

PERNICIOUS DOMICILE: THE HAUNTED HOUSE FORMULA IN SHIRLEY JACKSON'S THE HAUNTING OF HILL HOUSE

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Abstract:The haunted house formula is employed by the writers of American gothic fiction as metaphors for the trauma of the past and also the cultural fears imbibed by the characters. The chronotope of the haunted houses signify the spatial- temporal relationship of the characters with their domicile. Every nuance of an architectural complexity in the Gothic fiction has a significant role in molding the characters of the particular fiction. This paper focus on the chronotope of the haunted house with special reference to Shirley Jackson's *The Haunting of Hill House*, published in 1959. Jackson's fiction is shaped on the basis of the haunted house formula. Hill House, a source of evil is the center of Jackson's plot. The chronotope of the Hill House as a haunted site harboring evil and its impact on the characters residing in it form the basis of the narrative structure of the fiction. Jackson reassures through her fiction about the notion that a house is not just an architectural embodiment of concrete materials but rather a potential source which could influence its inhabitants based on their psyche.

Keywords:Gothic, Haunted- house, Chronotope, Uncanny, Architecture, Mother

Introduction:The French philosopher Gaston Bachelard asserts in his *Poetics of Space* (1958) that "the house shelters day-dreaming, the house protects the dreamer, the house allows one to dream in peace" (6). The house stands as an influential figure in literature. Apart from offering a simple living space the house serves as a metaphor for the societal ideologies and it also symbolizes the mindset of its inhabitants. In the Gothic and the Horror fiction, the space of living such as castle, monastery or the contemporary house serves a crucial role in unravelling the mystery and the psychological realm of the characters. The architectural details form an integral part of a Gothic text through which the relation between the space and characters of the plot influence each other. From Walpole's *Castle of Otranto* in 1764 down the time, the abode of the characters has a significant role in the materialization of terror within a fiction.

Bakhtin's theory of chronotope dwells into the spatial and temporal relationship framing a literary text. The chronotope of gothic home or the haunted house locks in the secrets from past which is a labyrinth of human consciousness and anxiety that is centered around the domestic sphere. According to Bakhtin, the significance of the chronotope is that they are the "organizing centers for fundamental narrative events of the novel. The chronotope is the place where the knots of narrative are tied and untied the chronotope makes narrative events concrete, makes them take on flesh, causes blood to flow in their veins (Bakhtin 250). Among the various types of chronotope, the chronotope of haunted house belongs to the minor chronotope within the major chronotope of the Gothic. The private history of the family governs the temporal aspects in the chronotope of a haunted house. The chronotope of the haunted house could be seen as a reinterpretation

of Bakhtin's chronotope of the castle. Mikhail Bakhtin in his seminal essay "Forms of Time and of the Chronotope in the Novel" included in his essay collection *The Dialogic Imagination* (1975) says,

The castle is saturated through and through with a time that is historical in the narrow sense of the word, that is, the time of the historical past.... The traces of centuries and generations are arranged in it in visible form as various parts of its architecture, in furnishing, weapons, the ancestral portrait gallery, the family archives and in the particular human relations involving dynastic primacy and the transfer of hereditary rights. And finally legends and traditions animate every corner of the castle and its environs through their constant reminders of past events. It is this quality that gives rise to the specific kind of narrative inherent in castles and that is then worked out in Gothic novels (245-246).

Freud's seminal essay, "The Uncanny" ascertains the idea of the unfamiliarity of a familiar object thus creating a state of insecurity in the mind of the individual. "Unheimliche," the German word for uncanny also means 'unhomely' or 'not-being-at-home'. Freud also states in essay that, the thing which is called "Uncanny" could also mean the opposite, i.e, it could also mean homely and familiar at the same time. Consequently, in an uncanny situation, the things that are familiar seems to be unfamiliar through a process of repression. In the chronotope of the haunted house tales there is a transformation from the homely to the unhomely as a result of the return of the repressed causing cognitive dissonance. Freud's concept of Uncanny thus suggests a notion of home as a source of terror. This notion became a central structure in the chronotope of the American Gothic, where the ancient castle and monasteries were replaced with the contemporary

house, a familiar and homely space for people. Home is a place which is supposed to provide safety and security to its inhabitants. But in the case of Gothic fiction the safety associated with the concept of home is often replaced by a sense of danger which toils with the psyche of its inhabitants. Anthony Vidler in his influential work, *The Architectural Uncanny: Essays in the Modern Unhomely* analyses Freud's and Jentsch's conceptual notion of uncanny and apply its relation to the science of architecture. He proposes that:

Architecture has been intimately linked to the notion of the uncanny since the end of the eighteenth century. At one level, the house has provided a site for endless representations of haunting, doubling, dismembering, and other terrors in literature and art. At another level, the labyrinthine spaces of the modern city have been construed as the sources of modern anxiety, from revolution and epidemic to phobia and alienation. (21)

In his *Nightmare on Main Street: Angels, Sodomasochism, and the Culture of Gothic*, Mark Edmondson states that "Architecture is central to the social polemic of the best terror writing and filmmaking. For a novel or a movie to be in the true terror mode, there must be a horrifying place" (54). While engrained in European gothic tradition, the haunted house formula has attained an altered connotation and a persistent role in the American gothic narration. The haunted house tales attempt to keep the history thriving by projecting the convolutions of the cultural background from which they materialized, thereby giving the past an opportunity to have a strong grip and impact over the present. Dale Bailey in his *American Nightmares: The Haunted House Formula in American Popular Fiction* states that "The House is our primary marker of class and our central symbol of domesticity, touching upon everything from women's rights (the angel in the house, not to mention the homemaker) to the deterioration of the nuclear family (the broken home)" (8).

Shirley Jackson's *The Haunting of Hill House*, (1959) is a key work of 20th century Gothic fiction which showcase the full quintessence of the haunted house formula. Jackson prudently employs the concept of terror while narrating the convoluted affiliation between the strange events of the Hill House and the psyche of its inhabitants. Hill House, a ninth-year-old mansion becomes the cornerstone of the plot. The paranormal investigator: Dr. Montague, the shy and reclusive: Eleanor Vance, the flamboyant and possibly lesbian actress: Theodora and the wayward young heir of the Hill House: Luke Sanderson who gathers in the Hill House to conduct an investigation on the psychic phenomena of the house does not encounter a supernatural entity in a physical form.

Rather it's the Hill House with its sinister histories which they have to deal with. Hill House built by Hugh Crain is a house that has a terrible history by the untimely deaths of its previous inhabitants. Crain and his three wives died in the driveway similar to the death of Eleanor in the end of the story. It was believed by Dr. Montague that the house could have been evil from the time it was built. Hill House is like a monster deliberately consuming its prey. Bailey's *American Nightmares* make the assertion that, The contemporary haunted house formula dispenses not only with ghosts, but with the ontological uncertainty.... Instead, the formula opts for a flatly prosaic depiction of the supernatural in which the house itself is sentient and malign, independent of any ghost which may be present (and very frequently none are) (5-6).

The dark history of the Hill House surpasses all other constituents in the story. The beginning and ending of the novel circles to the same point which displays Hill House as a source of terror and to describe in Bailey's words, "like a snake swallowing its tail" (40).

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 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)

Gaston Bache lard states in his pivotal work *The Poetics of Space* (1958) that "our house is our corner of the world. As has often been said, it is our first universe, a real cosmos in every sense of the world (4). But in the *Haunting of Hill House*, the house stands as an allegory for malevolence and the dark space. The Hill House is structured in such a way that it maneuvers with the febleness of its dwellers by making them question their own sanity. The architectural convolution creates a mental anguish among the characters as they try to maintain their stability and be rooted in the reality. In the distressing atmosphere of Hill House which effects everyone around it, Eleanor becomes the major victim. Dr. Montague doubted that the events which happened in the Hill House was the unconscious doing of Eleanor through her clairvoyant abilities. Already with a psychic past Eleanor starts losing herself to the Hill House. It could have been her telekinetic power which caused the rain of stones at her childhood home although she denies it as her doing. The terrible banging on doors and wall, the smearing of blood in Theodora's clothes, message written on the wall stating "Help Eleanor come home" could all have been the unconscious doing of

Eleanor, affected by the contagious atmosphere of Hill House. The novel doesn't verify whether the events happened were due to Eleanor's unconscious telekinetic abilities or whether a real supernatural agent was behind it. After a recurrent distressing events at Hill House the idea of the house as a space which offers comfort and security to its inhabitants were suspected. It is proved in the novel that the root of terror arises from within the confined space of the house. Bailey in his *American Nightmares* refers to Irving Malin's affirmations in *The New American Gothic* when he stated that:

The modern American gothic tale is marked by a profound turn inward. Though the gothic setting continues to serve as a microcosm for the clash of good and evil, that clash is increasingly dramatized on a personal, narcissistic level. And the gothic house, the haunted house, becomes in the end a distorted mirror of the self, reflecting the danger of self-absorption (34).

Bailey's book further makes an assertion parting from Malin that in the chronotope of the contemporary haunted house tales, the self-reflection which the protagonist acquires is an imitation of the fraudulent culture which has molded the character. Eleanor constantly tells herself during her stay at the Hill House that the "Journey's end in lovers meeting" (Jackson 36). Bailey suggests that this phrase "ultimately becomes a *leitmotif*, denoting not only Eleanor's loneliness but her vulnerability to the fantasy of emotional fulfillment which Hill House represents" (34-35).

Jackson has rendered the Hill House a feminine or motherly image. Luke Sanderson, the young heir to the house regards the house as something which is highly maternal. He says, "It's all so motherly ... Everything so soft. Everything so padded. Great embracing chairs and sofas which turn out to be hard and unwelcome when you sit down, and reject you at once" (209). Through Luke's words, Jackson describes the house as a "mother house... a housemother, a headmistress, a housemistress" (211). Eleanor Vance who has "internalized the oppressive ideology of her culture" (Bailey 33) goes to the Hill House in the hope of starting a fresh life after spending her youthful years in taking care of her invalid and despotic mother. The Hill House offered her the prospects of recognition and care which she desperately craved for. The shy and reclusive Eleanor having both the pangs of guilt and relief for the demise of her mother, enters the Hill House and senses that she has entered another atrocious womb. She ponders that "I am like a small creature swallowed whole by a monster, and the monster feels my tiny movements inside" (42). The constructed

feminine ideology of a "woman" has deeply infiltrated the consciousness of Eleanor that she can't convince herself to escape it. The haunted house could also be analyzed as a "metaphor for an oppressive patriarchal society" (Bailey 28). Bailey says that in *The haunting of Hill House*, "the eponymous house comes to represent the vast web of expectations and obligations, of female duties, which enmeshes the central character, Eleanor Vance" (28).

Knowing Hill House's wicked ability to possess its inhabitants, Dr. Montagues warns Eleanor, Luke and Theodora to leave the house if they start feeling pulled towards it. He specifically says to Eleanor: "promise me absolutely that you will leave, as fast as you can, if you begin to feel the house catching at you" (124). Towards the end of the story it was obvious for Dr. Montague that the house was gaining control over them. He doubted Eleanor's mental stability and was worried for the safety of her and others. Eleanor's obsession with the house failed her to realize the way in which the house was taking control of her lucidity. When she was asked to leave the Hill House, Eleanor told herself that "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" (Jackson 245). She believes that at least her death will unite her with the Hill House. At the culmination of the story before Eleanor crashes her car into the tree, there occurs a moment of instant realization in which she wonders, "Why am I doing this? Why am I doing this? Why don't they stop me?" (246). Thus Eleanor who didn't want to leave the Hill House merges with it forever. Soon after Eleanor's death the other characters at Hill House disperses to their private lives and the novels ends cynically with the same statement of "Hill House itself, not sane, stood against its hills, holding darkness within... and whatever walked there, walked alone" (246).

Conclusion: The fictional narratives of Jackson are centered on realism to a certain degree. The haunted house formula in the Gothic stories could be seen as a reaction to the socio-cultural fears which are internalized by the people. The false security offered by the transitory 'family' to each of the characters in Jackson's fiction and the terror aroused by the collapse of this fabricated familial ideology echoes the cultural apprehension about the domestic space in a society. The chronotope of the haunted house in Jackson's story is a projection of the concept of homeliness as a delusion. The *Haunting of Hill House* ascertains the idea that the elements of past always infiltrate to the present through the temporal dislodgment of space in a conventional Gothic fiction, by the haunting of a house.

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