my own hearth. I will raise white cats and sew white curtains for the windows and sometimes come out of my door to go to the store to buy cinnamon and tea and thread" (Jackson 22). The deft combination of all of these tenses in these dream passages—a combination which, of course, Jackson as author and narrator shares with Eleanor, on different levels of ontological reality—suggests that Eleanor lives in a complex combination of the past and the (sometimes certain, sometimes subjunctive) future, rather than in the present. Her brief dabble in the present progressive earlier in her fantasy narrative gave a slant of agency: "She smiled out at the sunlight slanting along the street and thought, I am going, I am going, I have finally taken a step" (15). We do not know from this in what tense—and thus in what primary universe of possibility—it takes place for her. Neither Eleanor nor the narrator allow us to be sure of that.

The lack of italics, quotation marks, or any other assignation to demarcate thoughts in the earlier passages, as in the rest of the novel, is the marker of Eleanor's unmediated subjective entrance onto the scene, or what I call bare thoughts. In "Omniscience" (2004), Jonathan Culler sets out that "the basic convention of literature is that narrative sentences not produced by characters are true, whereas in nonfiction similar statements would have a different status" (27). Such bare thoughts as Eleanor's do not map easily onto this formulation. The act of including some of her perceptions alongside the narrator's intensifies this fragmentation even as the perspective is broadened. The thoughts thus appear on their own, suspended between the

subjectivities of the narrator and the character having the thoughts (here, Eleanor), and creating a shift in register as well as—albeit to a lesser degree—calling into question who might be thinking them.

Even more interesting is a case where two different voices appear within this bare, unmediated register, such as “Beyond everything else she was afraid, listening to the sick voice inside her which whispered, Get away from here, get away. But this is what I came so far to find, she told herself; I can’t go back. Besides, he would laugh at me if I tried to get back out through that gate” (Jackson 35). Although both voices here are Eleanor’s, she (and/or the narrator, depending on whose subjectivity is the focal point here) sees them as separable—her own voice and “the sick voice inside her.” Each forms part of the divided subjectivity that characterizes certain kinds of mental illness, the prevailing Gothic sensibility, and, as is so clearly evident even in these first few sections of the novel, Eleanor herself. Even before her complexly pathos-woven destiny has been revealed, we as readers are likely to be hit with sympathy for her in this moment; knowing the ending may make it hit even harder.

Before Eleanor unravels completely, as she is losing her grip on the Hill House “family,” she is painfully open with Dr. Montague, Luke, and Theodora about her divided state—and its complications—after seeing her name appear on the wall: “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—” (160). By the time her voice fades, the “I” both legible and coming apart in pieces, turning into a disintegrating, whirling refrain as Eleanor’s emotions choke over her social graces and finally stifle her voice completely. Given the difficulty she has reading the world around her, her accurate identification of the dissociated, chaotic life in her mind is important, and is another moment that counters Hattenhauer’s misperception argument.² It also seems relevant that Eleanor is allowed to narrate this awareness directly, without the narrator’s intervention. Immediately after her voice fades, her last word, “surrender,” is disbelievably echoed by two of the three other characters present for her speech.

Jackson never makes it clear if the world Eleanor escapes to—the constrained and walled one of Hill House—actually does match the horror of her childhood (or, indeed, if that horror was reliably reported). The strained social

dynamics in the faux family certainly seem unpleasant, and at times verge on gaslighting, but because of the planned instability of how the story is told, we as readers can never really be sure that we are getting the “truth”—a concept Jackson troubles and subverts in all of her work. The uncertainty the novel sets up, on the level of fact versus interpretation, really leaves only one thing clear: Eleanor actually lives outside of the quotidian Gothic and sees that world through the prism of her fantasy, glued to her dreams, both good and bad.

In “‘Whose Hand Was I Holding?’ Familial and Sexual Politics in Shirley Jackson’s *The Haunting of Hill House*” (1991), Tricia Lootens links this uneasily located subjectivity to Eleanor’s ultimate death: “To sacrifice oneself, Jackson implies, one must have been able to develop a ‘self,’ and one must have a choice; it is not clear that Eleanor has either. Her death is only the dramatic accomplishment of a domestic murder that began long ago” (189). Lootens’ use of “domestic murder” here opens out onto the possibility that the stones incident, which Dr. Montague had initially read as a paranormal moment in Eleanor’s experience, was actually a metaphor for internal family violence. Jackson presents the stones incident twice in the novel, once in the form of a quasi-horror tale, recounted by the narrator, and once by Eleanor to Dr. Montague. The first version reads like a reverse fairytale, in contrast to Eleanor’s version (which I will revisit further on):

One day, when she was twelve years old and her sister was eighteen, and their father had been dead for not quite a month, showers of stones had fallen on their house, without any warning or any indication of purpose or reason, dropping from the ceilings, rolling loudly down the walls, breaking windows and pattering maddeningly on the roof. The stones continued intermittently for three days, during which time Eleanor and her sister were less unnerved by the stones than by the neighbors and sightseers who gathered daily outside the front door. (7)

The incident is initially presented without mention of the mother, absent as Gothic tradition dictates; Jackson as narrator adds her in a sentence later, wrapped in a “blind, hysterical insistence that all of this was due to malicious, backbiting people on the block who had had it in for her ever since she came” (7). Here, the narrator enters into the mother’s consciousness, while also, by excluding her from the initial description of the event, opening a place for the stones to represent, instead, the mother’s own violence. Even if the stones are external, thrown as they are by “the neighbors and sightseers

who gathered daily outside the front door,” their emotional heft in the context of a fractured family is undeniable.

The problem with Lootens’ framing of this scene, as I read it, is the degree to which it elides Eleanor’s selfhood, removing the choice (to live or die) from even her most decisive action, the last moment that she allows (and is allowed, by the narrative) forward motion. If Eleanor does not have a self, and if her death is merely a “dramatic accomplishment,” then her world has worked even harder against her than we previously thought. In these terms, her death would be preordained, and her whole voyage to Hill House and experience inside it would have to correspondingly shift in meaning and lose much of its relevance. While Eleanor certainly presents obvious and sometime distasteful psychological puzzles, like *Castle’s* Merricat, the unevenness of her mental health does not obviate her ability to dream and to act, or, indeed, her right to. Her quiet power in the face of considerable difficulty, some at the hands of others and some as a result of her internal imaginary, is worthy of as much readerly sympathy and even praise as her unraveling is worthy of pity or frustration.

The question of authorial sympathy is a trickier one that deserves its own article. Victor LaValle is a clear possessor of wit and sensibility that align with Jackson’s, but he uses them on his own terms, marking out more space for open emotion within his horror and satire than Jackson does. The sympathetic way he handles both mental health and the oppressive infrastructure of care in *The Devil in Silver* (2012), as well as the way he handles oppressive social structures and discriminatory social mores in *The Changeling* (2017), mark out a space of both, I think, authorial and narratological empathy for people fighting losing battles against hostile societies. For both LaValle and Jackson, horror comes out of different slants of structural inequality, but Jackson’s empathy does not extend as strongly to her oppressed characters as LaValle’s does. That said, perhaps the most pathos-laden example of Eleanor’s bare thoughts comes shortly before her death, at the point in the novel when the stories she has crafted to draw the other Hill House residents into closer relation with her, into their faux family, are fully unraveled:

“I haven’t any home,” she said again, and regarded them hopefully. “No home. Everything in all the world that belongs to me is in a carton in the back of my car. That’s all I have, some books and things I had when I was a little girl, and a watch my mother gave me. So you see there’s no place you can send me.”

I could, of course, go on and on, she wanted to tell them, seeing always their frightened, staring faces. I could go on and on, leaving my clothes for Theodora; I could go wandering and homeless, errant, and I would always come back here. It would be simpler to let me stay, more sensible, she wanted to tell them, happier. (238)

In these two paragraphs, Eleanor's spoken words, presented in quotation marks, cede the stage to her bare thoughts, presented without them. The second sentence of the second paragraph, however, goes even further, presenting those thoughts without any narrator mediation at all. Her thoughts, again in the conditional, like on her fantastic ride to Hill House, stand completely on their own, in a way that they have not since that literal and figurative voyage. As though in response to her freeing, future tense imaginings from that journey, now Eleanor is thinking entirely in the conditional: her own view of her agency has begun to shift away from even that partial possibility, and it is about to shift completely, as I will examine in my last section.

TRADITIONS OF NARRATIVE SLIPPAGE

Jackson's slippage of thought between narrator and protagonist is in some ways an homage to an earlier modernist tradition, which links it directly back to another experimental writer famously concerned with interiority, Virginia Woolf. In "Virginia Woolf's Narrative Strategies: Negotiating between Public and Private Voices" (2004), Anna Snaith summarizes this slippage neatly in the context of Woolf's style: "Indirect interior monologue, which Woolf used in eight of her nine novels, occurs when a character's thoughts are presented in the third person by the narrator. The narrator enters the mind of the character and reports his or her thoughts verbatim, but the first- and second-person pronouns of direct interior monologue are absent" (134). Culler supports this explanation in the context of omniscient narration: "In cases of reports of characters' thoughts, we are not dealing with narrators who know everything all at once but rather with narrative instances reporting now on this consciousness, now on that, often relaying, transposing, or translating thought into the intermediate discourse of free indirect speech, for example" ("Omniscience" 29).

What neither critic's summation covers, though, is the slipperiness of the way the bare thoughts appear without a mediating grammatical layer, even when examining similar techniques. Part of the difference, at least for Snaith, is that Jackson's move brackets the narrator's status as separate without

making Eleanor a character in a character-narrator relation like those that Snaith cites. Jackson is nowhere near as radical as Woolf is in these small moments, in terms of formal daringness and fragmentation, but the fact that these moments appear at all are significant to the shifting otherness of the protagonist. A moment of stasis like this is a convenient place for Jackson to allow the focalized protagonist—Eleanor—to slip in as though she were meant to be part of the narration. This element of participation begins to dissolve the line between public and private that Snaith identifies in Woolf (134). Jackson's canny use of a character's bare thoughts challenges Culler as well, shifting the action of "reporting now on this consciousness," as he puts it, into something more like "allowing inside this consciousness," as I would put it.

Even when othered by the world around her, then, Eleanor is allowed a degree of agency through the way her story is told and the way she is allowed to participate, off and on, in its telling. The narrator allows quotation marks around Eleanor's thoughts at two other times, around certain refrains: "a tag end of a tune danced through her head, bringing distantly a word or so; 'In delay there lies no plenty,' she thought, 'in delay there lies no plenty'" (22). The same pattern comes up later when she is soothing herself from her fear of the property's caretaker, Dudley: "she began to whistle, a little annoyed to find that the same tune still ran through her head. 'Present mirth hath present laughter . . .' And she told herself crossly that she must really make an effort to think of something else" (32). Close to the novel's beginning, then, it appears that Jackson is having Eleanor "properly" quoting, signaling that the words belong to another consciousness (though neither author nor character nor narrator say whose). Not all instances of these refrains, which are repeated several times, are set off this way; however, as the following lines in the second half of the novel show: "[Eleanor] heard Theodora's wild laugh, and thought, Maybe it will be me, after all, and I can't afford to. I must be steady, and she closed her eyes and found herself saying silently, O stay and hear, your true love's coming, that can sing both high and low. Trip no further, pretty sweeting; journeys end in lovers meeting . . ." (153). This singular use of quotation marks for "present mirth" may be a copy editor's blip, of course, but its presence coupled with the lack of quotations around Eleanor's own, bare thoughts unmistakably blurs the line between Eleanor's thoughts, speech, and memories of something she used to know.

The intertextual nod here of that other consciousness threads a canonical line through the book. Each of these refrains comes from Act 2, Scene 3

of Shakespeare's *Twelfth Night*; they are part of a song that Feste (identified as the Clown) sings. We as readers already know that Eleanor takes comfort in dreams of love, as her knight daydream from her drive to Hill House indicates. More poignantly, though, the Shakespeare lines offer her clear comfort amid destabilization. She repeats these lines throughout the novel—usually silently, keeping them in the world of her thoughts—in times of threat or anger or fear (as when unnerved in Hill House by Theodora or by Dudley the caretaker), and repeats the “journeys end” phrase three separate times when entering the house. For a person with so few apparent ties to the people and culture of the “real” world around her, it is interesting that Eleanor would signal any author in this way, let alone Shakespeare. Taken together, the lines and her repetition of them function for Eleanor as a talisman against (known or unknown) danger, and evoke a subtle tie to her past that, given the way Jackson has already presented her thoughts and feelings about her family, it seems safe to expect that Eleanor herself would disavow.

The dynamic of fantasy comes up within the house, as well, which contributes to Eleanor's feeling of connection with her surrogate family, and shores up their initial camaraderie: “He beamed at them slyly. ‘You are three willful, spoiled children who are prepared to nag me for your bedtime story.’ Theodora giggled, and the doctor nodded at her happily” (69). All of the characters, including Eleanor, very openly wrap themselves in fantasy to insulate themselves from the perceived dangers of the house. In this shared closeness, poor Eleanor thinks that she has found her people at last, a fact that tragically turns out to be false in several ways. Related to this and to the Shakespeare reference, I think, is a clear tension between memory and lack of memory in the book. Sometimes it is pure forgetting, as in the reveal that Eleanor is either unaware of or (more likely) shielding her own history with the paranormal in her retelling of the stones incident:

Theodora has shown herself possessed of some telepathic ability, and Eleanor has in the past been intimately involved in poltergeist phenomena—“I?” “Of course.” The doctor looked at her curiously. “Many years ago, when you were a child. The stones—” Eleanor frowned, and shook her head. Her fingers trembled around the stem of her glass, and then she said, “That was the neighbors. My mother said the neighbors did that. People are always jealous.” (72)

To believe that Dr. Montague already knows about the stones, we have to believe that he found out via “the records of the psychic societies, the back files of sensational newspapers, the reports of parapsychologists,” the sources the text gives for his initial list of people to contact who had been invoked in “abnormal events” (4). Eleanor’s stubborn belief in her mother’s version of events suggests repression and perhaps even coercion, both of which could contribute to her complicated feelings about her lost mother in the first place. It also shores up my earlier contention that the paranormal explanation is actually a cover for the mother’s abuse.

A version of the narrative destabilization that Eleanor causes with her bare thoughts and play of tenses with regard to the lions resurfaces in the novel’s title. In a sense, the novel might be more aptly titled *The Haunting of Eleanor Vance*, because there can be no present or progressive tense for the house (though Lootens identifies the haunting as a “process” (167), which lends credence to the gerund). For the house, everything is still and nothing changes—it is always already haunted—so the foreclosure of the novel’s last paragraph, to which I return below, is just as much for the house as it is for Eleanor. Eleanor has no more possibility, and the house has so much (albeit much of it latent) that none of the specifics actually matter.

(GENRE) CONCLUSIONS

Recuperating the loss in the terms of Lootens’ analysis, the major choice that would give Eleanor selfhood—more precisely, the action that, if it were a choice, would confer selfhood—is her death at the novel’s end, a fatalistic convergence that I have argued against. I remarked at the outset that the novel’s plot runs on motion, and motion is also what ends it, with Eleanor’s car crashing into a tree. Her last words before her death are presented with some of this same narrative freedom that I have been tracing through the novel, suggesting a level of agency for which Lootens (among many other critics) does not allow. The section is worth quoting at some length, since it reuses many of Jackson’s previous unmediating strategies, and yet they look different in this light given the finality of the outcome (which the reader may already sense):

They waved back at her dutifully, standing still, watching her. They will watch me down the drive as far as they can see, she thought; it is only civil for them to look at me until I am out of sight; so now I am going. Journeys end in lovers meeting. But I won’t

go, she thought, and laughed aloud to herself; Hill House is not as easy as they are; just by telling me to go away they can't make me leave, not if Hill House means me to stay. "Go away, Eleanor," she chanted aloud, "go away, Eleanor, we don't want you any more, not in our Hill House, go away, Eleanor, you can't stay here; but I can," she sang, "but I can; they don't make the rules around here. They can't turn me out or shut me out or laugh at me or hide from me; I won't go, and Hill House belongs to me." (244-45)

In this paragraph, Eleanor's thoughts come through again barely, without the narrator's mediation, and they include her Shakespearean comfort refrain, "Journeys end in lovers meeting." As in several previous places, Jackson allows her to draw succor in her last moments by speaking to herself, thus giving herself the support that both versions of her family, real and surrogate, denied her. In this, which can be read as a small and final act of self-love, she expresses an even more loving thing for herself: just as at the beginning, in her car ride to Hill House, she verbalizes confidence in her own dreams, dreams that are now much more realizable since they do not depend on the presence of other people (in fact, they repudiate it). A more psychoanalytic reading of Eleanor's reaction to the house, one that I have largely set aside in my analysis, is notably bleaker, of course. Read this way, defiance and confidence become dissociative, dangerous bullheadedness; this is, of course, likely to be how the other characters experienced Eleanor's pleading and then defiant exit. I think, though, that there is a kindness in a reader letting Eleanor (at least somewhat) off the hook at the end. Why not let her death be preceded by some bravery? Why not let her, adrift in the space between reality and fantasy, have some measure of choice.

Jackson and Eleanor continue together in a melding of Eleanor's narration with the narrator's own, but now, her thoughts are freely bare, existing on their own with very little reporting tacked on:

With what she perceived as quick cleverness she pressed her foot down hard on the accelerator; they can't run fast enough to catch me this time, she thought, but by now they must be beginning to realize; I wonder who notices first? Luke, almost certainly. I can hear them calling now, she thought, and the little footsteps running through Hill House and the soft sound of the hills pressing closer. I am really doing it, she thought, turning the wheel to send the car directly at the great tree at the curve of the driveway, 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 tree she thought clearly, Why am I doing this? Why am I doing this? Why don't they stop me? (244–45)

The passage is packed full of small moments that become painful and poignant as it dawns on the reader what is about to happen. The first paragraph again marks the distinction between Elinor's awareness of the world and her presence in it with the phrase "with what she perceived." She continued on in her sense that the people she worked to make her tribe are part enemy and part community, wanting them to notice but knowing they will not catch up. The mostly disembodied "they," is directly personified only as Luke. And there is such pathos in Eleanor's last words. Her penultimate ones poignantly claim agency—"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"—seeming as though she has fulfilled at least some measure of the fantasy of self-realization she has been articulating throughout the novel. At her last moment of life, though, she shifts to eternal doubt and, perhaps, a will to live. That kind of possibility requires people who *would* stop her, of course, and none of the family, surrogate or biological, she has amassed in the novel appear to have the strength or care to do so. The closing-in of the world her fantasy has created, the photo negative of the courtly story, end here, perpetuated in the first place, of course, by Dr. Montague with his summoning her there. Her last choice stays hers, but it is not entirely settled even in its finality, nor is it, as suicide is most sympathetically understood, actually and fully a choice.

If, as I posited at the outset, the domestic, un-Gothic nature of the narrative freedom and bare thought scenes—and Eleanor's continued desire for connection and normalcy through even the Gothic scenes—warrants a new genre analysis of *The Haunting of Hill House*, what might that new genre be? It would need to take into account the interplay of the imaginary and the quotidian, evoking both Woolfian intersubjectivity and shifting perspective. The fairytale moments that thread through the psychological horror of the story, much of which has been deeply examined elsewhere (allowing me to elide much of the discussion here), in order to let the former stand on their own, foreground the importance of what we might call an absolute imaginary. An absolute imaginary roots fantasy firmly in the realm of reality, recouping the "absolute reality" that the narrator, in the first and last passages of the book, links to insanity. In that light, the absolute imaginary is legible as a corrective, as a lifesaver—and yet in this novel, it

does not completely do its job. Even though her fantasies do not save her, Eleanor's initial awareness of the boundary between her imagination and the real world does not completely dissolve, and so the absolute imaginary has some utility for her. Merricat of *We Have Always Lived in the Castle* lives in an absolute imaginary too, and as such might present another candidate for my proposed genre, but hers is even more clearly marked by mental illness. In both *Hill House* and *We Have Always Lived in the Castle*, Jackson shrewdly manipulates the tropes of a classic Gothic tale—the motherless daughter, the looming sense of dread, the bloody things going bump in the night. But in *Hill House*, Eleanor's liminal existence, trying to meld present and future while haunted by and refusing the past, while seeing the world around her through a lens of fantasy, belies even these straightforward categories, which, I believe, was Jackson's intent.

Let us end as we began, just as Jackson does. The first sentences of *The Haunting of Hill House* emphasize dreams and take away agency from the dead. Through the telling of the story, both the narrator and Eleanor have troubled the meaning of those "conditions of absolute reality." Taking the notion of dreams even further, the novel's second and third sentences are repeated to end the book: "Hill House, not sane, stood by itself against its hills, holding darkness within; it had stood so for eighty years and might stand for eighty more. Within, walls continued upright, bricks met neatly, floors were firm, and doors were sensibly shut; silence lay steadily against the wood and stone of Hill House, and whatever walked there, walked alone" (Jackson 3 and 245). With this symmetry, Jackson wraps her story inside itself, implicitly commenting that nothing has changed. Eleanor's death solves nothing, in the end. She becomes the property of the force that has been tracking her instead of being able to be free. She could have just lived within a dreamworld. She could have stopped the car along the way to Hill House and made a new life for herself somewhere else, with or without a surrogate family. Instead, she succumbs to the spell of nothingness, for which she has always been waiting.

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NOTES

1. I am indebted to an anonymous peer reviewer for the clarifying light they cast on this aspect of Eleanor's mediating role in the novel.

2. While Hattenhauer's argument in *Shirley Jackson's American Gothic* marks out Jackson's fragmenting of reality as anticipating postmodernism, I think that she is actually bringing more radical instability into modernism.

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