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Suffolk University

“I Think You Should Come Home”: On Haunted Houses and Family Secrets

Sydni Masiello

Senior Honors Thesis

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Part One: I Think You Should Come Home

By Sydni Masiello

My hands gripped the scaly leather steering wheel at ten and two, though as my hold weakened, they began to slide down the edges, until my fingers made only the slightest contact with the wheel. My dad's voice cracked as it came through the Bluetooth speaker.

“She tried to kill herself,” Jeff said.

I stayed silent. For how long, I did not know. I watched the freeway to my right, the cars accelerated past me in waves of silver and red. Some were speeding to catch lunch with friends or to make it on time for their jobs, or teenagers heading in the direction of the mall—or as I saw it, the direction of my childhood home.

My car sat stagnant in the breakdown lane, its engine emitting a soft rumbling noise. I jerked my head away from the road, the way a young child would when refusing a forkful of broccoli. The freeway was a path that led to memories I didn't wish to dwell on.

“Joey, are you there?”

My eyes met with a verdant patch of park wedged between the freeway and beyond. Past a small barrier of grass and shrubs lay a winding walking path that seemed to go on forever. Its gravel path continued past a children's playground and a gazebo farther on in the distance and out of my line of sight.

A young woman emerged on the path, pushing along a stroller. I watched as she stopped in the middle of the desolate path to lift the hood on the carriage and coo at her baby. She then lifted a second hood to reveal another child who began to wail at the introduction of fresh air and

sunlight. The young mom dangled a small stuffed bear in front of the child who seemed to be appeased by its presence, wiggling its chubby fingers above its head.

“Joey, I think you should come home.”

A new and unwanted memory passed seemingly with each mile marker on the freeway. I had returned to my dingy one-bedroom apartment to pack a few outfits into a duffel bag—I wasn’t planning on staying long—and started my hour-long journey.

I couldn’t stop thinking back to the babies in the stroller. My mind drifted to the stuffed bear—a long-haired fluffy brown one, with a bright red neck scarf. It reminded me of a similar stuffed bear from when I was a kid, only by the time I was around five, its left ear had fallen off from my incessant biting—a habit of mine that seemed to give me comfort.

My vision drifted to the broken white line dividing the road, as it morphed into that of my mom’s partially empty canvas in my mind.

I remembered gripping the matted fur of my bear—what was its name? Barry? Beary? Maybe Mr. Bear? I guess it doesn’t matter much now. I was around five or six, maybe, watching my mother as she dipped her paintbrush into a new paint color, the figure of a man starting to come together on the canvas in front of her. I sat behind her, her back to me as I desperately tried to tie my shoe with the stuffed animal under my arm.

“Mom, I can’t do it!” I would say and be met with only the soft violin coming through the record player.

I remembered my dad walking into the art studio, a large room filled with my mom’s supplies and countless finished canvases.

“Why don’t you take Joey for a walk around the park, Marge?” he said, bending down and grasping my shoelaces. “They’re two bunny ears, remember, Joey?”

“I have to spend time with the painting,” Mom said, barely turning to look at Dad.

The deafening honk of a truck in the lane next to me brought me back to reality. I jerked my car back into my lane, flicking my eyes toward the dashboard mirror. Sweat prickled my forehead. The road ahead was long. I couldn't help but feel like I was being drawn back into the life I had so desperately tried to escape years ago.

I pulled into my childhood driveway carefully, as if not to alert anyone that I was there just yet. I bowed my head, ultimately resting it on the steering wheel, and took a few needed deep breaths. Finally, I opened the car door and swung my legs out of the car, where they were engulfed in terribly overgrown, half-dead grass. The pathway up to the house was nonexistent. The neat cement tiling was covered in weeds and moss, and the grass spilled over its limits. Jeff met me at the top of the steps, engulfing me in a hug.

“I'm sorry for the mess. Things might look a little different around here,” he said.

Different was an understatement.

“Marge,” he said slowly, knuckles tapping softly on the center of the chipping door.

“Joseph's here.”

We waited in silence. I tried desperately to focus on the quiet murmur of the fridge downstairs. It was as if no one was home or had ever lived there at all. The once baby blue curtains were coated in thick layers of dust, the cloth that once kissed the hardwood floors now drooping like an old man's face. The curtain rod was no longer level, looking as if the dainty spiderwebs attached to it were somehow weighing one side of it down. The crooked curtain rod

matched the stairs leading to her room— lopsided and threatening to cave in if someone with a heavy foot wasn't warned of where not to step.

I had never seen the house in such a state of disarray. It had been well over twenty years since I had been home. I had left when I was only thirteen—around the first time mom's mental health took a turn for the worse. The doctors had diagnosed her with OCD and depression—not that I knew what those terms meant at the time. She had started to increasingly obsess over her artwork, especially the one of the man she began painting when I was so young. I remember not being able to sleep at night as the soft hum of classical music filled my mom's art studio above my bedroom through the night. In the mornings, she would move through the motions of the morning listlessly, often giving me money for school lunch because she had no time to pack me one. She had to get back into the studio—back to her masterpiece.

So, I got sent off to boarding school. Jeff thought it best to get me out of the house while they sought treatment for mom's mental health. She eventually got better. Therapy allowed her to relinquish the hold the painting had on her. She no longer sought to perfect it, and eventually it was moved to the attic to live amongst other forgotten things.

My mom called me at boarding school a few years into her treatment and offered to come pick me up—to bring me back home, but by then it was too late. I had already felt the constant pang of abandonment and promised myself not to return and to instead construct a life of my own.

“We're going to come in now, Marge,” Jeff said.

In the middle of the floor sat a metal stool, the paint peeling off the sides and balancing only on three legs, the fourth being significantly shorter for some reason I could not fully figure out.

“Marge,” Jeff said, “honey.”

She sat atop the stool, hunched over in an oversized sweater like a deflated balloon. Her wrists poked out from the knit fabric and her hands were thin and deeply veined, with bony fingers that looked as if they could be snapped in half like matchsticks. Her hair, brittle and braided by the restlessness of the night, dangled down her back like twigs wrecked from a hurricane. She had never looked worse. She hadn't even looked this bad during her first battle with her mental health.

Before her stood a wooden easel, a completed painting perched on its ledge with color covering its every inch.

“It looks exactly the same,” I said. “It can't be.” I walked toward it, my body suddenly becoming heavy as I looked at the only thing in the house that hadn't been touched by the passage of time.

Everything about the painting looked the same—everything so familiar. The oversized brown leather chair, worn down and well loved, the arms unkempt, much like the one passed down from my grandfather, still sat in the corner of the painted room. Beside it, a threadbare carpet— one filled with drawings of angels that always reminded me of Raphael's *Sistine Madonna*, my mother's favorite painting, was still splayed across the floor, its pattern interrupted by two well-polished black shoes that attached to legs, one bent, gently crossed over the other's knee. The man's presence was still quite overbearing, the way his broad shoulders held up a head like a Greek-like sculpture. I met the painted man's stern gaze.

Before I knew it, I began to reach out, grazing the pads of my fingers across the dried paint, feeling the textures, like braille beneath my fingers. Jeff's strong grip pulled me back to reality.

"No!" she screamed, breaking out of her paralytic state. "No, no, no! You can't do that—he can't do that."

I withdrew my hand and looked into her crazed hazel eyes, which I barely recognized.

"It talks to me," she said shakily. Her eyes darted quickly back to the painting. "It's mad," she stated, "You made it mad."

"Now, Marge, we talked about this—a person can't make a painting mad," Jeff began.

I let Jeff's voice become mere background noise as I focused on the painting again. It felt so familiar, yet so different, probably because of the fact that I hadn't seen it in years—since it had seemingly caused her to spiral into madness so many years before. As a young boy I'd come up to her studio and watch her paint for hours after school—anything to try and gain an ounce of my mother's attention.

I was always captivated by the way my mother painted—as if she always found it necessary to work on the same patch of canvas until she was perfectly and utterly satisfied with it. I would attempt to bond with her over her love for painting. Always feeling second rate to her artwork, I would spend most of my free time upstairs in her studio badgering her with questions about her latest piece and trying to impress her with art history facts I would read up on in the late hours of the night. Her paintings were all captivating, yet this one was always at the forefront.

It was before my mother's first break with reality when she started to paint the man in the picture. I remember watching the painting progress through the years. Especially when she decided to bring life to it.

"Who is he?" I remember asking her one day, lying on my stomach on the floor of the studio, along with a piece of paper and some charcoal, wanting to replicate my mother's work.

"Who do you want him to be?" she asked me.

His blue eyes reminded me of my own, how a small patch of green resided within the icy blue of his left iris. "My older brother," I said, kicking my sock-covered feet in the air, working on detailing his smile.

She paused as I resumed my drawing, her smile slowly fading as she dipped her brush in a cup of water. "I think I'm done for the day, Joey. Why don't we go downstairs for a snack?"

"Joseph, I think it would be better if you waited downstairs for a while," Jeff said, his arm wrapped around Marge's shoulders protectively.

I nodded. As I turned to leave, my eyes caught something in the painting I had not noticed before her outburst or even as a child. In his chair he sat, his head tilted to the side ever so slightly as I always remembered; however, I did not recall the shape of his downturned lips, muscles taut in a frown, and his eyes sharp and squinted— his gaze burning through me.

"It's not happy that you're here!" her voice followed me as I trailed down the steps, careful of each stair.

"Neither am I," I mumbled.

“Did you see his eyes?” I finally spoke, the words spewing from my mouth like an unwanted taste. Jeff and I had sat down for coffee late at night after I had helped Mom into bed.

“His eyes?” Jeff asked.

I nodded, trying desperately to untie the unsettling knot in my stomach.

“Whose eyes?”

“The painting,” I began, trying to choose my words carefully, so as not to sound deranged. I repositioned myself in my chair and spoke again. “The man— his eyes looked different than I remember. And even the mouth!” I exclaimed, reliving old memories of watching her paint every day as a kid. “Does she ever add to it?”

“The painting?” he asked.

“Yeah, as a kid she used to add to it every day without fail. I’d come home from school and she’d be upstairs, a paintbrush in hand and fresh paint at the ready.”

“Marge doesn’t paint anymore. I haven’t seen a lick of wet paint since she found that old painting. Before the incident even, she’d get this weird look in her eyes and retreat up the stairs as if she was in some sort of trance. She’d just sit in front of that one painting every day. Now she never leaves it, unless I pull her away. But give it a few minutes and she’ll be right back on that stool,” he explained.

“When did it happen?” I asked, my eyes following the long legs of a black widow up the crumbling crown moulding. “When did she rediscover the painting, I mean.”

“A few weeks ago, I guess. We were searching for my old trunk. You know how your mother is— not the most organized woman in the world,” he chuckled, “We were looking up in the attic and she found it. She begged me to bring it down. I didn’t know what else to do.”

I sat back in the chair and sipped my cold coffee.

“Joey,” Jeff said, “she’s acting just like she did before—the first time.”

“Then we get rid of the painting. I’m not watching my mom go through that again. This stops now.”

And with that, I marched up the stairs to Marge’s art studio and yanked the canvas from the easel where it sat. I folded it under my arm and pulled the chain to the attic door, and the ladder slid down. Particles of dust descended from the void, like the breath of some invisible creature.

Once upstairs, I reached for the dangling chain and switched on the light. I hadn’t been in the attic since I was a young boy. Before the first incident, my mom and I would play hide and seek. My favorite room to hide in was the attic. I loved hiding amongst the old and forgotten things—their age determined by layers of accumulated dust, like the inner rings within an old tree.

I walked to the corner of the room where a heap of tan bedsheets lay sprawled out, almost, looking to me like the outline of a man sitting down. Grasping a corner of one of the sheets, I hastily threw it to the side, revealing a pile of boxed old records and a forgotten infant car seat. I bent down and placed the painting among the disregarded relics and covered it back up with the sheet. I sighed, really hoping that this would be the end of my mother’s torment. Maybe now we could be closer, like I wanted as a boy.

When securing the corner of the sheet under a nearby box so it would not fall and reveal the hoard behind it, I noticed a fairly large box poking out from underneath the sheet. The flaps of the box lay open and inviting. I squatted down to the floor to inspect it. In block letters I could now make out the label “Griffin’s Things” written in thick sharpie across the box. *Don’t do it*, my brain told me. I was pretty much conditioned from a young age not to ask about Griffin.

Marge never told me much about him, only that they got married young and he died in battle a little over a year before the war ended. Years later, she met Jeff and had me— our “perfect family.” She refused to tell me anything more, so I never asked. Just another way Marge found to shut me out of her life, I guess.

But my hands ignored my brain and got the better of me. Before I knew it, I was elbows deep in papers and random personal effects. Soon I was holding a photograph between my fingers. I scanned the picture of a young man, barely 23, suited in army gear, holding a rifle. On the back, in almost unreadable scrawl it read:

To Marge,

Greetings from Saigon!

Things over here keep looking worse and worse and it's hard to hold on to hope when you're so far away. I think about both of you every day. I'll be home soon, my love.

Love always,

Your Griffin

1968

My forehead creased as I read the last part of the letter, my eyebrows furrowing in confusion. I folded the photo and placed it in my pocket before taking one last look at the painting's new home and descending the ladder.

The next day, Jeff woke me up early. He spoke in a panicked tone, saying that he was startled when he didn't feel Marge's weight on the opposite end of their bed when he woke. A search of the house ensued, checking every room that Marge frequented—which was only her

bedroom, the studio, and the bathroom—all three of which she needed Jeff’s help to get to. Her physical health as well as her mental health, it seemed, was on the decline.

“I’ll check the studio, if you want to check the basement,” I said, already making my way up the stairs.

I called her name during my ascent, getting about halfway up before realizing that the attic door at the top of the stairs had been opened. The ladder descended from the ceiling. *What the fuck*, I thought, holding on to the railing to steady myself. I continued my journey up the stairs and peeked into the empty art studio before peering up the ladder to the attic and calling to her softly.

“Marge, are you up there?”

When I wasn’t met with her voice, I began to climb the ladder into the dimly lit attic. The wooden ladder creaked as if it was about to give way with every step I took. I stopped short on the last rung and lifted my head, peeking into the depths of the musty attic, my breath labored, almost quivering. My eyes drifted past the cardboard boxes and the poorly preserved linen-covered furniture until they fell upon the small frame of Marge.

“Mom? What are you doing up there?” I asked, barely able to comprehend how the frail old woman could have made it up a ladder alone, without falling.

I was met with no response— only the soft hum of the single lightbulb dangling above Marge’s head like a spotlight. Her hand dangled in the air as if attached to a string. A sad, forgotten marionette doll, cast to the corner of a sealed room. Slowly, she reached out in front of her; her hand gently caressing something just out of sight, touching it so fondly, as if it were her own flesh.

“Marge?” I repeated. “God damn it, Mom. Get down here.”

And with one more step up the ladder, my weight shifted as the sound of splitting wood filled my ears. The ladder had snapped in two beneath me, causing me to yelp and grab at the platform above me. My fingernails dug into the attic floor, attempting to work as makeshift nails— anything to cement me to the floor above. Feet dangling in mid-air and fearful of the drop below, I mustered enough strength to call out again for my mom. This time, I was met by the soft creak of a floorboard, the noise inching toward me. I looked up, expecting to see my mom reaching out to help me up but was faced with only darkness.

I began to feel a tingling at the tips of my fingers, still grasping the ledge. Soon, the tingling turned to pain, radiating upwards to my knuckles, my wrist, and soon my arms. My eyes widened at the smell of burning flesh. With a scream, I was thrown from the opening, landing at the base of where the ladder had been just moments before— my heart pumping so fast in my chest, I thought that it too would burn up.

“Fuck,” I muttered under my breath and looked above me at the gaping hole in the ceiling.

“Marge?” I asked, not expecting any response.

Then, I sat up slowly, pain radiating from my back like volts of electricity. Wincing, I brought my hands in front of me, turning my wrists to inspect the back of them. My eyes followed the three deep jagged lines on each hand that spread from my fingertips to my wrists, blood seeping from them like paint onto a canvas. I was horrified, fully unable to comprehend what could have caused such cuts. My vision became fuzzy as if I were in a dense cloud of smoke. Soon, I was out cold— the only movement in the house being Marge’s delicate fingertips stroking the textured canvas in front of her. And before my vision was fully engulfed in

darkness, a deep, grumbling laugh—a man’s laugh—seemed to travel through the house with ease, and rattled its very foundation.

It had only been around twenty minutes when I finally came to. Jeff had shaken me awake, clearly startled by my unconscious body at the foot of a broken ladder. As he asked question after question, I pawed at the wall, pressing my sweaty palms to it in hopes of being able to stand upright. I glanced at my hands, half sure the deep wounds would be nothing more than a panicked hallucination. But there they were. Sticky with congealing blood, my palms created smeared art on the wall—bloody handprints that looked like old kindergarten paintings of Thanksgiving hand turkeys.

“She’s up in the attic,” I said.

Jeff ran outside to the shed, promising to retrieve a ladder so I could safely guide her down.

Having still a severely clouded head and two hands that looked as if they were molded out of clay, I was able to successfully mount the metal ladder and ascend to the surface of the attic. I only stopped short on the last rung, feeling an eerie sensation build up my throat and behind my ears, tingling like an allergen had found its way into my body. Someone was whispering. It was fast and frantic but barely a whisper. It was Marge.

“Please,” she choked out, “I’ll stay forever with you. Just don’t hurt him— don’t hurt my Joey.”

I took another step, my foot finally in contact with a solid floor.

“I’ll stay with you forever,” she repeated.

I moved toward a seemingly dazed Marge, still facing what I could now make out as none other than the painting I had hidden away just yesterday. With my first step, the single

lightbulb illuminating the unsettling scene before me flickered as if on cue— a sign of my presence. Marge’s neck turned in my direction, her lips slightly parted.

“Mom,” I said, kneeling next to her, cupping her face in my hands. “Let’s get you downstairs, huh? You’ve lost all your coloring.”

Extending a hand to my mom, I wondered how exactly she had made it to the attic and found the painting. I didn’t ask her, though—I was too focused on getting her safely downstairs and away from the painting. But Marge had another idea.

“Bring him down, would you?” Marge asked quietly, stepping aside.

“Why don’t we just worry about you getting downstairs, okay? How about we paint something new today together?” I said.

“I said bring him down.”

My eyes fixed on those of the man in the painting. “Okay, Mom.”

“I’ll run you a bath,” Jeff said, laying a hand dirtied from repairing the attic’s ladder on Marge’s shoulder before retreating to the bathroom to draw her a bath.

Marge had returned to her semi-catatonic state, her sunken eyes fixed once again on her most prized possession. In that moment, I felt like a little kid again.

“Mom, look at me,” I said. “Please.”

A wash of guilt flooded over me. *Maybe if I had been here. Maybe if I had returned home after boarding school. If I had helped out more at home. If I had helped her recover after her first bout of depression. If I had just thrown away the god damn painting years ago, I thought to myself. But I hadn’t. I had neglected her when she needed me most.*

As Jeff ushered Marge into the bathroom, a creeping impulse began to flood my body: I had to see the painting. My legs, half reluctant to carry the rest of my body, carried me carefully up the stairs and into the art studio I had once remembered so fondly. Memories of times spent painting with my mother had faded, and instead of being comforted, wrapped in warm remembrances, I stood encased in a freezing cold whirlwind of stale air, face to face with the painting that had seemed to be the root of all my problems. Part of me knew that there was no way that a silly painting could cause such insanity, that there had to be a medical explanation for my mother's behavior. Depression or dementia or some other condition could have run in the family. How would I have known? The other part of me, however, had a deep gut feeling that somehow that painting held extreme power— power that seemed to come from another world. Staring into the eyes of the unnamed man, I knew this as a fact.

I told myself that I was there to confront him, as stupid as that may sound. I wanted to come face to face with the object that so haunted my mother. So, I studied the painting's background, its props, and finally the man. His chiseled face resembled an ancient Greek statue carved with precision. His oil-slick black hair was so perfect, it seemed to leave my mouth with a bitter and acrid taste. These features, however, were not the most unsettling to me. His eyes were what stuck in my mind: unfriendly and dark-looking, despite the lightness of their pigment. I had seen them change before my eyes into a fiery gaze of contempt. I was convinced of it.

"You son of a bitch," I said, needing desperately to take my anger and frustration out on someone, even if it was just a muddle of paint.

In a state of disgust and repulsion, I stared at the man's face, watching. Maybe I was waiting for a response— one that I would not receive in words, but instead the slow warping of the dried paint in front of me. As if able to easily make itself malleable, the paint that once made

up the irises and pupils in his eyes slowly faded to white. My heart rate accelerated as if it had just heard the pop of a gun signaling the beginning of a race.

There's no possible way, I thought.

The blank void of white stared back at me. I knew I needed to get out. The house was stuffy and oppressive, making it hard to breathe. It felt as if with each second I was under its roof, some invisible giant stood overhead, pressing down on the walls and stretching the house like taffy. I thought about leaving— walking away without bothering to grab my suitcase. Walking.

Just then, heavy footsteps echoed on the ceiling above me. I stood frozen. Someone was walking around the attic. Surely, I was hearing things. The footsteps persisted, getting heavier with each step, some even causing clouds of dust and debris to fall from the ceiling above. I silently walked from my position in the studio to directly below the attic door, hoping whatever was up there couldn't hear me. It seemed, though, that the footsteps above began to mimic my movement, stepping heavily with each step I took, moving the same path above me that I did. It was taunting me.

When I reached the top of the stairs, I looked up at the attic's entrance, deciding if I would dare venture into its depths. The decision was made for me as the door popped open. The ladder shot down before my feet in one harsh movement as if it were a tongue darting from a mouth in a malicious and teasing manner. I took the bait and ascended the ladder.

"Hello?" I called out into the stiffness of the air. Neither Jeff nor Marge was up there, that was for sure. But I had already known that.

The floorboards whined as I stepped into the attic, heading for the chain to the lightbulb that seemed impossible to find in the darkness. I blindly reached out, my childhood fear of the

dark kicking back into full gear as I was unsuccessful in coming into contact with the chain. With my next step, the toe of my shoe came directly into contact with something metal. A clamoring noise ensued, and soon I found myself on the floor after having tumbled over the object.

The light clicked on, the chain swinging back and forth violently as if it had been yanked with force. A ring of light surrounded me, an outline of golden light cast in a circle on the floor with me at its center. Next to me, a small tin box that I had never seen before, no bigger than a box of tissues.

I cradled the tin box in both hands, still sitting cross-legged on the cold floor of the attic like a child. There was no lock. There was no keyhole. Just a semi-rusted latch that popped open for me with ease. The yellow light above illuminated the contents within. A blanket of stars and stripes lay splayed across the top of the tin. Handling it carefully, I removed the precisely folded flag and set it down on the floor beside me. The rest of the box seemed to contain documents—all looking quite official. The first document I pulled out read “Certificate of Death,” followed by the spelling out of the name Griffin Stonem. It was dated 1968.

“Great,” I mumbled under my breath. “I’ve found a box of her ex-husband’s shit.”

I rummaged through the tin some more, coming across scattered love letters between Griffin and Marge from when he was in Vietnam years before I was even a thought in my mother’s mind. I opened each letter, their frail edges beginning to fray in my hands. And then, a bundle of papers, neatly wrapped in twine. In unraveling the knot and spreading the papers in front of me, I was met with what seemed like endless pieces of paper, all filled with inscrutable writing. The writing extended to the margins of each page, not leaving an inch of paper untouched. I recognized the handwriting as my mom’s, although it seemed more frantic—

desperate almost, in the way that the ink bled in places where it looked as if she had pressed the pen down with so much force. Slight rips and tears were apparent on each page—seemingly a product of excess pressure put on the pages. I could imagine her at the kitchen table, scribbling words down so violently that holes appeared between the lines. The manner of writing was strange, especially for Marge, someone with an extremely precise and light hand—but that wasn't the strangest part. My fingers ran across the ink of each page as I whispered the repeated sentence scrawled on each of the twenty-some pages.

“I will bring you back.”

I didn't understand. I pushed the pages to the side, crumbling them up in a ball out of a mixture of disgust and sadness. I had missed so much. I felt like I didn't even know my own mother.

I wondered why I was still in the attic. The footsteps had stopped. All the weird activity within the house had calmed. Clearly nothing was amiss. I was thinking that I must have been going crazy, when the tin that still sat half full of love letters was violently thrown on its side. The documents inside spilled out like a well-kept secret, revealing something I hadn't seen previously. It was a small manilla envelope, its edges creased from being cramped in a box for years. I looked down at the aged paper spotted with patches of yellow and suddenly realized that I wasn't breathing properly. The air felt permanently lodged in my throat, unable to finish its passage into my lungs. I reached down and pulled out the brittle envelope.

I opened the envelope with trembling hands, like a kid handling something they didn't want to be caught with. In my gut, I knew this would be something I should leave hidden, locked away in the tin and tucked in a dusty corner of the attic. The letter called to me. I plucked the

paper from the envelope. Inside there was a single piece of paper, sloppy cursive tattooed on its front and back. At the top in delicate lettering read the year 1968.

My Dear Raphael,

I sit here at my desk on this unbearably rainy day and think only of you. My Raphael— that's the name I gave you. Your father wasn't the biggest fan of the name, but ultimately, I had my way.

I guess this letter is as much for you as it is for me. I never planned on any of this happening. Marrying your father so young. Watching him as he left to fight a war in a place I'd never seen. Getting the news on a Sunday morning that he had been killed in battle.

You have to understand it was all so much for me. But I didn't want to raise you in a grief-stricken home. I didn't want to surround you with loss and sadness. I didn't want you growing up knowing only pain and struggle.

I guess what I'm trying to say is that I'm sorry. I'm sorry I couldn't provide for you and give you the loving family you would have deserved. It felt like my only choice at the time. I struggle with my choice every day.

One day I will get to meet you, when the time is right.

My Raphael, we will be together one day.

Love, Mom

I read the last line over and over again. *Love, Mom.* The words rang in my ears like the incessant tolling of a bronze bell. I began folding the paper into little squares, hoping that if I succeeded in folding it enough, the letter would vanish into thin air and all would be normal again, as if I had never read it.

But I had read it. And without time to ruminate over the letter any further, I heard a shriek—a frantic call for help, bellowing from the first floor. I could hear Jeff’s sobs as I broke out of my paralytic state on the attic floor and dashed to the ladder that suddenly felt unreasonably far away. Before I had even reached the opening in the floor, the ladder snapped upwards. Defying gravity, it retracted into itself like a rubber band, followed by the high-pitched whip of the attic door and latch slamming shut. The sound startled me, but not nearly as much as what was written in thick lettering across it.

Why do you get to live?

My eyes fixed on the question plastered on the wood, drawn like a finger painting. I watched as a glob of red paint traveled from the dot of the question mark in my direction, creating a path to where I stood. I heard Jeff cry out again— this time for me.

Frantically, I dug my nails in the tiny gap between the floor and the door and yanked upwards. My desperate attempts to free myself from the horrors of the attic were met only with the resistance of the door to budge.

I didn’t even realize I was screaming for Jeff until I heard him running up the steps. I was banging on the door by then, hoping that the wood would give out. My head spun. An eerie gravelly laugh that I couldn’t identify filled my ears. To my surprise, the door began to crack open, emitting a soft light. The laughter stopped. At the foot of the ladder stood Jeff, his eyes stained with tears, his shirt and hands smeared with blood.

“Your Mom,” he said.

I quickly descended the ladder, jumping from the fourth to last step and pushing past Jeff, who had collapsed, weeping on the landing. My feet fumbled over one another as I rounded the corner, stopping short in the doorway of the bathroom. At my feet lay Marge, sprawled out on

the floor with a pair of barber sheers imbedded deep in the center of her stomach. Her hand gripped the scissors, her knuckles so white they almost matched the walls.

I heard Jeff's footsteps behind me and looked up to see him in the frame of the door. My eyes were then drawn to the mirror above the sink, sticky with red. A single name splayed across the glass: Raphael.

My bloody hand unconsciously slid to the entrance of my pants pocket where the letter I had discovered only minutes ago rested. In the mirror, behind what was perhaps Marge's last handwritten message, I saw my face, my eyes puffy and pink, my lips pursed together, trying to contain sobs. Slowly, the corner of my mouth began to turn upward into a half smirk. I looked into the eyes of someone else, similar, yet not quite mine. I saw the face of someone familiar, but whom I had never seen in the flesh— someone whose face was only known to me on a canvas.

Sirens keened in the distance, but the only sound I heard was the demonic laughter coming from the contorted face staring back at me in the mirror.

Part Two: The Uncanny Effects of Family Secrets in Shirley Jackson's *The Haunting of Hill House*

At first glance, Shirley Jackson's novel, *The Haunting of Hill House* could be classified as a classic haunted house story. When looking further into both the structure of the house and the main character's relationship with the spaces of the house and the seemingly paranormal events which unfold within it, one can see that *The Haunting of Hill House* is, on a deeper level, a story concerning desires for family and belonging. The trope of the haunted house in literature can often be seen as a vessel for an underlying connection between structures and hidden secrets—many times these secrets being related to the family, and in Jackson's novel, this is no different. This relation between haunted houses and familial struggles is what makes the structure of *The Haunting of Hill House* particularly “uncanny.”

The story of Hill House follows the intersection of three individuals, Theodora, Luke Sanderson, and Eleanor Vance, who meet at the infamous Hill House to aid Doctor John Montague, a researcher of paranormal activity, in investigating Hill House and the apparent hauntings within it. The narrative focuses the readers' attention on Eleanor Vance, who is affected by the house a great deal more than her counterparts and is ultimately destroyed by her desire to remain in Hill House. Eleanor seems to be at odds with herself as she desires both to separate herself from her former life caring for her overbearing mother and become an autonomous being, and to belong to a family and seek the motherly bond that she never experienced with her own mother.

Sigmund Freud's definition of the uncanny can be used to help understand and further explain the duality between Eleanor Vance's desire to both flee from her mother and remain attached to a motherly figure. These conflicting desires directly cause Eleanor's uncanny

relationship to Hill House, in which it seems as if her experiences while at Hill House are familiar in the way she is reminded of her mother (even though these instances seem to have paranormal qualities) making her experience as a whole quite strange. Hill House in particular offers a look into a structure that is more than just haunted—it is experienced as uncanny by Eleanor Vance. To better understand the uncanny and its connection to Hill House, it is crucial to look at the research of Sigmund Freud himself.

Freud defines the uncanny as “that class of the frightening which leads back to what is known of old and long familiar” (Freud 220). In his essay “The Uncanny,” he explores the ways in which everyday experience and the experience of art and literature can be viewed as “*unheimlich*,” which literally translates from German as “unhomely.” The word also is used to describe what “ought to have remained secret and hidden but has come to light” (Freud 225). That which is uncanny then is both strange and familiar at the same time, becoming strange only by being linked to something familiar and also repressed that then resurfaces.

While Freud does bring up several examples of the uncanny in literary fiction, he only brings up the term “haunted house” sparingly. Using examples from German dictionaries, he shows that the common English translation of the German phrase “*unheimlich* house” is “(of a house) haunted” (Freud 221). Freud also mentions the haunted house when he writes that “many people experience the feeling [of the uncanny] in the highest degree in relation to death and dead bodies... some languages in use to-day can only render the German expression ‘an *unheimlich* house’ by ‘a *haunted* house’” (Freud 241). With this, it is interesting to look at Shirley Jackson’s own relationship to the uncanny, especially in regard to death and houses. Interestingly enough, Jackson had a pretty intimate encounter that can be viewed as uncanny when beginning to think about writing *The Haunting of Hill House*. When looking at examples of houses to base her

haunted house novel on, “Jackson claimed that in searching for a model for that novel’s haunted mansion, she had come upon a photograph of a California house with ‘an air of disease and decay.’ It turned out, she said, that her grandfather had built it” (Franklin 19). This strange occurrence mirrors exactly what Freud discusses in his article. Here, the house that Shirley Jackson encounters is seemingly an unheimlich or haunted house, but it is made even stranger and more ominous after Jackson realizes that she is intimately connected to it not only because she is physically drawn to it, but also because her grandfather built it.

In another uncanny encounter, Jackson describes the final occurrence that prompted her to begin writing *The Haunting of Hill House*. She writes:

...it was abundantly clear to me that I had no choice; the ghosts were after me. In case I had any doubts, however, I came downstairs a few mornings later and found a sheet of copy paper moved to the center of my desk, set neatly away from the general clutter. On the sheet of paper was written DEAD DEAD in my own handwriting. I am accustomed to making notes for books, but not in my sleep; I decided that I had better write the book awake, which I got to work and did.

(Jackson 203)

Here, Freud’s claim that the unheimlich feeling related to death is experienced in the highest degree seems to be true for Jackson, as death literally sits on Jackson’s desk in the form of writing. He explains in “The Uncanny” that while the human fear of death might not seem to be repressed, it is, in fact, because humans no longer believe in ghosts or evil spirits. He describes that what is repressed is this older way of understanding and perceiving death and life beyond death. The uncanny therefore occurs when an individual is reminded of it in an experience that evokes an idea of a ghost or haunting. This relates to Jackson’s anecdote on finding the piece of

paper with “Death” written on it. It shows how Jackson appears to be haunted by an unconscious part of herself in her experience of finding the note in which Jackson herself does not remember writing.

Looking further into the definition of the uncanny, Freud provides the German definition of *heimlich* saying that it is “Also belonging to the house, not strange, familiar, intimate, friendly, etc” (Freud 222). Freud also includes; however, that there is a connection between the word’s opposite *unheimlich*. He explains that “the word ‘*heimlich*’ exhibits one [definition] which is identical with its opposite, ‘*unheimlich*’. What is *heimlich* thus comes to be *unheimlich*” (Freud 224). Because of these seemingly opposite terms, one can conclude that the idea of the uncanny has to do with a blurring of lines between seemingly opposite meanings. Furthermore, these definitions would suggest that houses are deeply rooted in the uncanny and can help to better understand exactly how Shirley Jackson seems to blend the familiar with the unfamiliar in *The Haunting of Hill House*.

Keeping Freud’s definitions of the uncanny in mind, Hill House can be classified as being uncanny in nature due to both Eleanor’s experience at Hill House concerning both the spaces of the house in which she inhabits and also the events that unfold in these spaces. Jackson creates a sense of the uncanny through her inclusion of the image and character that is Hill House, which plays a key role in bringing back of Eleanor Vance’s repressed memories concerning her recently deceased mother. Hill House therefore acts as a means to bring out secrets that might have stayed hidden or repressed in Eleanor’s mind. By using Hill House as a vessel for such uncanny events to play out, Jackson uses the uncanny to create an unsettling atmosphere for the reader. As Maria Tatar points out:

Uncanny events have the power to provoke a sense of dread precisely because they are at once strange and familiar. Their strangeness endows them with a supernatural quality; their familiarity, once recognized and understood, divests them of this supernatural aura. Uncanny events are situated at the heart of the fantastic tale. (Tatar 169)

Shirley Jackson in *The Haunting of Hill House* does exactly this. Because of the events that unfold at Hill House, both past and present, the house is viewed as dreadful and perceived as haunted. This ultimately gives Hill House its supernatural reputation; even if the house does not contain paranormal beings, the familiarity of the events creates a feeling that Hill House may be haunted. But Tatar's claim that the supernatural aura of an event dissipates once its familiarity is recognized does not apply to Jackson's *The Haunting of Hill House*. This is because even while readers understand that there is a connection between the events that unfold and Eleanor's repressed memories of her mother, the uncanny question of the supernatural is still present throughout. Freud explains this idea and goes on to argue for ambiguity in effects of the uncanny: "[The writer] can keep us in the dark for a long time about the precise nature of the presuppositions on which the world he [*sic*] writes about is based, or he [*sic*] can cunningly and ingeniously avoid any definite information on the point to the last" (Freud 251). This explains what Shirley Jackson does in *The Haunting of Hill House* and how she never takes away the possibility of a supernatural explanation. This therefore keeps the idea of the supernatural as well as the effects of the uncanny, alive.

Before delving into how one can use Freud's definition of the uncanny to explain Eleanor Vance's relationship to Hill House, one must understand Eleanor's motive to accept Doctor Montague's offer to stay in the house. After the death of her overbearing mother, Eleanor Vance

is living with her sister and her family, who resemble Eleanor's mother in their attempts to control Eleanor and prevent her from becoming an autonomous being. Eleanor gets the chance to finally break free of her former life and especially the confines of her experience taking care of her mother by accepting Doctor Montague's invitation to help with his paranormal research at Hill House. Eleanor frequently reflects on this big change in her life and her newly found independence. Early into her adventure, she states, "Everything is different, I am a new person, very far from home" (Jackson 19). One can see Eleanor's main desire in *The Haunting of Hill House* is to finally break from her old life where she was subservient to her sick mother.

It can be said that Eleanor has not experienced life as an autonomous being, having been unseparated from her mother for thirty-two years. During this period of time, especially during the eleven years in which she alone cared for her sick mother, she was only defined as being subservient to her mother. In a sense, "her excursion to Hill House to participate in Dr. Montague's study of psychic phenomena appears as an opportunity for psychological liberation, the first steps towards autonomy" (Newman 172). This opportunity has never been offered to Eleanor before and thus is one that she could not refuse. She decides to go to Hill House to fulfill her own desire of fleeing from the constraints of her mother.

In regard to Eleanor Vance's strained and complicated relationship with her mother and her desire to both be mothered as well as flee from the mother, it is also interesting to look at how Eleanor's experience seems to reflect Shirley Jackson's own experience with her mother. It is widely noted that Jackson herself did not have a healthy relationship with her mother growing up and into her adult years. In fact, in her biography, Ruth Franklin writes that Jackson's mother Geraldine's criticism of "Shirley's appearance (especially her weight), her housekeeping, her child-rearing practices—never relented" (Franklin 24). In response to this intense and

unrelenting criticism from her mother, Jackson still seems to have desired her mother's affection and acceptance to some extent. While Jackson does end up "breaking" from her mother in the sense that she is separated from her mother who ends up moving back to California while Jackson resides on the East Coast, she is still connected to her mother through letters sent through the mail. Franklin writes, "Geraldine continued to nag and needle her daughter by mail" (Franklin 24). In response to these letters, however, Jackson "almost without fail... dutifully and cheerfully responded" (Franklin 24). This is significant because in *The Haunting of Hill House* readers are met with a similar overbearing matriarch, from whom Eleanor is trying to escape. Yet, as we see Shirley do in her own life, Eleanor's character is also still seeking acceptance from a maternal figure.

Along with this desire of breaking free of her mother and her past, Eleanor also seems deeply connected with her past and almost fearful of separating fully from her mother. She has a desire, in a sense, to be mothered and to belong within a familial structure. While at Hill House, Eleanor constantly is anxious of how the others perceive her and wishes desperately to win their affection. At one point, Eleanor even thinks, "I am the fourth person in this room; I am one of them; I belong" (Jackson 43). With this desire to both break free of the mother and the familial pressure put upon Eleanor in her past, she also desires to be surrounded with a familial structure, or else she may end up alone. This dichotomy can be further explained:

The tensions between "mother/self" and between "home/lost" connote a young child's ambivalent desires and fears: both to remain merged with the mother (who becomes emotionally identified with "home") and to separate from her, with the attendant danger of being "lost." (Rubenstein 309)

Eleanor is met with this tension, as she only knows the experiences and relationship with her mother in her past and feels comfortable in this familiar setting, yet she desires to find her own autonomy by separating from her mother and what she knows, with the risk of becoming lost.

With Eleanor's desires in mind, it is interesting to see how Eleanor's experience at Hill House can be viewed as uncanny. Shirley Jackson creates this sense of the uncanny by having Hill House bring Eleanor's repressed memories concerning her mother and previous traumas caused by her mother to light. During her stay at Hill House, Eleanor is met with these repressed memories through the way that she experiences the house. Memories of her mother reveal themselves both in the way that elements of the house seem to prompt these memories, and in the way that unexplained events are experienced by Eleanor.

One way in which the house reveals repressed memories of her overbearing mother is through how Eleanor experiences the spaces within Hill House. On various occasions, Eleanor experiences the rooms of Hill House differently from the other guests. Each room seems to be connected to a repressed memory of Eleanor's involving her mother. One scene in which this is apparent is when Doctor Montague is giving Theo, Luke, and Eleanor a tour of Hill House. He stops in front of the library doors and Eleanor refuses to enter, saying "I can't go in there," and then "My mother—" (Jackson 75). She is also described as having "backed away, overwhelmed with the cold air of mold and earth which rushed at her" (Jackson 75). When confronted with this room in the house, Eleanor has a visceral reaction that is seemingly prompted by a surfacing memory of her mother. The reader is able to connect the library to Eleanor's mother, as Eleanor, in a previous conversation with Theo, reveals that she "never could bear to read in the evenings" because of the fact that she "had to read aloud to her [mother] for two hours every afternoon.

Love stories” (Jackson 62). Here, one can see how certain areas of Hill House are used to bring repressed memories of the mother to light.

The library is used again as a space of the house that aids in Eleanor’s resurfacing of memories of the mother later on in the novel. This happens when Eleanor cannot sleep one night. She wants to get a book from the library but can’t bring herself to go there. Again, this particular space of the house brings up repressed memories of having to care for her mother and being connected to the mother. After thinking about this area of the house, Eleanor is met with a voice that she recognizes as her mother’s, say, “come along” (Jackson 168). Here, one can see how these repressed memories ultimately are brought to light through Hill House and therefore result in paranormal-like events that seem to target Eleanor, specifically.

Another section in which one can see the house revealing suppressed memories of Eleanor’s overbearing mother through the spaces within Hill House, is when Eleanor and Theodora are exploring Hill House, and they come into the kitchen. The space of the kitchen ultimately brings another memory of Eleanor’s mother to light. Eleanor comments: “In my mother’s house the kitchen was dark and narrow, and nothing you cooked there ever had any taste or color” (Jackson 81). After Eleanor lies to Theodora about owning her own apartment, Theodora asks Eleanor, “What about your own kitchen?” (Jackson 81). This shows how Eleanor, even though she wishes to be separate from her mother (by concocting a tale of owning her own apartment), she cannot fully separate from her mother and her memory of her mother. She cannot fully picture the reality of having anything separate from her mother—she is too attached to the memories that her experience within Hill House continues to bring up.

The way that Eleanor experiences the spaces within Hill House is exceptionally uncanny. These rooms within the house are able to unveil repressed memories of Eleanor’s concerning her

mother, therefore the house itself does not let Eleanor separate from her mother and live out her desire of becoming an autonomous being. The rooms of Hill House are then uncanny in Eleanor's experience, because they are both familiar, and yet strange and sinister. Rooms such as a library and a kitchen are not inherently strange or dubious. They are familiar to most, including Eleanor, because they are spaces that make up a typical home. These spaces are inhabited by family and therefore hold familial memories. These spaces of the house, while familiar to Eleanor, also end up being strange to her, because of the events that take place in Hill House. For instance, one room in Hill House, the nursery, is specified as having a significant cold spot in the doorway. Doctor Montague finds it as he "shivered as he passed through the door" (Jackson 87). Theodora describes the cold as being "like the doorway of a tomb" (Jackson 87). This is ironic, of course, because as a former nursery, this room should feel like the furthest thing from a place that holds death. Of course, the nursery itself symbolizes motherhood and family, so it is interesting to note Eleanor's apprehension towards the room. Quite like the description of the nursery, the description of the library also suggests a certain rotting quality of the room. After refusing to go into the library, Eleanor notes that she was "overwhelmed with the cold air of mold and earth which rushed at her" (Jackson 75). It is quite interesting to note the similarities in which both the nursery and the library are described. Both descriptions mimic that of a tomb—places of death and decay.

In regard to the nursery, when travelling around the inside of Hill House after hearing her mother call for her to "come along," Eleanor follows the voice "soundlessly down the hall to the nursery doorway" where she finds that "the cold spot was gone" (Jackson 168). This is significant, because it shows how the nursery room is familiar—something that represents warmth, love, family, and especially the presence of a mother to nurse and take care of children.

The nursery is also significant to Eleanor because, while it is familiar, it is also strange and sinister because of how she is experiencing this space of the house. Instead of feeling a loving motherly presence, she is met with the cold spot in the doorway. When the cold spot diminishes, it is only because the house is now calling to her, and she is beginning to surrender. This embrace of Eleanor by the “mother house” (Jackson 156), as Luke refers to Hill House, is both familiar and strange. These spaces of the house should feel comforting and like a safe space, but they are not. They come across as both cold and unfriendly, as well as sinister and paranormal.

An interesting idea about the mother and her connection to the daughter’s experience within haunted-seeming households also coincides with this idea of repressed memories of the mother. One can see in *The Haunting of Hill House* that internal familial conflicts can make a house or similar structure in literature appear as if it is haunted. Discussing the idea that houses can appear haunted by repressed memories of familial conflict, Richard Pascal writes:

The iconic households that aspired to keep the outer world at bay were spaces besieged from within --"haunted" is an appropriate metaphor -- by family members intent upon usurping complete control over the premises in pursuit of their own whims and desires, thereby undermining the communal basis of the familial model. (Pascal 464)

This idea can be connected to Eleanor’s experience within the confines of Hill House as well. Hill House, a house quite literally surrounded by hills, is cut off from the world, behind gates and a long driveway. The spaces of the house are also secluded and appear haunted because of the repressed memories that they unveil. For Eleanor specifically, places like the library, kitchen, and nursery, are all rooms that were controlled fully by her mother, who overpowered Eleanor and made her cater to her every need. Growing up, Eleanor’s living

situation was clearly volatile and controlled solely by her mother. As an adult, these spaces of the house cause these feelings and memories to reappear, even if Eleanor has moved from her childhood home. This idea of familial conflicts also shows how repressed internal conflicts within families can ultimately result in a seemingly haunted house. What is repressed in turn makes the house appear haunted. It is the secrets and the repressed memories of familial conflict that haunt the structure.

Another way in which Hill House reveals suppressed memories of Eleanor's mother is through how she experiences the unexplained events unfolding within the house. Hill House appears haunted, especially in Eleanor's eyes, because she bears the brunt of the hauntings within the house. Hill House, itself seems to target Eleanor, singling her out from the group, and ultimately turning most characters against her. Two such encounters Eleanor has in Hill House with the seemingly paranormal that stand out, are when her name is explicitly written on walls in Hill House. In her second overall encounter with the paranormal and strange, the group comes across writing on a wall written in chalk. It is described when, "the doctor, moving his flashlight, read slowly: HELP ELEANOR COME HOME" (Jackson 107). The second time in which her name is eerily written across the wall is found quite recently after the first encounter, as "HELP ELEANOR COME HOME ELEANOR written in shaky red letters on the wallpaper over Theodora's bed" (Jackson 114). These two instances of Eleanor's name being splayed across walls inside of Hill House can be seen as extremely uncanny events in regard to Eleanor's situation. In both instances, she is being singled out from the group she wishes to belong to.

When speaking with Theodora, who recoils from Eleanor significantly after suggesting that Eleanor might be writing her own name on the walls of Hill House, Eleanor describes exactly how she feels about these unexplainable experiences. She says: "I am always afraid of

being alone... Those letters spelled out *my* name, and none of you know what that feels like—it's so *familiar*" (Jackson 118). This is extremely important, because it shows the uncanniness of Eleanor's experiences within the house. Her name, no one else's, is being written on walls, therefore singling her out. The uncanniness of this situation can be explained by the fact that Eleanor's name being inscribed on walls is both familiar, yet strange and sinister. On the one hand, it is familiar because it is her name—a name that she has been called by her whole life, one that was assigned to her at birth. It is also a name that she had been called countless times by her mother, presumably most excessively while tending to her sick mother at the end of her life. On the other hand, Eleanor's experience of finding her name written on walls within Hill House is strange and sinister, because it is being written by some being of which Eleanor does not seem to know. This is also particularly disturbing, because the word "familiar" is related to both the words, "family" and "household" in its etymology. In fact, in dictionary definitions of the word "familiar," definitions still include, "of or relating to a family" and "a member of the household of a high official" ("Familiar"). With this knowledge, it is even more strange that her name appears to be written within the household as seeing her name is familiar and therefore relating to a household and family of which Eleanor does not believe she belongs.

This idea is reiterated by Judie Newman, who points out that after Eleanor's name appears chalked on a wall "Eleanor both revels and recoils. On the one hand the message expresses her own desire for home. On the other, she is anxious at being identified by name. *Her* identity is targeted; she has been 'singled out' (124) and separated from the group" (Newman 177). Here, Newman also points out that the message represents Eleanor's suppressed desire for a home. She yearns to be accepted and loved, both feelings that were not apparent in her life, living with her overbearing mother, and then her domineering sister.

Similarly, the uncanny events which unfold for Eleanor within the walls of Hill House show exactly how the house itself begins to smother Eleanor. The house singles Eleanor out, impressing upon her the idea that it is now a motherly figure to Eleanor. In her essay “The Gothic Mirror” Claire Kahane writes:

After a series of supernatural occurrences that serve Eleanor as recognitions of her past, after seeing her name literally inscribed on the walls of the house, after being rejected by Theodora, who insists on their separation, Eleanor surrenders to the house, surrenders her illusory new autonomy to remain the child, dependent on the maternal, on Hill House as protector, lover, and destroyer. (Kahane 342)

In other words, the whole time that Eleanor is attempting to create a new life for herself where she is fully autonomous, she inadvertently is drawn into the same trap. While she yearns for independence, a part of her cannot imagine a life in which she is separate from her mother. Because of this, Eleanor is ultimately destroyed by Hill House. Her desire, both to be free from maternal figures and to cling to the mother, ends with Eleanor’s demise.

This leads into another aspect of Freud’s essay on the uncanny which ties in seamlessly with *The Haunting of Hill House*. In his essay, Freud coins the term “compulsion to repeat,” which he describes as “a compulsion powerful enough to overrule the pleasure principle, lending to certain aspects of the mind their daemonic character, and still very clearly expressed in the impulses of small children; a compulsion too, which is responsible for a part of the course taken by the analyses of neurotic patients” (Freud 238). This undoubtedly connects to Eleanor’s struggle to break free of her mother. She cannot fully become autonomous, because she is stuck in a cyclical pattern of needing to belong and needing to be mothered.

Eleanor's need to be mothered and attach herself to a maternal figure can be seen in the way that she reverts to a child-like mindset while in Hill House. Even before stepping foot onto the grounds of Hill House, Eleanor contradicts her desire to be free from her mother. While in route to Hill House, Eleanor begins to dream up fantasies of different lives she could lead, now that she is independent. In one of these daydreams, Eleanor fantasizes that "A little dainty old lady took care of me, moving starchily with a silver tea service on a tray and bringing me a glass of elderberry wine each evening for my health's sake... when I slept it was under a canopy of white organdy, and a nightlight guarded me from the hall" (Jackson 12). Here, Eleanor cannot help but to imagine a life where she is being taken care of by an older motherly figure, quite like a young child. Newman also recalls this passage in her essay, where she explains that "The fantasy reveals just how much Eleanor herself wishes to be mothered" (Newman 172). One can especially see this in the way that Eleanor mentions a nightlight being present to guard her at night. This is a very child-like notion and shows how the fantasy overall inherently shows Eleanor repeating the same cycle of wanting to be mothered. Even in the first few moments of her apparent escape from a life which reminded her of her mother, she instantly dreams up ways in which she can fulfil the role of a child again.

Another instance in which we can see Eleanor repeating the same cycle of seeking to be connected to a maternal figure, and therefore reverting to the role of a child, can be seen in Eleanor's relationship with Theodora towards the end of the novel. As their relationship progresses, Eleanor clings to Theodora, as a child would to their mother. In several instances, Eleanor can be seen trying desperately to cling on to Theodora, who eventually, ends up wanting to separate from Eleanor. One of these instances is when Eleanor fantasizes about life after Hill House, she tells Theodora: "I am going to follow you home" (Jackson 153). This shows the

child-like behavior of Eleanor, who, seemingly cannot be independent, as she desires. Her conflicting desire, to be looked after and mothered, ultimately takes over. It can also be said that, “Like many fairy tales, Eleanor's fantasies revolve around the discovery of a lost home, a place where a lonely child (or a lonely woman) can belong” (Bailey 35). In this case, Eleanor’s desire and fantasy to leave Hill House with Theodora, is reflective of a sort of fairytale where a lonely and outcasted individual longs for a place to belong.

In another case, when Eleanor is frightened by the atmosphere of the house, it is said she “did not sleep during the afternoon... instead, she lay on Theodora’s bed in the green room and watched Theodora do her nails, chatting lazily, unwilling to let herself perceive that she had followed Theodora into the green room because she had not dared to be alone” (Jackson 85). This also shows the child-like qualities that Eleanor possesses. She attaches herself deeply to Theodora who is described as much more independent and autonomous than Eleanor. Theodora, though, ultimately rejects Eleanor as well, repeating the cycle of Eleanor being rejected by a maternal figure.

The significance of Eleanor’s compulsion to repeat lies in the fact that while she may think that by leaving her life behind and travelling to Hill House to begin anew, she is actually only repeating the cycle of trying to belong and constantly desiring affection from a maternal figure. Ultimately, while she might want to, Eleanor cannot physically separate from her mother. This is shown through her own repressed memories resurfacing at Hill House and also in the way that she reverts to a child-like state, searching for a maternal figure. Because of this, Hill House itself ends up seeming like a sort of maternal figure to Eleanor. She ends up not wanting to leave, and even refusing to leave when she is told she must. In the end, Eleanor is completely absorbed by the mother figure that is Hill House, which ends in her own demise.

In a last attempt at staying connected to the “mother house,” (Jackson 156) in Luke’s words, Eleanor crashes her car into a nearby tree. Kahane discusses the idea that women in many gothic novels have two choices concerning their escape from the haunted structure: either to remain trapped in the structure or to escape the haunted house and be faced with being ousted from society and/or their own identity.

As Holland and Sherman put it, “I will not let the castle force itself into me. I will put myself outside it.” But for women this is no easy task. Putting herself outside it, the conventional Gothic heroine puts herself outside female desire and aggressivity. In thus excluding a vital aspect of self, she is left on the margin both of identity and society. (Kahane 340)

In a sense, this also applies to Eleanor. She believes that she is literally putting herself outside of Hill House, and therefore believes that she has some aspects of free will—some sense of independence; however, she is actually ridding herself of her own identity and sense of self by committing to being fully absorbed by the mother. She is, in a sense, giving her desires up to fulfil her desire to be mothered. This can especially be seen in Eleanor’s attempt to remain at Hill House after being sent away. In one of the last scenes of the novel, Eleanor drives her car into a tree in a last-ditch attempt to both prove her independence, but also to commit her life to Hill House. In her action, Eleanor’s death is an independent action—something that she believes is contributing to her independence and is something that she is doing on her own, by herself. Before crashing, 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 by myself” (Jackson 182). Eleanor’s death is also a dependent action in the way that she is fully being absorbed by the maternal presence of Hill House and committing suicide to remain in the house and to remain a childlike, dependent being,

reliant on a maternal figure. Her last thought before the crash is even, “Why don’t they stop me” (Jackson 182), a pretty childish thought, proving that Eleanor is overall dependent on others and relies on them to save and care for her. This overall shows again the way that the idea of “heimlich” and “unheimlich,” seeming like antonyms, but actually coincide at a certain point. Here, the strange and the familiar seem to be doing the same thing in the way that Eleanor is both exerting her free will but is also committing an action that is not fully of her own volition.

Overall, Shirley Jackson’s novel, *The Haunting of Hill House* perfectly illustrates how the uncanny can relate to haunted houses in works of fiction. Through Eleanor’s character, Jackson allows her readers to look deeply into the strange, yet familiar setting of Hill House and the unexplainable events that unfold within. The house, which can ultimately be seen as a clone of Eleanor’s own mother (a mother figure in which Eleanor seems to seek out repeatedly) ends up fulfilling Eleanor’s desire to be mothered by fully absorbing her. In turn, this desire causes Eleanor to regress to a child-like state and, in the end, cling to Hill House, her new mother. As Eleanor says, “I can’t picture any world but Hill House” (Jackson 111). Eleanor is ultimately destroyed by her conflicting desires to both flee the mother and remain attached to the mother, where she chooses to fully commit herself to the confines of Hill House.

Afterword: The Uncanny in “I Think You Should Come Home”

When I was a child, there was one particular house on Raymond Street that all the kids said was haunted. I believed all of the stories of it lying abandoned due to ghosts and wicked spirits and even went as far as to avoid the street altogether on Halloween night. The house’s legend in my hometown continues to spread even past my generation finding out that the house wasn’t abandoned at all—just severely unhomey looking and inhabited by an old man who had outlived his wife and children. Needless to say, I’ve been obsessed with haunted house stories ever since.

The closest feeling I get to the childhood fear of that little old house back home came to me when reading Shirley Jackson’s *The Haunting of Hill House*. Hill House, which I often visualized as a much larger version of the house on Raymond Street, gave me a feeling that I could not describe at the time, but now understand as “uncanny.” I immediately knew I wanted to draw Hill House and the feeling of uncanniness into the depiction of the house in my own story.

One of the first things I set about doing in my own story for my thesis was drawing inspiration from the seemingly haunted occurrences in Hill House and their relation to a deeper unconscious familial problem. In *The Haunting of Hill House*, Eleanor’s hellish relationship with her deceased mother is at the root of Eleanor’s uncanny experiences within Hill House. When writing, I kept thinking a lot about both the relationship between Eleanor and her mother and also Shirley Jackson’s own strained relationship with her mother. I was especially intrigued by how her own experience in her relationship translated into a lot of her fiction, as in most stories, including *The Haunting of Hill House*, a maternal figure is either not present or their presence is suffocating and lingers. I wanted to make a character whose relationship with their mother

worked in these same ways. I found that I wanted the relationship between Joey and Marge to be present in my story, but to also to showcase the ways in which a strained relationship between the pair can result in a seemingly haunted home plagued by an ominous presence. In other words, I wanted to reflect the way in which repressed familial secrets and problems could act as a cause for a house to appear haunted.

Similarly, I wanted to mirror *The Haunting of Hill House's* emphasis on desires throughout my short story. Jackson focuses a lot on the juxtaposition of Eleanor's desires both to be free from her mother and to remain mothered. I wanted to focus a lot on the desires of my story's characters as well, making apparent Joey's desire to refuse a relationship with Marge due to fear of being neglected again as he was as a child, but also his desire to help his mother and protect her from a painting that seems to be controlling her. I also strove a lot to make the desires of Marge apparent throughout my short story. I wanted to get across the idea that Marge desires to have a relationship with Joey, but also desires to rectify her decision to abort Raphael by making a sort of pact to bring him back one way or another. These clashing desires are meant to mirror the desires of Eleanor in the way that they revolve around family and struggles and secrets of the past that keep reoccurring.

There were also a few scenes within Jackson's *The Haunting of Hill House* that inspired scenes in my own short story. One scene that I knew I wanted to draw inspiration from was the scene in which Eleanor and the others get trapped in a room within Hill House. Jackson writes that "The doctor grimaced, and shivered; at that moment the door swung wide and then crashed shut, and in the silence outside they could hear slow rushing movements..." (Jackson 147).

I liked the idea that they all were trapped in a space of the house together, but Eleanor is essentially secluded—she is the only one that can feel the movements and noises within Hill

House seemingly in her body. This makes her completely ousted from the family unit and alone mentally. In my own short story, I wanted to draw upon this in a scene, and chose to write one in which Joey is being taunted by these noises coming from the attic and is drawn up into the room alone. I again drew upon the scene in *The Haunting of Hill House*, when “the ladder snapped upwards. Defying gravity, it retracted into itself like a rubber band, followed by the high-pitched whip of the attic door and latch slamming shut” (Masiello 21). I wanted to recreate this feeling of Joey being trapped and secluded both physically and mentally. I wanted to create a scene in which Joey had just found out a huge secret his mom had kept from him and then add in the ways that the house reacts to Joey finding this secret out.

Another scene I was inspired by, is the beginning of *The Haunting of Hill House*, itself, where Eleanor is travelling to Hill House by herself and reflecting on her new journey in life. While in this scene, Eleanor, in her mind, is moving away from her past life and is no longer tethered to her mother, I wanted the scene in my short story to be the journey back to the past and back to Joey’s mother and childhood house. With this being said, I wanted to make the opening scene of my short story similar to Eleanor’s trip to Hill House, because I think that it reveals a great deal of the protagonist’s desires. In Joey’s case, he is apprehensive to go home and even has a kind of visceral reaction to the highway that leads to his childhood home.

Overall, haunted house stories have always piqued my interest, especially concerning the houses that seem to be haunted because of repressed memories. Shirley Jackson’s *The Haunting of Hill House* really allowed me a better look into how houses can be haunted by more than just apparitions in fiction, therefore giving me a chance to try exploring repressed memories concerning a strained relationship with a maternal figure in my own short story.

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