

# ENTRAPMENT AND ESTRANGEMENT IN SHIRLEY JACKSON'S GOTHIC FICTION

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GOTHIC FICTION estranges the horror of female entrapment. This article analyses the interaction of entrapment and estrangement in the gothic elements of Shirley Jackson's fiction. Through an examination of Jackson's life and social context and through attentive readings of Jackson's stories, including her most celebrated novel, *The Haunting of Hill House* (1959), this article will argue that the devices of estrangement developed in works of gothic fiction give Jackson a means to explore and assert her voice, body, and agency as a woman in postwar America.

Gothic fiction was popularised by eighteenth-century novelist Ann Radcliffe, and it is a genre whose themes and conventions appeared two hundred years later in the work of Jackson. In their entry on gothic fiction in the *Concise Oxford Companion to English Literature*, Dinah Birch and Katy Hooper define gothic fiction as fiction "dealing with supernatural or horrifying events and generally possessed of a claustrophobic air of oppression or evil," typically occurring in "enclosed and haunted settings such as castles, crypts, convents, or gloomy

mansions.”<sup>1</sup> As Gina Wisker suggests, the genre was mostly written during periods in which various phenomena, including women’s experiences—but also family abuse and slavery—were “hidden.”<sup>2</sup> At this time, women were confined to the domestic sphere and unable to participate in the public sphere, not in terms of education, owning public property, or electing (or being elected) representatives in public office.<sup>3</sup> Where women’s entrapment is systemic and thus imperceptible, gothic fiction, with its “images of ruin and decay, and episodes of imprisonment, cruelty, and persecution,” estranges women’s entrapment to make invisible women visible again.<sup>4</sup> The genre makes women’s oppression strange and horrific instead of ordinary and commonplace.

The concept of estrangement, which is sometimes retranslated to *enstrangement*, was first defined by the Russian Formalist Victor Shklovsky.<sup>5</sup> In his seminal essay “Art, as Device,” Shklovsky writes,

this thing we call art exists in order to restore the sensation of life, in order to make us feel things, in order to make a stone stony. The goal of art is to create the sensation of seeing, and not merely recognising, things; the device of art is the “enstrangement” of things, and the complication of the form, which increases the duration and complexity of perception, as the process of perception is, in art, an end in itself and must be prolonged.<sup>6</sup>

He continues:

Things that have been experienced several times begin to be experienced in terms of recognition: a thing is in front of us, we know this, but we do not see it. This is why we cannot say anything about it. Art has different ways of deautomatising things...<sup>7</sup>

Radcliffe, in works including *The Mysteries of Udolpho* (1794), established the central figure of gothic fiction: “that of an apprehensive heroine exploring the sinister building in which she is trapped by the aristocratic villain.”<sup>8</sup> Jackson employs this narrative framework of entrapment in her most celebrated novel, *The*

1. Dinah Birch and Katy Hooper, “Gothic fiction,” in *The Concise Oxford Companion to English Literature*, (London: Oxford University Press, 2012), 290–91.

2. Gina Wisker, “Ghostings and Hauntings: Splintering the Fabric of Domestic Gothic” in *Contemporary Women’s Gothic Fiction* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), 208–212.

3. *Ibid.*, 213.

4. Birch and Hooper, “Gothic fiction,” 291.

5. Alexandra Berlina, “Translating ‘Art, as Device,’” *Poetics Today* 36, no. 3 (2015): 152.

6. Viktor Shklovsky, “Art, as Device,” trans. Alexandra Berlina, *Poetics Today* 36, no. 3 (2015): 162.

7. *Ibid.*, 163.

8. Birch and Hooper, “Gothic fiction,” 291.

*Haunting of Hill House*. It also appears many times in her collection of stories, *The Lottery and Other Stories* (1949), albeit on a smaller though by no means less horrifying scale. In these stories, there are no signs of the “aristocratic villain,” and often the “sinister building” is only a small house or apartment. But, as Wisker argues, in Jackson’s stories the “promise and security of the home, hearth, and family are revealed as oppressive nightmare.”<sup>9</sup>

### Shirley Jackson, “The Lottery,” and Postwar America

In the abstract for her introduction to and translation of Shklovsky’s “Art, as Device,” Alexandra Berlina writes that “We get used to horrible things and stop fearing them.” Comparing Shklovsky to the Romantics, Berlina then notes that Shklovsky “sees art also as a way to make [the world’s] horrors felt.”<sup>10</sup> Jackson explores the same sentiment in her widely anthologised short story “The Lottery.” The story opens with a peaceful scene in a small village: “The - of June 27<sup>th</sup> was clear and sunny, with the fresh warmth of a full-summer day.”<sup>11</sup> The narration is matter-of-fact, so that it comes as a shock when the titular “lottery” is revealed to be a method of choosing which villager to stone to death as part of a ritual sacrifice.

“The Lottery” first appeared in the *New Yorker* on June 26, 1948, just three years after the end of World War II. It upset and disturbed so many readers that hundreds were moved to write to the magazine, threatening to cancel their subscriptions. According to Jackson’s biographer, Ruth Franklin, the story generated “the most mail the magazine had ever received in response to a work of fiction.”<sup>12</sup> Jackson herself received 300 letters and, of those, only thirteen, which she stated were “mostly from friends,” were complimentary.<sup>13</sup> Franklin pored over the letters and reported that, while some were certainly unkind, calling Jackson “perverted” and “gratuitously disagreeable,” with “incredibly bad

9. Wisker, “Ghostings and Hauntings,” 208.

10. Shklovsky, “Art, as Device,” 151.

11. Shirley Jackson, *The Lottery and Other Stories* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2005), 291.

12. Ruth Franklin, “‘The Lottery’ Letters,” *The New Yorker*, June 25, 2013, <https://www.newyorker.com/books/page-turner/the-lottery-letters>.

When discussing Jackson’s life throughout this article, I draw primarily on Franklin’s biography of Jackson, *Shirley Jackson: A Rather Haunted Life* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2016); however, I also use excerpts from the book published in various other publications, as well as Jackson’s own personal essays.

13. *Ibid.*

taste,” many were simply confused.<sup>14</sup> “I suppose I hoped,” wrote Jackson, that “by setting a particularly brutal ancient rite in the present and in my own village, to shock the story’s readers with a graphic dramatisation of the pointless violence and general inhumanity in their own lives.”<sup>15</sup> As Jackson’s comments suggest, the story aimed to estrange her readers from their political and social context, to use art to make life’s horrors felt.

In the late 1940s, instances of “pointless violence and general inhumanity” were happening in America’s own backyard—and kitchens. Postwar America for the white middle class was an idyllic suburban life characterised by material prosperity and modern home conveniences. However, it was also marred by paranoia, mass anxiety, and the cementing of gender roles. In the months following the war, “Rosie the Riveter,” a symbol of the empowered female-led wartime workforce, was soon replaced by the white-gloved “Kelly Girl,” who was named after the 1950s temporary employment agency. Historian Erin Hatton argues that Kelly Girl became the iconic image of a respectable white, middle-class housewife “with a little extra time on [her] hands,” the model housewife who could join the workforce but was still able to “keep up with [her] domestic duties.”<sup>16</sup> Where Rosie the Riveter worked in patriotic service to her country, the Kelly Girl worked “for glamour, self-fulfilment, and independence.”<sup>17</sup> However, in both cases, female labour was seen as transitory and marginal, because women’s domestic duties took precedence. As Hatton notes, “Rosie was working only until her soldier came home from the war; Kelly was working only until her kids came home from school.”<sup>18</sup>

The years 1948 to 1953 also marked the peak of the Cold War, the nuclear stalemate between the United States and the Soviet Union.<sup>19</sup> The American government waged war on the propaganda front by emphasising the importance of the nuclear family, normatively defined as a married heterosexual couple and

14. *Ibid.*

15. *Ibid.*

16. Erin Hatton, “The Making of the Kelly Girl: Gender and the Origins of the Temp Industry in Postwar America,” *Journal of Historical Sociology* 21, no. 1 (2008): 2, 8.

17. *Ibid.*

18. *Ibid.*

19. *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, s.v. “Cold War,” accessed December 2, 2019, <https://www.britannica.com/event/Cold-War>.

their biological children, and glossed as an “antidote” against Communism—a representation of American “civic virtue” and the “triumph of capitalism.”<sup>20</sup> After the war, young couples were awarded government subsidies that facilitated the baby boom. But, as Elaine Tyler May contends, “those who did not conform to that norm, such as unwed mothers, or gay men and lesbians, faced ostracism,” attracting “suspicion” in the feverish anti-Communist crusades of the postwar decades.<sup>21</sup>

Several notable publications during this time mirrored the anxieties, beliefs, and institutionalised gender roles in America. Ayn Rand’s ode to individualism, *The Fountainhead* (1943), was published in the same cultural moment as Benjamin Spock’s child-rearing guide for mothers, *The Common Sense Book of Baby and Child Care* (1946) and Jackson’s “The Lottery” (1948). *The Lottery and Other Stories*, first published in 1949, is the only short story collection Jackson published while she was alive. It is filled with women dealing with persecution, isolation, and powerlessness, trapped in the claustrophobic family home and burdened by societal expectations. Domestic duties take precedence for Mrs. Hutchinson in Jackson’s “The Lottery,” just as they did for the Kelly Girl, the wife in America’s postwar nuclear family. Mrs. Hutchinson is a wife and a mother who arrives late to the lottery because she is busy doing housework; she is chided for this: “Thought we were going to go on without you, Tessie”/ “Wouldn’t have m’leave my dishes in the sink, now, would you, Joe?”<sup>22</sup> Later she emerges the winner of the lottery and is stoned to death.

In addition to suffering societal entrapment as a woman in Cold War America, Jackson also experienced entrapment in her own home. In 1948, Jackson was thirty-two years old and had been married to Stanley Edgar Hyman for eight years. Hyman was hired as an instructor in Bennington

20. Elaine Tyler May, “Family Values’: The Uses and Abuses of American Family History,” *Revue Française d’études Américaines* [French Review of American Studies] 97, no. 3 (2003): 14.

21. *Ibid.*

22. Jackson, *The Lottery and Other Stories*, 294–95.

College and would later become known as a literary critic. The couple settled in North Bennington, Vermont—the “village” that would become a stand-in for the unnamed small towns in Jackson’s stories—and had four children. Jackson’s marriage was itself a horror story. Hyman repeatedly slept with other women, including his students, and exerted tight control over Jackson’s and the family’s finances, even though Jackson earned considerably more money than Hyman through the success of *The Lottery and Other Stories* and her later books.<sup>23</sup>

Jackson felt ostracised in the insular village of North Bennington, which, according to Franklin, “closed ranks when challenged by a relative newcomer.”<sup>24</sup> Jackson and her husband endured “gossip about her housekeeping, the boozy parties they threw, [and] their African-American friends.”<sup>25</sup> After Jackson challenged the school board for not firing her daughter’s schoolteacher after he used corporal punishment in her class, the neighbourhood harassment became even more venomous. The family discovered “garbage dumped in their yard” and “swastikas soaped on the windows.”<sup>26</sup> On top of all this, Jackson suffered physical entrapments: she was afflicted with chronic headaches, anxiety, and debilitating agoraphobia, which led her to become a recluse later in her life.

### Shirley Jackson: Essayist, Fictionist

Aside from fiction, Jackson communicated her domestic, physical and societal entrapment through nonfiction works. Jackson wrote extensively of her home life in essays published in women’s magazines and later collected in two volumes, *Life Among the Savages* (1953) and *Raising Demons* (1957). In “Memory and Delusion,” published posthumously, Jackson wrote:

23. Ruth Franklin, *Shirley Jackson: A Rather Haunted Life* (New York: Liveright Publishing Corporation, 2017), 342.

24. *Ibid.*, 379.

25. *Ibid.*, 380.

26. *Ibid.*

I am a writer who, due to a series of innocent and ignorant faults of judgment, finds herself with a family of four children and a husband, an eighteen-room house and no help... Anyway, what this means is that I have at most a few hours a day to spend at the typewriter, and about sixteen—assuming that I indulge myself with a few hours of sleep—to spend wondering what to have for dinner tonight that we didn't have last night... It's a wonder I get even four hours' sleep, it really is.<sup>27</sup>

Unlike the sombre, atmospheric style of her fiction, Jackson's essays are written with a subtly humorous tone that remains inspired by the gothic. As Eric Savoy observes, Jackson's domestic writing is "more than obliquely continuous with [her] final Gothic masterpieces that delineate the toxicity of family life."<sup>28</sup> For Savoy, Jackson invites her audience "to read, with bifurcated vision, or with an attention divided between the amusing details of what children do or say and the looming possibility that the 'savage' and the 'demonic' are something other than clever metaphors."<sup>29</sup> In other words, Jackson's characterisation of family life as an amusing world that is also charged with sinister elements is not simply a literary conceit, and experiment in gothic stylisation; it is a way of identifying the dysfunction intrinsic in the apparently charming model of the nuclear family.

Humour allows Jackson to convey unsettling thoughts to the reader while making her household despair palatable to 1940s and 1950s America. However, humour does not provide sufficient distance from reality, nor enough estrangement to invite us "to look again and understand differently."<sup>30</sup> One can imagine a housewife barely holding it all together, unassisted by her husband in child and house care, but still required to smile and be flippant about her troubles—despite the daily struggles she faced. As Joyce Carol Oates observes, Jackson often presents as "the captive cheerily assuring strangers that all is well."<sup>31</sup> If Jackson had to complain, or issue a call for help,

27. Shirley Jackson, "Memory and Delusion," *The New Yorker*, July 31, 2015, <https://www.newyorker.com/books/page-turner/memory-and-delusion>.

28. Eric Savoy, "Between as If and Is: On Shirley Jackson," *Women's Studies* 46, no. 8 (2017): 829.

29. Ibid. Here the words "savage" and "demonic" refer to the titles of Jackson's nonfiction volumes, *Life Among the Savages* (New York: Farrar, Strauss and Young, 1953) and *Raising Demons* (New York: Farrar, Strauss and Cudahy, 1956).

30. Wisker, "Ghostings and Hauntings," 207.

31. Joyce Carol Oates, "Shirley Jackson in Love & Death," *The New York Review of Books*, October 27, 2016, <https://www.nybooks.com/articles/2016/10/27/shirley-jackson-in-love-death/>.

it had to be obscured—in this case, by humour—lest she be accused of being a bad mother and inadequate faculty wife.

Jackson herself preferred the refuge and freedom that fiction gave her. In her posthumously published “On Fans and Fan Mail,” Jackson wrote of her own preference for solitude:

I think that the popular notion of the writer as a person hiding away in a garret, unable to face reality, is probably perfectly true... contacts with the big world outside the typewriter are puzzling and terrifying; I don't think I like reality very much.<sup>32</sup>

Similarly, in one version of a speech she delivered often, Jackson claimed she liked writing fiction “better than anything, because just being a writer of fiction gives you an absolutely unassailable protection against reality,” since “nothing is ever seen clearly or starkly.”<sup>33</sup> In the published version of this speech, titled “Experience and Fiction,” published posthumously, Jackson writes, “it is much easier, I find, to write a story than to cope competently with the millions of daily trials and irritations that turn up in an ordinary house.”<sup>34</sup> In many ways, fiction was a distraction from life—a “flattering veil” through which to reenvision the world around her.<sup>35</sup>

32. Shirley Jackson, “On Fans and Fan Mail,” *The New Yorker*, August 1, 2015, <https://www.newyorker.com/books/page-turner/on-fans-and-fan-mail>.

33. Franklin, *Shirley Jackson: A Rather Haunted Life*, 262, quoted in Ruth Franklin, “Shirley Jackson Wasn’t Actually A Witch. Or Was She?,” *Literary Hub*, September 28, 2016, <https://lithub.com/shirley-jackson-wasnt-actually-a-witch/>.

34. Shirley Jackson, “Experience and Fiction,” in *Come Along with Me*, ed. Stanley Hyman (London: Joseph, 1968), 203.

35. *Ibid.*

### *The Lottery and Other Stories*

In Jackson’s fiction, the house often figures as a site of horror. Jackson explores isolation, ostracism, conformity, and powerlessness, injecting menace and the macabre into otherwise ordinary events. Though “The Lottery” ends with a grand surprise—and with slaughter—Jackson’s other stories in *The Lottery and Other Stories* concern tiny cruelties and trivial violences that inflict harm without drawing blood; however, like “The Lottery,” they too juxtapose dark scenarios with the bright interiors of the domestic sphere, thereby estranging familiar spaces and shocking the reader into paying closer attention.

In Jackson's stories, the kitchen is one such space, a familiar room that often becomes a site of entrapment. In "The Intoxicated," which opens the collection, a man stumbles out of the dining room and into the kitchen during a party; there he finds the host's daughter, a seventeen-year-old girl named Eileen. "I'm writing a paper about the future of the world," Eileen explains to the man.<sup>36</sup> Eileen is the only character named in a story filled with adults, alerting the reader to her uniqueness and importance, even as the man begins to mock her. "In my day," he propounds, "girls thought of nothing but cocktails and necking."<sup>37</sup> In the conversation that follows, Eileen invokes horror in the man by illustrating to him a different world with "new rules and new ways of living."<sup>38</sup> She tells him of a doomed future, and describes how she believes the world will end:

Churches going first... then all the big apartment houses, slipping slowly into the water with the people inside... And the schools, in the middle of Latin class maybe, while we're reading Caesar... Each time we begin a chapter in Caesar, I wonder if this won't be the one we never finish.<sup>39</sup>

The man realises that Eileen is imagining a world in which he is dead—buried in the ruins. When it ends, the man finds himself "want[ing] to say something adult and scathing, and yet... afraid of showing her that he had listened to her."<sup>40</sup> But by this point, it has become clear to the reader and the man alike that the future of Eileen's imagination is simply that—an imagined future—and so the man leaves the kitchen and leaves Eileen behind, her story ignored and inconsequential.

In "Flower Garden," entrapment is apparent in both the domestic and societal spheres. In this story, the recently widowed Mrs. MacLane and her young son, Davey, have moved from New York into the small town and are soon befriended by Mrs. Winning. Jackson estranges small-town conformity in the

36. Jackson, *The Lottery and Other Stories*, 5.

37. *Ibid.*

38. *Ibid.*, 7.

39. *Ibid.*, 6.

40. *Ibid.*, 7.

way she names her characters. Stepping into the story is akin to stepping into a claustrophobic house of mirrors, as the characters reflect one another in disconcerting ways. In addition to Mrs. Winning's mother-in-law also being called Mrs. Winning, the two Mrs. Winnings both have husbands named Howard, and in turn both have sons named Howard. The young Mrs. Winning emulates the older Mrs. Winning in moments of maternal service: she tries to "anticipate her mother-in-law's gestures of serving," and thinks, with relief, that "she had at least given them another Howard, with the Winning eyes and mouth, in exchange for her food and her bed."<sup>41</sup> The young Mrs. Winning's comments are a clear affirmation of the societal expectations placed on married women.

The young Mrs. Winning also thinks, at first, that Mrs. MacLane, a young mother, is her reflection, at least until the latter befriends an African-American neighbour and hires him to work on her flower garden. Thus crossing over the town's unspoken racial lines, Mrs. MacLane shatters the illusion of likeness that Mrs. Winning is primed to project or perceive in the newly arrived mother. As Mrs. MacLane is snubbed by the town, Mrs. Winning withdraws from her one-time friend, cocooning herself in the safety of conformity and the esteem of her respectable name.

In "The Daemon Lover," Jackson estranges feminine anxiety and fear, a form of psychological entrapment, by intensifying it. Jackson illustrates a woman's fear of ageing, of growing undesirable and alone, through her unnamed female protagonist, who experiences increasingly bizarre events and reactions. The protagonist is thirty-four and engaged to a younger man: "I can hardly believe it myself," she writes to her sister.<sup>42</sup> She is so anxious on her wedding day that she rips a seam under the arm of her dress. But something else is wrong: she cannot recall the face or voice of her husband-to-be, a man named James Harris, nicknamed "Jamie," and she discovers that he is not at his

41. *Ibid.*, 7.

42. *Ibid.*, 9.

apartment either. She travels all over the city looking for him, encountering people amused by her appearance. At one point of her search, the protagonist notes “three or four” policemen, “standing around listening, looking at her, at the print dress, at her too-bright make-up, smiling at one another.”<sup>43</sup> Later, when she speaks to a man in the doorway of an apartment building she believes is Jamie’s address, the man tells her, “you got the wrong house, lady,” and adds, laughing, “or the wrong guy.”<sup>44</sup> Finally, she is led to an apartment where no one comes to the door, but she is convinced that there is “someone inside” because she can hear laughter.<sup>45</sup> The story closes on a disturbing note: “She came back many times... but no matter how often or how firmly she knocked, no one ever came to the door.”<sup>46</sup> Here, the desperate protagonist’s entrapment is associated with her belief in a man who appears no longer to exist—a man she was engaged to marry—and the narrative gives frenzied expression to her deep fear of abandonment.

### *The Haunting of Hill House*

Jackson revisits the theme of feminine anxiety in *The Haunting of Hill House*, first published in 1959.<sup>47</sup> In his 1981 survey of the horror genre, *Danse Macabre*, Stephen King called *The Haunting of Hill House* “one of the finest books ever to come out of the genre.”<sup>48</sup> In 2010, Sophie Missing reviewed the novel in *The Guardian*, lauding it as the “definitive haunted house story.”<sup>49</sup> Indeed, the novel’s opening paragraph is an exemplar of horror literature:

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. Hill House, not sane, stood by itself against the 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

43. *Ibid.*, 23.

44. *Ibid.*, 15.

45. *Ibid.*, 27.

46. *Ibid.*

47. Shirley Jackson, *The Haunting of Hill House* (New York: Viking Penguin, 1959).

48. Stephen King, *Danse Macabre* (New York: Gallery Books, 2010), 310.

49. Sophie Missing, “The Haunting of Hill House by Shirley Jackson,” *The Guardian*, February 7, 2010, <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2010/feb/07/haunting-hill-house-shirley-jackson>.

were sensibly shut; silence lay steadily against the wood and stone of Hill House, and whatever walked there, walked alone.<sup>50</sup>

The novel begins and ends with a description of Hill House (“not sane”), but what the story focuses on, and what truly captivates the reader, is the protagonist Eleanor Vance. Eleanor has spent eleven years caring for her cruel, “invalid mother,” and has become so desperate for human connection that she approaches a strange invitation to live with a Dr. Montague and some others for a time at an old house, Hill House, with curious optimism.

Eleanor approaches the Hill House stay as a new beginning and escape from her entrapment. Of course, this “escape” also constitutes a period of seclusion inside a house with a dark history. However, at least initially, Jackson’s novel estranges the protagonist’s feelings of entrapment, with Eleanor envisioning her new predicament in an unexpected way—with glee and excitement:

She smiled out at the sunlight slanting along the street and thought, I am going, I am going, I have finally taken a step.<sup>51</sup>

Eleanor finds joy in Hill House, marvelling at her easy banter with the others who had been invited to live there: “I am one of them; I belong.”<sup>52</sup> She soon discovers that the invitation was part of an investigation into supernatural phenomena at the Hill House—an apparently haunted house—that is being led by Dr. Montague, a “doctor of philosophy” in anthropology who is “scrupulous about the use of his title,” lest he be regarded as unscientific.<sup>53</sup>

But Eleanor’s joy is often mixed with terror, and at times she feels both emotions simultaneously, or is aware and then unaware of them:

Idly, Eleanor picked a wild daisy, which died in her fingers, and, lying on the grass, looked up into its dead face. There

50. Jackson, *The Haunting of Hill House*, 3.

51. *Ibid.*, 15.

52. *Ibid.*, 60.

53. *Ibid.*, 4.

was nothing in her mind beyond an overwhelming wild happiness. She pulled at the daisy, and wondered, smiling at herself, What am I going to do? What am I going to do?<sup>54</sup>

What is terrifying in this passage (as well as in the novel as a whole) is not the morbid nature of the house, nor the rapid death of the flower, but Eleanor's descent into madness, which can be understood either as an incident of the house taking control of her mind, or as an aftereffect of Eleanor's social isolation and the trauma of caring for her spiteful mother. But Eleanor's madness is coupled with her slow realisation that the moment the experiment ends and the participants are required to leave Hill House, she will have nowhere else to go. She cannot return to her sister's house—where she sleeps on a cot in her baby niece's room—because she has stolen her sister's car in order to drive to Hill House. Planning ahead, she tells another participant, Theodora, that she will follow her home: "I want to be someplace where I belong."<sup>55</sup> But Theodora rejects her, responding dismissively: "I am not in the habit of taking home stray cats."<sup>56</sup>

Eleanor is a thirty-two-year-old woman in a society that demands beauty and conformity—and she is acutely aware of it. On her way to Hill House, she watches a child refuse to drink her milk at a country restaurant, instead crying out for her "cup of stars" as her mother, who soothes her, attempts to persuade the girl to take her milk from the regular glass. "Don't do it," Eleanor thinks, for "once they have trapped you into being everyone else you will never see your cup of stars again."<sup>57</sup> Eleanor knows she herself is trapped, though not in Hill House, but in the house of her body and mind, a prison much harder, if not impossible, to escape. "Why don't you run away?" Eleanor asks a waitress she meets in the restaurant, with whom she hears of the "lucky ones" who escape the town. The waitress's curt reply is telling. "Would

54. *Ibid.*, 180.

55. *Ibid.*, 208.

56. *Ibid.*

57. *Ibid.*, 22.

I be any better off?" she asks, her entrapment in the town made clear in her implication that leaving would be futile.<sup>58</sup>

Near the end of the novel, Dr. Montague and the other participants, fearing that the house is affecting Eleanor's sanity, decide that Eleanor should leave Hill House immediately. Hill House is starting to look kinder than the outside world and, in the end, Eleanor makes her choice. She sits behind the wheel of her sister's car, considering her predicament:

... 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.<sup>59</sup>

She then crashes the car "at the great tree at the curve of the driveway," finding an escape from entrapment in her own death.<sup>60</sup>

### Conclusion: "A Thing in Front of Us"

Fiction, ultimately, could not protect Jackson from reality. Nor could it estrange her world enough to change it. Like Eleanor Vance, Jackson tried to escape the world but could not escape her body and mind, which continued to plague her with myriad illnesses. Jackson died of heart failure on August 8, 1965, at the age of forty-eight, leaving a legacy of thirteen published books, including a short story collection, six novels, and two memoirs.<sup>61</sup> In 2007, the Shirley Jackson Awards were established to honour her legacy, celebrating "outstanding achievement in the literature of psychological suspense, horror, and the dark fantastic."<sup>62</sup>

After being largely out of print until 2009, Jackson's fiction returned to mainstream consciousness with the 2018 Netflix mini-series adaptation of *The Haunting of Hill House*.<sup>63</sup> Unfortunately, this modern reimagining proves to be fundamentally unfaithful to Jackson's novel. It effectively erases Jackson from the story's universe by attributing the novel's opening paragraph to a male character who is a writer,

58. *Ibid.*, 26.

59. *Ibid.*, 245. Italics in original.

60. *Ibid.*

61. Franklin, *Shirley Jackson: A Rather Haunted Life*, 494.

62. The Shirley Jackson Awards (website), accessed December 2, 2019, <https://www.shirleyjacksonawards.org/>.

63. *The Haunting of Hill House*, directed by Mike Flanagan, aired October 12, 2018, on Netflix, <https://www.netflix.com/au/title/80189221>.

frustrating the novel's potential for a psychobiographical analysis. It is a perspective change that, as Abigail Nussbaum observes, "infects" the whole series.<sup>64</sup> In this Hill House, the crumbling edifice is a metaphor for a crumbling family life that can be fixed only by the husband and, later, by his heir and the house's new owner, his oldest son. At many points in the series—upon uncovering black mould in the mansion he is remodelling, or while cradling his wife who has jumped to her death—the patriarch Hugh Crain announces, "I can fix this."

The series thus eschews the specific feminine anxiety of Eleanor Vance and puts male perspectives at the front and centre, turning a story of "women who have been failed by men" into a story of "men who have failed women... in the service of elevating the pain and redemption of men," as Nussbaum articulates.<sup>65</sup> It is arguable, then, that now, more than half a century after Jackson's death, her descriptions of the rich internal lives of her haunted women and her estrangement of domestic life are even more vital. Female entrapment can still be, to return to Shklovsky, seen but not seen, even when "a thing is in front of us."<sup>66</sup> One of the most compelling moments in *The Haunting of Hill House* is when Eleanor quietly admires her individual personhood: "What a complete and separate thing I am," she thinks to herself.<sup>67</sup> Notice how Eleanor needed to state what should be self-evident, to alert us to what is already directly in front of us: that she is a woman, with her own voice and agency. But at times it is necessary. The devices of estrangement in gothic fiction allow the previously unseen not only to be seen but to be gazed at in a different light.

64. Abigail Nussbaum, "The Haunting of Hill House," *Strange Horizons*, October 29, 2018, <http://strangehorizons.com/non-fiction/reviews/the-haunting-of-hill-house/>.

65. *Ibid.*

66. Shklovsky, "Art, as Device," 162.

67. Jackson, *The Haunting of Hill House*, 78.

