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“Whatever walked there, walked alone”

Shirley Jackson’s female isolation

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This master's thesis analyzes different forms of isolation in Shirley Jackson's novels *Hangsaman* (1951), *The Haunting of Hill House* (1959) and *We Have Always Lived in the Castle* (1962). It aims to show that the female protagonists of the three novels are isolated by various societal, emotional and psychological reasons, and to explore how isolation acts in turn as both a destructive and an empowering force in Jackson's work.

The three novels were analyzed utilizing the framework and context of the Female Gothic tradition, through a feminist-historical lens. They were observed as pre-second-wave feminist works of fiction that deal in questions of feminism and the ways in which social factors had an effect on the isolation of women in mid-century American society. Attention was paid to their content as well as elements of their narrative form, such as narration and focalization.

The analysis observes that the female protagonists in Jackson's work experience isolation as a result of both societal, emotional and psychological factors, all of which interact with one another. In the first two novels the heroines form relationships with other women that have the potential to become liberating and offer human connection, but which ultimately disintegrate, leading to unhappy endings. It is only in Jackson's last novel *We Have Always Lived in the Castle* where the heroine, in part due to her close relationship with another woman, her sister, is able to find empowerment in her isolation.

This thesis follows in the footsteps of previous research on Jackson's writing, which has positioned her firmly in the canon of the Female Gothic. Her work is relevant to analyze through the Female Gothic lens because of the ways which it centers women and explores women's issues while utilizing, as well as sometimes subverting, gothic tropes and conventions.

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1 Introduction

In her 2017 biography of Shirley Jackson, Ruth Franklin writes about Jackson's fantasy of leaving her husband and family life behind. Franklin quotes diary entries in which Jackson writes about "the glorious world of the future" where she is "alone. safe[1]" (479). Jackson thought that no matter what she might lose in the process of leaving, it would be worth it "to be separate, to be alone, to *stand* and *walk* alone, not to be different and weak and helpless and degraded…and shut out. not shut out, shutting out[2]" (479). These themes of "safety" and agency in aloneness, juxtaposed with simultaneous fears of being "different and weak and helpless and degraded" go a long way in illuminating Jackson's personal struggles, but are also strikingly prevalent in her fiction writing, channeled through her various isolated female characters. Many of Jackson's female protagonists seem to share both a longing for, and a fear of, a life alone. Their isolation is both physical and societal – as women in mid 20th century America – as well as emotional and psychological. Through their behavior they isolate themselves from society and their peers, while simultaneously longing for connection and experiencing emotional loneliness. Their position in society, as women, isolates and confines them into domestic spaces and limits their possibilities and dictates the expectations placed on them, which in turn affects their mental states and contributes to the loneliness and psychological turmoil they experience. Jackson's characters offer varying examples of the distinctions and conflicts between ideas of being "shut out" and "shutting out."

In this master's thesis I examine Jackson's fractured, volatile, confused and often confusing female protagonists and their relationships with isolation; social, physical and psychological. I argue that Jackson uses isolation as both a destructive and empowering force in her works *Hangsaman* (1951), *The Haunting of Hill House* (1959) and *We Have Always Lived in the Castle* (1962). The three novels take very different approaches to their protagonists' various forms of isolation, and I will be analyzing these differences in the context of historical and societal realities of mid-century America, feminism, and the Female Gothic literary tradition.

Jackson's writing career took place in a time of post-war prosperity in the United States. It was the golden age of the American housewife, the domestic goddess who found the time to

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[1] Shirley Jackson wrote her diaries and notes mostly in lowercase – these quotes and any further citations from her private documents will follow her original formatting.
[2] All emphases in quotes throughout this thesis will be taken from the original source, unless otherwise stated.

take care of the children, the cooking, the dishes, the cleaning, her figure, her hair, her makeup and most importantly, the happiness of her husband. It was a period of time that eventually led to the publishing of seminal works such as Betty Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique* and Sylvia Plath's *The Bell Jar* in 1963 – a year after the publication of Jackson's last novel – and, essentially, the birth of second wave feminism in the United States. Jackson was part of the academic scene, respected by her peers and married to literary critic Stanley Hyman (e.g. Miller xii). Still, she was unable to escape the demands of being a housewife and a mother to four children, and, as Laura Miller puts it in her introduction to a 2006 edition of *The Haunting of Hill House*, Jackson had "difficulty integrating these contradictory selves" (xii). It is no wonder, then, that Jackson's female protagonists also reflect these contradictions of self and conflicting desires and fears, and that, as is typical for Gothic literature, split identities and disintegrating selves are so present in her work. For the purposes of this thesis, the contradictions I am most interested in relate to the societally imposed isolation and confinement and its interaction with the emotional and psychological isolation that Jackson's female protagonists experience. Isolation is something Jackson's protagonists both fear and seek out and it acts in turn as both an empowering and destructive force in their narratives.

In the rest of this introductory chapter, I will first offer some theoretical background on the Female Gothic as it relates to Jackson's work, give context on the feminist climate of 1950s America, and finally give short synopses of the three novels I will be analyzing in this thesis.

1.1 The Female Gothic

Jackson's work has been considered to belong to the wider context of *Female Gothic*. The term was first introduced by critic Ellen Moers in the 1977 re-edition of her book *Literary Women: The Great Writers.* Moers gives a rather simple initial definition for the term as "the work that women writers have done in the literary mode that, since the eighteenth century, we have called the Gothic" (138). Moers presents literary icons Ann Radcliffe and Mary Shelley as pioneers of the Female Gothic, while acknowledging that they represent two very different approaches to both the Gothic tradition and female identity. Radcliffe's women, Moers argues, are simultaneously "persecuted victim[s] and courageous heroine[s]" (139), and represent what she calls "traveling heroinism" – they act, move and experience exciting adventures (191). Shelley's *Frankenstein*, on the other hand, Moers sees as a tale of maternity and birth (140). The enduring foundational examples agreed upon by academics for the

Female Gothic and the more violent and taboo-exploring Male Gothic are Anne Radcliffe's *The Mysteries of Udolpho* and Matthew Lewis's *The Monk,* respectively (e.g. Wallace & Smith 3).

Traditional plot elements of the Female Gothic might include a heroine pursued and threatened by some kind of a patriarchal figure (Wallace & Smith 3), possibly in a setting of an old castle of some kind where she may live out Moers' traveling heroinism and "scuttle miles along corridors, descend into dungeons, and explore secret chambers" all by herself (Moers 191) – a possibility of movement perhaps denied from her in society at large. In traditional Female Gothic narratives, an explanation is provided for ghostly apparitions, whereas in the Male Gothic, the supernatural simply exists in the reality of the narrative (e.g. Wallace & Smith 3, Williams 103). Female Gothic literature also "demands a happy ending" (Williams 103), while male stories often end in death and tragedy. Female Gothic narratives often feature unreliable narrators, and suspense is created by the reader sharing the limitations of the heroine's mistaken perceptions (102). A significant reoccurring characteristic of the endings of traditional Female Gothic novels is a form of rebirth, where the heroine is rescued from danger and reawakened to a new world where "she acquires in marriage a new name and, most important, a new identity" (104).

The traditional Female Gothic model has faced criticism for its portrayal of women and its particular brand of feminism. Diane Hoeveler, for example, presents a rather more complex and critical view of the traditions of the genre than the summary above, positing that while writers of Female Gothic were angry, their heroines were not (15). Instead of "dirtying her dainty little hands" (7) to defeat the stereotypical patriarchal gothic villain, the gothic heroine, according to Hoeveler, safely performs femininity and victimizes herself, confirming a "fantasy that the weak have power through carefully cultivating the appearance of their very powerlessness" (7). Hoeveler sees that heroines of the Female Gothic seemingly fought against patriarchal power, while ultimately reverting back to conformity (6). Such criticism echoes other academics who have seen the Female Gothic genre as ultimately conservative (Wallace & Smith 3).

For readers of Jackson, it is obvious that her work does not conform to many, or even most of the parameters set by academics for what makes Gothic traditionally "female". Her novels do not have straightforwardly happy endings and certainly do not end in marriage, her female

protagonists are undeniably angry, and much of the uncanniness and unease in her work comes from within the psyches of her characters – all features more akin to the traditions of Male Gothic. Indeed, while Jackson's position within the canon of modern Female Gothic seems undisputed, the exact genre and mode she operated in is an area of some nuance and debate, and varies depending on which of her works is being discussed. Andrew Smith refers to Jackson's "domestic female Gothic" in the title of his essay for *The Female Gothic: New Directions*, Diana Wallace discusses the "satiric Gothic" of *We Have Always Lived in the Castle* (76), and Daryl Hattenhauer sees Jackson's work as "proto-postmodernist", observing the ways in which Jackson "puts the feminine and masculine Gothic in dialogue" (2, 185). This dialogic relationship between what has been traditionally deemed Female and Male Gothic seems to describe Jackson's nuanced relationship to the tradition aptly, while simultaneously demonstrating the admittedly arbitrary nature of the binary division into Male and Female Gothic, when applied to modern literature and feminism. Much of the writing that has been done on the Gothic and women – including Moers's original writing and Hoeveler's criticism – focuses on the Radcliffean tales of the 18th and 19th century. It is only natural that the definition of what constitutes as Female Gothic would have evolved and transformed significantly in the 150 years separating Radcliffe's *Udolpho* and Jackson's writing career. Both literature and women's issues had seen significant changes by the time Jackson picked up a pen in the 1950s, and her specific mode of Female Gothic literature reflects the society around her – more on this shortly.

Like Smith in his aforementioned essay, some analyses place Jackson as a master of the "domestic" Female Gothic, a type of Gothic literature where writers examine the absurdities and horrors of the middle-class family home as the "woman's place". As Wallace puts it, "the Gothic has been the mode of writing which has perhaps most brilliantly articulated and symbolized the terrors of that domestic space" (75). The term "domestic Gothic" was introduced by Joan Lidoff in her analysis of Christina Stead's 1940 novel *The Man Who Loved Children*, a work which, according to Lidoff, "allows the revelation of fantasy material" but, in contrast to the Gothic, is otherwise contextualized as 19th century realism. (203). The domestic Gothic tale deals in mundane details but is "pervasively colored by the emotional and metaphorical excesses of a Gothic novel," depicting the "violent emotional forces", "psychological struggles of domination" and "fantasies of the subterranean psychic world" that lurk beneath these everyday interactions and realities (203).

Lidoff asserts that feelings of "fragmentation" and "dissolution of identity" (205) – phenomena frequently depicted in literature dealing in the Gothic device of the grotesque – can stem from, among other things, "social subordination" (205). She argues that this subordination of women was a driving force behind the development of domestic Gothic literature, and that it was a mode where the angers, frustrations and horrors resulting from being confined to domestic spaces – that, according to Hoeveler, where so hidden in the traditional Female Gothic – could be explored via gothic literary devices and conventions. While Jackson's heroines in the novels I will be analyzing defy a central characteristic of Lidoff's most traditional domestic Gothic, in that all three are single, unmarried women who are not housewives or parents, they are nevertheless surrounded by societal expectations and figures who perhaps offer glimpses into their own futures in such domestic confinement. Jackson's domestic Gothic can be seen as presenting a more lightly satirical approach to the terrors of womanhood – as mentioned, Diana Wallace in her essay for *Women and the Gothic*, categorizes Jackson's work, particularly her novels *The Sundial* and *We Have Always Lived in the Castle*, as "satiric" domestic Gothic (76). But, in the manner of domestic Gothic, Jackson's writing similarly utilizes gothic tropes and imagery mixed with depictions of everyday realities of womanhood and a looming threat of social subordination, all of which combine into works that are, in my view, politically charged and pronouncedly feminist.

To explore these feminist implications of Jackson's work, it is important to situate her writing in a sociopolitical context by acknowledging the relevant feminist theory of the era. In 1963, the second wave of feminism in the United States gained a foundational text in Betty Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique.* The book takes its title from the name given by Friedan to the myth of the American housewife, a myth which she aimed to deconstruct and critique by exposing the profound unhappiness and unease that inhabiting the role aroused in many women. In a survey she conducted among college-educated housewives, phrases like "I feel as if I don't exist" (18) and "I just don't feel alive" (19) repeated. Thus, as Rebecca Munford observes, the feminine mystique was a very Gothic phenomenon indeed, inseparable from these feelings of undeadness and ghostliness. For many highly educated women, it represented a "return to the home and the trappings of domestic femininity" after the progress made in previous decades (125).

Friedan's text was published a year after Jackson's last novel, *We Have Always Lived in the Castle,* making it impossible to cite as an influence for any of Jackson's writing, but the social

climate that led to its publishing was developing throughout the fifteen-year period during which Jackson wrote her most seminal works. Smith notes that Jackson's career spans a "period of comparative disempowerment to the liberations provided by the passing of the Equal Pay Act in 1963 and the Civil Rights Act of 1964", and emphasizes the importance of placing her work in this "illuminating" historical context (160). A great number of scholars have made the connection between Jackson and Friedan's writing, seeing Jackson's work as "anticipating" the themes of domestic entrapment discussed and condemned at length by Friedan (see e.g. Franklin 197, 236; Munford 125; Smith 160; Wilson 33). It is not novel, then, to explore Jackson's writing as articulation of the anxieties and frustrations of a woman of her time.

In line with this connection with Friedan's text, and in contrast to criticism of the conservative nature of the Female Gothic, Wallace and Smith observe that the genre can be seen as "politically subversive", putting into words women's "dissatisfactions with patriarchal structures and offering a coded expression of their fears of entrapment within the domestic and the female body" (2). These fears of entrapment, within the physical, societal and the psychological, are undeniably a throughline in Jackson's work. Smith sees Jackson's "reworking" (153) of the Female Gothic tradition as notedly more pessimistic than the Radcliffean Gothic of the past, which projected a certain kind of "social, economic and moral optimism" (153) and a belief in the possibility of women to move up the social ladder (161). This air of pessimism can be seen as another point of connection between Jackson and *The Feminine Mystique* (164). Smith's analysis echoes John G. Parks, who observes how "poetic justice and moral virtue" rarely triumph in Jackson's narratives, as she sticks to her vision of "the evil of our time" (249). This prevailing pessimism – most clearly demonstrated by the tragic endings of many of Jackson's tales – is seen by Smith as a reflection of the world in which Jackson wrote, a dark time for women before the birth of second wave feminism and the emancipation of the mid-century American housewife (164).

This sociopolitical and feminist line of interpretation of Jackson's work is followed by Gizem Akçil, who sees Jackson's work as belonging to the tradition of Female Gothic due to the way she explores "conflict between the individual and society" through her "isolated female protagonists" (30). Gothic mansions not only entrap her protagonists, but in some cases also act as "subversive hideouts" (31) and reflect the self and a desire to defy societal norms (31). Focusing specifically on Jackson's last novel, *We Have Always Lived in the Castle*, Akçil

discusses Jackson's protagonists and their desire for isolation and for a "retreat from a hostile world" (32). Jackson's female characters are non-conforming, often psychologically haunted women who enact their resistance to societal order through the Gothic (32-33). These nuanced relationships between the entrapping and empowering nature of isolation are what I will explore in this thesis, analyzing not only Jackson's last and most subversively Gothic novel, but also her markedly different earlier novels *Hangsaman* and *The Haunting of Hill House*. All three novels feature female protagonists who are haunted and isolated in their own ways and who both yearn for and yearn to escape these states.

Before moving on to analysis, I will provide short introductions and synopses of the three novels featured in this thesis.

1.2 Primary material

Hangsaman, published in 1951, is Jackson's second full-length novel. It chronicles the mental breakdown of 17-year-old Natalie Waite as she begins her studies at a prestigious all-girls college. Natalie is a young girl drawn to fantasies and imaginary scenarios. At the start of the novel, she lives with her pompous academic father and miserable housewife mother. After seemingly experiencing sexual assault at her parents' garden party at the hands of her father's colleague, she leaves for college, suppressing the event and pretending it never happened. While at college, Natalie lives in a dormitory where she feels like an outsider and looks down on most of her peers, makes friends with the young alcoholic housewife of a handsome professor, writes letters to her father, and, eventually, starts to become destabilized in her identity. Natalie befriends an unconventional girl named Tony, and the two quicky become close. The novel culminates in a strange and dreamlike sequence of events where Natalie and Tony take a bus ride to a closed amusement park and walk into the dark woods. Natalie, feeling uncomfortable, leaves Tony in the woods and escapes. After getting back to her college town, Natalie contemplates suicide but ultimately decides against it, declaring herself "alone, and grown up, and powerful, and not at all afraid" (*Hangsaman* 218).

1959's *The Haunting of Hill House* centers a lonely woman in her early 30s called Eleanor, who has spent most of her adult life caring for her unwell mother. At the start of the novel, she has answered an advertisement looking for assistants to research supposed hauntings at an old house and has stolen her sister's car to get there. At the house Eleanor meets Theo, another participant, Luke, the son of the family who owns the house, and Dr. Montague, who

is conducting the paranormal research. During the following nights, the four have increasingly strange and inexplicable experiences at Hill House. There are cold spots in the house, doors seem to close on their own, and banging noises can be heard at night. As the days pass, Eleanor and the others come to believe that the house is somehow specifically targeting Eleanor – a message reading "HELP ELEANOR COME HOME" appears on the wall, seemingly in blood. Eleanor grows increasingly unwell and unstable in her identity, no longer sure of what is happening inside her head and what the others can perceive. Finally, the group decides it is best for her to leave, though she is reluctant. Eleanor starts driving away, but, steered by her obsessive thoughts of Hill House belonging to her and being her home, she veers the car into a tree and dies.

We Have Always Lived in the Castle was published in 1962. It ended up being Jackson's final finished novel before she died of heart failure in 1965, at the age of 48, after struggling with severe agoraphobia[3] and anxiety in her final years. It follows Merricat Blackwood, an 18-year-old who lives in her family's old estate with her older sister Constance and senile uncle Julian. We find out early on in the novel that the rest of the Blackwood family died some years ago from poisoning, and that Constance was questioned but acquitted for the murder – later we come to know that the culprit was actually Merricat. Constance is now fully housebound and never goes to the village, which Merricat also only visits twice a week for groceries. The villagers hate the Blackwood family and do not keep it a secret, harassing Merricat with gleeful rhymes about her family's fate. The sisters' isolated domestic idyll is disrupted when a cousin, Charles, shows up to the estate, clearly after Constance's hand in marriage and the Blackwood family wealth. Merricat, who practices witchy rituals, tries everything in her power to get Charles to leave, eventually unintentionally setting fire to the estate. Angry villagers come to cheer on the burning of the Blackwood house, and the commotion leads to Uncle Julian's death. Merricat and Constance return to the house after the destruction, finding it half-ruined. They decide to keep on living in the now appropriately gothic ruins of the house, isolating themselves for good and becoming witchlike mythical beings of the village.

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[3] Jackson's agoraphobia is, for obvious reasons, a fascinating biographical detail in the context of the topic of this thesis – she literally isolated herself in her house for several years after writing a book about characters who do the same thing. This thesis will not, however, delve too much into biographical analysis. The final chapters of Ruth Franklin's Jackson-biography *A Rather Haunted Life* explore this time in her life in detail.

In the following discussion chapters I will analyze these three novels and their protagonists, first focusing on the societal factors that contribute to their isolation, feelings of entrapment and loneliness. I will then move inwards, to explore the inner lives of Jackson's female characters, their personal feelings of loneliness and isolation, and their complicated and fractured psyches. In the final discussion chapter, I will examine the kinds of relationships that they are able to form in their respective narratives and how the ways in which these relationships conclude contribute to what Jackson's writing ultimately has to say about isolation. The structure of this thesis enables the analysis of different kinds of factors, from the external to the internal, that contribute to each character's isolation, and how these contributing factors relate to one another and interact with each other.

2 Societal isolation and domestic entrapment

Jackson's female protagonists represent three very different kinds of young women. Natalie in *Hangsaman* is a seventeen-year-old who feels like she "[has] been truly conscious only since she was about fifteen" (3), whose life is just on the verge of truly beginning. Eleanor in *Hill House* is in her early thirties and, by the standards of 1950s society, already past her youthful years. She is unmarried, still waiting to gain independence after years of caring for her ailing mother. Merricat in *Castle*, like Natalie, is young, but her life experiences at eighteen differ vastly from those of Natalie – she has murdered most of her family members.

While the heroines in these novels are in different stages of their lives and go through very different kinds of experiences, they also share important similarities. All three women are in some way isolated and trapped, in physical spaces or in their bodies, by the expectations they face as young women, and to varying degrees in their own minds. These forms of isolation and entrapment affect and are in constant interaction with each other. In this section I will be analyzing how the female characters in Jackson's three novels experience isolation and confinement specifically through societal expectations placed on them, as well as the physical domestic spaces they exist in. From a feminist viewpoint, I will explore how the haunting threat of "social subordination" (Lidoff 205) acts as a catalyst for fear in Jackson's Female Gothic, and how the fear of "entrapment within the domestic" (Wallace and Smith 2) manifests itself in these three novels. In this section I will focus my analysis first on the protagonists of the earlier two novels, Natalie and Eleanor, as Merricat's relationship to domesticity presents an evolution in Jackson's writing and will be discussed more later.

2.1 The confinement of social expectations

Hangsaman's heroine Natalie seems at the start of her narrative to have all the prospects in the world at her fingertips – she is seventeen and about to leave for a respected college. Natalie's father is an academic and understands the value of his daughter getting an education. He pays for her to go to an all-girls college and seems to very much encourage her development as a writer. But it is clear that he also adheres to the patriarchal values and strict gender roles of the time. Mr. Waite expects his wife to handle all of the work in the kitchen as the family prepare for their weekly Sunday garden party – the guests for which are always invited by Mr. Waite and include "anyone who please[s] him" (16). Naturally, Natalie is also expected to join her mother in the preparations. Natalie's mother, too, sees these weekly tasks

as “good training” (16) for Natalie’s future. But even though Mrs. Waite participates in the restricting gendered traditions within her household and seemingly expects Natalie to continue doing the same when the time comes for her to start a family, she is also revealed to be absolutely miserable with her own lot in life. The kitchen is described as the only place that Mrs. Waite “[possesses] utterly” in the family home, the only place where she can remain, in a connotatively loaded expression, “unmolested” (16). Mrs. Waite tells Natalie that as a young woman she thought marriage was “everything [she] wanted” (19), but while drunk, confesses that she is extremely unhappy, despairing at the fact that this is the “only life [she has] got” (34), and warning Natalie that living with a husband is similarly restricting to living with one’s parents as a child.

At the beginning of *Hill House*, Eleanor, while much older than Natalie in *Hangsaman*, is on the verge of a similar life change. After the death of her sick mother, whom she has looked after for over a decade, Eleanor is filled with hope and free to take on a new adventure. Bernice M. Murphy writes that Eleanor’s lifelong wish that “something would happen” (7-8) is in itself already a powerful statement against the pervasive conservative ideology of the era, a “nagging reminder of the unfulfilled potential and low-grade despair” felt by women of time who were confined by their position in society to lead uninteresting and isolated lives (19-20). Eleanor hated her mother, and also hates her only remaining family member, her sister. Eleanor’s time stuck in the role of a carer has left her lonely and isolated “with no one to love” (7), and she now finds it difficult to talk to anyone without feelings of self-consciousness. Her loneliness and yearning for a place to belong make her an ideal target for the evil house at the center of the narrative.

When Natalie in *Hangsaman* goes to college, she encounters another woman suffocated by the role society has chosen for her. She attends the English class of Arthur Langdon, whom she develops a small infatuation on and who also, in true gothic fashion, reminds her of her father (83). Natalie eventually meets Langdon’s young wife Elizabeth. Elizabeth invites Natalie to the couple’s home, and it quickly becomes clear that she is desperate for connection and friendship. We find out she is only 21 and a former student of Langdon’s, now a housewife bored out of her mind and jealous of her husband’s young admirers. She admits to Natalie that she is embittered by the fact that she “used to be a student and now [she is] a faculty wife” (80). Elizabeth has a drinking habit and a self-destructive edge – she lights things on fire apparently by accident while drunk or passed out, and further on in the book

makes a drunken admission to Natalie that she wants to die (133). Elizabeth entering through the door of her house reminds Natalie of a bird stepping into a cage (77). The parallels between Arthur and Elizabeth Langdon and Natalie's own parents are made clear and explicit. Both women, married to academics, are miserable, unfulfilled, and resentful of their lives after marriage. Natalie, then, has two examples of women in her life who have been rendered unhappy by their roles as housewives, resorting to drink to cope. In a sequence where Elizabeth and Arthur come to visit Natalie's upperclassmen friends, one of them, Anne – who it seems is having an affair with Arthur – remarks to Elizabeth, who has been doing housework all day, that she thinks that "housework must be really the *most* satisfying work of all," and how it must be wonderful to see "*order* out of *chaos*, you know that you've done it yourself" (123-124). Elizabeth can only stare and remark that Anne must have never had to scrub a floor. The exchange, in a dryly humorous way, exemplifies the ways in which young women of the era were sold the idea that housework was the ultimate source of fulfilment – an idea that, as Franklin also points out (198), was eventually notably challenged in *The Feminine Mystique.*

Diana Wallace sees the home as an "uncanny space haunted by lost possibilities and shadowed by patriarchal power" (Wallace 75). She writes that, among other things, "confinement" and "loss of identity" haunt the concept of the home for women who are already in, or fear being confined to, the role of a housewife (75). For Natalie, who finds the idea of being a housewife and mother "nauseating" (*Hangsaman* 9), Elizabeth and her mother, then, act as haunting omens of a life to come. *Hangsaman* does not necessarily explicitly focus on "[exploring] the predicament of the housebound wife and mother and her daughter," (Wallace 76) something that Wallace sees as one of the defining characteristics of domestic Gothic, but is more set on telling a coming-of-age school story littered with surreal and gothic elements. The context and society in which Natalie is coming of age is, nevertheless, rife with patriarchal expectations, men with authority over women, and women trapped in roles determined for them by their surrounding society.

As a contrast to the haunting nature of domesticity that is presented in the two novels, *Hangsaman* and *Hill House* also offer examples where the issue is seen in a different light. During the final sequence of *Hangsaman*, where Natalie and her friend Tony skip class and go on an adventure in the near-by town, Tony imagines them living in one of the houses there. The girls imagine sharing the house, where Natalie could sweep the porch, and Tony could

dust the living room (204). Similarly, while Eleanor is driving to Hill House, she passes by a house with stone lions on its steps and thinks that she could live there. In a wording that closely reflects that in *Hangsaman*, she imagines that every morning she might "[sweep] the porch and [dust] the lions" (18). Further along on her drive, she comes across an isolated cottage and fantasizes about how she "could live there all alone" and "no one would ever find her", imagining herself as a witch-like woman who lives with cats, brews love potions and reads fortunes (22). There is a reoccurring motif, then, of the heroines of Jackson's novels harboring a desire for their own homes and spaces. What is interesting is that these fantasies do not forget to include the element of housework, like dusting and sweeping. Are the characters so entrenched in the expectations placed on them as women that even their escapist fantasies include domestic duties? Or is the idea of doing housework simply for themselves, without outside pressure and patriarchal expectations, empowering and enticing? Interestingly, these brief fantasies that Jackson's women have of an isolated domestic existence are finally realized in *We Have Always Lived in the Castle*.

At the start of *Castle*, the novel's two central female characters, Merricat and Constance Blackwood, already live a seemingly idyllic existence, accompanied only by their senile and unthreatening uncle Julian. Wallace writes that the two sisters "order their world through ritualized domestic routines" (Wallace 83). They practice the dusting and sweeping imagined by Natalie and Eleanor in the two earlier novels and live an isolated existence by their own rules. Merricat is in many ways a non-conforming young woman. She practices witchcraft and on the first lines of the novel proclaims that if she had been lucky, she would have been "born a werewolf" (*Castle* 1). She is the one of the two sisters who most advocates for a life of total isolation, even when her older sister is being tempted to return among the rest of the society by acquaintances and by Cousin Charles. Throughout the novel, Constance is actively being persuaded into leaving her isolated female idyll behind and conforming to the expectations of society, while Merricat does everything in her power to get Charles to leave and continue their family's seemingly peaceful existence. In the end, though, as Uncle Julian has died and the Blackwood mansion has burned badly, now resembling a gothic ruin, the "Castle" of the title, the two girls choose to stay isolated for good. In what Akçil recognizes is a thematically paradoxical ending, the two women at the center of the narrative are forever trapped and isolated in their domestic space, but simultaneously free to express their non-conforming behavior outside the reaches of men or patriarchal rule (Akçil 45). They are not housewives or

mothers, but Jackson "radically reinterprets" (Downey 298) their roles within the domestic space. Next, I will go beyond the restricting role of society and delve deeper into exactly how isolating houses and physical spaces of domesticity – including the Blackwood mansion – are utilized in Jackson's work.

2.2 The entrapping house

Domestic entrapment takes on a more concrete form in *Hill House*, where the central female protagonist quite literally gets trapped within a house, eventually by dying on its grounds. Dara Downey writes about Jackson's "domestic hauntings" and observes that in *Hill House*, the titular building depicts the capability a house can have to "tyrannize over its occupants" (295). Hill House exploits Eleanor's loneliness and lures her in with the promise of becoming a home for her, but ultimately the pull it has on her ends up being destructive. At the beginning of the novel, as Eleanor begins her drive to Hill House in secret from her family, having left her isolated life as a carer behind, she thinks "I am going, I am going, I have finally taken a step" (*Hill House* 15). A similar hopeful phrasing occurs at the very end of the novel: as Eleanor veers her car toward a tree in front of Hill House, seemingly because she never wants to leave, she thinks "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 all by myself" (245). This sense of agency then turns into questioning just before she hits the tree and dies. "*Why* am I doing this? Why am I doing this? Why don't they stop me?" (246) are Eleanor's final thoughts. The false hope of being able to achieve something for herself is taken away, as Eleanor is claimed by the house. Whether one believes that Eleanor will now forever haunt Hill House as a spirit, or that she simply died and disappeared forever, her life and prospects are nevertheless cut short, and she may never leave the house again.

Wallace writes that the popular image gracing the covers of mid-century "drugstore" gothic novels often depicts a "young woman in period costume fleeing a brooding castle," observing that this trope of women haunted by evil houses and unhomely domestic spaces was a response to the frustrations and fears of housebound mothers and those who feared such a confined existence (Wallace 75). Eleanor in *Hill House* may not dress up in "period costume" but the novel does take quite a self-aware approach to its Gothicism. For example, when Eleanor first approaches the house, she wonders if perhaps its gothic exterior conceals within "a tower, or a secret chamber, or even a passageway going off into the hills and probably used

by smugglers" (32), obviously referencing imagery of the gothic castles of Radcliffean Gothic. The novel takes domestic entrapment from the implicit threat of *Hangsaman* into the literal, physical space of the titular house. Eleanor may not act out the traditional "traveling heroinism" of Radcliffean Gothic referred to in the introduction, but Hill House certainly acts as representation of the modern gothic castle. Wallace observes that in tales that deal in domestic Gothic tropes, women can become "possessed by the domestic" (75). In Hill House, too, it seems that the titular house has an effect akin to possession on its lonely and isolated inhabitant.

Dara Downey and Gizem Akçil both see an evolution from *Hill House* to *Castle*, one of the house transforming from an evil and destructive entity to a place of refuge (Akçil 31, Downey 295). Perhaps the most illuminating way to observe the evolution in Jackson's utilization of the gothic house is to look at two excerpts of *Hill House* and *Castle*, respectively, where the titular house is described from the outside. First, let us read part of the famous opening paragraph description of *Hill House*:

> 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. (3)

Next, here is Merricat's description of the Blackwood house as she returns for dinner:

> The roof pointed firmly against the sky, and the walls met one another compactly, and the windows shone darkly; it was a good house, and nearly clean. There was light from the kitchen window and from the windows of the dining room; it was time for their dinner and I must be there. I wanted to be inside the house, with the door shut behind me. (97)

The similarities in the descriptions are obvious – the houses are described, with similar syntax, as standing firmly and defiantly against their surroundings, evoking an imposing image. But while Hill House is "not sane", the Blackwood house, in Merricat's eyes, is a "good house". Hill House "holds darkness within", but looking into the Blackwood mansion, Merricat sees an inviting light in the kitchen window. Hill House is characterized by a prevailing loneliness and an uninviting air – "whatever walked there, walked alone". But when it comes to the Blackwood house, Merricat wants to be inside, with the door shut behind her. Eleanor, despite the pull Hill House eventually has on her, is at first appalled and horrified by its "evil face" and has the strong urge to immediately turn around (33-34).

Merricat on the other hand, “[looks] at the house with all the richness of love [she contains]” (97).

The Blackwood house, for all its confinement, is ultimately portrayed as a place of refuge and safety in *Castle*. This is, in part, the result of the narrator’s own skewed, superstitious viewpoint and hatred of the outside world, but as it is her with whom we are asked to empathize with, the safety of the house is also relayed to the reader. In *Castle*, the gothic house remains much the same in its essence, but it no longer represents patriarchally enforced domestic entrapment. This subversion will be explored more in the final analysis chapter of this thesis. Next, I will turn from the physical to the psychological, and explore the emotional isolation and inner lives of Jackson’s female protagonists.

3 Emotional isolation and psychological entrapment

"Isolated", "beleaguered" (Downey 290), "solitary", "mousy", "fragile", "lonely" (Miller xi) – these are just some of the adjectives used by academics to describe Jackson's female characters. No matter their differences and the variety of narratives they inhabit, there is a common thread of loneliness and general unhappiness that connects them. As we have already discussed, these women are often trapped in various states of social subordination or domestic spaces, or they fear being restricted by the expectations placed on them by surrounding patriarchal forces. In the following, I will be focusing on the internal and emotional isolation these women feel, in part due to these social and patriarchal forces at play. I will then delve further into how Jackson's women are often trapped in their own psyches, how this is apparent in the narration, and how the characters' internal struggles often lead to psychological disintegration and destruction.

3.1 Loneliness and emotional isolation

At the start of *Hangsaman*, Natalie is already someone who prefers to spend time alone, fantasizing about a "a great lonely rock over the sea" (*Hangsaman* 7). She also spends a lot of time with her own imagination, in her own head. Throughout the first third of the book, she has a series of unexplained imaginary confrontations with a detective who seems to be interrogating her for a murder, perhaps a sign of some underlying anxiety or guilt. Wallace and Smith observe that the Female Gothic explores fears of entrapment not only within the domestic but also in the female body (2). These fears play a significant role in *Hangsaman*, namely in the novel's thematic thread of sexual violence, which contributes significantly to the feelings of emotional isolation Natalie experiences throughout the novel.

Near the start of the novel, a guest at the Waite's Sunday garden party and friend of Mr. Waite's, leads Natalie away from the other guests, into the darkness near the trees in their yard. We are never told what happens between the much older man and Natalie, but the chapter ends with Natalie, "so sickened she nearly said it out loud", thinking, "is he going to *touch* me?" (43) Everything indicates that the guest sexually assaults Natalie, but we never learn more details about the encounter. The next morning, Natalie regards her bruised face in the mirror and is in complete denial, repeating phrases like "I don't remember, nothing happened" and "I will not think about it" (43) over and over again. We can assume that the general horror of the traumatic event is exacerbated by the social stigma around the sexuality

of young women and shame associated with rape at the time, and that these features of society factor in her not sharing her experience with anybody. This culture of silence and shame is implicitly made evident when Natalie's parents do not acknowledge her bruised face at the breakfast table the next morning, and she never ends up telling them what happened. She also clearly blames herself and feels guilty to some extent, evidenced by her regarding her body in the mirror in the morning and seeing it as "erring" (44), as something that has done wrong.

The experience of sexual assault is isolating for Natalie not only because of the personal and traumatic nature of the event, but also because societal pressures and attitudes dissuade her from seeking help and sharing her experience. The assault itself is enabled by patriarchal power structures and attitudes – the man who assaults Natalie is a respected guest and colleague of Mr. Waite's. Right before the event, the man refers to Natalie patronizingly as "quite the little writer" (39), a remark whose belittling tone Natalie recognizes and takes offense to, and which emphasizes the age, status and power difference between the two. The attack provides Natalie with a traumatic reminder of her entrapment within the female body and her "social subordination" as a young woman.

At college, the experience leads to further feelings of isolation; at an initiation ritual, upper class girls make freshmen disclose if they are "virgins", further solidifying the atmosphere of shame around the sexuality of young women (60). When Natalie's turn comes, she refuses to answer and also refuses to tell a dirty joke. She is called a "bad sport", and leaves the initiation "alone, and with a realization of aloneness" (62). The impact of the sexual assault, thus, acts as a catalyst for the isolation Natalie comes to experience at her college. While the other girls at her dorm do not seek to connect with her, Natalie is likewise quick to judge them in return, usually based on superficial details – she notices that one girl's hair "[grows] in an ugly line on her forehead" (54), and when a girl called Rosalind seeks to ally herself with Natalie, Natalie observes that she is "ugly" (71) and seems irritated by her. Other girls, according to Rosalind, regard Natalie as "crazy" and say that she "[sits] in [her] room all day and all night" (68).

Natalie, then, does not end up making friends with other students and only forms superficial connections with a couple of girls, Vicki and Anne, whom she meets at Professor Langdon and his "faculty wife" Elizabeth's house. Despite being excited to make friends during her first night at the dorms, as the novel goes on Natalie seems to become convinced that what

she actually wants is to spend time by herself. When Rosalind informs her about what the other girls at the dorm think of her, she insists that all she wants is for them to leave her alone (69). She finds solace in the thought that "there was always and beyond all the laughter and beyond all the scrutiny her own dear home of a mind, where she was safe, protected, priceless…" (69). Thus, her own mind and imagination act as refuge from the ostracism she faces. Natalie wishes she was the only person in the world and, "with a poignant longing, [thinks] then that perhaps she was, after all" (96). There is a push and pull between Natalie's desire for connection and this "poignant longing" to be the only person in the world, to isolate herself. In college, her own room becomes a beloved refuge to her, "her own sure place" (168), where she is relieved to return to, especially after an incident that reminds Natalie of her assault: As she is escorting a drunk Elizabeth back home, vague and confused thoughts that allude to a sexual scenario come to her, she thinks of Arthur, who might possibly remind her of her attacker, and then repeats a line from the song that was being sung at the garden party while she was being led away by her attacker. "[S]uppose in the darkness under the trees…" (134), she then thinks, flashing back to her own traumatic experience (Hattenhauer 106). Returning to the dorms after this triggering incident, Natalie is relieved to be back in "her own safe dear room, where she might sit by herself with no interruption" (*Hangsaman* 136). She does not seek the help of anyone else, but opts to find comfort in her own company and solitude.

Natalie's father, Mr. Waite, also plays a crucial role in her emotional isolation. It seems that Mr. Waite has trouble accepting that Natalie is drifting away from him – he insists that Natalie has a "double responsibility" (118) for not only her own but also his existence. He emphasizes the close relationship he and Natalie share and seems to discourage Natalie from making connections by stating, "if you abandon me, you lose yourself" (118), and in a letter where he tries to console her daughter, he writes "it was part of my plan for you to be unhappy for a while" (117). There is undeniably an uncomfortable undertone to the relationship between the two: as Hattenhauer notes (102-103), at one point they exchange letters inhabiting the roles of a princess and a knight. Tellingly, Natalie's father informs her that in his opinion, "princesses are confined in towers only because they choose to stay confined, and the only dragon required to keep them there was their own desire to be kept" (137). Belittling Natalie's feelings of isolation and implicitly reinforcing misogynist notions

that women enjoy being “kept”, he implies that Natalie is not lonely or trapped but has a “desire” to be confined and isolated.

Eleanor in *Hill House*, as discussed in the previous chapters, has spent most of her adult life caring for her sick mother. Exhibiting a “ghostlike state of weariness and despair” (Munford 127), at the start of the novel, she is completely cut off from human connections, save for her sister and brother-in-law whom she dislikes, and she finds it difficult to even engage in conversation with anyone. Eleanor regards her assignment at Hill House as an opportunity for growth and liberation, and she is full of hope and nervous excitement on her drive to the house. As she arrives at the house, and many more times throughout the novel, a quote from Shakespeare’s *Twelfth Night*, “Journeys end in lovers meeting”, echoes in Eleanor’s mind – she hopes that her own journey to Hill House will result in “lovers meeting” and that she will be able to achieve some kind of a human connection and love that she is missing in her life.

Arriving at Hill House further stirs Eleanor’s hopes of belonging somewhere. She is instantly taken with her company and immediately believes that the other inhabitants of Hill House are “going to be her friends” (60). Filled with hope, she thinks: “I am the fourth person in this room; I am one of them; I belong” (60). In the beginning, staying in the house seems to have a positive effect on Eleanor’s mood and self-confidence – after the first night, “the first good night’s sleep she had had in years” (93), she is excited and wakes up happy. After the second night she is even more elated, thinking to herself that she “has finally been given [her] measure of happiness” (137). These hopeful thoughts are soon followed, however, by continuing strange phenomena in the house, ones that now seemingly start to turn on Eleanor specifically – messages reading “HELP ELEANOR COME HOME” appear on the walls of the house. The house, or whatever entity possesses and haunts it, seems to be latching onto Eleanor’s intense loneliness and longing for a place to belong, and exploiting it in its endeavors to drive Eleanor mad. As Eleanor starts to become untethered and her experiences become more hallucinatory, her loneliness drives her to insist that she come live with Theodora after the two leave the house. Theodora rejects her suggestion, but Eleanor keeps on pressing the issue, mapping out their future existence together, until Theodora, irritated, asks her “Do you always go where you’re not wanted?” This comment no doubt affirms for Eleanor her already existing feelings of loneliness, and she replies, “I’ve never been wanted anywhere” (209).

A significant amount of Eleanor's feelings of isolation and loneliness seems to stem from her interactions with and relationship to her late mother. Eleanor admits to having hated her mother and the task of caring for her, and she mentions her often, especially when recounting things that her mother would have judged her for or not let her do. She also carries guilt over the circumstances of her mother's death – she died while knocking on the wall for her medicine, calling for Eleanor who never woke up. "I've wondered ever since if I did wake up. If I did wake up and hear her, and if I just went back to sleep" (212) she admits to Theo and Luke. It is telling that one of the most harrowing scenes of haunting she experiences at the house is a banging heard from the outside of her room, a sound that Eleanor first thinks is her mother knocking for her medicine. Much of Eleanor's loneliness thus comes back to her time spent caring for her mother, and her guilt over her death and the conflicted feelings she has for her, and the house seems to be taking advantage of those feelings. Whether the hauntings come from some supernatural entity, or are just manifestations of Eleanor's inner torment, they are taking inspiration from her deepest fears, guilts and desires (Franklin 409).

Eleanor's loneliness makes her the perfect victim for the house to claim – it needs only to build upon her desire for a home and a place to belong, and does so, until Eleanor feels like she simply cannot leave the house. "I am home" (232), Eleanor thinks as her mental state has deteriorated and she wanders around the house at night in a daze. She eventually kills herself, in a desperate effort to stay in the house. On one hand she achieves her desire for a home, by "surrendering to the pull of the house" (Franklin 415). On the other hand, however, the novel ends with a repetition of its opening passage that describes the house, and as Miller observes, the phrasing of "whatever walked there, walked alone" has not changed – either Eleanor's spirit has not been preserved in the house like she clearly hoped, or if it has, it nevertheless "walks alone", and her desire for companionship and community has not been fulfilled (Miller xxii).

In comparison with Natalie and Eleanor, Merricat in *Castle* is the most physically isolated and ostracized protagonist of the three novels, but also seemingly the most content with her isolation. She does not seem to suffer much emotionally from her detachment from other people but rather relishes it and seeks to stay that way. She has feelings of intense hatred toward the people of the village, who likewise are hostile to her and her family. She loves her sister Constance dearly and is seemingly content and happy with spending time with only her,

their uncle Julian and her black cat Jonas, which is why Cousin Charles's arrival at the house disturbs her so much.

At the start of *Castle*, Constance has clearly already begun considering ending her self-imposed exile and returning to society. She makes references to leaving several times, and it is suggested to her by women visiting from the village – each time the topic is brought up, Merricat describes being "chilled" at the thought (*Castle* 19, 21, 24, 27). She clearly finds the idea of Constance leaving and ending their peaceful coexistence horrifying. The despair with which Merricat tries to keep Constance from leaving the house and returning to society tells us that she has no other human connections in life. She clearly cares for Uncle Julian, but her terror at the thought of losing Constance – and relative unaffectedness by Uncle Julian's eventual passing – makes it evident that Constance is the person she cares for the most. Her only other friend is her cat Jonas, a kind of witch's familiar to whom she assigns human thoughts and feelings, for the lack of any real human friends.

Constance is also the only person in the world who knows Merricat's secret of being the murderer of the Blackwood family. Though the two do not explicitly discuss Merricat's culpability until a moment later on in the novel (110), it is clear that Constance has known it was Merricat all along; it was Constance who carefully cleaned the bowl from which the arsenic-laced sugar was served on the night of the murder (36). At first glance Merricat does not seem to carry guilt or trauma about the incident, unlike Natalie does about her assault, and Eleanor about the death of her mother. Echoing what Constance is reported having said after she was falsely accused of the murder (37), Merricat likewise seems to think that her family deserved to die, for whatever unnamed reason. However, there is a kindness Merricat extends to Julian – whom she also tried to poison – that raises questions about possible feelings of guilt Merricat may harbor after all. She constantly reminds herself to "be kinder" (e.g. 20, 43) to Julian, which does not seem to be in accordance with what she tried to do to him in the past. There is also a sequence later on where Merricat ventures into the summerhouse on the Blackwood property that she has not set foot in since the murder. In the summerhouse, a rotting, unpleasant space, she imagines her dead family members gathered around the dining room table, singing her praises and professing their love for her, insisting that she should "never be punished" and "would never allow herself to do anything wrong" (95). This fantasy may illustrate Merricat's underlying guilt about what she did to her family – she prefers to tell herself that she never did anything wrong and that her family members still love her. It is also

very possible that Merricat never received this type of love and support from her family while they were alive, and the fantasy is merely a wish-fulfilling delusion that conveys that Merricat may be lonelier and more similar to Natalie and Eleanor than her defiant first-person narration reveals on the surface.

All three protagonists are lonely in their own ways – Natalie's isolation in *Hangsaman* stems largely from her traumatic experience and her desire to find refuge within her own mind, in her own company. Eleanor has been left lonely and desperate for companionship as a result of her time being a domestic carer and companion to her mother. Merricat's isolation is the most literal and concrete – the society around her despises her and her family, and the feeling is mutual. On the surface she seems defiant and content with her situation, but the aforementioned details may reveal some underlying unhappiness. The endings of each novel go further in illuminating each character's relationship to their isolation and what the novels ultimately have to say on the matter – they will be discussed in chapter 4 of this thesis.

3.2 Trapped in the unstable mind

Laura Miller refers to *Hill House* having an underlying feeling of "physical and psychic claustrophobia" (xv). Her assessment rings true and illustrates the way Jackson's characters often find themselves confined in their own troubled minds, in addition to physical and social spheres. Their own minds often betray them, distorting events and going as far as producing hallucinations. The characters' perceptions of the world are limited, warped by their own inner anxieties, fears and psychological troubles. *Hangsaman* and *Hill House* in particular heavily explore the disintegrating minds of their respective protagonists.

In *Hangsaman*, Natalie's loneliness and trauma eventually lead her to create a companion for herself. Tony, the friend Natalie suddenly makes in the third act of the novel is widely interpreted as being a figment of Natalie's fractured mind (e.g. Hattenhauer 108; Murphy 109). She only gets mentioned in passing in one of Natalie's letters to her father (138), but later on the narrator is suddenly describing the two interacting like best friends, people who have known each other for a long time. The first time Natalie mentions Tony in the letter to her father comes immediately after the previously discussed incident with a drunken Elizabeth that reminds her of her assault. This experience could be interpreted as a trigger to whatever happens in Natalie's mind that leads her to create Tony.

Beyond the point where Tony first appears, the narration gets increasingly more disorientated, seemingly mirroring Natalie's mental crisis. She begins writing her name "crazily on everything" – an action that can be read as an effort to hold on to her identity (151). She starts questioning her very existence, contemplating the possibility that she is not Natalie Waite at all, but a mental patient, and everything in her life has been a waking dream of some kind. She dismisses the thought, but still insists that she has memories of "white walls and the nurse coming closer" and an "iron bedstead" (152). If she is simply Natalie Waite and her life is real, she questions, then why does she experience a "constant unusual shock of the sound of her own name said aloud?" (152). It is clear that she is losing her sense of self by this point, soon after the emergence of Tony. In the end it is revealed that Natalie has not been to classes for two weeks, something that seems to come as a surprise to her, even though it is brought up by Tony, her own psychological manifestation. By this point, the two girls act extremely close and familiar with each other. Their conversation flies at the speed of light, and they have the exact same sense of humor – Tony is the perfect friend for Natalie. "[T]hey want to pull us back, and start us all over again just like them and doing the things they want to do and acting the way they want to act and saying and thinking and wanting all the things they live with every day" (199), Tony insists, the confusing syntax a reflection of the disoriented state of mind Natalie is in.

Natalie is also described as having an almost godlike fantasy, where she imagines herself rearranging the campus and its residents like "dolls", moving them around "while they beg to be released and I look down, so large they cannot see me, and laugh at them" (174). She also speaks about "violating" all these "dolls", with Arthur Langdon in the center of them all (174). This fantasy can be interpreted as Natalie desperately yearning to take back control of her own life, body and identity. Natalie's trauma stemming from sexual violence, her inability to speak to anyone about it, and the men around her who remind her of the patriarchal culture that enabled her assault, lead her to suffer a psychological crisis and a disintegration of identity.

Inner turmoil gets externalized into the titular setting of *The Haunting of Hill House*, as Eleanor's psyche in a way transforms into the house, or vice versa. In her notes for *The Haunting of Hill House*, Jackson wrote: "The house is Eleanor" (Franklin 415). As Eleanor's state of mind starts to deteriorate, she can hear and feel things that are happening around the house, even far away. Her own feelings of loneliness, guilt, and longing for a home begin to

manifest themselves as hauntings around the house. Near the final act of the novel, a haunting episode, a pounding on the walls, seems "inside her head as much as in the hall" (200), and Eleanor wonders how the others can hear a noise coming from her own mind. She feels like she is "disappearing inch by inch" (201) into Hill House, losing her identity in a similar manner to Natalie. The noise inside her head, Eleanor fears, is "getting out, getting out, getting out" (202). A sequence later on in the book sees Eleanor mistakenly thinking that she is walking ahead of Theo and Luke, only for them to not be behind her, having been replaced by some invisible entity. Eleanor hears a voice calling out her name, "inside and outside her head" (215). The line between hallucinatory episodes and supernatural events is left up to interpretation, but Eleanor's disintegrating and increasingly unstable identity mirrors that of Natalie's – both characters experience things that are not there, and their experiences are tied to the loneliness they feel and the trauma and guilt they are trying and failing to process. "[The] house is destroying itself" (203), Eleanor at one point thinks, and in the end, it is she who ends up ending her own life. The house metaphorically becomes a manifestation of her own haunted mind, and in the end, she is unable to escape.

The characters' inability to step outside of their own distressed minds is also reflected in the narrative voices of each novel. Both *Hangsaman* and *Hill House* are told in third person through a tight internal focalization, whereas *Castle* is told through Merricat's first person narration. Both forms of narration can be interpreted as highly manipulative in their own ways, and limited to the main characters' often warped perception of the world around them.

The closely focalized narration in *Hangsaman* does not reveal the inner thoughts or intentions of any secondary characters, but often spends time exploring Natalie's increasingly disoriented thought processes. In the beginning of the novel, it is made clear that Natalie is someone prone to fantasies, perhaps setting up expectations for the reader that not everything that is to come should be taken at face value. There is also the curious running thread in the novel of a thief that is going around the college dormitories, stealing pieces of clothing and jewelry from the girls' rooms. The culprit is never found, but when Natalie is unsure whether or not she herself might be the thief (99), the reader can be certain that not everything is being conveyed through an entirely lucid and present focalizer. Tony's appearance also adds to our distrust of the narrator – a first-time reader may not be entirely sure what is going on, but it is impossible not to sense that something is amiss when the narration suddenly acts as if Tony has been part of the proceedings all along, a familiar character to Natalie and to the reader. It

feels like information is being deliberately left out, but the sudden leaps in narration may simply be an expression of Natalie's own, at this point, illogical, mind.

Hattenhauer delves extensively into Jackson's various and complex narrator voices in *Shirley Jackson's American Gothic*. He observes that in *Hangsaman*, "as Natalie grows increasingly divided, the narrator grows increasingly fallible" (111). Hattenhauer points out instances where markers of uncertainty such as "probably" and "perhaps" are used to signify the narrator's mirroring of Natalie's own uncertainty (111-112). This effect is demonstrated with the following passage from Hangsaman: "Natalie put her head down on her knees and thought, I wish I could go home, and perhaps said it out loud". Because Natalie herself does not know if she said it out loud, the narrator does not know either (112). Hattenhauer refers to the kind of narration in *Hangsaman* as "double voiced" (112), meaning that it occasionally seems merged with the unreliable thoughts of its delusional focalizer.

In *Hill House*, the narration is similarly in third person and closely focalized through Eleanor. Throughout the novel, she seems anxious, eventually to the point of being paranoid, about what others are thinking and saying about her, and it is very possible that these anxieties color the tightly focalized narration, especially when it comes to the descriptions of Theodora's actions. When the Hill House team discover the first "HELP ELEANOR COME HOME" writing, Theodora tries to ease Eleanor's shock and fear by making her angry instead, by suggesting that Eleanor herself was the one who wrote it. It appears to work, and Eleanor's mind clears up, and she thanks Theo, after which the narration relays the following: "Smiling down into Theodora's bright, happy eyes, Eleanor thought, *But that isn't what Theodora was doing at all*" (149, emphasis mine). The chapter ends here, and the narration never elaborates further on the meaning of this statement, but it is clear that Eleanor suspects Theo of something. Such a representation of Eleanor's doubts about Theo influences the way the reader, too, thinks of Theo. As Eleanor becomes increasingly confused in the grip of Hill House, she begins to feel intense feelings of hatred toward Theo, interspersed again with moments of normality and affection. While Theodora is reeling from an episode where all of her clothes get inexplicably soaked in blood, Eleanor thinks, "without trying to find a reason, that she had never felt such uncontrollable loathing for any person before" (157), seeing Theo as "wicked", "beastly, soiled and dirty" (158). She then fantasizes about hitting Theodora "with a stick" and "[battering] her with rocks" (158) – violent thoughts that closely echo those that Merricat in *Castle* has towards the villagers and Cousin Charles. Eleanor's feelings are

never fully explained, and when the narrator begins describing Theodora's actions in ways that portray her in a cruel light – her smiling "wickedly" at Eleanor, seemingly mocking her for her infatuation with Luke (172), making jabs about Eleanor possibly writing the messages on the walls (210) or angrily asking Eleanor "What on earth do you want this time?" (216) – the exact credibility of the events is easy to call into question.

Hattenhauer discusses the limited perception of *Hill House'*s narrator in similar terms to the one in *Hangsaman* – it is limited because of the limitations of the psyche of its focalizer, and at times it can only relay things in the manner in which Eleanor perceives them (171). However, Hattenhauer also points out that, in contrast, the narration sometimes extends way beyond the bounds of what its focalizer could possibly perceive in her limited view, reporting on the goings-on all around the massive house at the same time, in the manner of a truly omniscient narrator (172). The narrator is also unable or unwilling to reliably relay to the reader whether supernatural occurrences are actually happening or not. Since Eleanor is experiencing these hauntings – whether they are delusions or not – the narrator has to relay them to the reader (172).

We Have Always Lived in the Castle is, as mentioned, the only novel of the three told in first-person narration. Merricat acts as the narrator of the story, and, naturally, the world relayed to the reader is even more closely filtered through her eyes than in the other books. Merricat's unreliability as a narrator is most evident in the interpretations she makes about the feelings and motivations of those closest to her, namely Constance. Constance's emotions are conveyed solely through what Merricat sees and how she interprets her sister's reactions, and there are several occasions where Merricat makes evaluations that may or may not reflect Constance's actual inner thoughts. When other people show Constance affection, Merricat reads negative emotions on Constance's face: when a visiting woman from the village sits close to Constance, Merricat informs the reader that Constance "detest[s] having anyone near her but me" (26), and when the woman asserts that she has always been a close friend of Constance's, Merricat abhors that she "really could not see how Constance withdrew from such words" (26). While the two sisters are clearly extremely close, and know each other well, it is very possible that Merricat's interpretations of Constance's feelings are to some extent a projection on her part, affected by her own terror at the thought of losing her sister and their peaceful coexistence. When Merricat makes a mess in Cousin Charles's room in an attempt to get him to leave the house, and Charles furiously brings the twigs and dirt to the

kitchen to show what she has done, Merricat wonders if perhaps the reason Constance looks sad is "the dirt on her clean table" (92) – she does not even consider that it is her own actions and antagonism towards Charles that may have upset Constance.

The element of delusionality and psychological deterioration plays less of a role in *Castle* than it does in the other novel's discussed, which, interestingly, creates the effect that Merricat as a first-person narrator is less "unreliable" than the third-person narrators of *Hangsaman* and *Hill House*. Beyond the clear hallucinatory episode in the summerhouse, Merricat's narration come across as clear and logical – if sometimes affected by childlike superstition – compared to much of the narration in the previous novels. Even in the summerhouse, as Merricat imagines the members of her family speaking to her, her narration makes it clear that they do not actually appear, but that she intentionally conjures them, "[placing] all of them correctly in [her] mind, in the circle around the dining-room table" (95). The narration of *Castle*, then, presents a different approach to its narration than what is present in *Hangsaman* and *Hill House,* whose narrators are heavily influenced by the deteriorating psyches of their respective focalizers. All three protagonists are, however, trapped in their own minds to various degrees, limiting their capabilities of connecting to others and furthering the isolation they experience.

4 Female relationships

While Jackson's female characters are lonely, they do not spend the duration of their respective narratives alone – they interact with other people in the story and form and maintain relationships and connections, however superficial or fleeting, with other significant characters that occupy their narratives. In order to fully understand how the protagonists end up isolating themselves, driving away people and sabotaging their own relationships, it is salient to also explore the relationships they *do* form. While the male characters such as Mr. Waite and Natalie's professor Arthur Langdon in *Hangsaman*, Luke and Dr. Montague in *Hill House*, and Uncle Julian and Cousin Charles in *Castle* do play significant roles in their respective novels, for the purposes of this thesis the more multi-dimensional and impactful supporting roles are given to the women. In the following I will be analyzing the most significant female relationships in the three novels. In *Hangsaman*, it is the relationship between Natalie and Tony that holds most narrative weight, in *Hill House*, the novel's most complex and intriguing relationship is the one between Eleanor and Theodora, and in *Castle*, the entire narrative hinges on the isolated Blackwood sisters and their ultimate, final retreat from the surrounding society.

4.1 A queer reading

As discussed previously, Natalie's connections with her peers are few and far between, and they do not go beyond superficial acquaintances with girls who do not seem to value her, a feeling that seems to be mutual. The relationships she has with her mother and with Elizabeth remind her of her own possible future fate, and her father's belittling responses to her obvious unhappiness do not offer much comfort. In the end, her most important relationship, and the one that on its surface comes closest to liberating and empowering, becomes that between her and Tony. Whether or not Tony exists in the storyworld, her and Natalie's bond is nevertheless important in Natalie's narrative, and her presence has significance, raises questions and invites interpretation beyond what her presence in the narrative putatively conveys about Natalie's mental health. Most importantly, examination of this central relationship in *Hangsaman* raises a significant point of focus in the scholarship on Jackson's writing: queer analysis. Jackson's work, *Hangsaman* and *Hill House* in particular, have often been analyzed within the context of queer literature and through the lens of lesbian desire (see e.g. Haggerty 2006, Palmer 2012, Westengard 2022).

There is undeniably an underlying romantic or sexual tension in the way Natalie and Tony's relationship is portrayed in *Hangsaman*. Their friendship, according to the narrator, seems to garner some interest from the fellow campus girls, who stare at Natalie as she makes her way into Tony's room, and gather outside the door, giggling and seemingly curious about what is going on inside. Natalie and Tony bathe together and share a bed, and while Natalie is falling asleep, Tony reads her a passage from *The Way of Man with a Maid* (180), a scandalous pornographic novel that deals with, among other things, sadomasochistic and lesbian themes. As the two wake up together, they are described as "enjoying the quietness of the morning when everyone else was asleep and enjoying, too, the feeling of being together without fear" (183). Natalie is at her happiest and most content in Tony's company – Tony seems like a friend constructed specifically for Natalie, a confident and outgoing persona who is everything Natalie is not. Her response to the girls outside of her room listening in on her and Natalie's conversations is to simply open the door in exasperation, and "with a large and menacing gesture" drive them away (*Hangsaman* 180). Natalie, who has been left "unable to feel empowered", finds comfort in Tony's power and confidence (Hattenhauer 109). A queer reading of Natalie's character might also enable us to see Tony's nonchalant attitude towards the girls eavesdropping as a manifestation of Natalie's own hidden desire for confidence in her own sexual nonconformity – this idea of Tony representing a repressed side to Natalie is one that closely ties in with the idea of doubling, which will be discussed in the following subchapter.

In *Hill House*, the most central female relationship of the novel could very well be argued to be that between Eleanor and her deceased mother – it looms large in the background of the novel and seemingly has an effect on most of Eleanor's experiences and actions. As discussed, the novel often references her mother, and Eleanor does not seem to have many positive things to say about her, mentioning ways in which she was restrictive and unpleasant, how her time with caring for her was filled with "small guilts and small reproaches, constant weariness, and unending despair" (*Hill House* 6) However, the relationship given most weight between living characters in *Hill House*, and one with the most potential to turn into something positive, is that between Eleanor and Theodora. Theodora is a rebellious woman who leads a bohemian life and pays no mind to "[d]uty and conscience," qualities she attributes to "Girl Scouts" (*Hill House* 8). She has a "friend with whom she shares an apartment" (9), whose gender is deliberately never specified. The character's lesbian coding is

evident in the text and was even more explicit in an early draft of the novel (Franklin 412). The relationship between Eleanor and Theodora, like that of Natalie and Tony, lends itself to queer interpretation. This is not only the result of the heightened Gothicism of the novel – the Gothic genre with its built-in "social-sexual transgression" is, as Westengard puts it, "inherently queer" (260) – but also because of the intimate interactions between the two characters found in the text itself. Theodora, an extroverted character compared to Eleanor, is prone to small physical intimacies. Just moments after meeting, she "[touches] Eleanor's shoulder gently", prompting Eleanor to note that she is "charming" (*Hill House* 43). During their first night at the house, the two women share a conversation by the fire, and Theo puts her hand on Eleanor's, leaving Eleanor "embarrassed" with the physical touch. Eleanor's question about Theo's marital status leads to a small, pointed, moment of silence, after which Theodora laughs and says that she is unmarried (88). The scene has an undeniably flirtatious undertone, with Theo then touching Eleanor's cheek and calling her "funny" (88). Eleanor is once again embarrassed about being touched by Theo, suddenly self-conscious about the lines around her eyes, a possible reminder of her lack of experience in relation to her adult age. If Theodora is indeed Eleanor's "alter-ego" and an embodiment of Eleanor's "repressed eroticism and assertiveness" (Hattenhauer 163), her queerness can also be read as representative of Eleanor's hidden desires.

In her biography of Jackson, Ruth Franklin recounts an anecdote Jackson wrote in a letter, about her discovering a chapter on *Hangsaman* in the 1956 volume *Sex Variant Women in Literature* by Jeannette H. Foster. Jackson's shock, expressed in the letter, at seeing her work interpreted in this way suggests that the queer subtext may not have been a conscious intention of hers. Discovering the prevalence of this line of interpretation led her to overhaul her developing draft for *Castle,* transforming it from a narrative about friends into one about sisters, in order to dissuade a lesbian reading of their relationship (Franklin 440-441). Nevertheless, as evidenced by the research cited in this chapter, queer analysis of Jackson's work persists to this day.

4.2 Gothic doubles

Beyond queer interpretation, the close relationships Jackson's protagonists develop in these novels can be analyzed through the concept of gothic doubling. With its roots in Freudian psychology, the gothic double has been a trope of the genre since its inception. As Smith

summarizes in *Gothic Literature*, the concept of the double, to Freud, "[suggested] that the self is haunted by repressed feelings" that threaten normality and stability (6). As a representation of repressed feelings, the double naturally goes hand in hand with the ideas of queerness and repressed sexual desires – two examples of the phenomenon provided by Smith are Coleridge's proto-vampiric, late 18th century poem *Christabel* and Le Fanu's later 19th century vampire tale *Carmilla*, both usually interpreted as lesbian metaphors (95). Perhaps the most well-known example of gothic doubling comes in the form of *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*, also referred to by Smith (95). The Jekyll and Hyde dynamic provides us with perhaps the most prototypical example of the contrast that is inherent to gothic doubling – if doubles represent "repressed feelings", it is only natural that the two personalities are often two sides of the same coin, equally the same and entirely different. Jackson's three novels all feature central female relationships where these elements of doubling can be found. In the first two novels, the more subdued and neurotic heroine, who adheres more to the socially accepted "femininity" of the time, is paired up with a daring and self-assured counterpart, whereas *Castle*'s central sibling dynamic more or less inverts this dynamic.

The doubled identity of Natalie and Tony in *Hangsaman* is exhibited, for example, in the way Natalie confuses herself with Tony (Hattenhauer 108). It may seem odd to keep talking about Tony as if she exists in the real world of the story, after making the assessment that she is simply a creation of Natalie's unwell mind, but what is important to understand is that within the fiction Tony is more or less treated like a corporeal person who exists in and interacts with the world. This, to me, makes it acceptable and necessary to analyze her as a "real" character. When Tony and Natalie skip school and run off into the city, they look into a mirror above a drugstore counter and the narrator – focalizing through Natalie – seems to be confused as to which of the girls is which: "Natalie, on the right (the one on the right *was* Natalie?) looked very thin and fragile in the black sweater; Tony, (on the left?) seemed dark and saturnine in blue" (186). As discussed, the two girls seem to almost share the same mind – their sense of humor and interests are similar, and the relationship they share seems easy and natural, especially in contrast with Natalie's other relationships. Parks refers to Tony as Natalie's Doppelgänger, a representation of Natalie's increasingly fragmented mind (241). In line with the feature of the gothic double as a mirror, Tony seems to represent everything Natalie wishes she was – "exotic, clever, intelligent, and self-possessed" (Parks 241).

Theo and Eleanor's dynamic is similarly one between two contrasting female characters. While being wholly different in personality to Eleanor, Theodora can also be considered Eleanor's double (Hattenhauer 163). After arriving at Hill House, Eleanor immediately feels close to Theo, despite the fact that she normally has trouble making social connections (49), and there are multiple deliberate points of comparison between the two women – the rooms they inhabit at the house are "exactly alike" (*Hill House* 44), they share similar anecdotes about their family, coming to the conclusion they must be "cousins" (54), and the incident involving mysterious blood staining Theo's wardrobe even leads her to put on Eleanor's clothes. In her notes on the novel, Jackson even wrote: "theo is eleanor" (Hattenhauer 163). Theodora was chosen for the Hill House experiment by Dr. Montague because of her apparent powers of telepathy. Hattenhauer (162) emphasizes this ability of Theo's to seemingly know what Eleanor is thinking and feeling, which further builds upon doubled nature of the two characters – in other words, while within the story Theo's ability to read Eleanor's mind is likely supernatural, metaphorically it emphasizes that the two are so close that they are basically the same person.

As discussed, *We Have Always Lived in the Castle* diverts from the two other novels in that its central relationship is familial, rather than a homoerotically charged friendship. Merricat and Constance are nevertheless both women, a younger and older sister living in isolation with the only remaining male member of their immediate family. It is another pair of contrasting female personalities, with the younger Merricat's adventurous, rebellious and volatile nature and the pure, angelic, domestic spirit of Constance. This time, the point-of-view character is the one who does not conform, while her sister-double, at least on the surface, represents everything required from a "proper" 1950s woman.

Leaning on psychoanalytic approaches common in the study of Female Gothic literature, Rubenstein, in her essay on "House Mothers and Haunted Daughters" also sees elements of an idealized mother-daughter bond in Constance and Merricat's relationship. While acting as both Merricat's double and polar opposite, Merricat's split self that represents her good and virtuous side, Constance can also be seen as the good, nurturing mother – a contrast to the "bad" mother who, according to Merricat, deserved to be killed (Rubenstein 138). This interpretation is backed up by the twisted family setup that emerges with Charles's arrival into the house, as he tries to "[assume] the role of the patriarchal father, appropriating Constance as the submissive wife and mother", leaving Merricat to inhabit the role of the child that

Charles can control (140). The protagonists in all three novels, then, have or form relationships with women who can be seen as their gothic doubles – another significant example of Jackson utilizing traditional gothic imagery and tropes to explore the nuances of womanhood and questions of non-conformity.

4.3 The empowering potential of female companionship

The relationships that Jackson's characters have and form in *Hangsaman* and *Hill House* have the potential to have positive impacts on their isolated lives. Whether they are viewed as literal representations of queer relationships, or metaphorical doubles through which the characters live out their hidden desires, they act at first as a reprieve from the loneliness that Natalie and Eleanor feel. However, neither central relationship ends happily. I will now analyze how each relationship deteriorates and ultimately concludes, and what the central relationships and respective endings of *Hangsaman*, *Hill House*, and finally *Castle*, ultimately convey about the nuances of isolation in Jackson's work.

The ending of *Hangsaman* presents itself to innumerable interpretations, especially with regards to the ultimate resolution of Natalie and Tony's "relationship". The final sequence of the novel sees the two girls skipping school to go on a trip to the neighboring town, eventually hopping on a bus to an unknown location. They get off at night, near an abandoned theme park, and Tony leads Natalie into the dark woods beside the park. Hattenhauer observes that, throughout the novel, trees and darkness remind Natalie of her sexual assault (106). This analysis is already given credence by the previously discussed sequence with Elizabeth, where Natalie remarks upon "the darkness under the trees", while flashing back to her assault. In this climactic sequence with Tony, too, much attention is drawn to the trees and darkness that surround the pair in the woods. "Are you going in *here?* Into the trees?" (*Hangsaman* 209) Natalie asks, clearly uncomfortable, as Tony urges her to follow. The trees "[wait] in the darkness, quietly expectant" as Natalie and Tony venture into the woods, a "deep and natural darkness which comes with a forsaking of natural light" (209). Natalie feels as though the trees bend over her, perhaps trying to "touch her hair", or "[lean] over to watch her" (210). At one point Natalie even mistakes a tree for Tony in the darkness. As Hattenhauer also points out (113), in a scene earlier on in the novel, Natalie walks out onto a porch and looks into the woods, when "one tree demonstrated that it was not rooted and perhaps not completely indifferent by disengaging itself from the others and coming toward Natalie" (*Hangsaman*

148). The "tree" turns out to be Tony, another instance of her being associated with or mistaken for a tree. In the woods near the theme park, Tony leans her head against the trunk of a tree, "familiarly" (213).

With all these references to traumatic triggers for Natalie, the final sequence in the woods thus has a clear sense of sexual threat – Hattenhauer observes that Tony takes Natalie's arm in a manner reminiscent of the attacker, and that she sounds like a "male seducer steeling himself" (110). When Natalie follows Tony into the darkness of the trees, her assault comes back to her once more, as it did with Elizabeth. When Tony touches Natalie, with her "hands on her face, on her back, holding her" (*Hangsaman* 214), Natalie shudders and once more recalls a line from the song that was being sung before her assault. The line she remembers this time is "*One is one and all alone and evermore shall be so*", a poignant reminder of her isolation and loneliness in the face of her trauma. Echoing her "sickened" realization – "is he going to *touch* me?" (43) – before her assault, Natalie has the horrified thought, "She *wants* me" (214). This time Natalie refuses to comply and emphatically states to Tony, "I will *not*," continuing by declaring "I am not afraid of you" (214). Natalie leaves Tony in the woods, and though she pleads for Tony to come back with her, Tony seems to disappear.

Lucie Armitt observes that in gothic writing, female intimacy is often portrayed as "dangerous", a threat that needs to be overcome by the end of the narrative in order for "respectability to be restored" (64). There is a reading of this sequence that is in line with Armitt's assertion; after a period of comfortable intimacy between the two, Natalie's rejection of Tony's clearly sexually charged advances can indeed be read as her turning away from and rejecting queer sexuality. But the sequence can also be understood as Natalie confronting the trauma of her sexual assault. Her assertion of "I will *not*" can be seen as a defiant response to her sexual trauma, and leaving Tony behind in the darkness under the trees, presumably for good[4], may represent both her leaving her trauma behind and her lack of need for the companionship of her imaginary friend who was created as a response to the aftermath of that trauma.

After leaving the woods and hitching a ride with a friendly couple back to the college town, Natalie shortly contemplates suicide on a bridge before deciding against it. A group of

[4] Hattenhauer disagrees: to him Natalie leaving Tony behind is only temporary – "Natalie has not overcome Tony; Natalie has only lost track of her." (113) The multiplicity of interpretations of the text even among academics further speaks to the ambiguity of the novel.

students pass by her, barely giving her a second glance – the narrator assesses that she is of "small interest" to them. The final line of the novel reads: "As she had never been before, she was now alone, and grown-up, and powerful, and not at all afraid" (218). Like much of the novel, this final line lends itself to a multiplicity of interpretations. Is it sincere or ironic? Hattenhauer reads the ending as unreliable, assuming that it is another case of the narrative voice mixing in with Natalie's own delusion (112), and to Rubenstein the final words "[sound] rather hollow" (131). The emphatic phrasing of "not at all afraid" certainly has an air of protesting too much, and it is plausible that, while Natalie may very well have gone through a transformative experience by facing her trauma, she remains the mentally unstable character prone to delusion we have been following and may only be at the beginning of her journey to self-realization and "growing up". For the purposes of my analysis however, the most salient part of this final line is the statement that Natalie is now "all alone". While abandoning Tony may have been an act of healthy defiance, Natalie is also now truly without companionship, isolated even more than before. This can either be read as a positive development in self-reliance, or more in keeping with the pessimistic tone of the preceding narrative, and of Jackson's other work, a tragic conclusion to a story of a girl desperate for connection. The people on the bridge, who have most likely just seen Natalie climb the parapet of a bridge with suicidal ideation, pay her no mind, and it occurs to Natalie that "unless she actually [jumps] over the parapet into the river" (218), she will offer them no cause to take interest in her. This observation leads the reader toward a melancholy and pessimistic interpretation of the ending with regards to Natalie's isolation – the only way she could truly get attention from the people around her would be to do something as drastic as commit suicide.

In *Hill House*, Michael T. Wilson, referring to Crastnopol's psychoanalytic terminology on trauma, sees that Eleanor and Theodora's relationship follows the parameters of "uneasy intimacy", a kind of relationship that is formed between two people who feel alone in a specific setting and situation and connect precisely because of that shared loneliness (31). Wilson observes that it is Theodora who first encourages their intimacy, with her physical touches and lighthearted assertions that the two shall never be separated, unaware of the significance that this kind of human connection could have for isolated, lonely Eleanor (32). Eleanor latches onto this playful intimacy initiated by Theodora too enthusiastically, and eventually, under the destructive influence of Hill House on her mental stability, insists that

she should come live with Theodora, an advance that Theodora, put off by Eleanor's enthusiasm, rejects (32). Analyzing *Hill House* through the lens of trauma studies, Tony M. Vinci interprets Eleanor's eager attachment to Theo as a mechanism for keeping her trauma at bay and holding on to her sense of self and humanity. During the first haunting Eleanor and Theo experience – the one that so reminds Eleanor of her mother, a major contributor to her guilt and trauma – the pair are able to keep the ghost banging on the walls from entering their room by listening and holding onto each other, their shared "human connection" (Vinci 66). Theodora's resilience, confidence and vibrancy contrast Eleanor's neurotic and shy personality– as Wilson points out, Theo describes her own traumatic childhood experiences but is able to look back on them in an "ego-affirming" way (Wilson 29). Eleanor concludes from Theodora's behavior that she must not care what people think of her, and Theodora clearly has a much more fixed sense of self and a "willingness to express negative emotions openly", making her much more resilient to the corrupting effects of Hill House than Eleanor (29).

As Eleanor and Theodora's relationship develops, it also grows more volatile and difficult to decipher. As discussed in chapter 3, Eleanor's deteriorating state of mind and paranoia may affect the way the intensely focalized narration relays some of Theodora's crueler moments to the reader, as well as go some way towards explaining the sudden moments where Eleanor feels intense hatred towards Theo. Vinci sees these vindictive and eventually even violent thoughts as Eleanor acting out in response to being unable to work through her traumas with her new social connections, in the manner promised to her by her initial connection with Theodora. This inability to relieve herself of her anxieties is illustrated by a scene where Eleanor tries to confess her possible culpability in her mother's death to Theo and Luke, who react dismissively and in a hurtful, uncaring manner (Vinci 68). Wilson expands on this reading by observing how, by becoming irritated and turning on Theodora, the only other woman at the house, Eleanor illustrates a trend with Jackson's traumatized female characters where "victims readily become perpetrators" themselves[5] (Wilson 31).

As previously discussed*, Hill House* ends tragically, with Eleanor taking her own life on the grounds of the house. Andrew Smith describes the ending as "a moment of disempowerment

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5 This is a phenomenon also present in *Hangsaman*, where Natalie is quick to judge and turn on her peers at the college. Also in accordance with this trend is the previously discussed scene where Natalie flashes back to her assault while escorting Elizabeth home – her own thoughts take on a sexually predatory edge towards Elizabeth and she "identifies with the attacker" (Hattenhauer 106).

which masquerades as a moment of apparent empowerment" (162). Driving away, Eleanor is at first defiant, thinking to herself: "*they* don't make the rules around *here*" (*Hill House* 245), as she fights against being forced to leave the house. But her seemingly assertive and empowered jubilation at "really really really doing it by [herself]" quickly turns into panicked questioning and a loss of control – "*Why* am I doing this?" – just as she crashes into a tree and dies. This "moment of apparent empowerment" echoes the ending of *Hangsaman*, whose final words may read at first as triumphant, but mask something tragic. Eleanor makes her own decision and refuses to leave Hill House, the "home" that she has been desperately longing for, but loses her life as a result.

Lynette Carpenter has explored the Blackwood family dynamics in *Castle* in her essay on the "establishment and preservation of female power" in the novel – she contends that the family, prior to Merricat's crime, was a patriarchal one, a family that "exploited its women if they were docile", like Constance, who performed much of the housework, and "dismissed them if they were not", like Merricat (202). Merricat was "neither useful daughter nor male heir", rendering her position in the family irrelevant, which led to her receiving punishments and being "dismissed from [the family's] presence for her rebellion against its laws" (202). There are certainly hints given throughout the novel of the controlling nature of the deceased family patriarch, who put up a wire fence and signs warning trespassers around the Blackwood property. John Blackwood, it is reported by Uncle Julian, possessed "forceful traits of character" (*Castle* 34) and "took pride in his table, his family, his position in the world" (33). On the night of the murder, we are told, Mr. Blackwood also sent Merricat to bed without dinner as a punishment, an occurrence it seems was not uncommon. The image of the controlling patriarch is emphasized by the constant comparisons made between the antagonistic Cousin Charles and Mr. Blackwood. Charles immediately tries to take over as the head of the family, sitting in the father's chair and sleeping in his bed. When Charles first arrives at the house, Merricat keeps insisting that he is a "ghost" (61). Carpenter observes that, in Charles, Merricat recognizes the "ghost" of her dead father – for Merricat, Charles brings back with him the specter of patriarchal control and punishment (205).

Constance seems to be the only member who treated Merricat with respect and love when she was a child, and thus the only family member (intentionally) spared from her act of mass murder. As mentioned, it is heavily implied that Constance may have even been an accomplice to the crime, and she certainly does not seem to blame Merricat for doing what

she did. The bond between the two sisters is strong. Merricat seems intensely protective and even possessive of Constance, reflected in her previously discussed fear of Constance ending her exile. Constance's responses to Merricat's rebellious antics often involve merely a fond smile and a loving utterance of "Silly Merricat" (73). There is also emphasis placed upon the two sisters as women passing knowledge between one another – Constance is very knowledgeable about plants, for example – and this sharing of knowledge deepening their bond (Carpenter 202).

Castle is seen by many as an evolution in Jackson's portrayal of female isolation into a more optimistic, subversive and even empowering direction (e.g. Downey 298; Franklin 442; Carpenter 212). At the end of her narrative, Merricat is completely cut off from the world, stuck forever inside a house, a domestic space and role that so haunts many other women in Jackson's work. She has no future prospects, no outside connections, and it is unclear how she can even survive in the isolated house if the food donations of the villagers ever dry up. She has become a fairytale creature sustained by perhaps some supernatural power, an isolated witch who haunts her own family property. What makes her situation hopeful, however, is her relationship with Constance, another woman's presence and companionship, someone she can share her existence with, even if it is an existence of delusion. "[We] are so happy," reads the final line of *Castle*, and it is easy to read as a continuation of the chillingly satirical tone of what has come before, another one of Jackson's pessimistic endings masquerading as empowering. But with the villagers finally, truly afraid of the witchlike women of the Blackwood estate, affording them respect and viewing them as powerful creatures of almost mythical status, it is hard not to feel a sense of triumph at the twisted ending. Witchcraft, for Jackson, is a "metaphor for female power and men's fear of it" (Franklin 449). The oppressive, haunted Gothic mansion of *Hill House*, and of other works of traditional Female Gothic, has been turned into a refuge and a "self-contained community of women […] that shuts out the violence of the surrounding patriarchal society" (Carpenter 212). If Natalie at the end of her narrative is "all alone", and whatever specter inhabits Hill House "[walks] alone" in the end, then by the end of *Castle* Merricat may be physically isolated, but she has someone to share her life with.

Conclusion

In this thesis, I have argued that Shirley Jackson's female protagonists in the novels *Hangsaman, The Haunting of Hill House* and *We Have Always Lived in the Castle* experience isolation in a variety of ways, be it through feeling confined by social roles, in domestic spaces or in their female bodies. I have also explored how they isolate within their own minds as mentally unstable characters and how these factors interact and cause feelings of emotional loneliness.

I first laid out the basic framework of Female Gothic literature and justified Jackson's position within its multifaceted and debated canon, as well as discussed some of the social and feminist context in which she was operating. After this I moved on to explore how Jackson's heroines are isolated by their positions as women in mid-20th century America, and how their isolation is manifested in social subordination through domestic confinement. I observed how the women in the life of *Hangsaman*'s Natalie act as haunting omens of her destined role in domestic confinement. I discussed how Eleanor in *Hill House* experiences literal confinement within the titular house and is unable to escape her life of being a domestic carer to her ailing mother or find any true, welcoming home, as the haunted house eventually takes her life. I then moved onto exploring *Castle*, where the haunted house and the domestic are subverted into a source of comfort, security, and agency.

Chapter 3 turned to discuss the emotional isolation and psychological entrapment of the three heroines. Natalie suffers from a lack of friends and emotional connections, in part due to her own desire to isolate, but also because of the trauma of her sexual assault and the controlling nature of her father. Eleanor's deep loneliness and longing for human connection makes her the ideal target for Hill House, which exploits her feelings of isolation and guilt over her relationship with her mother, slowly making her increasingly more desperate and unstable. Eventually she comes to think of the house as her only chance of "belonging" and kills herself on its grounds. Merricat lacks any real human connections, aside from her sister Constance. At first it seems as if she is mostly happy and unaffected by her situation, but there are hints that she suffers from an isolating sense of guilt just like Natalie and Eleanor.

Analyzing the troubled minds of the three heroines and how they affect the narration in all three books, I found that *Hangsaman* and *Hill House* both feature deeply unstable protagonists whose disintegrating and confused minds lead them to hallucinations and

delusions. This instability results in ambiguity about what in the stories is real and what is not, and this effect is emphasized by the way the third-person narration is tightly focalized through the protagonists. In the case of *Castle*, I suggested that the sometimes unreliable and affected first-person narration acts as a demonstration of the inability of the main character to step outside her own disturbed mind, but that overall, the narration presents a perspective that seems more coherent and rational than the previous two books.

Finally, to help develop a clearer picture of the nature of the three characters' isolation, I analyzed the relationships they do have. I explored the queer implications of *Hangsaman* and *Hill House*, a line of interpretation that is closely linked with the concept of gothic doubling. The doubles in *Hangsaman* and *Hill House* act as representations of the hidden desires of the comparatively more "proper" and conforming main characters, while *Castle* flips the dynamic around. The central relationships in the two first novels offer possibility for connection and empowerment, but ultimately disintegrate, while in *Castle*, the relationship prevails. In line with previous research on Jackson, what I ultimately observed is a continuum through her work that leads to *We Have Always Lived in the Castle*, where the main character, a non-conforming, angry and rebellious young woman, is happy to end her story isolated in a gothic house, a haunted domestic space. In Jackson's work, the house goes from a place that haunts, possesses and traps, into one that *also* protects, liberates and empowers. This is made possible through sisterhood and the companionship of another woman.

Through analyzing Jackson in the context of Female Gothic I have demonstrated that by continuing to regard Jackson and her contemporaries as part of the canon of Female Gothic, it is possible to broaden the traditional understanding of the genre and examine the ways in which the changing times have led the traditions of Female and Male Gothic to blur. The term's usefulness could be – and has been – critiqued in this day and age, but I argue that Jackson's work deals with female issues and questions of feminism in such a way that makes it relevant to examine her novels against this framework.

Continuing research on Jackson's work could further solidify her position within the tradition of Female Gothic literature and the Gothic canon in general. For one, including her other novels and her short stories in the primary material would offer even more and even more varied examples of the haunting domestic. More work could be done in examining the curious narrative voices and techniques that Jackson utilizes, particularly her use of third-person

narration which can be quite difficult to categorize. A comparative analysis of *Hill House* together with a traditional Female Gothic tale of a haunted house could offer even more insight into the ever-evolving relationship between women and the Gothic. In addition, while heavily influenced by the Gothic, Jackson's work offers such a varied mixture of genres that the field of Gothic studies should not be considered the only path forward. For example, Hattenhauer's take on Jackson as a writer of "proto-postmodernism" demonstrates that her work lends itself to more angles of analysis.

In her work, Shirley Jackson almost exclusively wrote about women. She portrayed her female protagonists as complicated, troubled individuals who were allowed to contain contradictions. She wrote at a time in history where certain, restrictive expectations were placed on women, and her work explored the nuanced ways in which women experienced isolation as the result of patriarchal conventions. She explored the feelings of alienation her protagonists felt as an interaction of multiple factors, both external and internal. While never explicitly making feminism the focal point of her work, her writing presents a powerful message on the social position of women in her time, and resonates to this day. As seen in the diary entry quoted in the introduction to this thesis, in her personal life, Jackson recognized the important distinction between "shut out" and "shutting out". She channeled this balance in her work, and explored the nuances between the two concepts through her female characters. The two central female characters in her final published novel are able to finally achieve happiness by choosing isolation, importantly, on their own terms.

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