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"No Way Out": The Gothic Concept of Home in Shirley Jackson's Horror Fiction

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Abstract: The "haunted house formula" is a central component in every Female Gothic narrative from the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Typically, it revolves around a heroine trapped in a gloomy mansion, seeking to escape a male villain. This trope, which covertly explores feminine anxieties such as domestic confinement and familial oppression, recurs multiple times in Shirley Jackson's "house trilogy" as well, namely *The Sundial*, *The Haunting of Hill House*, and *We Have Always Lived in the Castle*. However, as noted by many critics, while Female Gothic narratives usually conclude with the protagonist's successful escape and her marriage to the male hero, in Jackson's fiction, there is "no way out". Her protagonists remain confined within the domestic space. This essay explores Jackson's reappropriation of the haunted house trope as a symbol of the paranoia experienced by women in 1950s suburban America. The analysis begins by outlining the theme in traditional Female Gothic fiction, followed by an account of the sociohistorical context in which Jackson operated, without dismissing the significancy of her personal life experiences as well. Jackson's "house trilogy" will then be examined, paying particular attention to the ways in which the haunted house formula is subverted to function not as an escape narrative, but as a metaphor for modern women's inescapable confinement.

Keywords: Shirley Jackson; Female Gothic; haunted house; house trilogy; *The Sundial*; *We Have Always Lived in the Castle*; *The Haunting of Hill House*

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1. Introduction

Since its conception, the Gothic genre has been particularly successful among female readers (Becker 1999, p. 2): indeed, during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, its stylistic and narrative codes were appropriated by numerous women writers who used them to channel hidden "anxieties over domestic entrapment" (Ledoux 2017, p. 2). This particular branch of Gothic fiction by women was defined by Ellen Moers (1976) as "the Female Gothic" (p. 90). As Punter and Byron (2004) note, the Female Gothic is narratively marked by a series of tropes:

> the female protagonist [...] is usually depicted enjoying an idyllic and secluded life; this is followed by a period of imprisonment when she is confined to a great house or castle [...] under the authority of a powerful male figure or his female surrogate. Within this labyrinthine space she is trapped and pursued, and the threat may variously be to her virtue or to her life. (p. 279)

This Gothic subtype of escape narrative allowed women to explore their own sense of confinement in contemporary society, and their desire to flee imposed obligations in order to form a separate identity; significantly, it did it through the situating of characters within supposedly haunted spaces: see, for instance, Sophia Lee's *The Recess* (1783), together with Ann Radcliffe's *The Romance of the Forest* (1791), *The Mysteries of Udolpho* (1794), and *The Italian* (1797). This strategy, defined by Dale Bailey (1999) as the "haunted house formula" (p. ix), exploits the domestic space and transforms it into a locus horridus, from which the female protagonist desperately tries to escape through a metaphoric

journey from a dark inside to a sunny outside. What is particularly interesting is that said journey usually ends with the protagonist's happy marriage to the male hero, which actually reinforces the domestic ideology that was "the cause of all her problems and suffering" (Punter and Byron 2004, p. 281). As Claire Kahane (1985) suggests, "while the heroine ultimately moves into a space that she seemingly controls, that control is illusory, based as it is on social withdrawal and psychological repression, on an ultimate submission to patriarchal constructs of the feminine" (pp. 340–41). This trope is significantly reversed in Shirley Jackson's (1916–1965) so-called "house trilogy", namely *The Sundial* (1958), *The Haunting of Hill House* (1959), and *We Have Always Lived in the Castle* (1962), in which the Gothic theme of the haunted house becomes a powerful metaphor for women's condition in the Fifties, an era marked by women's experience of being pushed back into the domestic sphere (Harvey 1993; Oakley 1986). As stated by Keith Thomas (1971), actual hauntings are not a necessary asset for the haunted house formula to be effective, since people "stopped seeing ghosts" from the eighteenth century onward as these gradually lost their "social relevance" (p. 606). Indeed, it can be argued that no hauntings are ever really present in Jackson's fiction: from *Hill House*'s Eleanor Vance, who spent all her adult life tending to an ill and abusive mother and comes to Hill House in search of a new family, to *Castle*'s Constance and Merricat Blackwood, who pass the time cooking and gardening in the peaceful isolation of their manor to avoid the hostility of their fellow villagers, the female protagonists of Jackson's "house trilogy" are symbolically walled in, acting and becoming themselves the very ghosts haunting their own homes. Therefore, while the vast majority of Female Gothic texts from the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries seems to merely reinforce the patriarchal discourse, presenting marriage as the only path to the heroine's self-affirmation (which, in narrative terms, is symbolized by her journey from a dark inside to a sunlit outside), I argue how in Jackson's fiction there is really "no way out" (Jackson 1998, p. 1) from the haunted house, as her protagonists usually remain confined in the domestic space. By so doing, Jackson conceptualized a new mode of conceiving of the Gothic home that perfectly encapsulates women's experience in 1950s suburban America (Ingram and Mullins 2018). Indeed, as observed by Kahane (1980), "typically, in modern Gothic, there is no escape" (p. 53). This argument will be supported by an account of the sociohistorical and personal context in which Jackson operated and by a close analysis of Jackson's "house trilogy", paying particular attention to the ways in which the haunted house formula is subverted to function no more as a romantic escape narrative trope, but rather "to explore the predicament of the housebound wife" (Wallace 2016, p. 76); demonstrating once again how the Gothic is still relevant in modern society as it "gives voice to the dark nightmare that is the underside of 'the American dream'" (Savoy 2002, p. 167).

A Note on the Contextual Usage of the Expression "Female Gothic"

It is undeniable that the expression "Female Gothic" coined by Moers paved the way for a more thoughtful consideration of women's Gothic literature, promoting the emergence and dissemination of a whole series of texts authored by militant second-wave feminist scholars, such as Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar, aimed at the recovery of women's Gothic works from the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. However, the problematic quality inherent to this expression cannot be overlooked and has to be factored in when employing it in a contemporary study. Moers defined the Female Gothic as "the work that women writers have done in the literary mode that, since the eighteenth century, we have called the Gothic" (Moers 1976, p. 90). However, Ellen Ledoux (2017) significantly suggests that it may more accurately relate to "the ideological goals of second-wave feminist literary criticism" (p. 2), rather than to these writers' true intentions. Moreover, since many studies identified a specific style pertaining to the Female Gothic, represented by Ann Radcliffe's so-called "explained supernatural style", such theories risked applying indiscriminately the lens of gender essentialism to literary manufacts (Smith and Wallace 2004, p. 1). Consequently, Ledoux continues, labeling a priori Gothic works produced by women as "Female Gothic" is too limiting, as well as perhaps too exclusive concerning the selection of texts to focus

on, since "Women-authored texts that do not feature 'Female Gothic' tropes [. . .] are often given little critical attention" (Ledoux 2017, p. 2). As Baldick and Mighall (2012) point out,

> the construction since the 1970s of the predominantly universalizing category of the "female Gothic", as an embodiment of some invariable female "experience" or of the archetypal "female principle", leads straight out of history into the timeless melodrama in which (wicked) "male Gothic" texts always express terror of the eternal "(M)other" while (good) female Gothic texts are revealed to be [. . .] not just "empowering" but "revolutionary". (p. 285)

Despite its drawbacks, the expression "Female Gothic" is anyway a helpful analytical framework for its immediacy and evocativeness, which can be used in contemporary discourses regarding gender and genre provided it is continually updated and critically contextualized. Therefore, it will be employed in the present study merely to refer to the aforementioned literary tropes, particularly the haunted house formula as identified by Bailey, without any intention of comprising all female-authored Gothic works within this label, nor of attributing specific qualities to women-authored works in an essentialist manner. It will merely be applied to a specific corpus of women-authored texts which present the characteristics exposed above, mainly the focus on the domestic space and a narrative arc leading from the inside to the outside, as opposed to what will be observed regarding Shirley Jackson's fiction.

2. Shirley Jackson and the Fifties

Shirley Jackson was born in San Francisco on 14 December 1916. From an early age, she had a difficult relationship with her mother, who was unable to provide affection or support (Franklin 2017, pp. 23–25). At eighteen, she enrolled at the University of Rochester but dropped out two years later due to severe depression (Franklin 2017, p. 45), a condition that would persist throughout her life, leading her to rely on alcohol and prescription drugs as coping mechanisms (Durastanti 2018, online). Upon later enrolling at Syracuse, she met future literary critic Stanley Edgar Hyman, who was struck by a story of hers published in the college magazine (Franklin 2017, pp. 94–95). The couple married in 1940 and moved to New York (Franklin 2017, p. 128), where they used to entertain lavish dinner parties with the most renowned intellectuals of their time. The marriage to Hyman, however, was not the happiest: Hyman turned out to be unfaithful and sexist, delegating to Jackson the entire domestic load (Durastanti 2018, online), further aggravated by the birth of four children. A few years later, the couple moved to North Bennington in Vermont, where Hyman had obtained a professorship. There, Jackson experienced more and more the nagging feeling of being an outsider: perceived merely as a "faculty wife" by her community, she dealt exclusively with raising children, cleaning and cooking, confining writing activity to the rare scraps of time (Durastanti 2018, online). Locals remained quite hostile towards the Hyman family, deemed to be too eccentric to really fit in. This creeping hostility will give rise to many of Jackson's works, including the short story "The Lottery" (1948).

Arguably, this lingering sense of isolation influenced Jackson's "house trilogy", a triad of novels all centered on the themes of home and domesticity (Bailey 1999); the protagonists of these narratives are always women, disturbed, locked up, angry and, above all, lonely. In these works, the domestic space is an ambivalent symbol of both warmth and confinement. Ingram and Mullins (2018) point out how Jackson's controversial treatment of domesticity mirrors the deep-seated anxieties experienced by American society in the mid-twentieth century (p. 342). Indeed, one should not forget the sociohistorical context in which Jackson wrote, the decade remembered in the U.S. as "the Baby Boom era", characterized by the return of the G.I.s after World War II and the restoration of the status quo regarding societal and familial gender roles. This was undoubtedly a cause of strong social pressure on women, who felt they had to adapt to a narrow housewife-y script that, in the 1950s, was extremely idealized. Family life was made out to be women's only concern: in her groundbreaking study *The Fifties* (1993), Brett Harvey interviews women who were young girls in this profoundly problematic decade, and discovers how

many of them were extremely ambivalent towards pursuing higher education, considering how their only possible future in society was to become housewives. In this respect, Rich Pascal (2005) interestingly observes how the period's veneration of the nuclear family was linguistically marked by "newly coined phrases that highlighted the centricity of the family ('family-size carton', 'family room', 'family car')" (p. 92). Housing conditions changed, too: as many middle-class families started to move to the suburbs, and housewives found themselves isolated while their husbands worked in the cities, "the percentage of a woman's day spent chauffeuring other family members about increased exponentially" (Matthews 1987, p. 212). Many American housewives of the 1950s found themselves split into two: on the one hand, they felt the overwhelming pressure to adhere uncritically to a prepackaged social model; on the other hand, they became more and more aware of their overwhelming psychological discomfort. The first symptoms of this feminine struggle, sublimated significantly in the literary field by a return to narrative patterns typical of Female Gothic fiction (Ingram and Mullins 2018), were the rise of disorders such as anxiety and depression, and the abuse of prescription drugs and alcohol (Pallejá-Lopez 2010, p. 77). Feminist activist Betty Friedan, who first addressed this phenomenon in her essay *The Feminine Mystique* (1963), significantly called it "the problem that has no name":

> It was a strange stirring, a sense of dissatisfaction, a yearning that women suffered in the middle of the twentieth century in the United States. Each suburban wife struggled with it alone. As she made the beds, shopped for groceries, matched slipcover material, ate peanut butter sandwiches with her children, chauffeured Cub Scouts and Brownies, lay beside her husband at night—she was afraid to ask even of herself the silent question—"Is this all?" (Friedan 1974, p. 11)

In an era that was pervasively dominated by the media, a very specific representation of femininity, influenced by advertising and women's magazines, took over. The latter, in particular, made sure to cut out any geopolitical or cultural reference from their content: suddenly, women were considered incapable of thinking about anything else apart from taking care of their homes and families. Many publications made use of the so-called "housewife formula", consisting of manual-type articles on household chores, child-rearing and marital satisfaction, accompanied by romantic or humorous short stories (Friedan 1974, p. 48) often penned by the so-called "Housewife Writers", a group of talented women writers who recounted their domestic (mis)adventures in a comic and cheerful manner. In Friedan's (1974) words, "'Laugh,' the Housewife Writers tell the real housewife, 'if you are feeling desperate, empty, bored, trapped in the bedmaking, chauffeuring and dishwashing details. Isn't it funny? We're all in the same trap'" (p. 50). At times, Jackson's name figured among those of other Housewife Writers in the most fashionable women's magazines of the time, such as *Mademoiselle* and *Woman's Home Companion*, as she often alternated Gothic-horror genre narratives with humorous and autobiographical writings focused on her own life as a wife and mother of four: a "split literary persona" (Ingram and Mullins 2018, p. 343). Significantly, these narratives often shift from the narration of lively domestic situations to Gothic constructions pivoting on the idea of the haunted house; which appears to reinforce Amanda Bingham Solomon's (2012) observation that "the house and home of modern America may be seen as a figure of architectural uncertainty, a place which ostensibly acts as a well-groomed, domestic refuge while becoming increasingly entangled with that which is unhomely and inhospitable" (p. 2). Not surprisingly, the anthologies which collect Jackson's domestic writings have strongly evocative titles, such as *Life Among the Savages* and *Raising Demons*, and make extensive use of Gothic imagery. See, for instance, the opening passage of the former:

> Our house is old, and noisy, and full. [. . .] This is the way of life my husband and I have fallen into, inadvertently, as though we had fallen into a well and decided that since there was *no way out* we might as well stay there and set up a chair and a desk and a light of some kind. . . (Jackson 1998, p. 1, emphasis mine)

This kind of ironic, yet disquieting mode of writing about family life appears to reinforce Ingram and Mullins' (2018) idea that "Jackson saw familial relationships, and the relationships between women and their houses, as a type of predatory feeding" (p. 347), which allowed no space for salvation or escape.

3. Shirley Jackson's "House Trilogy"

As stated in par. 1, the present study takes into consideration the reappropriation of the haunted house formula, typical of Female Gothic texts, by Shirley Jackson's horror fiction. The term "horror" is not used inconsistently here. Many critics (such as Clive Bloom and Jess Nevins) agree in defining horror as a predominantly "responsive" genre: in fact, unlike the Gothic tale, "the horror [. . .] refuses rational explanation, appealing to a level of visceral response beyond conscious interpretation" (Bloom 2012, p. 221). In short, "To qualify as horror, [. . .] all that a text must contain is the ability to create an effect in its reader: the feeling of dread" (Nevins 2020, p. 16). This type of visceral response, I argue, is very typical of Jackson's narratives, in which nothing apparently happens, but which still manage to produce discomfort and anxiety in the reader through a strong sense of impending doom and that something is *just not right*. In this sense, Jackson's horror, which confounds the mind, is opposed to Ann Radcliffe's (1826) terror, aimed on the contrary at producing a contemplative effect (p. 159). Moreover, according to Noël Carroll (1990), horror is "an *emotional state* wherein [. . .] some nonordinary physical state of agitation is caused by the thought of a monster, [. . .] which [. . .] also includes the recognition that the monster is threatening and impure" (p. 35, emphasis mine). The concept of impurity is well articulated by Mary Douglas in her *Purity and Danger* (1966): here, the impure subject is defined as "interstitial" and having "fusive" qualities (see, for instance, the archetypal horror figures of werewolves, zombies, etc.) (Douglas 2001). It is worth mentioning how Carroll identifies haunted houses as interstitial entities, too, which, by extension, positions Jackson's houses as horror, since many of her protagonists have a tendency to identify with their homes and become absorbed by them; as we shall see in the following paragraphs.

3.1. The Sundial (1958)

The first novel of Jackson's "house trilogy" recounts the ironic tale of twelve characters (a sort of dysfunctional extended family) who wait for a forthcoming Apocalypse inside the Halloran mansion; said house belongs to the eponymous family, whose member Aunt Fanny received the announcement of the imminent doomsday by the ghost of her deceased father. The characters believe they will be saved by staying inside the house, and will inherit "a new, clean, pastoral world" (Akçil 2019, p. 88). In fact, the Halloran family home is arguably the main character in the novel: each architectural feature is described in great detail from the very first paragraph. Furthermore, the house is represented as the main site for the female struggle over the gain of material powers and possessions by presenting the question of inheritance immediately in the first lines (Wallace 2016, p. 79). Orianna Halloran, the matriarch of the family, gained power by allegedly pushing her son Lionel down the stairs, killing him; as the opening line of the novel reads, "After the funeral they came back to the house, now indisputably Mrs. Halloran's" (Jackson 2014, p. 1). At the end of the novel, closing the circle, Orianna's granddaughter Fancy will pass over her dead body to take her crown from her head, screaming "*My* crown, now" in delight (Jackson 2014, p. 216). Far, in my opinion, from challenging "the traditional postwar ideology of the primacy of marriage and family", as Marilyn DeAngelis Boyer (2011) argues, I believe this narrative pattern further emphasizes 1950s women's obsessive focus on anything pertaining to the domestic sphere, the only realm on which they could exert some kind of influence. As stated by Gizem Akçil (2019), "in *The Sundial*, the women succeed in crippling the patriarchy, [. . .] yet they try to replace it with an equally oppressive and totalitarian order" (p. 122). The house and everything concerning house management is the main focus of the characters' dialogues and their only way of expressing some kind of emotion towards the unfolding

events, as shown by the following exchange between Orianna and Richard immediately after their son's funeral:

> "Now that Lionel is gone", Mrs. Halloran said, "I am going to have to get someone to manage the estate".
>
> "Lionel did it very poorly. At one time the rose garden was perfectly visible from my terrace, and now I can only see hedges. I want the hedges all cut down. At once".
>
> "You are not to excite yourself, Richard. You were always a good father, and I will have the hedges trimmed". (Jackson 2014, p. 4)

Even more interestingly, according to the novel's Italian translator, Silvia Pareschi, the Halloran house is built like some kind of Russian-doll mechanism: in it, other houses can be found, such as the little girl Fancy's dollhouse and Aunt Fanny's own childhood apartment, recreated by the latter on the mansion's third floor. Fancy's dollhouse serves as a compelling metaphor for women's restrained condition within the walls of their homes, in which they act just like little dolls, as this passage cleverly shows:

> "I have my doll house", Fancy said suddenly, looking for the first time squarely at Aunt Fanny. "I have my beautiful little doll house with real doorknobs and electric lights and the little stove that really works and the running water in the bathtubs. [. . .] And all the little dolls. One of them", Fancy giggled, "is lying in the little bathtub with the water really running. They're little doll house dolls. They fit exactly into the chairs and the beds. They have little dishes. When I put them to bed they have to go to bed. When my grandmother dies all *this* is going to belong to me. [. . .] When my grandmother dies", she said, "I am going to smash my doll house. I won't need it any more". (Jackson 2014, pp. 17–18)

On the other hand, as pointed out by Akçil (2019), "Aunt Fanny's apartment is similar to Fancy's doll house in that it provides a private Gothic domestic space where she can use her imagination to reflect on her memories" (p. 120). Thus, *The Sundial* employs the house as a symbol of 1950s women's self-containment within the space of the home, the only one which they can actually exert some kind of control on; the fact that the Russian-doll mechanism of the Halloran estate is built around the belongings of young Fancy, a child, and Aunt Fanny, an older woman, serves as a powerful reminder that all of a contemporary woman's lifespan was meant to be spent inside. This is also made clear by the metaphorical encapsulation of the Halloran estate within stone walls:

> The Halloran land was distinguished from the rest of the world by a stone wall, which went completely around the estate, so that all inside the wall was Halloran, all outside was not. The first Mr. Halloran [. . .] was a man who, in the astonishment of finding himself suddenly extremely wealthy, could think of nothing better to do with his money than set up his own world. His belief about the house [. . .] was that it should contain everything. (Jackson 2014, pp. 7–8)

Fanny's "miniaturized" apartment, and her almost theatrical reenactment of her original family's relations when she goes there, is also proof of how paralysis and isolation become the true markers of family in 1950s America: "It is not a communal group that grows and diversifies over time, or that radiates outward beyond the immediate household, but one that resembles a photograph, a spatiotemporal moment from the past frozen into an image that is non-contiguous and miniature" (Pascal 2005, p. 93). Indeed, the novel also marks the beginning of what will come to be a central theme in Jackson's writing, that is, the dysfunctionality of the nuclear family idealized by 1950s propaganda: from its very opening lines, the narrative satirically focuses on the vindictive and Machiavellian relations between the various family members (Pascal 2005, p. 92), highlighting the impossibility of personal fulfilment inside the traditional family roles assigned by society, especially to women.

3.2. The Haunting of Hill House (1959)

The Haunting of Hill House is one of Shirley Jackson's best-known works and has become emblematic of the haunted house theme (Tetro 2014, p. 199). The protagonist is Eleanor Vance, a troubled 32-year-old who, having spent her entire life caring for her disabled mother, finds herself deprived of social relationships, dreams or goals. When she is invited by Dr. Montague to take part in an experiment on the supernatural phenomena which may be occurring at Hill House, a supposedly haunted mansion, she steals her sister's car and sets out into what she considers her first, exciting adventure. The group of people who will spend the summer at Hill House consists also of Theodora, who appears to have been previously involved, like Eleanor, in paranormal events, and Luke, the future heir of the house. Thus, what takes shape in Hill House is, again, nothing but the ironic reconstruction of a family unit, with Montague in the role of patriarch and Eleanor, Luke, and Theodora in that of filial figures:

> Quickly upon taking occupancy the ghost hunters constitute themselves as a family. The middle-aged Dr. Montague's relationship with the three younger adults is construed by all as that of a benign father figure charged with administering a household of engaging, somewhat rambunctious youngsters. Like the happy close-knit families of postwar cultural lore, they gather together in the evenings for dinner and, subsequently, in a drawing room for chatty conversations and parental story-telling. (Pascal 2014, p. 480)

Indeed, the daily routine of the group is immediately consolidated in the form of family traditions, as one passage in the novel points out:

> They had come through the darkness of one night, they had met morning in Hill House, and they were a family, greeting one another with easy informality and going to the chairs they had used last night at dinner, their own places at the table. (Jackson 2013, p. 92)

However, this ironic reconstruction only serves as a marker of how inadequate traditional gender roles actually are (Bailey 1999): indeed, the fragile balance initially established is destined to be corrupted by conflict, arising primarily from the rivalry (not without erotic tension) between Eleanor and Theodora. Once again, this second novel manages to conjure up postwar America's anxieties regarding contemporary family's structure (Pascal 2014, p. 466) and women's role in it, and does so by situating the characters (and the female protagonist above all) in an inescapable, supposedly haunted house. In fact, Eleanor's sanity seems to crumble piece by piece, captivated by the house's mysterious magnetism, which results in a psychological crisis when she is explicitly invited to leave by the rest of the company. The ambiguous ending depicts Eleanor crashing her car into a tree, apparently committing suicide but actually realizing what she is doing when it is too late. One interpretation of this conclusion is that Eleanor cannot fathom her existence outside of Hill House, as there is, in fact, no possible existence for 1950s women outside the home. Therefore, Jackson borrows the stereotypical Female Gothic tropes and brings them further, proposing an ending that contemplates domesticity, as eighteenth- and nineteenth-century narratives did, but reinterprets it as the ultimate cancellation of the feminine self. Not surprisingly, the incipit of *Hill House* states that whatever moves inside the house does so in solitude ("whatever walked there, walked alone") (Jackson 2013, p. 3). In a sense, as was already hinted in par. 1, it can be argued that Eleanor herself is the ghost of Hill House: in the last chapter, prey to a nocturnal delirium, she will in fact be the force behind the "paranormal" phenomena experienced by the rest of the group. Eleanor's substance becomes more and more intangible, so much so that "Mrs. Montague cannot even remember who exactly Eleanor is" (Anderson and Kröger 2016, p. 46). Towards the end of the novel, the other characters seem to forget about Eleanor's existence as well; indeed, the protagonist begins to experience events around the house only insofar as she eavesdrops and peeks, unseen, at what is happening:

> Theodora laughed, and Eleanor, hidden deep in the shadows behind the summerhouse, put her hands over her mouth to keep from speaking to let them know she was there; I've got to find out, she was thinking, I've got to find out. [. . .] When are they going to talk about me? Eleanor wondered in the shadows. (Jackson 2013, pp. 207–9)

The identification of Eleanor with the house and her self-incarceration there (Anderson and Kröger 2016, p. 161) is mirrored in the architectural conformation of the building, which resembles the Halloran Russian-doll house and, possibly, the protagonist's own psyche:

> The rooms on the first floor of the house are arranged in concentric circles: outer rooms open into inner rooms, the inmost room has no windows, and doors always remain closed, even when one leaves them open. Once again, a Gothic house *is* the female protagonist. . . (Akçil 2019, p. 134)

Eleanor's physical and mental confinement is an example of how Jackson uses Female Gothic tropes to draw attention on the troubles of contemporary women who lost themselves to and in their homes. While Ann Radcliffe's gothic heroines ended their own captivity by marrying (Drew 1993), as if marriage was a liberation from their submission and fears, captivity is the conditio sine qua non of Eleanor's phantom existence: "like housewives all over America, [Eleanor] has been caged within her home just as surely as her gothic sisters were in their cells, chambers, and towers" (Rasmus 2009, p. 16).

3.3. We Have Always Lived in the Castle (1962)

We Have Always Lived in the Castle is arguably the most "domestic" of all of Jackson's novels, in which the revisited haunted house formula takes on the shape of a more positive, empowering self-entombment. The plot revolves around sisters Constance and Merricat Blackwood, who live secluded in their mansion with their disabled Uncle Julian after the rest of their family died by poisoning. Since Constance is the one usually taking care of the family meals, the villagers are convinced she is the one responsible for the murder (whereas, in fact, Merricat is), which results in the Blackwood sisters living isolated from the rest of the world. Only Merricat unwillingly ventures into the village to provide groceries and library books. Her profound dislike for the townspeople is evident in her wishing that

> they were dead. I would have liked to come into the grocery some morning and see them all [. . .] lying there crying with the pain and dying. I would then help myself to groceries, [. . .] stepping over their bodies, taking whatever I fancied from the shelves. . . (Jackson 2016, pp. 8–9)

Merricat's fantasy of helping herself to groceries and taking what she wants resembles very closely Fancy's gesture of passing over her dead grandmother's body to take her crown, and represents both young characters' rebellion and frustration towards the patterns of mundane, domestic rituals. Moreover, Merricat's alienation from society (and the rest of her family) is evident in her being often expelled from the dinner table when the other family members were alive (Muñoz-González 2018); the dinner table being, in this case, yet another symbol for the traditional image of the nuclear family. Merricat's status of social misfit is compliant with Akçil's (2019) conceptualization of both sisters' personalities:

> the nickname "Merricat", with the word "cat", signifies her witch-like character, whereas the name "Constance" indicates her unchanging adherence to the female gender role of homemaker. Never leaving home, she does all the gardening, cooking and cleaning, and takes care of Merricat and Uncle Julian. [. . .] Cleaning the house, raising plants, and preparing the meals, Constance represents the cult of true womanhood and domesticity. (p. 155)

The extravagant little family composed of Constance, Merricat, and Uncle Julian leads a peaceful life consisting of small homely rituals, mainly revolving around gardening and cooking. The trio's serene balance is disrupted, and not saved, by the intrusion of the

outside world, represented by the arrival of Cousin Charles, who seeks to marry Constance, luring her back to society, in order to inherit the family fortune. Merricat's dislike for him eventually leads to her burning the Blackwood house down, causing the death of Uncle Julian. The remains of the house are torn down by the town-dwellers, who see the fire as an opportunity to unload their rage at the Blackwoods, whom they hate not only for the supposed murder but also for their wealth and snobbishness. After hiding in the woods, Constance and Merricat return to the ruins of their house and resume their daily routine as if nothing happened. Therefore, as stated above, the novel offers a somewhat happy ending, which sees Constance and Merricat peacefully "haunting" the ruins of their own house and being seen as witches by the townspeople, who bring them food offerings out of guilt. In a sense, then, the novel perfectly reinterprets Eugenia DeLamotte's (1990) noticing of an ambivalence associated with the domestic sphere in Gothic narratives (an ambivalence which is, in this case, represented by the dual characterization of the Blackwood sisters): on the one hand, "womanly retirement [is] warm, safe, and maternal but dark; innocent but imprisoning"; on the other hand, the emergence into the world is "full of danger and suffering" (p. 171), thus Jackson's heroines prefer the well-known if ambiguous containment of their home. Once again, the Female Gothic journey is reversed, from the outside to the inside. In fact, the offers of food from the villagers become a means of communication (Carpenter 2005, p. 209) between the two worlds, and more in general, between life and death. As Akçil (2019) points out, "By conveying their rage against the misogynistic and hostile world in which they live, Merricat and Constance consciously reject the role of angel, and instead, choose to live as non-conformist, isolated women inside the barricaded Blackwood castle, drawing strength from sisterhood" (pp. 176–77). Therefore, in *Castle* the Gothic house takes on a positive connotation, by becoming a sanctuary of womanly solidarity against patriarchy. Darryl Hattenhauer (2003, p. 185) observes how Merricat has a habit of anthropomorphizing the Blackwood mansion, stating that it has a "stern, unwelcoming face" (Jackson 2016) and noticing how after the fire it "seemed to shiver" (Jackson 2016): it almost seems as though Merricat projects her feelings onto the house (Hattenhauer 2003, p. 185), becoming one with it much like Eleanor does in *Hill House*. Finally, when Charles' pipe leaves a mark in a chair (a clear symbol of male corruption), Merricat "hoped that the house, injured, would reject him" (Jackson 2016). As it appears, the house is haunting outside intruders as much as it is haunted by and protector of the discomforting presence of female loneliness and alienation.

4. Conclusions

Far from being exhaustive, the present study proposes one way of looking at Shirley Jackson's "house trilogy", linking the author's preoccupations with house chores and domesticity to recurring themes of confinement and isolation inside dark spaces which are typical of traditional Female Gothic narratives. However, as observed, Jackson's treatment of the haunted house trope differs significantly from her eighteenth- and nineteenth-century counterparts. She reinterprets the domestic space as a symbol of contemporary women's confinement, where escape is neither possible nor, in some cases, desirable. Female Gothic writers appropriated Gothic tropes to resist patriarchal norms regarding women's role in the house, and they did so by proposing the protagonist's identity formation through marriage; more than a hundred years later, Jackson appropriated Female Gothic themes to highlight the problematic quality of sexist ideologies in 1950s suburban America. Her female protagonists identify with their material, domestic possessions (see the Halloran women in *The Sundial*), refuse to abandon a newfound home even when it means becoming possessed (Eleanor Vance in *Hill House*), and ultimately form a sisterly bond within a ruined mansion (the Blackwood sisters in *Castle*). Although, Jackson's novels depict how women occasionally find ways to resist societal impositions, they also reveal that women's liberation was (and remains) far from complete, confirming Bailey's (1999) statement that, for Jackson, as for all women, "every house [is] haunted".

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