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Mallory Danley  
mdanley@rollins.edu

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**A Feminine Gothic Revival: The Haunting of  
Shirley Jackson and Toni Morrison**

*A Project Submitted in Partial Fulfillment  
of the Requirements for the Degree of  
Master of Liberal Studies*

*by*

*Mallory L. Danley*

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*Mentor: Dr. Jill Jones  
Reader: Dr. Lucy Littler*

*Rollins College  
Hamilton Holt School  
Master of Liberal Studies Program*

*Winter Park, Florida*

## Introduction

Sun sneaks through the waxy leaves of the avocado tree in our backyard. The warm, wet, and humid air seeps into our skin. Sounds echo in the background, unimportant. Shadows crawl across her face. I am four years old. She is two. We are playing in the dirt, primal, and innocent. She places a stone in her mouth. Her face turns blue. I scream loud enough for God to hear me. I am four years old. This is my first memory of fear.

Everyone experiences fear. It is part of our human experience to be afraid of *something*. Often, we exist afraid of many things. For me, my first memory of fear was that I would lose my little sister. I knew something was very wrong and that frightened me. I was a toddler—I did not comprehend fear, I did not know what it was, or even how to process it. As I grew older, I experienced more fear: spiders, fear of rejection, fear of failing. But never a fear quite like the first one. I learned that it was death. The fear of losing her to death would be total and final. We are not taught about death as children, and when it comes, we are not taught how to process it. This extremely human fear of death has existed through human nature over time and will continue to do so. It has inspired philosophies, religions, art, and literature. It is a universal fear across nations, races, and genders. It lingers over the world like a giant black haze. Constantly there but often ignored. There is one genre that not only refuses to ignore this fear, but rather looks it in the face. This genre will dissect and dismember every concept behind fear and death. And this would be called Gothic literature.

Some believe that a good story is subjective, that whether or not a story is “good” depends on the consumer—or: beauty is in the eye of the beholder, to each their own, etc. But stories in general are fundamental to the human condition and our history as a species. Stories are how we learn about the past, morality, love, and loss. Some stories teach, while others merely entertain. Fear exploited for entertainment value. And as American popular culture would insist, there is a formula to what makes a typical, yet satisfying horror story. A monster whether human, deformed, or supernatural is the psychotic killer, killing at random. The young, beautiful, naïve teenagers with their whole lives ahead of them. The dark, wet, abandoned, old house. The night where it all went wrong. The hero/heroine that will ultimately prevail. While those elements make for a typical “slasher” film and have one goal: to entertain, —they all stem from a much older, wiser, sophisticated form of storytelling that was intended to evoke fear so deep into our existence, we had to compartmentalize it into Freddy and Jason-esque entertainment for the masses. Stories can be therapeutic. Manifesting our deepest fears and most tangible anxieties into a narrative that will hold a much deeper meaning. Stories can be frightening. A lesson or symbolism meant to hold a mirror to society, forcing us to consider our actions and consequences. But when a genre of story survives throughout generations, across different continents and ideologies, the story holds something uniquely inherent for the human condition. It doesn’t stay confined to race or gender, age, or time. It simply and remarkably touches on what makes us all human. And what, does make us human? How could *literature*, a “story”, possibly answer a question as old as man? I don’t believe we will ever have the answers to that question. The human condition is meant to keep asking that question until man no longer exists. The answer does not lie

in a single work of art, literature, science, or philosophy. No amount of argument could make the answer to what makes us human so singular, so...finite. It evolves alongside us, in the shadows of our achievements and mistakes, mankind is haunted by this question. What makes us human? Why do we act and think a certain way? Why have we committed such horrors? And what could it all possibly mean for the future of the human condition? In our desperate need to answer these questions, we create. We watch and escape. We read and partake.

This “horror” story exists in the form of Gothic Literature. In primary school we are taught some of the classics, *Frankenstein* and *The Bell Jar*, pieces of art to check the “Gothic” box required by curriculum. To fully grasp where the Feminine Gothic comes from, it is important to understand the origins and what some scholars argue is the definition of Gothic literature. Marie Laura Mulvey-Roberts introduces Gothic literature in *The Handbook to Gothic Literature* by first asking, “What is Gothic literature? Is it a plot, a trope, a topos, a discourse, a mode of representation, conventions of characterization, or a composite of all these aspects?” initiating us to consider genres and ideas within literature as we have been taught to understand them (Mulvey-Roberts, xvi). Mulvey-Roberts creatively describes the Gothic Novel, stating:

Associated with the traditional Gothic Novel is an ivy-colored haunted ruin, a swooning heroine replete with sensibility, and a tyrannical villain, bequeathed with a lock, a key and a castle. Constituting and constitutive of anachronism and counterfeit, the Gothic plot, the proverbial textual folly, is a mirror diverting us from the trauma and taboo. The concoction is a

dark yet familiar brew – an uneasy and eerie dialectic between anxiety and desire (Mulvey-Roberts, xvi).

Mulvey-Roberts defines what the Gothic Novel *is* by composing the mise-en-scene of what is a typical Gothic Novel: the haunted house in disrepair and our championed naïve female powerless against evil. Whether you have studied Gothic literature or not, the tropes and motifs are recognizable in American culture.

How many films and television shows are hellbent on “entertaining” us with the damsel in distress, the castle she shouldn’t go into, and the demons or monsters that we hope are defeated? While it feels easy to dumb down what the Gothic is on that assumption alone, Gothic literature is and has been much more than that. Another expert in the Gothic, William Hughes, takes a more historical and tactical approach in defining the Gothic. Hughes writes,

Gothic’s historical implication within explorations of the monstrous and the perceptibly abnormal facilitates its insertion into the nascent popular genres of the nineteenth century, most notably crime fiction and science fiction. If these genres characteristically eschew the supernatural content so popular within First-Wave Gothic, they make extensive use of Gothicized modes of characterization and geographical description and implicate another defining element of Gothic since the time of Walpole:

the disruptive potential that the past may have in the present day (Hughes, 5).

Here, Hughes mentions “Walpole” to date his definition. Hughes claims that there is what some critics consider to be a First Wave in Gothic literature that date back to the mid eighteenth-century. *The Castle of Otranto* by Horace Walpole (1764) is what academia argues as “the first nominally termed work in the genre (Gothic)” (Hughes, 5). This work is important because one of the fascinating things that the Gothic genre has done and continues to do so today across different mediums, is stay consistent in the intent. Who was the work made for and what the work was meant to do? Hughes’ argument for Walpole’s work to be considered fundamental to the Gothic genre is as follows,

It is a moral tale, punctuated by immoral incidents, and the restoration of conventional morality is achieved through ghostly rather than divine intervention. Certainly, *The Castle of Otranto* establishes many of the conventions which continue to punctuate Gothic works the present day (Hughes, 4).

Gothic literature is made for human beings and human nature intended to petrify and scrutinize our deepest anxieties and current conditions. Two female authors have simply taken that formula and molded it to carve out a very specific, niche, and absolutely terrifying space within the Gothic.

History has paid more attention to the male counterparts within such disciplines that have influenced the world. Art, theology, philosophy, literature, music, and theater. It is not surprising that this form of elitism would exist in a world where creation is a window into understanding the human condition. A delusional exercise of power. However, Gothic literature has shown to be an exception to this exclusive rule. If Gothic literature was a consumer product, the marketing campaign would undoubtedly read: “created *by women for women*”. And thus, out of Gothic literature, the Female Gothic literature would be born. Hughes defines the Female Gothic as,

First proposed in *Literary Women* (1963) by Ellen Moers, this terms greatly enhanced the recognized achievement of female authors working with Gothic stylistics from the eighteenth century onwards. Moers, significantly, revisited the recurrent plotlines of the genre, and argued that these functioned in part to move the fictional heroine to the center of the reading experience, her episodes of peril often showcasing her resourcefulness and resilience. (Moers, Hughes, 69).

No longer is the damsel in distress reliant on a knight in shining armor to defeat whomever or whatever has locked her away. We are gifted a *heroine*: a super-hero like female character that connects with the reader and ultimately prevails. Gothic literature made for women by women, became more powerful than ever. Moers does an excellent job maintaining that “although the female character proves to be resilient in the female Gothic, she still experiences “episodes of peril” in a very familiar plotline of Gothic literature” (Moers, Hughes, 69).

Multiple critics would come to define the Female Gothic because as much as it is a branch in the family tree of Gothic literature, it remains unique while rooted in the foundation of its' predecessor. Hughes characterizes the Female Gothic by quoting Anne Williams, a prominent critic of the Female Gothic. Hughes states,

The Female Gothic is characterized by a limited viewpoint for the narration (where suspense is generated through a singular concentration on the heroine and her activities); it tends to eschew a literal supernatural in favour of one where uncanny or unprecedented events are ultimately explained as the result of human actions; and its conclusion is more likely to come in the form of a happy and restorative ending rather than in a bleak tragedy" (Williams, Hughes, 69).

This definition is crucial in defining how the Female Gothic separates itself from the original, Male Gothic version of this genre. Historically, Gothic literature as male-centered, "favours graphic horror over subtle terror, a commitment to depictions of the absolute supernature rather than to seemingly uncanny events that have a human explanation, and a rendering of the heroine in strikingly sexual terms" (Hughes, 102).

This paper is meant to celebrate those drastic differences and see exactly how influential they are, not only to literature or the Gothic genre, but to how we explore the human condition moving forward. While other definitions of the Female Gothic will be considered and explored in this paper, to initially understand the difference between the female and male renditions will prove beneficial.

First, we have to study fear. The origins of it, the history behind it, how it makes us feel, and how much authority it has over our future. Fear and Death thrive within a parasitic relationship, with humanity as the host. Gothic literature has historically manipulated this concept and done so through a gendered lens. The traditional, Male Gothic existed to serve the illusion that weak, vulnerable, and anxious women were prey for sexual violation—beautiful but insecure and defenseless creatures kept secluded from the world and manipulated at the male villain's will. But this form of literature was only serving half of the population; through the cracks and crevices of the Male Gothic logic, the Female Gothic would emerge. Female characters no longer subject to terror but heroines surviving against all odds and thus regaining autonomy. Both facets explore the sublime and unnatural world to justify the fears human nature suffers from.

The world is not black or white. Literature is not strictly male or purely female. We create in a world of chaos to challenge contemporary society and carve out cultural significance that we can hold onto. Shirley Jackson's *The Haunting of Hill House* (1959) and Toni Morrison's *Beloved* (1987) do exactly that within the bounds of Gothic literature and prove to be, what I argue, the two most significant works of the Feminine Gothic Revival. Jackson and Morrison invent the haunted heroine, a leading lady so haunted by the past, relationships, and emotions that by unique character development, insidious use of dread, and malicious paranormal occurrences create a nouveau dichotomy within Gothic literature. Jackson's *The Haunting of Hill House* and Morrison's *Beloved* contend that the human condition is a *haunted*

condition. Through their renaissance of Gothic literature they force a mirror up to society and history, and by their work we are forced to face our own hauntings.

## Chapter 1: Hill House, Not Sane

We have an insatiable desire for entertainment. We often tap into fear, adrenaline, and the unknown for amusement: a temporary distraction from a mundane reality. But why is it that we yearn to be frightened or triggered? Is it perhaps part of the human condition that we as a species could and often do rely on fear to feel alive? Flesh and blood persisting against whatever otherworldly nightmare exists. Horror stories have a familiarity to them that is almost comforting. The people we don't know yet empathize with, the places we have never been to yet can smell, hear, feel. The overall nostalgia of what was before and how it went so terribly wrong. We see ourselves in these characters. We know the haunted house is dark and cold. We can sense evil.

Western civilization cultivates constructs such as good versus evil, light versus dark, heaven versus hell. And when it is more than that, when the "evil" carves itself into our minds, burrows into our hearts, and haunts our souls, the ghost in the story is no longer a whimsical character conceived from fear. *We are* the ghosts. We become the fear. Gothic literature has brought us to our knees with this concept and forced a mirror in front of humanity. The genre has been and continues today to comment on the human condition of fear: mental health, femininity, patriarchal oppression, race, substance abuse, and the family dynamic. Gothic literature begs the question, what does it mean to be human and why are we so afraid?

Shirley Jackson's, *The Haunting of Hill House* from 1959, is as classic as a horror story can come. The haunted house isolated from civilization, the nearby town skeptical and superstitious, a vague history of the house and those who haunt it, naïve newcomers

who seem to be victimized. We are allowed to appreciate *The Haunting of Hill House* for what it originally sets out to do. When we oversimplify, we fail to understand this Gothic tale and its purpose in the first place. Jackson gifts us a horror story that pulls on emotion from the reader. *The Haunting of Hill House* is an emotional rollercoaster throughout the text of empathy, anger, compassion, confusion, sympathy, fear, shock, and terror. By allowing the reader to feel such emotions throughout the work, Jackson makes us forget that this is a horror story. We become lost in the characters, *their* minds, and emotions. Lost in the unnatural occurrences that the reality of what is actually happening tends to slip further and further away. We are greeted with these infamous first lines:

No live organism can continue for long to exist sanely under conditions of absolute reality; even larks and katydids are supposed, by some, to dream. Hill House, not sane, stood by itself against its hills, holding darkness within; it had stood so for eighty years and might stand for eighty more. Within, walls continued upright, bricks met neatly, floors were firm, and doors were sensibly shut; silence lay steadily against the wood and stone of Hill House, and whatever walked there, walked alone (Jackson, 1).

Our first character introduction is to the entity of Hill House itself as deranged, vicious, and isolated. Here in these first few lines Jackson begs us to suspend our disbelief. Whatever we think we may know of the world, people, and even reality is to be questioned and judged by our reaction to Jackson's words. Immediately, we are subjected to terror. We learn that Hill House was "not sane", but secluded, dark, old, and heavy.

Jackson presents this vital character as a living organism: Hill House is more than a house. Hill House is our first character, reality is a distant memory, and the hairs on the back of our necks stand up at the mercy of these first, eight, lines.

Jackson invites the reader to understand the characters inherently, deeply, and fully before allowing for the “horror story” effect. We are privy to know Eleanor better than she may know herself, why each thought enters her mind the way it does, her insecurities, and every single emotion she may experience. We know more about who she is as a person in the present before we know her past, where she comes from, or what she has been through. We find comfort in how quickly she feels accepted by Theodora, Luke, and Dr. Montague. The way in which Jackson gave us Eleanor is a gift that will carry throughout the remainder of the work. Just like the careful introduction to Hill House as a character, we are methodically and deliberately introduced to Eleanor Vance as someone recognizable to us and yet as someone so unrecognizable that the immediate sense of sympathy and pity we have for this person is overwhelming. In what most consider the prime of their life, 32, she is isolated from the only family she has left, removed from any source of social friendships, and harbors intense emotions of overall unhappiness.

Jackson states,

This was owing largely to the eleven years she had spent caring for her invalid mother, which had left her with some proficiency as a nurse and an inability to face strong sunlight without blinking. She could not remember ever being truly happy in her adult life; her years with her mother had

been built up devotedly around small guilts and small reproaches, constant weariness, and unending despair. Without ever wanting to become reserved and shy, she had spent so long alone, with no one to love, that it was difficult for her to talk, even casually, to another person without self-consciousness and an awkward inability to find words. (Jackson, 3).

We are within and without. We understand Eleanor and at the same we cannot understand the depth of exactly how unhappy she really is. Jackson foreshadows an unhappiness here that will appear again toward the end of the work. I argue that this paragraph, three pages into the work as a whole, tells us everything we need to know about Eleanor's tragic end. We had to come to know Eleanor this way. We had to choose her as our heroine. And we had to see ourselves in her. Jackson is clever; we should remember to hesitate in calling Eleanor our heroine. In some ways she is victimized, preyed upon by the house, preyed upon by her own guilt, and prey to the toxicity that can lie within a mother-daughter relationship. Eleanor is a complex character because we do not know whether to call her a heroine or victim. We do not know how we should feel about her, is she insane? Is she weak or strong? Is she guilty or innocent? Jackson intrigues us because even Eleanor does not know the answers to such questions. Eleanor suffers from a complete lack of identity although self-aware and conscious of her interaction with the world. This characterization of Eleanor fits within the motif of the Gothic narrative, however Jackson defines Eleanor by concepts of guilt, consumption, and the mother-daughter dichotomy that is essential to this notion of the Female Gothic.

Human beings are haunted creatures. We remain haunted by our past, decisions we made or didn't, actions we took or didn't. We haunt ourselves with the constant pestering of "what ifs" and self-doubt. I believe it is innately human to question, why am I here? What is this all for? Guilt is a debilitating emotion that implies our consciousness governs our behavior. Guilt is defined as "the state of one who has committed an offense especially consciously", and further I might argue and also—because they are somewhat opposed, almost diametrically, and "feelings of deserving blame especially for imagined offenses or from a sense of inadequacy" (Merriam-Webster).

The emotion of guilt whether deserved or not, leaves Eleanor to live her life under this dark veil that happiness or joy threatens her way of existence. A human being so haunted by her guilt, she becomes the absolute manifestation of guilt. Early on, Jackson presents Eleanor in this light. Before we enter Eleanor's mind, we are given a glimpse as to what to expect. Jackson portrays her as not a thriving young woman with the world at her feet, but a meek and insecure, hardly living creature that fears life itself. Eleanor is a hollow shell of a person in a society that insists she should be self-defined and confident. Jackson utilizes this early characterization of Eleanor to further the Feminine Gothic motif that ultimately distinguishes itself from the overarching Gothic genre. Kahane brilliantly describes this departure from Gothic:

As Jackson's novel insists, the female Gothic depends as much on longing and desire as on fear and antagonism. Yet if it frequently indulges some of the more masochistic components of the female fantasy, representing the pleasure of submission, it also encourages an active exploration of the

limits of identity. Ultimately, however, in this essentially conservative genre – and for me this is the real Gothic horror – the heroine is compelled to resume a quiescent socially acceptable role or to be destroyed (Kahane, 342).

And thus, Jackson becomes well-known for these highly anxious female main characters. Roberta Rubenstein leans on Joan Wylie Hall, an expert on Jackson's writing to say, "Jackson often wrote of ordinary characters – typically women in their twenties and thirties – who become enmeshed in extraordinary situations that either free them or, more often, trap them" (Rubenstein, 311). This is inherently true to the character of Eleanor. For Eleanor, the extraordinary situation both frees and traps her as we will soon find out. Hall explains this entrapment as it relates to the Gothic narrative, tropes, and motifs. This concept of being both freed and trapped by the same "extraordinary situation" is tortuous throughout *The Haunting of Hill House*. Eleanor is imprisoned by her own emotions and anxieties no matter the circumstance. This plays into the Gothic narrative however, carving out a space for specifically the Female Gothic. Rubenstein elaborates, "Gothic narratives pivot upon anxieties about self-hood and entrapment, represented through bizarre or exaggerated events that may or may not be explained as manifestations of the (typically) female central characters' troubled imagination" (Rubenstein, 311).

Before Hill House and after the sad introduction regarding her family affairs, we are gifted a free and happy Eleanor for a brief period of time on her drive to Hill House. This small cosmic moment is how we come to love Eleanor, why we chose Eleanor.

Jackson presents the very human Eleanor; we are allowed to see ourselves in her and enter a reality that we have hopefully felt before. Jackson places us in this reality and moves us to say to ourselves, “I’ve felt this way before just as she does now”, thus opening the door to a wound that would only grow deeper and fester with terror. We are allowed to be vulnerable with Eleanor. But this wound Jackson would inflict on us would never heal only grow malignantly as Eleanor falls victim to the infectious Hill House. Jackson describes Eleanor’s trip to Hill House, stating:

The journey itself was her positive action, her destination vague  
unimagined, perhaps nonexistent...she might never leave the road at all,  
but just hurry on and on until the wheels of the car were worn to nothing,  
and she had come to the end of the world (Jackson, 11).

In this paragraph we learn of Eleanor’s desires: how human it is to want to be somewhere else. We see Eleanor alone for the first time in what feels like is just the beginning of her life. She is daydreaming of what a distant whimsical alter-reality might look like. When this daydreaming stops abruptly, the destination—the home forever—dissipates and Eleanor is left with not an idea, not a plan, nothing. The nothingness Eleanor feels and the guilt that has abscessed inside of her, fuels the fantasy that her car will bring her to “the end of the world”.

We are drawn to Eleanor before this thought of hers. The ideas of the open road, freedom, having the car to ourselves for the first time, daydreaming of who we will meet in the towns we have never been to. This fleeting freedom pulls us in, freedom as a gift

and not a right. And for women particularly, freedom can be everything all at once. Jackson manipulates us with Eleanor's freedom. Avril Horner says, "Gothic novels by women interrogate this gendering of the genre and their heroines are often a response to the cultural anxieties and dominant discourses at the time" (116). And after drawing us in, Eleanor drags us down into the black nothingness, into the dark corners of her mind where her true desire lie. In these dark corners is where the true grit of the Feminine Gothic comes to fruition, these moments that will leave a breadcrumb trail to tragedy for our heroine.

It is important to mention an author's life and background however, it is equally important to not consider an authors' biography as the one source of meaning for their work—a biography is never one solid answer—and therefore during a time of Jackson's life where her freedom, by any measure, must have felt fleeting became mirrored in much of her fiction. Rubenstein states, "Throughout her life, Shirley was distressed by her mother's profound insensitivity to her unconventionality. By contrast, Shirley's father seems to have been a figure on the margins of her life who corroborated his wife's conventional expectations for their daughter" (Rubenstein, 310).

Some believe that we as adults are shaped by our childhood. The Female Gothic plays with the concept of the home, the family, and how it appears within and outside of reality for the main character. Rubenstein elaborates, "The tensions between 'mother/self' and between 'home/lost' connote a young child's ambivalent desires and fears: both to remain merged with the other (who becomes emotionally identified with 'home' and to be separate from her, with the attendant danger of being 'lost' (309). In a way, adults become haunted by their childhood and idolize it as "a simpler time". But was it? What

was simple about an imagination on fire in a world that would make every effort to smother its flame? As we grew older, our imagination shrunk in size and the Giant of societal norms held our hands. This can manifest whether we are aware of it or not, into serious mental health issues such as guilt, self-deprecation, anxiety, and depression. And as adults we have allowed ourselves to be haunted.

At one point on the journey, we are reminded of Eleanor's childhood briefly and we see that the emotion of guilt tied to her childhood still lingers. Eleanor stops in a restaurant for lunch while on the road and the only other guests in the dining room are a young family. A mother, father, little boy, and girl. The little girl fusses to drink her milk because it is not in her "cup of stars", her mother makes apologies and tells the little girl, "you'll have your milk from your cup of stars tonight when we get home. But just for now, just to be a very good little girl, will you take a little milk from this glass?" (Jackson, 15). This scene is important because it reveals Eleanor's anxieties while commenting on the constraints growing up has had on us, what society has made us do. Eleanor states,

Don't do it, Eleanor told the little girl; insist on your cup of stars; once they have trapped you into being like everyone else you will never see your cup of stars again; don't do it; and the little girl glanced at her, and smiled a little subtle, dimpling, wholly comprehending smile, and shook her head stubbornly at the glass. Brave girl, Eleanor thought; wise, brave girl (Jackson, 15).

As powerful as Eleanor's thoughts are, the delusion is that the little girl can read her mind and acknowledges what Eleanor's thoughts are as if it were an intimate conversation only the two of them were having. Eleanor's self-doubt and anxiety make her want to believe that this little girl understands the gravity of what Eleanor is thinking, that Eleanor wishes she was like this wise, brave girl. When in fact, she has allowed, the ominous "they"—society, her mother, her sister, her guilt, her lack of identity—to trap her into being like everyone else: silent, submissive, good. I argue that this scene is strategic in complying with the narrative of the Feminine Gothic. This loss of identity that Eleanor feels is due to conforming to social and gendered norms and associated to caring for her invalid mother for decades. Who was Eleanor without her mother? Who was Eleanor if she was not a "good" girl? Such a thick lack of identity that we will come to see it affect Eleanor's relationships with Theodora, Luke, and ultimately Hill House. Rubenstein argues that the cup of stars scene is about maternal issues,

Eleanor appropriates the image of the child's magical milk cup with its suggestive sense of the mother's absent and idealized nourishment. The very fact that Eleanor never possessed such a cup but makes it hers in imagination, referring to it several times, betrays her distance from and longing for maternal nurturance (Rubenstein, 318).

I disagree. It is clear in the very early instances of this text that Eleanor has some genuine issues regarding her mother. Jackson expands on the intricate facets regarding a mother-daughter relationship through Eleanor's guilt. However, this "cup of stars" moment, I

argue, does not remind Eleanor of the mother she has lost or the nurturing from said mother she never had. This “cup of stars” moment is entirely personal to Eleanor, a moment of introspection as the little girl reminds Eleanor of the kind of little girl, she wishes she would have been, the kind of little girl that would have led her to be a different woman now.

Society, or “they”, would take away your cup of stars, your individuality. And bend you into a woman who smiles, obeys, and submits. Eleanor imagines herself in that chair at that table with this nuclear family, never really fitting in and never being brave enough not to. She imagines all of this because she never *was* this, never could be as brave as that little girl. And even now, in her adulthood, on her own for the first time, free. She is not wise and brave. She does not have her own cup of stars.

At this point in the work, Jackson gives a character we just want to wrap our arms around and as the first chapter ends and we come to rest inside the thoughts of Eleanor, we are met once again with the creature that is Hill House. The relationship that will form between Eleanor and Hill House will soon define whether Eleanor is our heroine or victim. As Eleanor meets the house for the first time, Jackson writes:

It was an act of moral strength to lift her foot and set it on the bottom step, and she thought that her deep unwillingness to touch Hill House for the first time came directly from the vivid feeling that it was waiting for her, evil, but patient (Jackson, 25).

These very first thoughts that Eleanor has about Hill House foreshadow how the two beings would coexist together. While some argue that the House is a foil for Eleanor's mother, I argue it is a representation of Eleanor's mental health struggle deeply rooted in the Feminine Gothic narrative. Although, the mother-daughter relationship is important and relevant throughout, the House's consumption of Eleanor is something separate from her mother and intrinsic to Eleanor herself. In the early moments while Eleanor first arrives to Hill House as the only guest so far, her thoughts betray her,

When she stood still in the middle of the room the pressing silence of Hill House came back all around her. I am like a small creature swallowed whole by a monster, she thought, and the monster feels my tiny little movements inside. 'No', she said aloud, and the one word echoed (Jackson, 29).

This will not be the first instance that Eleanor feels consumed by the house. However, it is surprising that she feels this way as soon as she is alone inside the house. With Hill House as a maternal entity, Eleanor becomes trapped in her womb. Just as an infant grows during pregnancy with the walls of the womb closing in, Eleanor too felt as if the House was molding to fit her *inside* of it.

## Chapter 2: Consuming Fear

With many of the liberal arts disciplines, definitions within the discipline vary as time progresses and movements age. Gothic literature is no different. However malleable Gothic literature has been over the past few centuries, at its very core, the Gothic has focused on the sublime. In the eighteenth century, the Western world is blessed by this notion of romanticism and the sublime. As a departure from religious art ensued, this century would gift the world art and literature unlike anything seen before and more importantly, unlike anything ever *felt* before. Instead of considering our sins and penance when confronted with an image or story related to everyday life, we are granted an open door to cross an astonishing threshold, experience, and explore how we truly feel amidst the chaos of a world we try to explain. If religion no longer dictates a divine explanation of the world and why I am in it, what entity can?

This was the beauty of the sublime and the Gothic. A question like this triggered by an anxiety intrinsic to the human condition. An anxiety that the Gothic would nurture, cultivate, and encourage. According to Edmund Burke in 1757, “the sublime as an artistic effect [is] productive of the strongest emotion the mind is capable of feeling. Whatever is any sort terrible or is conversant about terrible objects or operates in a manner analogous to terror, is a source of the sublime” ([tate.org.uk](http://tate.org.uk)). Burke would come to be one of the most influential theorists of the Gothic discipline and this notion of the sublime. People needed to understand what this new genre was and why it was affecting them so. Burke furthers this definition. As William Hughes notes:

Burke draws a distinction between the sublime – which inspires awe in the perceiver – and the beautiful or picturesque, which merely please. The experience of awe is closely associated with the emotion of fear, which undermines the rational and thus elevates the mind to contemplate a world which is not wholly contained or comprehended by human thought and human power. The sublime thus inspires in its perceivers a new sense of relative insignificance, which a consciousness of the brevity of human life, the smallness of the human frame, and the puniness of human achievements when set against the immensity of nature (Hughes, 145).

What this tells me, is that we are meant to feel fear. Fear as a basic human emotion directly linked to awe. Gothic is an entity, exploiting basic human emotions to achieve the goal of suspending our disbelief rooted in an alternate universe of imagination. It is this space—that the human condition has desperately and relentlessly turned to—to justify their place and purpose within the cosmos. And to think that all stems from the all-too-human emotion: fear.

This is amazing and confusing and divine and natural and everything all at once. Fear raises our blood pressure, evokes fight or flight responses, sends us into hiding or forces us to rush the front lines of danger. But what exactly, are we afraid of? Spiders? Ghosts? Demons? Can an entire species come to one shared common fear? Regardless of time, race, gender, culture, ancestry, etc. Is there a history of this one shared fear? Long, ancient, and universal: the fear of death. And in the shadows of emotions and awe, we are consumed by death.

Death is all consuming. It is a fear that we cannot rationalize completely; we can theorize, but never know for sure. Not with religion, the sublime, science, philosophy, art, literature, or history. There is not a single answer to any of our questions about death. And this ambiguity consumes us. These notions of fear, the sublime, and consuming death associated with the Gothic, are found within Hill House. Jackson's unique use of these Gothic elements is what sets Hill House and Eleanor in a newly defined space of Gothic literature. Our dear Eleanor becomes consumed by our antagonistic Hill House. If Eleanor is the character given to us by Jackson to come to love and identify with, then Hill House is the character that we are taught by Jackson to fear, loathe, and resent.

Jackson carefully spoon feeds us the terror and dread associated with Hill Houses' characterization. She characterizes an inanimate object into something that feels very alive to us—alive and well, with a personality hellbent on terrifying Eleanor for its' own personal gain. This is yet another way Jackson is molding this new, contemporary, Female Gothic.

Gothic literature celebrates the concept of anthropomorphism. Hughes defines this as:

The ascription of a human attribute or personality to a non-human entity. Though anthropomorphism is commonly deployed in order to effectively humanize the behavior of animals, it may function also in ascribing some form of volition or motivation to objects and buildings. In Gothic, this may take the form of an object which is seen as cursed or else malignant in itself (Hughes, 23).

And this is exactly what Jackson does with Hill House as a character. The house itself is malignant, an all-consuming tumor that will essentially lead to its poor victim's end.

What makes this innately part of the Female Gothic is that Eleanor, is prey for the bloodthirsty Hill House. Eleanor arrives and instantly believes that this house has an evil personality with a malicious goal. Jackson illustrates their first meeting, writing:

No Human eye can isolate the unhappy coincidence of line and place which suggests evil in the face of a house, and yet somehow a maniac juxtaposition, a badly turned angle, some chance meeting of roof and sky, turned Hill House into a place of despair, more frightening because the face of Hill House seemed awake, with a watchfulness from the blank windows and a touch of glee in the eyebrow of a cornice" (Jackson, 24).

First and foremost, Jackson deliberately capitalizes "Human" to nod towards a sense of separation. She urges to remind us that we are the humans and shocks us back down to earth. We are the humans and this character, this "Hill House" is much more than that, much more than the Other commonly associated with Gothic narrative. However, Jackson does go as far as to give this inanimate, non-Human like entity very Human like features. Jackson's deliberate use of words like "face, maniac, awake, watchfulness, eyebrow" provide us with a wolf-in-sheep-clothing like fear. The absurdity of a house with eyebrows or a building that could be awake cautions us to remember exactly what we are walking into, with or without Eleanor. With the brilliance of one capitalized word,

“Human”, we are slapped in the face with the reality that this entity has no regard for anything remotely human. And that this entity lives within the sociopathic tendencies of serial killer—awake with “a touch of glee”—we alongside Eleanor, are just a means to an end. According to John G. Parks, “the gothic house in a real sense is the chief character of *The Haunting of Hill House* (1959). Its presence is felt on nearly every page. The house is over eighty years old and carries the unsavory reputation of death, madness, revenge, and suicide” (25). Here, Parks insinuates that not only is Hill House our first character, but a primary one at that. A character that can maintain a reputation and haunt the reader throughout Jackson’s work, even when Jackson gives us fleeting moments of happiness for our beloved, Eleanor.

As children, we are taught that in every fairytale the Princess finds her true love, Prince Charming saves the day, and the Hero always prevails. But life is not a fairytale. Life is not a story to pass on. Gothic literature takes our childhood fairytales and turns them on their heads. In *The Haunting of Hill House* our “Princess” commits suicide. There is no Prince Charming. We lose our Hero. And the Villain is satisfied, happy, and full. There is no magical forest, enchanted castle, or show-tune singing animals. The “castle” is haunted and bitter swallowed by an ominous forest. And the only songs our sweet Eleanor hears, are in her head.

True to Gothic nature, Hill House is consistently cold according to its guests. Associated with paranormal activities, the cold draft of Hill House is unforgiving and often haunting: the “cold” of Hill House holds a dual purpose. Hill House is cold emotionally as well: an unwelcoming living entity unwilling to show empathy, emotion,

or affection. I argue that this coldness becomes evident in one of the hauntings experienced by Eleanor and Theodora, Jackson writes Eleanor's thoughts:

I am calm, she thought, but so very cold...is this what they mean by cold chills going up and down your back? Because it is not pleasant; it starts in your stomach and goes in waves around and up and down again like something alive. Like something alive. Yes. Like something alive (Jackson, 94).

Here, Jackson characterizes Hill House as a living, breathing, hateful creature by insisting on the phrase "Like something alive" three times, consecutively. We are not allowed to dissociate during this scene from the concept that this house, is "something" other than human: living and breathing, conscious and planning. In this scene, as the haunting continues, Jackson tells us, "The cold crept and pinched at them, filling and overflowing the room" (Jackson, 95). Like a predator stalking and playing with its food, a sociopath harming for pleasure, Jackson's use of the phrase, "pinched at them" becomes an animated instance of Hill House with actual claws physically grasping at the two women. To further this concept of hands or claws associated with the cold, Jackson continues to personify the house and its actions, stating: "The cold troubled her even more than the sounds; even Theodora's warm robe was useless against the icy little curls of fingers on her back" (Jackson, 96). Jackson makes us think that inanimate objects could maliciously extend their limbs to cause us harm, physical or psychological. This "micro theme" of Jackson's of personifying inanimate objects into physical attacks is an

almost foreign concept. This unique theme is undoubtedly more terrifying for women and sadly, rooted in reality. This twist on the Feminine Gothic is unique to Jackson. To give an inanimate object something as human as hands is more than terrifying. It becomes repulsive. This image that our darkest fears have limbs to grab us with to drag us down into the abyss forever. An image we are not allowed to “unsee” but hold dear in our nightmares.

In Jackson’s literature, the heroine is a lost, anxious, and alone soul—a woman in a constant state of vulnerability. Jackson’s use of terror embodies the sense that Hill House is predatory and male: the intent in making Hill House seem as real as flesh and blood all while preying on vulnerable, frightened women. The notion of male penetration and hidden sexual agendas on the part of either victim or villain is considered a foundation to the Gothic plot. Perhaps because, unfortunately, predatory male behavior is so prevalent in real life. According to the National Coalition Against Domestic Violence (NCADV), 1 in 3 women have experienced some form of physical violence by an intimate partner and 1 in 10 women have been raped by an intimate partner. Further, according to the National Organization for Women “Young women, low-income women and some minorities are disproportionately victims of domestic violence and rape. Women ages 20-24 are at greatest risk of nonfatal domestic violence, and women aged 24 and under suffer from the highest rates of rape” (NOW). What these statistics tell us is that it is not a coincidence that Gothic literature seeps out negative, predatory, aggressive male energy against a helpless, weak, anxious, woman.

Gothic literature mirrors much of the anxieties associated with everyday life in Western society. Pertaining strictly to the Feminine Gothic, Holland and Sherman go so

far as to state, “The more usual gothic defines its heroine’s anxieties as fears of nothingness, vulnerability, and above all, of sexual penetration. For a woman in a sexist society, imagining being penetrated (an experience of being “filled”) can be a pleasure but also a threat” (Holland and Sherman, 283).

While our heroine, Eleanor, deals with anxieties as fears of nothingness and vulnerability, I do not see evidence that Hill House gives off a purely violent sexual energy. While I’m not convinced that Hill House is concerned with penetrating Eleanor, I do believe the House is obsessed with consuming Eleanor, entirely. For Hill House, the gratification lies in consuming Eleanor and not to become a part of her through penetration but rather through torture. This would include not only tormenting her psychologically, but consuming her very being and assaulting her in the physical world without consent. Through these villainous attacks, Eleanor starts to shrink in her own mind and loses the physical energy required to fight back against her assailant. Against forces beyond her control, our martyr is slipping away. We relentlessly champion for Eleanor while we watch her slip away from us and further into the clutches of Hill House. It is here, during this transitional phase for Eleanor that we watch helplessly and heartbroken, her fall from heroine to victim all the while Hill House gorges on her very existence.

Leading up to her very climatic demise, Eleanor experiences several hauntings that trigger her deeper anxieties of femineity, identity, and guilt. Here, Jackson adapts a common Gothic concept and applies it strictly to a woman’s point of view. The Feminine Gothic mirror we are not allowed to look away from. I argue that this terrifying consumption becomes evident in Eleanor’s first morning in Hill House. Jackson writes,

“It’s charming, Eleanor thought, surprised at herself at the same time unable to account for the excitement she felt, which made it difficult to remember why it was so odd to wake up happy in Hill House” (Jackson, 68). Here Jackson tells us Eleanor’s emotions and thoughts within Hill House, even in the very first morning, are not to be trusted as a reliable source, but that they are being manipulated by the forces within Hill House. This is an early example of the House manipulating Eleanor and her mind, while the house tricks Eleanor into believing this is a safe place. An even earlier instance of Hill House starting to possess Eleanor served as a warning to the group. For example, Eleanor addresses the group of Luke, Theo, and the Doctor,

I don’t think we could leave now if we wanted to. Eleanor had spoken before she realized clearly what she was going to say, or what it was going to sound like to the others; she saw that they were staring at her, and laughed and added lamely, Mrs. Dudley would never forgive us. She wondered if they really believed that that was what she had meant to say, and thought, perhaps it has us now, this house, perhaps it will not let us go (Jackson, 54).

A prime example of foreshadowing, this little snippet is Jackson’s way of urging us not to forget the power of the grip Hill House has on Eleanor. Her intuition knows something about the House that the others do not. In this scene, not only are we confronted with an early sign of control, but Eleanor second guesses herself in opening up about these intuitions to the group. According to Rubenstein,

Gothic narratives pivot upon anxieties about self-hood and entrapment, represented through bizarre or exaggerated events that may or may not be explained as manifestations of the (typically) female central character's troubled imagination. More specifically, Jackson's later narratives contain distinct elements of the type of Gothic narrative that has been termed 'Female Gothic' (Rubenstein, 311).

Will these three strangers listen to her? Why should they? When has anyone in Eleanor's deplorable life taken a moment to truly listen. This persists throughout the work; Eleanor is screaming into a sea of people, and they don't hear a sound. This anxiety, this Gothic-fear, so feminine and unique, is exhibited masterfully in Jackson's *Feminine Gothic*.

As we progress alongside Eleanor in Hill House, the hauntings become increasingly more vicious alongside a parasitic energy that insists on destroying Eleanor. Jackson's presentation of this particular haunting, this total consumption of a woman, is uniquely feminine. A memorable and vile scene of the writing on the wall stays with us. Jackson writes, "Eleanor come home Eleanor written in shaky red letters on the wallpaper over Theodora's bed" (Jackson, 114). Eleanor is haunted by her own reaction and desperately seeks out understanding from the group. Eleanor urges,

Those letters spell out *my* name, and none of you know what that feels like – it's so *familiar*". And she gestured to them, almost in appeal. "Try to

*see*,” she said. “It’s my own dear name, and it belongs to me, and something is using it and writing it and calling me with it and my own *name*... (Jackson, 118).

Jackson insists that Eleanor refer to what has written her name as “something”. Not a person. Not an animal. Not a worldly being. I contend that by Eleanor not identifying the “something” for what it is, Eleanor refuses to give Hill House power over her. This is Eleanor’s “Hail Mary”, a final attempt to gain some autonomy over the psychotic Hill House that is slowly but surely consuming Eleanor. This is Eleanor fighting like hell to survive. As I’ve argued earlier, we empathize with Eleanor and see ourselves in this character. In this very moment, we as the readers, might ask ourselves wouldn’t we fight like hell too? Try to convince those around us to understand? Beg for anyone to listen? It is not outlandish to understand why she is upset and yet she has to convince a room of strangers that are staring at her why she *deserves* to be upset. This leaves us heartbroken as we watch and fall with her in solidarity into a secluded, separate, isolated space from the group.

Further, her defense is uniquely her own. Her name, her identity, her very existence that she has been—up to this point—allowed autonomy over has been threatened. In our society, women are often not given control over their own bodies, lives, sexuality, fears, standards, expectations, dreams, and desires. Jackson, by putting meaningful weight into Eleanor’s words, and by pointing out the threat to her autonomy, her identity, and her name, redefines a haunting and strictly Feminine Gothic.

However, although Eleanor defends herself, the group does not immediately support her. Instead, she feels alienated and as a result the group furthers itself from Eleanor. She then states,

Look. There's only one of me, and it's all I've got. I *hate* seeing myself dissolve and slip and separate so that I'm living in one half, my mind, and I see the other half of me helpless and frantic and driven and I can't stop it, but I know I'm not really going to be hurt and yet time is so long and even a second goes on and on and I could stand any of it if I could only surrender"(Jackson, 118)

It is here that we no longer recognize our Eleanor in this manic-depressive episode. During her rambling, the reader stands shoulder to shoulder with Theo, Luke, and the Doctor as they learn the inner most personal thoughts into who Eleanor is, wants to be, or can't be. Jackson utilizes Eleanor in this moment as a mouthpiece for Hill House's agenda: her surrender. Jackson uses abrasively physical words such as "dissolve" and "slip" and "separate" to insinuate a clear distinction between Eleanor and the Group. With these words, Jackson released Eleanor from the conformity of the Group and cast her aside. Alienating her, "slipping" her away from reality and those who operate within it. These thoughts that she shared—after something truly traumatizing—are intimate and leave her vulnerable. This kind of vulnerability from a woman, in our society, has often been seen as hysteria; an emotional outburst absents from logic. I argue that in this scene, we are granted another one of Jackson's unique ways of presenting the Female Gothic. Jackson places us in the room with our once heroine and forces us to watch—as well as

distance ourselves from her—as Eleanor becomes “the Other”, an outsider as she is fed to Hill House.

As we follow our Eleanor through a series of hauntings at the discretion of Hill House, slowly but surely losing her to Hill House itself, Jackson pleads with us to dissect these “hauntings” and further understand how we are losing Eleanor before our very eyes. As previously touched on, Eleanor is a character that is consumed by her own guilt and manifests it into how she treats the world around her and particularly in how she responds to moments of social interaction and stressful events. One haunting that plays on this concept is where Eleanor and Theodora are spending the night next to each other holding hands,

Holding hands so hard that each of them could feel each other’s bones,  
Eleanor and Theodora listened, and the low, steady sound went on and on,  
the voice lifting sometimes for an emphasis on a mumbled word, falling  
sometimes to a breath, going on and on. Then, without warning, there was  
a little laugh... (Jackson, 119).

In a panic, Eleanor is struck with fear and terror as she cannot move or speak to wake Theodora in a dark room that was previously lit. In her fear she tells herself that the sounds, laughs, and cries are that of a child. Jackson tells us,

...and then she heard a little soft cry which broke her heart, a little  
infinitely sad cry, a little sweet moan of wild sadness. It is a *child*, she

thought with disbelief, a child is crying somewhere, and then, upon that thought, came the wild shrieking voice she had never heard before and yet know she had heard always in her nightmares (Jackson, 120).

Jackson's truly Gothic vocabulary composes the words to create a sound that haunts the reader. Words like "sweet moan of wild sadness" and "she had heard always in her nightmares" invents a deeply haunting, unfortunately familiar, inhuman sound that Jackson demands we listen to. While we are just as terrified as Eleanor, realizing that she cannot stand the sound of a tortured child she thinks,

I am scared, but more than that, I am a person, I am human, I am a walking reasoning humorous human being and I will take a lot from this lunatic filthy house but I will not go along with hurting a child, no, I will not; I will by God get my mouth to open right now and I will yell I will I will yell 'STOP IT' (Jackson, 120).

This scene proves powerful for many reasons and draws on not only on Eleanor's guilt or haunted relationship with her mother, but on our pathos surrounding harm inflicted on the innocent, a child. Whether or not this is legitimately happening to Eleanor is not entirely clear, but even if this is made up in her mind from a deeply disturbed post-traumatic place, we enter into some of Eleanor's deepest thoughts surrounding a mother-daughter relationship. As Claire Kahane elaborates,

Jackson dislocates me in typical Gothic fashion by locating me in Eleanor's point of view, confusing outside and inside, reality and illusion, so that I cannot clearly discern the acts of the house – the supernatural – from Eleanor's own disordered acts – the natural. But whether the agency of the house is inside Eleanor's mind or outside it, in either location it clearly functions as a powerful maternal imago (Kahane, 341).

The absent mother, a fundamental Gothic theme, rears its ugly head in this scene. However, Jackson takes this strictly Gothic focus, and twists it into something grotesque, something more than just the agony associated with a broken family dynamic. Up to this point, Jackson has fed us the breadcrumbs that would lead to Eleanor's consumption by guilt. Many critics argue that this consumption is more than guilt, and that strictly saying Jackson gives us a character *only* consumed by guilt would be watering down what Jackson has tried to do in the first place. However, Eleanor is consumed by this guilt and this emotional state serves as fuel for the hauntings of Hill House to commence. Because of this, Hill House knows exactly how to break Eleanor, strip of her of any possible individuality or free will, and ultimately drive her to the desperation of feeling nothing at all.

As I have stated before, Hill House is a character with serial killer, sociopathic tendencies. This entity finds joy in manipulating and threatening our main character, our faulted heroine, our vulnerable victim; this *thing* called Hill House, is taking her from us and all we can do is watch. This guilt is the offspring of an extremely toxic mother-daughter relationship that haunts Eleanor and every aspect of her being. Her lack of

identity, lack of femininity, vulnerability, and manic thoughts all stem from the roots of this unresolved trauma. Further Kahane argues,

what is seen is images of self-hatred, which take the form of freaks of all kinds, and thus leads to a grotesque tradition in Female Gothic. I would like to complicate that answer; for if the older Gothic tradition involved an obscure exploration of female identity through a confrontation with a diffuse spectral mother, in modern Gothic the spectral mother typically becomes an embodied actual figure. She, and not some threatening villain, becomes the primary antagonist. With that shift, the heroine is imprisoned not in a house but in the female body, perceived as antagonistic to the sense of self, as therefore freakish (Kahane, 343).

Kahane makes an excellent point—that in this modern Gothic that we are exploring, the mother becomes the antagonist. However, I assert that Hill House is its own character separate from that of the mother antagonist. And therefore, it is the House that Jackson has personified and developed an entire characterization for, the ultimate antagonist. Hill House wants Eleanor. Hill House knows how to take Eleanor. Hill House knows what will send Eleanor over the edge and lock her behind its' doors forever. It is important to note here that the house is not a metaphor for her mother. The hauntings of Hill House directed toward Eleanor are a direct reflection of what is going on inside of Eleanor. The storm that is brewing inside Eleanor's mind and soul is that of manic guilt, depression, unprocessed family trauma, matricide, lack of identity, grief, and isolation. And to make

matters worse, this toxic cocktail enters her bloodstream at an alarmingly fast rate: she cannot process her thoughts in a healthy way or to the group to even ask for help. Eleanor is not given a fair chance at survival. Isolated from her family, from the outside world, from the group, and towards the end, even us Eleanor never had a chance. And even though at this point we feel far from the Eleanor we loved, the cup of stars Eleanor, the oleanders Eleanor, Jackson sears an image into our minds: Eleanor's car and body wrapped around a tree.

In this moment, I believe we genuinely ask ourselves, why did she kill herself? Why suicide? She had a chance to escape, why wouldn't she take it? And she does, she *does* escape. Eleanor refuses to let the dark corners of her mind consume her. She refuses to allow grief, guilty, and depression define her. If she was going to exist without a confident sense of identity than she would be the one to decide that she would not exist at all. In a gut-wrenching scene, Jackson gives us our Eleanor one last time:

With what she perceived as quick cleverness she pressed her foot down hard on the accelerator; they can't run fast enough to catch me this time, she thought, but by now they must be beginning to realize; I wonder who notices first? Luke, almost certainly. I can hear them calling now, she thought, and the little footsteps running through Hill House and the soft sound of the hills pressing closer. I am really doing it, she thought, turning the wheel to send the car directly at the great tree at the curve of the driveway, I am really doing it, I am doing this all by myself, now, at least; this is me, I am really really really doing it by myself (Jackson, 182).

This almost feels like too much to bear. Jackson gives us so much to unpack and yet no time at all to process it. It feels as if we are watching this madness unfold in front of our very eyes. We are standing there with Theo, Luke, and Dr. Montague waiving good-bye. And in this moment, we are both outside and inside; inside that car we are allowed to witness a confident Eleanor for the first time. Eleanor refers to herself six times and by doing so reclaims herself and her place in the world right before she leaves it.

For the first time in her life, Eleanor is deciding what is best for Eleanor and she is doing it without any assistance or handouts from the outside world, family, or acquaintances in a strange home. We are tricked to believe that even though she is mentally unstable, that this could end her pain. If this is the one thing, she can give herself then it *might* make sense. But how are you supposed to rationalize a horror such as a suicide? Particularly when the victim is a weak and vulnerable female who just needed *help*. She only needed to be seen and heard. How could we sit right with that? This is exactly what Jackson implores us to consider.

Jackson created a niche within Gothic literature, the female as a martyr, someone to be made an example of a character desperately looking for a sense of purpose in the world: the female protagonist as the mirror. These Jackson women hold a mirror up to us, we are to face our flaws, fears, and insecurities. We are supposed to question the world around us and how it treats women. Eleanor's suicide is a warning. Shirley Jackson's *Feminine Gothic*...is a warning.

### Chapter 3: Sethe and Black Motherhood

As we heed Jackson's warning and confront the ghost within ourselves, we come to a bleak and dismal realization: we are haunted humans. The human condition is to be haunted by the past. The past is a place we cannot return to and yet yearn for. Our past holds us prisoner to nostalgia. We miss who we were in the past, our childhood, and mourn for a time we might soon forget. We are haunted by the constraints of society built on the blood of history. We are haunted by the ghosts of our past: the ghost of who we once were and the ghost of those we have lost. Lives of loved ones we must rationalize now as in a better place than with us. We desperately cling to the notion of life after death, a soul, or some form of explanation for what happens when our material world goes black, and our hearts stop beating. We fill our minds with biased accounts of what really happened to compartmentalize the truth and the past. What happens when the past is too horrific to understand as true?

The past of African Americans in this country is truly an American haunting. Because at its very conception it is one of the oldest and deeply rooted horror stories of mankind. Toni Morrison's *Beloved* provides a window into this disturbing past; a fictional rendition of what it was like to live and breathe as a human being in a dehumanizing world through a mother's lens. Morrison modernizes the American Southern Gothic motif and designs an entirely new hybrid genre on its' own: the Feminine Gothic. As this paper focuses on Toni Morrison, it is important to distinguish a definition of the Southern Gothic through her predecessor, William Faulkner. William Hughes explains:

Within twentieth- and twenty-first century American Gothic, Southern Gothic characteristically depicts scenes of personal, familial and social degeneration in the former slave-owning states. The term was first applied in criticism to the writings of William Faulkner (1897-1962), these being works that do not dwell on slavery itself but rather upon its aftermath: the collapse of the riches, social standing and culture of the white families and communities that once derived their wealth from slave-maintained plantations. Here, the crumbling and damp plantation house stands emblematically in the stead of the castellated ruin associated with European Gothic, though the secrets it may harbor – incest, madness, violence, sexual perversion, rape and murder – are historic Gothic preoccupations. (Hughes, 141-142).

The American Southern Gothic genre often used the tortured main characters to serve as martyrs for the grotesque situations encapsulated by excessive violence, poverty, alienation, social relations, crime, race, ghosts and the supernatural. Traditionally, the American Gothic was speaking primarily to a white audience. In Morrison's *Beloved*, Morrison characterizes our main character, Sethe, by separating her from victim to heroine. Morrison impedes Sethe's femininity and motherhood through the historical lens of slavery. Morrison destabilizes us in a purgatory-like atmosphere while we try to comprehend Sethe's reality.

Seldom, are we granted the perspective from the author themselves. During the forward of *Beloved* Morrison alludes to how inspiration for Sethe came to be. The beauty

of literature is that readers are often left to interpret characters and analyze them strictly on our own. In her forward Morrison states,

A newspaper clipping in *The Black Book* summarized the story of Margaret Garner, a young mother who, having escaped slavery, was arrested for killing one of her children (and trying to kill others) rather than let them be returned to the owner's plantation. She became a cause célèbre in the fight against the Fugitive Slave laws, which mandated the return of escapees to their owners. Her sanity and lack of repentance caught the attention of Abolitionists as well as newspapers. She was certainly single-minded and, judging by her comments, she had the intellect the ferocity, and the willingness to risk everything for what was to her the necessity of freedom (Morrison, xvii).

Even before we meet Sethe, we understand why she is created. We understand what compelled Morrison to tell Sethe's story. Although *Beloved* ends with the repeating lines, "It was not a story to pass on" in a state of juxtaposition, Morrison does exactly that (Morrison, 323). She insists that this is a story to pass on. It is a historical and cultural story that is passed onto future generations, to remind them of a haunted past, and to immortalize the conditions in which African Americans lived in this country. Morrison refuses to let history whitewash away this vital and bloody part of America's past. Morrison found immeasurable strength in Margaret Garner and through this strength, planted the chokecherry tree that is Sethe.

A story about motherhood, slavery, guilt, and grief, *Beloved* stretches the boundaries of the Female Gothic. Unlike Eleanor in Jackson's *The Haunting of Hill House*, our anxious heroine tormented by the guilt of her mother's death and seemingly haunted by her mother's ghost in the typical castle-like motif, Sethe is nonetheless our Gothic haunted heroine. Morrison fabricates typical Gothic and even Female Gothic motifs, themes, and tones. The house is haunted, Sethe has a dark and blood-filled past, the women are numb survivors, and a ghost walks among them. Instead of the experimental get-away at Hill House that lures Jackson's characters and initiates the story of Eleanor, Morrison uses history to set the stage for this work. Morrison places *Beloved* on a platform to discuss race, discrimination, and black motherhood, tapping into the slave narrative genre to write a new kind of Feminine Gothic.

A little over 120 years prior to *Beloved*, Harriet Jacobs writes, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* (1861). In this text, she gives herself a fictional name to write the true story of herself as a mother and runaway slave fighting for freedom for herself and her children. The work is a detailed account of the horrors of slavery, the choices mothers in slavery were faced with, and the constant test of their humanity. In an essay titled *The Soul Has Bandaged Moments: Reading the African American Gothic in Wright's "Big Boy Leaves Home", Morrison's "Beloved", and Gomez's "Gilda"* Cedric Gael Bryant states the differences between Linda Brent and Sethe in their struggle against slavery and womanhood. For example, he writes:

Like Linda Brent in Harriet Jacob's slave narrative, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* (1861), paradoxically subject to but not protected by the codes governing the 'cult of true womanhood' in the nineteenth century,

Sethe exalts in the appropriation of powers and privileges codified in masculinity and whiteness. Like Sethe, Linda Brent reasons that killing her children is preferable to surrendering them to slavery (Bryant, 548).

An immeasurable circumstance and that many find unfathomable. But these were the choices that slavery had backed women into, an impossible and heinous corner. It is important to recognize how Morrison differs from Jacobs though, Bryant explains,

Sethe, however, is made more monstrous than Linda Brent by the difference between thinking and doing the unspeakable, and by the intoxicating freedom of her act, which transforms, shape shifts, her into something “new”, as Paul D says, that lies outside all the familiar social constructions of normal, human, mother, woman, lawful, blackness, and whiteness (Bryant, 548).

This is how Morrison revives the Female Gothic. She takes this monstrosity unable to be rationalized by the average human being. For the reader, there can be no happy ending in a story where the mother murders her child, there can be no redemption, she is not our heroine, and Morrison has drowned us in brutal dark chaos.

Despite all odds, Morrison still gives us a heroine: she gives us a mother that loves as only a mother can, a more-than-human flawed individual, a product of systemic oppression. Sethe is the embodiment of a mother’s fierce and unforgiving love. Jean Wyatt furthers the Jacobs comparison and states, “Morrison in turn reconstructs the acts of maternal heroism as the reproductive feats of the maternal body. Sethe (and Jacobs)

finds the courage to escape because they want their children to be free” (Wyatt, 475). Morrison utilizes physicality and autonomy to depict this maternal heroism, a burden only motherhood could be haunted by. Morrison physically characterizes Sethe during this choice early in the text. Sethe says:

All I knew was I had to get my milk to my baby girl. Nobody was going to nurse her like me. Nobody was going to get it to her fast enough or take it away when she had enough and didn't know it. Nobody knew that she couldn't pass her air if you held her up on your shoulder, only she was lying on my knees. Nobody knew that but me and nobody had her milk but me (Morrison, 19).

Certain words pertaining to Sethe specifically sting the reader like alcohol on an open wound. For example, *my baby girl, my knees, but me, nobody, nobody, nobody, nobody*. Morrison asserts this characterization through language, context, and repetition. Directed towards Paul D, these sentences are short and begin with the word “nobody” repeated four times, the words “me” and “my” holds Sethe's position firmly, a position which Paul D, a man, could never understand no matter how many times she says “nobody”. This stance that Sethe lives by, the idea that a man could never understand her perspective, is radically modern feminist ideology, and implicates the womb as only “ours”.

I believe what Morrison wanted from Sethe's characterization was to convince readers that Sethe is not just a normal mother, she is “too” maternal, but also not something or someone we would find familiarity in. She is a mother that slavery has

molded into this vehement, unforgiving, unapologetic mother. We recognize the fierceness; we just cannot accept it. Unlike the tormented female characters of the Gothic genre and especially what we see with Jackson's Eleanor—the deceased mother, anxiety, or even the moment of happiness Jackson gave us with Eleanor...in the car...with the oleanders—Morrison does not allow this. According to Morrison, the reader was that of the white male gaze and Morrison, quoted in her biographical film, *The Pieces I Am*, said she intended to create for black culture haunted by slavery in America, and was aware of the audience that would be consuming her work, criticizing it, and teaching it (*The Pieces I Am*). How could that reader ever possibly understand what Sethe went through? How could a country so saturated with racial tensions completely comprehend *why* Sethe did what she did? Morrison had to take Sethe and demonize her this way so that we will confront ourselves, our history, our bigotry, and realize that the blood on this country's hands is that of every black child born into slavery, of every mother who had to hold that knife. Sethe is our responsibility.

The mother-daughter relationship throughout history has been a complex and fascinating dynamic that has inspired art, poetry, music, and even psychology. Film and television have since portrayed this duo as life-long “best friends”, a relationship filled with love, support, and mutual understanding. Other popular culture depictions would portray the angsty teenager in open rebellion against her mother's rules. In real life, this mother-daughter relationship is often much more. Morrison dissects this dynamic and presents it to us in a harsh reality: a reality of slavery, loss, grief, loneliness, alienation, and femininity.

Morrison bestowed literature the concept of the “haunted mother” through Sethe. Sethe is separate from the absent or deceased mother in Female Gothic literature that would torment the vulnerable, weak, young female main character, like Eleanor. Eleanor had a tumultuous relationship with her mother that followed Eleanor even after her mother died. Whereas Sethe had “too” much love for her children resulting in a horror that she was reminded of everyday. Morrison made the ghost *real*, and we were to say her name: Beloved. This is the first instance of Morrison giving life to a new concept, a truly feminine concept, while staying true to the Gothic narrative. In a moment of clarity, Denver thinks:

Denver thought she understood the connection between her mother and Beloved: Sethe was trying to make up for the handsaw; Beloved was making her pay for it. But there would never be an end to that, and seeing her mother diminished shamed and infuriated her. Yet she knew Sethe’s greatest fear was the same one Denver had in the beginning – that Beloved might leave. That before Sethe could make her understand what it meant – what it took to drag the teeth of that saw under the little chin; to feel the baby blood pump like oil in her hands; to hold her face so her head would stay on; to squeeze her so she could absorb, still, the death spasms that shot through that adored body, plump and sweet with life – Beloved might leave. (Morrison, 295).

*Beloved* is a story of a mother haunted by her choices; choices inflicted upon her due to slavery. Sethe is a mother haunted by her own capacity for violence directed at her own children. This is how Morrison forces a mirror to society, this is the new-age gore associated with the Feminine Gothic Revival. *Beloved* is an elaborate and beautifully depicted characterization of Sethe, the maternal relationships to living and dead children, and the survival a mother faces under systemic oppression, murder, and slavery. We as readers are forced to walk in Sethe's shoes during a time that many readers have learned about but never truly empathized with or understood. Morrison's story of Sethe is a familiar one among African Americans, the mother's journey of escaping from slavery is a maternal narrative, a maternal heroism to save her children born into slavery.

There is a Gothic darkness that surrounds Sethe, visible to the outside world. This darkness that can only be assumed to manifests itself into Sethe's own burden of self-awareness. When Paul D first arrives to Sethe he notices his place amid her darkness. Morrison states,

Even in that tiny shack, leaning so close to the fire you could smell the heat in her dress, her eyes did not pick up a flicker of light. They were like two wells into which he had trouble grazing. Even punched out they needed to be covered, lidded, marked with some sign to warn folks of what that emptiness held (Morrison, 10).

There is a grotesqueness to Sethe according to Paul D, and the reader enters brief moments where we share the same disgust for Sethe. We are equally afraid of the

darkness surrounding Sethe and the images of Sethe eyes alone invoke a sense of panic in us. How he sees Sethe scares him, the lack of humanness she exhibits is almost frightening and should be hidden from the world. This warning that Paul D believes is in the emptiness of her eyes is his own detachment from her pain. He cannot understand why her eyes are like that, what she is feeling, how she is feeling, what she went through to create such eyes that deserve a caution sign. This descriptive language by Morrison is a calculated way to divide the masculine vs feminine emotions. We are to understand early on in their relationship, Paul D will never understand Sethe's mind, feelings, thoughts. This fragmented relationship feeds the Feminine Gothic motif that Morrison is evolving around Sethe herself, alienating her, surrounding her in a cloud of darkness that not even a fire can penetrate. Like prey walking into a trap, Paul D had to learn to trust her, he had to walk through the threshold of 124 to understand their way of life. This does not mean that he comes to terms with *who* exactly Sethe is, but there is an effort made to reconcile her demons that terrify him. He enters into the home,

Now the iron was back but the face, softened by hair, made him trust her enough to step inside her door smack into a pool of pulsing red light. She was right. It was sad. Walking through it, a wave of grief soaked him so thoroughly he wanted to cry. It seemed a long way to the normal light surrounding the table, but he made it – dry-eyed and lucky (Morrison, 11).

Paul D was confronted with his fears; he would not let himself cry. At first, He didn't believe her or trust her. He had to encounter an other-worldly, mystical, sublime sadness to grasp just an instance of what she (Sethe) felt her entire life. Morrison inserts Paul D to disrupt this Feminine Gothic space. The haunted house is filled with women, even the

baby ghost is female – and although he does not have the agenda of the traditional male Gothic villain – he agitates the space by merely being an on-looker. If anything, Paul D exists to further Morrison’s motif of the horrors of slavery. Sethe and Paul D both escaped from Sweet Home and have similar life experiences, timelines, and mutual relations. However, it becomes clear that what Paul D experienced, was not Sethe’s experience in the sense that she is a female, she is a mother. She was a mother at Sweet Home when she sent her babies off to safety without her. She was a mother when Paul D stood on the steps of 124. And she was a mother when they took her milk.

#### Chapter 4: Beloved. She's Mine.

The tormented, alienated, and lonely souls that govern familiar Gothic stories are personified through Sethe, Denver, and Beloved. However, the haunting of Sethe as a mother is what defines this Feminine Gothic genre from the traditional Gothic genre. Sethe is a haunted mother versus Eleanor as the haunted daughter. However, both Sethe and Eleanor's tragedies take place in the very typical Gothic "haunted house". The "house" or "home" of these women is anything but a domestic safe haven. Sethe and Eleanor characterized through manifestations of their own guilt and grief while the home serves as primary antagonists in these works. Eleanor believes Hill House wants her, claiming her, consuming her. Whereas Sethe has learned over the years to live with the paranormal assaults from her dead infant.

The first words of *Beloved* are "124 was spiteful. Full of a baby's venom" (Morrison, 3). Morrison chose these words to be the very first two sentences we read. This is a powerful and calculated decision to illustrate not a normal ghost story: there is a hatred to this spirit and an anger and pain to those we will soon read about. The words "baby" and "venom" right next to each other, juxtapose all reason for us. A baby, in our minds, cannot have a toxic bitterness. It just is not possible for us. For some reason it is easier for us to justify the hauntings in Hill House than it is to justify the ghost of a dead baby. We can attribute the creaking wood, ice cold air, and whispers into Eleanor's ear as Eleanor losing grip with reality. Human beings struggle to blame children, let alone one as helpless as Beloved. Morrison writes Sethe's thoughts, "Counting on the stillness of

her own soul, she had forgotten the other one: the soul of her baby girl. Who would have thought that a little old baby could harbor so much rage?" (Morrison, 5).

And Sethe, mirrors this struggle, she makes excuses for the ghost's behavior but never apologizes for her actions that placed the ghost there. Sethe first interacts with the homes' poltergeist as a mother simply hushing an unruly toddler. For instance, when Paul D is invited into the home he reacts, "Good God. He backed out the door onto the porch. What kind of evil you got in here?" and Sethe replies, "It's not evil just sad. Come on. Just step through" (Morrison, 10). This complacency within Sethe is that of a mother that refuses to abandon her child and therefore ends up isolating her from community, her daughter Denver, Paul D, and even herself. And through this isolation, the guilt and grief become the pillars to her personality.

This is another instance of how Morrison uses poetic language and powerful images to teach us, very early on, what this haunting means to Sethe. For example, Denver states, "For a baby she throws a powerful spell," to which Sethe replies, "No more powerful than the way I loved her" (Morrison, 5). This is an early form of possession between Beloved and Sethe, Sethe possessed a love so deep that it grants Beloved power *over* Sethe, "In other words, love is power. Beloved's return to life opens up the space for Beloved to be able to kill Sethe, because, contrary to the mother, the daughter's 'spell' is more powerful" (Caesar, 119). Unlike Eleanor, Sethe is not consumed by the hauntings but possessed by them; they have authority over Sethe and how she will live her life.

In Jackson's *The Haunting of Hill House* the characterization of Hill House itself fits comfortably in the trope of the haunted castle or possessed house. Hill House is evil

for the sake of being evil, evil for pleasure, sociopathic. In *Beloved* the house itself is not terrifying, but the spirits' rage should be. The house is just wood, and a roof nailed together, the Gothic fear resides in the souls that walk there. And while we spent most of the work inside both structures, *Beloved* focuses on the relationships and happenings within the space whereas in *The Haunting of Hill House* it is purely about Eleanor and the journey to her end. What should be more terrifying than the haunted house is the ghost made real in Morrison's story. Hill House never turned into a person and simply walked out of the water to dance with Eleanor. The haunted and the hauntings come to fruition in the form of a young woman, a breathing, eating, drinking, woman. Morrison leaves us paralyzed with the images associated with *Beloved's* arrival. Morrison writes:

A fully dressed woman walked out of the water. She barely gained the dry bank of the stream before she sat down and leaned against a mulberry tree. All day and all night she sat there, her head resting on the trunk in a position abandoned enough to crack the brim in her straw hat. Everything hurt but her lungs most of all. Sopping wet and breathing shallow she spent those hours trying to negotiate the weight of her eyelids. The day breeze blew her dress dry; the night wind wrinkled it. Nobody saw her emerge or came accidentally by. If they had, chances are they would have hesitated before approaching her. Not because she was wet, or dozing or had what sounded like asthma, but because amid all that she was smiling” (Morrison, 60).

This scene is bizarre and yet we can picture it vividly thanks to Morrison's diction. And through language and imagery, Morrison terrifies us with a fully clothed, wet, smiling woman. At this moment, we can assume or infer whom we believe this woman to be, but Morrison wants to poke and prod our intuition, our common sense. And because of this idea of a grown woman walking out of the water, dressed, wheezing, grinning as something so strange or unfamiliar, we cannot rationalize and therefore we are guarded against something as innocent as a smile. This fear instilled in us is directly how Morrison revives the Feminine Gothic; we are not afraid of a haunted house or villainous male, but we are petrified by the innocuous smirk of a woman we do not even know yet.

The possessive nature of Sethe is a maternal instinct, something intrinsic to who Sethe is as a person. This ownership of the child, even a dead one, is Morrison's own take on the Female Gothic: the motherly possessive nature of something no longer existing. However, what Morrison does to this motherly divine custody is in turn flipped and it is Beloved who comes to own Sethe. This revolutionary concept distinguishes this novel from the realm of Female Gothic and into an entirely own unique narrative. The critic Terry Paul Caesar argues that possession is a ruling motif in this work. Caesar states, "Who defines whom is an obsessive question in *Beloved*, and neither mother nor daughter is free to define the terms of their mutual possession of each other because each has been formed by the outer violence that disrupts their relation" (Caesar, 114-15). It is natural for us to assume a mother taking ownership or possessing her children. They grew inside of her of her own flesh and blood. This dominion over the life you created, nurtured, and protected for nine months *from* your own life is a psychology that one might argue, only a mother can understand. We recognize it in our culture but rarely identify with it. And

this is the logic that Morrison manipulates to make us understand why Sethe did what she did. Through Morrison's use of possession and obsession throughout the development of both Sethe and Beloved, we somehow come to terms with infanticide. And coming to terms with something that callous, and damning is only one-way Gothic literature is an echo of this haunted human condition.

To some critics, the choices she made were "unimaginable" but is that because we can't imagine what life in slavery was like? Morrison asks us to contemplate what would we have done in that situation, during that time? Sethe is stronger than the average human being, she is stronger than the mothers we know because of what she has lived through. Sethe coexists in her role as the heroine and the haunted.

As the haunted heroine, Sethe is a complex creature that we watch unfold under grief, slavery, motherhood, and mental illness. Morrison consistently uses the female body and maternal reproduction to assert maternal connections between Sethe and her children. The female reproductive form on a raw display as a very literal symbol of motherhood. For example, "Sethe maintains this roundabout self-definition through the many images of nursing that picture her as the sustaining ground of her children's existence; even after the children are weaned, her bond with them remains so strong that she continues to think of it as a nursing connection" (Wyatt, 476). We see this continued nursing connection with both Denver and Beloved. With Denver, this nursing connection manifests itself into education. Sethe tries to teach Denver what her past was like, what it took to get here, and why they live the way that they do. For example, when Paul D first arrives, "Now her mother was upstairs with the man who had gotten rid of the only other company she had. Denver dipped a bit of bread into the jelly. Slowly, methodically,

miserably she ate it” (Morrison, 23). Denver has only ever grown up around absence, the baby’s ghost was more comforting to her than her own mother. And the same went for Sethe. The presence of her dead baby was more comforting than her alive daughter under the same roof. With Beloved, the nursing connection comes through in possession. Sethe consistently refers to her milk and Beloved as “mine”. Morrison writes, “Beloved, she my daughter. She mine. See. She come back to me of her own free will and I don’t have to explain a thing” (Morrison, 236). Even in claiming the ghost, Beloved, as her daughter, Sethe is reminds herself that *she* did this, she gave her daughter a reason to haunt her. This resurrection of grief and guilt manifested in the supernatural is just one of the ways Morrison plays into this nouveau Feminine Gothic genre persistent throughout *Beloved*. Beloved is not a random ghost, she belongs to Sethe.

What Morrison insinuates is that Sethe could not exist as Sethe without these hauntings, without the ownership of a dead child. Just as Beloved would not exist without Sethe: her murderer and mother. Beloved would not have existed as an infant if Sethe did not carry her in her womb nor as a ghost if Sethe had not killed her. Beloved is reborn as an infant in a woman’s body, claiming to be a daughter. But Beloved was never given the chance to *be* a daughter to Sethe. Her life was taken from her at the hands of her mother who she wasn’t alive long enough to know. This creates an identity crisis in Beloved she doesn’t know who she is. Her lack of identity mirrors the anxieties we see in Eleanor. Beloved enters a family and violently carves space for herself in it. Whereas Eleanor, never truly found any space for herself in this world at all. And arguably, Sethe’s grief and guilt allowed for Beloved to enter Sethe’s life physically at all. Through this

codependent toxicity, Beloved feeds off this guilt relentlessly, never satisfied and slowly we start to lose Sethe to her.

Sethe is not the average mother and Beloved is not a normal daughter. We are met with two polarizing extremes of motherhood and childhood. This is an extremely complex relationship that Morrison deliberately means to confuse us with. Caesar argues further, “Why does Beloved exist? The answer may be that she has never ceased to exist, at least as something ‘outside’ of Sethe. Mother and daughter are here, once again, two parts of the same being, and therefore one could never have apostrophized the other into existence” (Caesar, 116). The concept of infanticide is horrific, and Morrison knows this will evoke a certain kind of reaction in us. However, by granting Beloved control over Sethe, Morrison gives Beloved a chance to fight back: putting us in this confused space of uncertainty as to which woman is the villain and the victim. She also gives us Sethe in a situation that is a lose-lose for our haunted heroine, no matter how it ends. Memory is a ghost. And Sethe is persistently haunted by her memory and rememory.

In an argument for circularity, Phillip Page claims,

This is the reason that Beloved, the symbol of her past, has such power over Sethe: If nothing ever dies, if the past can never cease to exist, the memory always lives, as well as fear of the reality of that past. Curiously, Sethe’s word for this is rememory, a combination of memory and remember – which in itself doubles the process. For her, memory is both an actual repetition of real events and a repetition of a memory, a re-

memory, a circling back in one's mind to what was previously there both in reality and its recall (Page, 37).

We are often told that our memories can be an untrustworthy source of the truth, we remember our past as what reality is to us. And if Sethe's reality is the constant memory of killing her child, is that not just another form of slavery? Terry Paul Caesar argues,

*Beloved* consistently reads this bond (mother-daughter) on the model of slavery. *Beloved*'s desire for her mother expresses an absolute tyranny, a complete enslavement from which any self-possession by Sethe is ultimately impossible. How could she be free? Even after *Beloved* is gone, through the efforts of another daughter, Sethe's refusal to forgive herself persists, and haunts her (Caesar, 119).

Sethe might be physically free, but she is a slave to her haunted past, her choices, her own reality...and that is how Morrison terrifies the living hell out of us. Morrison doesn't need a ghost to scare us, she has our memory.

Reoccurring theme that separates *Beloved* from other Female Gothic works is the constant reiteration of possession, ownership, and definition. In these concepts there is a constant state of confusion for the reader. We enter a maze of mirrors that seems to go in a circle: the possession of Sethe by *Beloved* vs. the possession of *Beloved* by Sethe, the possession of Slavery vs. the possession of freedom, the ownership of a mother by a

daughter vs. the ownership of a daughter by a mother, what defines a mother vs. what defines a daughter. All of these concepts operate within a continuous battle of tug-of-war. Morrison drags us into this ominous, toxic, and complicated environment. Morrison does this so well, that we as readers cannot pick a side of this tug-of-war and therefore, we enter into the same limbo that *Beloved* haunts and Sethe is haunted by, we become just as haunted as these complex characters. We are too haunted by our inability to pick sides, much like how we distance ourselves from Eleanor and feel mixed emotions at her suicide. We are haunted because we don't understand.

Sethe and *Beloved* exist in this parasitic dichotomy that leads to them confronting each other in shared misery. Morrison writes,

*Beloved* accused her of leaving her behind. Of not being nice to her, not smiling at her. She said they were the same, had the same face, how could she have left her? And Sethe cried, saying she never did, or meant to – that she had to get them out, away, that she had the milk all the time and had the money too for the stone but not enough. That her plan was always that they would all be together on the other side, forever. *Beloved* wasn't interested. She said when she cried there was no one. That dead men lay on top of her. That she had nothing to eat. Ghosts without skin stuck their fingers in her and said *beloved* in the dark and bitch in the light. Sethe pleaded for forgiveness, counting, listing again and again her reason: that

Beloved was more important, meant more to her than her own life. That she would trade places any day (Morrison, 286).

This scene, this image that Morrison gives us, is haunting enough. Morrison begs the question, what if our dead could talk to us, confront us? What if had the opportunity to tell them after they have passed, what it meant to us, how we can't accept it even being able to talk to them now in this moment, that pain is effervescent and damaging. This scene redefines the Female Gothic: a mother pleading with her dead daughter that her (Sethe) life is meaningless compared to Beloved's. The entirety of Morrison's words numbs our joints and make it hard to swallow images we can never forget. Phrases like, "ghosts without skin stuck their fingers in her" is one of the most disturbing, eerie, and ominous phrases we could ever imagine.

In a way, we wanted Morrison to give us this dispute between Sethe and Beloved. We knew that their interaction had to come to a head someday. So even when Morrison does give us this, it feels as if we are being punished for even asking for it.

### Conclusion: Forever Haunted

We are at a unique place in American culture. Screens dominate most of our day and “good art” exists in the form of the next binge-worthy television show. Entertainment serves as a platform to educate: movies hope to accomplish anything at this point and an esteemed goal is to consider music as loud poetry. Creators concentrate on challenging the status quo, exposing hard truths, and imploring the public to avoid complacency against injustices. One look at our nation’s history should strike fear in the heart for where we are headed. The lessons and enlightenment attempted by authors such as Jackson and Morrison were not made to fall to on deaf ears. Their art was created to inspire, teach, and even enrage.

Literature as history’s first form of entertainment and yet unfortunately, Gothic tropes, ideas, and motifs have been adapted to adolescent vampire fantasy fetishes, demonic possession of children, and apocalyptic zombie infestation. Shows like *Vampire Diaries* have a cult-like following where the classical Gothic Dracula is now the teenage boy with chiseled abs, dreamy hair, who emotionally broods as an extreme sport. Gothic images have become overly sexualized or exceedingly gory for mere entertainment. But the anxiety and fear that Gothic literature sets out to teach us, the introspection it plagues humanity with cannot be dumbed down to *Twilight*, *the Walking Dead*, or *The Conjuring*. Shirley Jackson’s, *the Haunting of Hill House* and Toni Morrison’s *Beloved* act as our guides, there are few works spread throughout today’s popular culture that honor such storylines rooted in historical and cultural warnings.

Over time, the light that flickers from the television set has served as an escape. Television and movies are used to avoid our “first-world” problems or the mundanity of our lives. They provide a moment to laugh or cry about something not relating to yourself, a moment of catharsis to enter a world entirely not your own. Modern viewers use horror and gore to spike our adrenaline, give us anything to feel *something* for at least an hour. With subscription services such as Netflix, and Hulu, our fears can be exploited with just the click of a button: twenty-first century access to our nightmares. Mike Flanagan does just this with his adaptation of Shirley Jackson’s *The Haunting of Hill House*, titled, *The Haunting of Hill House* (2018). The show is a loosely adapted rendition of the novel marketed as a horror-thriller-drama series. In one criticism from Vulture,

Netflix’s new ten-episode horror series, *The Haunting of Hill House*, uses Shirley Jackson’s famous novel as a road map to explore this house-as-body metaphor, and it does so with a profound and precise tenderness. Creator and director Mike Flanagan crafts a wholly unique haunted-house fable — abandoning the book’s paranormal investigation plot — using the hollow halls of a disordered mansion to tell the story of the disordered family who lives there. The hidden ghosts of *Hill House* aren’t nameless spooks trapped between spiritual realms; they are personal manifestations for the people they haunt, visual aids for the truths they must accept and vanquish. It’s not a paranormal story so much as a meditation on the distinct way grief and trauma maim the living (Romain).

Here, Gothic Literature is used to mirror the outside world. Although very different from Jackson's original work, the show paints a broader picture while maintaining that *we are still the ghosts*. On a larger scale and focused more on the dynamics within an American family, Flanagan modernizes Jackson's *The Haunting of Hill House* from 1959. In Flanagan's adaptation, we are given multiple female characters and male characters with individual problems and anxieties that lead to their demise or survival. Eleanor is every American woman. Olivia is the mother figure our culture idolizes. Jackson is holding a mirror up to society just like Morrison does – and while Flanagan is here to entertain us as well, he does so while holding up the same, exact, mirror. We look at the emotions that consume the characters in the show, how they cope with trauma and grief, but nothing about how they got there or where they are headed in world of chaos. We're left again, with a somewhat happy ending despite losing a main character. Whereas Jackson rips Eleanor away from us. That is our ending.

Considerably one of the most challenging few years in American history, 2020 was haunted by the all-too-familiar plea of a Black man, "I can't breathe". The story of race relations in America is just that: a haunted one. Told over time through post-colonial rhetoric and traumatic family histories. These words fueled the Black Lives Matter movement more than ever before. These words would be heard not only by the entire nation but by the world. A nation forced to listen for perhaps the first time in American history.

We did not arrive here over night. What began centuries ago bled into the politics and culture surrounding racial tensions today. The Black Lives Matter movement would become a part of American daily life. The forefront of major media campaigns or news outlets, and social media sites dominated with #BlackLivesMatter #ICan'tBreathe #HandsUpDon'tShoot #GeorgeFloyd #SayHerName. Our minds, bodies, and souls were flooded last summer with the blood, sweat, and tears of a suffering Black community nationwide at the hands—or knees—of White supremacy. The Black Lives Matter movement is essentially a response to the culminating suppression of Black Americans in this country. It is a movement entirely conceived on the notion of being “fed-up” with how their ancestors and their present-day community at large have been oppressed, marginalized, and murdered at the hands of White-supremacy and state-sanctioned violence. The Black Lives Matter movement was “founded in 2013 by Alicia Garza, Patrisse Cullors, and Opal Tometi in response to the acquittal of Trayvon Martin’s murderer, George Zimmerman” (Black Lives Matter). Trayvon was 17. Trayvon was among a myriad of murdered sons, brothers, fathers, and husbands that served as martyrs for an afflicted community that just wanted the country that killed these men to realize *they* were Americans all the same. According to the Black Lives Matter website, their mission is as follows, “To eradicate white supremacy and build local power to intervene in violence inflicted on Black communities by the state and vigilantes. To combat and counter acts of violence, creating a space for Black imagination and innovation and centering Black joy. To move beyond the narrow nationalism that is all too prevalent in Black communities and affirm the lives of Black queer, trans, disabled, undocumented, and Black lives of all genders” (Black Lives Matter, about). The Black community was

done burying their loved ones who were killed for jogging in a neighborhood: Ahmaud Arbery, sleeping in her home: Breonna Taylor, or using a counterfeit dollar bill: George Floyd.

We have complicated and darkened our history with the lack of empathy for humanity. The toxic culture of White supremacy has only been concerned with *their* humanity, disregarding the humanity of anyone labeled as “other”. But have we, as a society, learned from our past and progressed towards a better future? A more inclusive future? An intersectional future? A more humanitarian future? Sadly—or realistically—I don’t believe we’ve progressed as much as our past demands of us. And this is where Toni Morrison, with all of her literature, tried to bridge this gap. As she is praised in her biographical documentary *The Pieces That I am* “Morrison was trying to reimagine “us” (African Americans) on this white American landscape” (*The Pieces That I Am*).

With literature as this reimagination, this revival, and the Black Lives Matter movement as a backdrop: a new Black exposure and representation flooded American culture, television, and film. One of the most critically acclaimed contemporary horror films in the past four years has been Jordan Peele’s, *Get Out* (2017). In his directorial debut, Peele addresses the anxieties of young black adults drowning in the ignorance of the racists “super”-left white liberals’ agenda. *Get Out* came at a time of extreme political strain and racial tensions in this country. Bethanie Butler in a review of the film notes, “It makes racism viscerally terrifying. And in another instance of apt timing, Peele’s directorial debut lands amid the Black Lives Matter movement and on the heels of a contentious presidential election that exposed the country’s deepening racial divisions” (Butler). A horror film yes, but also a political commentary rooted in racism. Peele

wanted to expose the behavior that so many Americans exhibit as what they believe to be non-racist, woke, or inclusive. But in reality, it is conceived in ignorance and is more damning than they realize. These are the people that Peele comically and satirically adds, “would have voted for Obama a third time if they could” (Peele). Lanre Bakare from the Guardian writes,

The villains here aren’t southern rednecks or neo-Nazi skinheads, or the so-called “alt-right”. They’re middle-class white liberals. The thing *Get Out* does so well – and the thing that will rankle with some viewers – is to show how, however unintentionally, these same people can make life so hard and uncomfortable for black people. It exposes a liberal ignorance and hubris that has been allowed to fester. It’s an attitude, an arrogance which in the film leads to a horrific final solution, but in reality, leads to a complacency that is just as dangerous (Bakare).

Peele was strategic in exactly whom this film was made for through representation versus whom this film was made for to teach a lesson. *Get Out* is an example of entertainment as a slap in the face.

Just as Morrison carves out a niche of the Female Gothic genre, Peele sabotages what we look for in typical “horror” films: he artistically intends to do much more than scare us. In the film, we follow a young black man Chris (Daniel Kaluuya) who is about to meet his white girlfriend Rose Armitage’s (Allison Williams) family for the first time. Just as Morrison created work *for* the African American gaze, Peele embodied representation in this film as well. The anxiety that pours out from Chris is an anxiety

Peele knew was all too familiar to young black men in America today. Kaluuya's acting is impeccable as he invites us to feel just as anxious as Chris does. Chris is a character that honors much of our hero/heroines in the traditional Gothic genre. For example, Chris is haunted by the guilt he feels about his mother's death when he was a child much like Jackson's Eleanor. Ancestral anxieties surround Chris as well, this sense of colonial disposal of black people, not human beings but a means to end for white people and in this case, mortality. Peele connects this anxiety at the end of the film as our hero, Chris, has escaped with his life and the villains defeated. What sound ring as a happy ended in haunted by the musical score that echoes into the credits. According to Splinter, Charles Pulliam-Moore writes,

In an interview with GQ, Peele explained that in addition to including black artists like Donald Glover on the film's soundtrack, he worked with composer Michael Abels to create a score that was distinctly black, but that was sonically and lyrically different from African American music that tends to have "a glimmer of hope to it". "I was into this idea of distinctly black voices and black musical references, so it's got some African influences, and some bluesy things going on, but in a scary way, which you never really hear," Peele said. "I wanted Michael Abels, who did the score, to create something that felt like it lived in this absence of hope but still had [black roots]. That something ended up being the song that begins and ends the film, "Sikiliza Kwa Wahenga," a Swahili phrase that translates to "listen to (your) ancestors" and the song's lyrics loosely

mean "something bad is coming. Run." "The words are issuing a warning to Chris," Peele said.

Peele does not want this happy ending to enable us to forgive and forget. He gives us this story and its entertainment value to serve as a very dark reminder of history. Much like Morrison, Peele's intent is to haunt us with undeniable facts, truths we cannot change for the sake of comfort. He wants us to be uncomfortable, anxious, and angry.

What does popular culture, film and television tell us about the human condition? What lessons are we to learn from our favorite television shows or chair-gripping movies? If we are going to survive, it *has* to. We look to art for help, in any medium. The stories we watch today are the stories that haunt our past. And in order to move forward, we have to understand the past, in all its blood and suffering. Morrison and Jackson want us to face ourselves, face our grief, insecurities, and anxiety. So does Peele. So does Flanagan. These voices want us to face the horrors of slavery and racism, motherhood, and death. And not in the self-help version of face our fears or tackle our biggest battles—but look at our fears, touch them, smell them, sit with them—to walk hand-in-hand with what connects us all at the very least. Jackson and Morrison revise the Gothic to make us face what makes us human. They want us to face what we *are*. We are the ghosts in this story. We are haunted.

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