

Gender and Spatial Politics in Shirley Jackson's 'Haunted Houses'



The Haunting, dir. by Robert Wise (Argyle Enterprises, 1963).

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Abstract

Shirley Jackson, once dismissed as a substandard housewife humourist by the male-dominated canon, has in recent decades been re-evaluated as a gothic writer of unique genius. This dissertation will consider the functioning of gender in the spaces of Jackson's 'haunted houses' in her final two novels, *The Haunting of Hill House* (1959) and *We Have Always Lived in the Castle* (1962). Writing in an epoch of the reconsolidation of the housewife and 'separate spheres' in the American consciousness, Jackson's texts emerge from the white, middle-class, female experience of the home. Examining her settings as blurring the line between the house as a site of female entrapment and empowerment, I endeavour to unveil the socially constructable nature of space, the way it shapes female subjectivities and ultimately, the complicated and resistant gender politics of the home.

I examine the haunted house through a variety of lens: in chapter I, I consider it as a historic and literary site of female madness and entrapment; in chapter II, I use Michel Foucault's notion of the heterotopia to interpret the space of the home more fully and finally, in chapter III, I explore it as a stage of potential. Much critical attention has been devoted to Jackson's houses as psychological and metaphorical tropes, but little consideration has been given to them as gendered architectural presences, something I strive to draw more attention to.

Contents

Introduction.....
p. 4

Chapter I: Female Madness and Entrapment..... p.
5

Chapter II: Heterotopias.....
p. 11

Chapter III: House as Stage..... p.
17

Conclusion.....
p. 20

Bibliography.....
p. 22

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Introduction

Shirley Jackson's texts *We Have Always Lived in the Castle*¹ and *The Haunting of Hill House*² revolve around the spatial dynamics of the white middle-class female experience in the 1950s American home. Space, including that of the home, is an entity which is politically and socially produced by hegemonic power structures rather than simply existing. Yet the white bourgeois conception is that home is, as bell hooks puts it, 'politically neutral space'³, an illusion that consolidates the male, public space as the only political one. Such a misconception needs to be unveiled. Rather, the seemingly banal space of the home is deeply embedded in gender dynamics and patriarchal structures of oppression which mould its occupants to its androcentric will. The gothic nature of Jackson's 'haunted houses' provides a hyper-focus on such spatial politics, transporting readers from the prevailing narrative to instead experience a radical and horrific truth of the white, middle-class home-bound woman. It is important to note that this dissertation does not focus on working class, male, black or ethnic minority experiences of the home, all of whose involvements with this space are equally important and will radically differ. Instead, it strives to give an insight into the relationality between bourgeois spaces and femininity.

¹ Shirley Jackson, *We Have Always Lived in the Castle* (London: Penguin, 1962). All further references are to this edition.

² Shirley Jackson, *The Haunting of Hill House* (US: Penguin, 1959). All further references are to this edition.

³ bell hooks, 'Homeplace: a Site of Resistance', in *Undoing Place? A Geographical Reader*, ed. by Linda McDowell (London: Routledge, 1997), pp. 33-38 (p. 37).

In his exploration of social space, Henri Lefebvre writes that 'all 'subjects' are situated in a space in which they must either recognize themselves or lose themselves, a space which they may both enjoy and modify'.⁴ Responding to such a dilemma, Jackson seemingly establishes her houses as both sites of entrapment and inclusion, as spaces which are deeply patriarchal but also bare the potential to be reclaimed. Exploring the haunted house as both a historic and heterotopic site, I interrogate this conundrum.

Chapter I: Female Madness and Entrapment

The home has been socially understood as a gendered space since at least the 19th century when the construction of private and public spheres emerged along gender essentialist, capitalist-oriented lines. As John Ruskin wrote in 1865,

'[women's] intellect is not for invention or creation, but for sweet ordering, arrangement and decision. [. . .] The man, in his rough work in open world, must encounter all peril and trial; [. . .] But he guards the woman from all this; within his house, as ruled by her [. . .] need enter no danger, no temptation, no cause of error or offense. This is the true nature of home – it is the place of Peace.'⁵

As Ruskin illustrates, it is socially perceived that the constructed distance between male and female natures was so large that they must occupy entirely different realms, spatialising gender relations into the dominant, active, capitalist-driven 'open world' and the subjugated, unpaid 'home' (public and private). In turn, this spatial bifurcation reproduces and reinforces gender difference, inscribing gender politics into those spaces and patterning its occupants to

⁴ Henri Lefebvre, *The Production of Space*, trans. by Donald Nicholson-Smith (Oxford: Blackwell, 1991), p. 35.

⁵ John Ruskin quoted by Hilde Heyen, 'Modernity and Domesticity: Tensions and Contradictions', in *Negotiating Domesticity: Spatial Productions of Gender in Modern Architecture*, ed. By Hilde Heynen and Gülsüm Baydar (New York: Routledge, 2005), pp. 1-29 (p. 7).

such an ideology. As such, the space of the home became an essential part of the enactment of femininity; women and house symbiotic. Judith Butler relays this gendered spatial duality - 'if there is a body in the public sphere, it is masculine and unsupported, presumptively free to create, but not itself created. And the body in the private sphere is female, ageing foreign, or childish, and pre-political'.⁶ Her labelling of the home as a perceived 'pre-political' space takes hooks' 'politically neutral' home a step further. These labels impart what masculine hegemony would have us believe - that the home is a naturalised, non-constructed space that has always been in existence. Ruskin's romanticised construction of the 'angel in the house' trope here, fraught with idealised labels of home as a 'place of peace' where there is 'no danger' which is 'ruled by her', contributes to such an illusion. But in actuality, the home belongs to, if not a literal man, the symbolic man. As Ruskin wrote, it is 'his house'.

Men colonize spaces: as Luce Irigaray writes, 'everywhere you [man] shut me in [...] you mark out boundaries, draw lines, surround, enclose. Excising, cutting out'.⁷ The female space of the home is marked by man's strict boundaries and barriers, entrapping women physically, socially and mentally. Mark Wigley writes that in traditional patriarchal thought, it is considered that 'women lack the internal self-control credited to men as the very mark of their masculinity. This self-control is no more than the maintenance of secure boundaries [...] unable to control herself, she must be controlled by being bounded'.⁸ The house as an orderly, feminine 'separate sphere' serves as one means of binding women, of containing their fluidity and threatening 'unstable' identities between four walls. Confined by this oppressive spatialised gender role, women are pushed to the margins of society as 'others'.

⁶ Judith Butler, *Notes Towards a Performative Theory of Assembly* (London: Harvard University Press, 2015) p. 71.

⁷ Luce Irigaray quoted by Elizabeth Grosz, 'Woman, Chora, Dwelling' in *Gender Space Architecture*, ed. Jane Rendell, Barbara Penner and Iain Borden (London: Routledge, 2000) pp. 210-222 (p. 210).

⁸ Mark Wigley, 'Untitled: The Housing of Gender', in *Sexuality and Space*, ed. By Beatriz Colomina (New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 1992), pp. 327 -389 (p. 335).

In both *Hill House* and *Castle*, home-bound protagonists Eleanor and Merricat are perceivably moulded to this established gendered spatial philosophy. Jackson's epoch saw the development of the 'angel in the house' into the cult of the white middle-class 1950s American housewife, labelled by Betty Freidan 'the feminine mystique'.⁹ In *Hill House*, both Eleanor's reality and fantasies notably centre around the home. For one, she runs away from her old life to go to a haunted house (a perverse choice of 'freedom'), and en route, her fantasies and thoughts revolve around homemaking - 'she passed a vast house, pillared and walled, with shutters over the windows and a pair of stone lions guarding the steps, and she thought that perhaps she might live there, dusting the lions each morning and patting their heads goodnight' (p. 18); 'she nearly stopped forever just outside Ashton, because she came to a tiny cottage buried in a garden. I could live there all alone, she thought' (p. 22). Her escape is thus an extremely conservative one, envisioned through a patriarchal lens, abiding to the notion of women as belonging to the house. In *Castle*, the enactment of domesticity and confinement to the home equally define the lives of the Blackwood sisters. As the text begins, 'we always put things back where they belonged. We dusted and swept under tables and chairs and beds and pictures and rugs and lamps [...] Blackwoods had always lived in our house' (p. 1). The sisters spend their days tidying, the syndetic listing exhibiting the mundanity and repetitiveness of it all, in a disturbing echo of Ruskin's 'sweet ordering, arrangement and decision'. Alarming, this has 'always' (repeated twice) been the way for Blackwood women. Internalizing and performing the ideologies of the spaces they inhabit, Jackson's characters are entrapped, unable to imagine a life outside of the home and domesticity.

⁹ Betty Freidan coined this term in *The Feminine Mystique* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1963).

However, while some of their behaviour is apt of the 'angel in the house' cliché, Jackson's female protagonists are not so one-dimensional, their natures bare dark and 'mad' sides which are decidedly unbefitting of such a title. Both Merricat and Eleanor conform to the home-ridden life willingly, but they also bare murderous disdain for their families (an integral part of the feminine mystique). Merricat, as the narrative of *Castle* gradually reveals, has killed all but two of her immediate family members. Correspondingly, Eleanor considers herself accountable for the death of her mother, and it is said of her that 'the only person in the world she genuinely hated, now that her mother was dead, was her sister' (p.6). These characteristics reveal the feminine mystique to be illusionary. Furthermore, the respective women's split conformity to the domestic cult resounds with the theorization Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar make of the essentialist typecasts the 'angel in the house' and its coexistent binary, 'the madwoman in the attic' (the unacceptable madwomen who is locked away for her non-conforming, monstrous femininity) in 19th century female literature, both of which are engrained in Jackson's houses.¹⁰ Her texts strongly resonate with the canon of works cited by Gilbert and Gubar: as the mentally unstable Merricat sets the Blackwood mansion alight so did 'mad' Bertha Mason burn down the house in *Jane Eyre* before her, and like the protagonist of *The Yellow Wallpaper* who loses her sanity to the wallpaper and confining walls of the text's house, Eleanor loses her mind to Hill House. These strong echoes from the nineteenth century canon to Jackson's houses reveal the persistence of the house as prison-like, stifling and a maddening space for women. Female anguish is historically and textually engrained in this site.

¹⁰ Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar, *The Madwoman in the Attic* (London: Yale University Press, 1979)

Turned ‘mad’ by their constraining environments, Jackson’s characters exhibit an extreme form of agoraphobia. They stop at nothing to comply with their internalised spatial misogyny - to stay inside, to take up as little space as possible and to bind themselves to the home. As Susan Bordo writes, in the agoraphobic condition ‘the construction of femininity is written in disturbingly concrete, hyperbolic terms: exaggerated, extremely literal, at times virtually caricatured presentations of the ruling feminine mystique.’¹¹ In *Hill House*, Eleanor kills herself rather than leave the property - ‘they can’t turn me out [...] I won’t go and Hill House belongs to *me*’ (p. 245) she says adamantly, driving into a tree in a seeming attempt to engrain her posthumous self into the haunted structure of Hill House. While of a similarly radical nature, in *Castle*, Merricat burns the house down when cousin Charles insights the possibility of her leaving. Merricat and Constance then abide in its scorched remains, boarding up the windows and shrouding themselves in darkness rather than face relocation and reality. There is a tragic irony in Jackson’s respective endings, as the protagonists are engrained to believe that the very site of their entrapment is their only safe-haven and redemption, and that the world outside this space is no place for them.

As male-centric architecture increasingly confines the respective women, they become objects of patriarchal control themselves, gazed upon as part of the house and merged into its structure by the end of both texts. Eleanor states that Hill House, ‘wanted to consume us, take us into itself, make us a part of the house’ (p. 139), and eventually it does, becoming part of her narrative and entering into her psyche. ‘I am disappearing inch by inch into this house, I am going apart a little bit at a time’ (p. 201), she says. By the end of *Castle*, Merricat seems also to be part of the house; dressing up in a table cloth like a dining room prop, she says with glee, “‘some days I shall be a summer breakfast on the lawn, and some

¹¹ Susan Bordo, *Unbearable Weight* (London: University of California Press, 1993), p. 169.

days I shall be a formal dinner by candlelight...” (p. 137). The joyous tone is a tad ironic, as Merricat becomes the very object of domesticity, the androcentric structure of the house absorbs her body.

Comparably, in *Hill House* the essentialised maternal body is presented as part of the house; house and mother are merged, drawing attention to the misogynistic construction of the home space as symbiotic with the mother figure. As Freud writes, the womb is the ‘former heim [home] of all human beings’.¹² The maternal body is appropriated as a realm to be occupied in *Hill House*, its spaces and objects distinctly maternal: “‘its all so motherly,” Luke said’ (p. 209) ; it is “a mother house” [...] “a housemother”” (p. 211). Even the layout of the house is notably womb-like; it is arranged in ‘concentric circles’ with ‘inside rooms [...] with no direct way to the outside’ surrounded by ‘the ring of outside rooms’ (p. 100). The maternal body is trapped in the house’s foundations, echoing the feminine mystique’s entrapment of women as mother and housewife first and human second.

Throughout the ‘Female Gothic’¹³ tradition, the ‘haunted house’ trope has been utilised to accentuate such identified themes of female madness and confinement. It counters hegemonic cultural assumptions regarding the home, heightening it as an uncanny space of horror and destabilising its ‘neutral’, ‘peaceful’ nature. To elaborate his concept of the uncanny, Freud uses the German translation *unheimlich* (“unhomely”) and its opposite *heimlich* (“belonging to the home”). The definition of the words overlaps, as Freud writes, ‘among its different shades of meaning the word *Heimlich* exhibits one which is identical

¹² Sigmund Freud, *The Uncanny* (London: Penguin Books, 2003) p. 151.

¹³ The term Female Gothic was introduced by Ellen Moers as ‘the work that women have done in the literary mode that, since the eighteenth century, we have called the Gothic’. Ellen Moers, *Literary Women* (London: The Women’s Press, 1976), p. 90.

with its opposite, *unheimlich*. What is *heimlich* thus comes to be *unheimlich*'.¹⁴ The etymology spotlights the home as the archetype of the once familiar space turned unfamiliar and terrifying, an insight highlighted by Jackson's haunted house trope. Hill House is the quintessential haunted house; it is 'not sane' (p. 3), it holds 'darkness within' (p. 3), it is 'vile, it is diseased' (p. 33), 'a place of despair' (p. 34), it is 'evil' (p. 35). The Blackwood house eventually comes to be seen as a comparably haunted house by outsiders, as the sisters shut it off entirely from the outside world. After the fire, the villagers perceive that the 'castle' is a place of murder and destruction; they comment "'now it looks like a tomb'" (p. 140). Both houses are tinged with grave, macabre tones of oppression. Freud continues that 'everything is uncanny that ought to have remained hidden and secret, and yet comes to light'¹⁵ and it follows that Jackson's uncanny haunted houses reveal those oppressive patriarchal structures that were meant to remain hidden, to remain 'pre-political' and 'neutral'.

Chapter II: Heterotopias

Michel Foucault's concept of the Heterotopia describes spaces that are 'other'.¹⁶ Heterotopias exist alongside real spaces, mirroring and inverting the society in which they exist. Foucault's text, however, is notably androcentric. He neglects to focus on the female experience of space and how this might alter his concept of the heterotopia. As Mary McLeod writes,

'one of the most striking aspects of Foucault's notion of heterotopia is how his concept of 'other' spaces, in its emphasis on rupture, seems to exclude the traditional arenas of women and children, two of the groups that most rightly deserve the label 'other' [...]. (And what might be even harder for

¹⁴ Freud, p. 132.

¹⁵ Schelling, summarised by Freud, *ibid*.

¹⁶ Michel Foucault, 'Of Other Spaces', *Diacritics*, 16.1 (1986), 22-27, <<https://www.jstor.org/stable/464648>>, accessed 24/03/21.

most working mothers to accept with a straight face is his exclusion of the house as a heterotopia because it is a 'place of rest'.¹⁷

The notion of the home as a 'place of rest' clearly conforms to the predominant patriarchal mythology previously highlighted, resonating with Ruskin's description of home as a 'place of peace'. Considering the deconstructed ideology of the home, it is apparent that this normative space can in fact be considered heterotopic. Designated 'other' by hegemonic power structures, women are confined to the marginal and liminal 'other' space of the home. As Lefebvre writes of the heterotopia, they are 'the places of what has no place, or no longer has a place'.¹⁸ The Blackwood sisters and Eleanor, isolated from male society and shunned as single women, dwell in such 'placeless places'. Jackson's haunted houses are distinctly heterotopic; they hold up a mirror to patriarchal society while welcoming subversion and horror into the space, combining reality with unreality. Foucault writes that one role of the heterotopia is 'to create a space of illusion that exposes every real space as still more illusory'.¹⁹ Accordingly, Jackson's construction of the haunted house uncovers the dominant cultural narrative of the home as 'illusory'. As Foucault notes of the heterotopia, 'they dissolve our myths'.²⁰

Lefebvre writes that the heterotopic site will exceed its 'symmetries [...] axes and planes, centres and peripheries, and concrete (spatio-temporal) oppositions'.²¹ The very architecture of Hill House presents fragmentation and instability – 'every angle is slightly wrong' (p. 105) there are 'stairs which are not level' (p. 106), 'the doorways are all a little bit off centre' (p. 106) and there is 'a fairly large distortion in the house as a whole' (p. 106). As

¹⁷ Mary McLeod, 'Everyday and "Other" Spaces' in *Gender Space Architecture*, pp. 182-202 (p. 186).

¹⁸ Henri Lefebvre, p. 163.

¹⁹ Foucault, 'Of Other Spaces', p. 27.

²⁰ Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things* (London: Routledge, 2001), p. xix.

²¹ Lefebvre quoted by Andrew Hock Soon Ng, *Women and Domestic Space in Contemporary Gothic Narratives* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), p. 41.

the doctor remarks, it is ““a masterpiece of architectural misdirection”” (p. 106). Meanwhile, the ‘Castle’ is barely standing, it is a scorched pile of bricks ‘open to the sky’ (p. 120). As these uncanny haunted homes become more perverse, notions of ‘spatio-temporal oppositions’ seem to fragment. They become spatiotemporally othered sites, a defining feature of the heterotopia, accentuating the ostracizing reality of the home to females.

Both the Blackwood Estate and Hill House are spatially othered, isolated from the outside world by their topography and strict, oppressive boundaries. Hill House ‘stood by itself against its hills’ (p. 3), so far away from the town that if you screamed no one would hear you. The Blackwood Estate is similarly detached, ‘steady against the world’ (p. 1). Such topography isolates women in asocial enclosures, removing them from society and limiting their connection with other women. The containment of women in these enclosure is severe in both the texts; the houses act as a panopticon of control, observing and governing the actions of women as they go to and fro. In *Hill House*, ‘the gate was tall and ominous and heavy’, ‘locked and double-locked and chained and barred’ (p. 28), the house aggressively closed off, trapping its occupants inside. In *Castle*, the boundaries are self-imposed by Merricat with obsessive ritualistic occultism:

‘Always on Wednesday mornings I went around the fence. It was necessary for me to check constantly to be sure that the wires were not broken and the gates were securely locked. [...] On Sunday mornings I examined my safeguards, [...] so long as they were where I had put them nothing could get in to harm us’

(p. 41)

And the Blackwood Estate becomes progressively enclosed as the text advances; the novel begins with Merricat entering the town but by its end she notes that, ‘I never went farther away than the edge of the woods’ (p. 140). The house becomes a barricaded fortress, ‘a castle’. While Merricat attempts with all her will to keep others out, she also locks herself

and Constance into this heterotopic site, influenced by the self-containing patriarchal ideology of the space she inhabits. Each house becomes an ostracised site.

Jackson accentuates such female sequestration in the home by her presentation of the houses as islands, detached and othered from all that surrounds them. Immediately after the fire in *Castle*, the space of the Blackwood house seems to take on a wild and natural fantastical quality for the sisters. It is like the desert island of a golden age Children's book - an image alluded to when Merricat tells Constance, "“Robinson Crusoe dressed in the skins of animals,””(p. 137) and again in the Peter-Pan quality of her statement that "I shall weave a suit of leaves. At once. With acorns for buttons." (p. 135), which locates 'the castle' in a kind of Neverland. This fantastical, infantile spatial imagery may appear utopic, but it also locates the sisters with the 'othered' social group of children, who also conventionally dwell in the home with women. Similarly, in *Hill House* Luke remarks "“we are on a desert island”", while Theodora states they are 'marooned' (p. 151). Hill House is a catastrophic shipwreck, a home of desertion for Eleanor.

As space alters, so does time, as illustrated in the heterotopic realms of Jackson's gothic. As Foucault writes, 'the heterotopia begins to function at full capacity when men [and women] arrive at a sort of absolute brake with their traditional time.'²² In the course of *Hill House*, time begins and ends for Eleanor, as if the dwelling is its own universe. Johannes Fabian writes that 'time is immanent to, hence coextensive with, the world'.²³ Thus, by braking with time in the heterotopic Hill House, Eleanor's relation to the world ends, entirely othering her. Driving away from her old life and towards Hill House, Eleanor enters a new

²² Foucault, *Of Other Spaces*, p. 26.

²³ Johannes Fabian, *Time and the Other* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2014), p. 11-12.

temporal realm. 'Time is beginning this morning in June, she assured herself, but it is a time that is strangely new and of itself' (p. 18); time is 'of itself', separate from other things, 'new', suggestive of Foucault's notion of a 'brake' with traditional time. Once in Hill House, time becomes distorted for Eleanor, seemingly on a trajectory towards a decisive end point when it will fragment and fall apart. Firstly it slows down - 'time is so long and even a second goes on and on' (p. 160) - and then it stops - 'Eleanor looked up at Luke and the doctor, and felt the room rock madly, and time, as she had always known time, stop' (p. 178). Is this how Eleanor has always known time, or is it how Hill House has always known time? Given that time had, but a week before, been re-born in Eleanor's imagination, it would seem the latter. Consumed by Hill House, Eleanor conforms to the houses' heterotopic temporality. It is significant that at the moment she climbs to the top of Hill tower, arguably the climactic height of her overpowering by Hill House, she remarks with cosmological grandeur, 'time is ended now' (p. 232).

Post-fire in *Castle*, time is also severed; Merricat notes 'that we had somehow lost ourselves and come back through the wrong gap in time, or the wrong door, or the wrong fairy tale' (p. 114). But as 'fairy tale' suggests, the new time that emerges is of a much more whimsical quality than the Doomsday like time that ensues in *Hill House*. The sisters erase their old dwelling, they 'closed all the doors to the dining room and never opened them again' (p. 121), and by the time they are done amending the house, the old one bares 'no connection with the house where we lived now' (p. 145). The Blackwood mansion becomes 'a castle, turreted and open to the sky' (p. 120). 'Castle' again insinuating fairy tales and romantic legends as well as antiquity and medieval history, all of which situate the space in an entirely different temporality to that of prior reality. And the text's title *We Have Always Lived in the Castle*, locates the castle in an eternal temporality, a time with no beginning, as

the sisters perceive that they have *always* lived there. In a descent into madness, the sisters disappear into their delusional rewritten history as a means of surviving in the house.

Fabien draws attention to time for the 'other', writing that 'one assigns to the conquered populations a different time'.²⁴ If the women of Jackson's respective texts are considered as the 'conquered' gender, cast-out by the patriarchy, it follows that their experience of time differs in their abodes, distanced from hegemonic, masculine time. There is a cultural schism between rational, empirical, orderly, anthropomorphic male time and nature-bound, cyclical feminine temporality. When Charles' arrival disrupts Merricat's sense of security in the house, she notes that 'time was running shorter, tightening around our house, crushing me' (p. 84), referring to a more constrained masculine model of time that she associates with him. Attempting to expel Charles from the house, it is significant that Merricat chooses to destroy his watch: 'I twisted the winding knob backward until there was a small complaining crack from the watch and the ticking stopped. [...] one thing at least had been released from Charles' spell' (p. 8). The watch signifies those conventional masculine temporal ideologies and in its destruction, Merricat attempts to take back time from Charles, adamant on establishing a feminine temporality. In achieving her fantastical moon dream, "'we are on the moon at last'" (p. 112), and breaking with traditional time, she does just this, as, significantly, the moon is a cultural symbol of women, lunar time directly linked to the female menstrual cycle. In a similar manner, the timeless temporality of Hill House feasibly alludes to Plato's *chora*, a site associated with women and marked as the maternal-like origin of spatiality²⁵. An 'other', female space is created in both texts.

²⁴ Fabien, p. 30.

²⁵ Grosz summarises philosophical reflections on the *chora* and its overlooked association with women in 'Woman, Chora, Dwelling', in *Gender Space Architecture*.

Thus, are Hill House and the Castle spatio-temporally othered heterotopic sites, iterating the sequestration of home-bound women. But these spaces do not only expose the harsh reality of the home for women, as Foucault states, the heterotopia also has creative potential. It can construct,

another real space, as perfect, as meticulous, as well arranged as ours is messy, ill constructed, and jumbled. This latter type would be the heterotopia, not of illusionment, but of compensation.²⁶

As space has been shaped to patriarchal ideology so can it potentially be re-shaped and reclaimed, moulding its inhabitants to a new identity. In a similar vein, Irigaray writes, ‘the transition to a new age requires a change in our perception and conception of space-time, the inhabiting of places and of containers, or envelopes of identity.’²⁷ By altering space and time in Jackson’s heterotopic houses, a new and subversive ‘envelope of identity’ is potentially produced for those women who dwell there.

Chapter III: House as Stage

The language of mimesis is consistently used by critics to refer to space. Wigley writes that ‘space is no more than a prop’²⁸ exceeded by subjectivity, Beatriz Colomina comments that ‘the house is received as an environment, as a stage’²⁹, and Lefebvre notes that space is inhabited by ‘actors’³⁰. This terminology - ‘prop’, ‘stage’, ‘actors’ – all convey the sense that space is performative, and followingly, a means of performing gender.³¹ But one does not have to strictly perform a given gender role in this space; as José Muñoz writes

²⁶ Foucault, *Of Other Spaces*, p. 27.

²⁷ Irigaray quoted by Grosz, p. 28.

²⁸ Wigley, p. 383.

²⁹ Beatriz Colomina, ‘The Split Wall: Domestic Voyeurism’ in *Sexuality and Space*, pp. 73-130 (p. 85).

³⁰ Lefebvre, p. 57.

³¹ I refer here to Judith Butler’s idea of the performativity of gender which she theorizes in *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York, Routledge, 1990).

with reference to queerness as ‘a stage’, it ‘is imbued with a sense of potentiality’.³²

Envisioning the home as a stage of potential, the heterotopic realms of Jackson’s texts bare such a prospect, facilitating occupants in possibly re-writing their gender roles and entering into a queer space.

In *Castle*, Merricat and Constance reimagine a sphere of protection and happiness for themselves away from society and the gaze of others. With the death of Uncle Julian and the abjection of the patriarch Charles from the space, it becomes a female-centric realm, offering them a greater sense of freedom. Although they remain domestically bound, they claim the space as their own, taking agency and creative power within its walls. Butler writes, ‘gender is an exercise of freedom, which is not to say that everything that constitutes gender is freely chosen, but only that even what is considered unfree can and must be claimed and exercised in some way.’³³ As such, the sisters exercise the right to claim their socially assigned gendered space and their roles within it, thus reinstating some authority over the home.

Merricat and Constance restructure their abode around the kitchen (and thus food and cooking) as all other parts of the house are either destroyed or closed off, transforming this hyper-feminine space into a fulfilling and empowering one. The only things that survive the fire seem to be food, the stocked cellar untouched by the mob. This leaves the sisters in a disproportionate state of joy, as they realise they can live entirely out of the kitchen - “‘vegetable soup,” she [Constance] said, almost singing, “and strawberry jam, and chicken

³² José Muñoz quoted by Emily Banks, ‘Insisting on the Moon: Shirley Jackson and the Queer Future’, in *Shirley Jackson and Domesticity, Beyond the Haunted House*, ed. By Jill E. Anderson and Melanie R. Anderson (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2020), pp. 169-188 (p. 177).

³³ Butler, *Notes Towards a Performative Theory of Assembly*, p. 94

soup, and pickled beef” (p. 115). The significance of this is incomparable, as food functions as the sole source of female authority in the text; Merricat poisons her entire family by placing arsenic in the sugar bowl while it is said of Constance that she ‘can put her hand upon a bewildering array of deadly substances without ever leaving home; she could feed you a sauce of poison hemlock, [...] She might have made a marmalade of the lovely thornapple or the baneberry, she might have tossed the salad with holcus lanatus.’ (p. 35). Jackson’s black comedy, established by her juxtaposition of death and domicile comforts, is an ironic twist on the laborious cooking duties of the feminine mystique. Fischler writes of cooking that ‘it is an act so magical that one remembers the strange kinship between cookery and witchcraft’³⁴, and there is black magic in the clandestine authority of the sister’s poisonous food. Food, like witchcraft, bares the ability to alter and disrupt boundaries; ‘uneaten food is ‘other’, part of the world outside’.³⁵ Women, food and witchcraft all threaten masculine notions of control and self-containment; thus by restructuring the house to centre it on the kitchen, the sisters reclaim this space as an empowering one.

Merricat’s imagination runs wild with the utopic possibilities the new space offers; it becomes reenvisioned as their fantastical ‘castle’, saturated in images of children’s stories and fairy tales. “I will go on my winged horse and bring you cinnamon and thyme, emeralds and clove, cloth of gold and cabbages” (p. 133), Merricat says with jubilant juvenility; food here is magical and dazzling. The sisters and their abode become part of a local fable, a fairy-tale in itself. But rather than the joyous, unicorn-riding gatherer Merricat casts herself as and the ‘fairy princess’ she believed Constance to be as a child, the sisters are perceived as the

³⁴ Claude Fischler quoted by Deborah Lupton, *Food, the Body and the Self* (London: Sage Publications, 1996), p. 8.

³⁵ Sarah Sceats, *Food, Consumption and the Body in Contemporary Women’s Fiction* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), p. 11.

terrifying witches who ‘make you eat a candy full of poison’ and ‘go hunting little children’ (p. 141) (Food, again, the source of the sisters’ authority). Returning to Gilbert and Gubar, and the bifurcation of women as ‘the angel of the house’ and the monstrous ‘madwoman’, it is as if the sisters indeed occupy both of these roles. To outsiders, they embody monstrous femininity, but from the inside, they occupy the role of de-sexualised feminine housekeepers. Jackson insightfully explores the reliance of the female home-bound image on the changeability of perception, offering an alternative to that of ‘the madwomen’ in her blissful (but perhaps sardonic) imagining of the sisters reconfigured home. However, the dual depiction of the sisters still rely on dichotomous images which are born of the patriarchy.

In *Hill House*, Eleanor seems to think she has found a space of autonomy and a sense of place. In a radical shift from her reserved character, she dances through the house’s corridors in a sort of *danse macabre*, saying, ‘I have broken the spell of hill house and somehow come inside. I am home, she thought, and stopped in wonder at the thought. I am home, I am home’ (p. 231). There is a powerful phallic quality to her penetration of Hill House, a sort of performative masculinity, as the house becomes a stage with which to reimagine herself.

In the final moments of Eleanor’s residence at Hill House, she believes she is finally independent as she attempts to cement her assimilation into Hill House:

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 last; this is me, I am really really really doing it by myself.

(p. 245)

The repeated emphasis on the self, ‘I’, ‘me’, is seemingly autonomous, and the repetitive ‘really’ persuasive of such a self-sufficiency. However, Eleanor is under the spell of Hill House, as ‘In the unending, crashing second before the car hurled

into the tree she thought clearly, *Why am I doing this? Why am I doing this? Why don't they stop me?*' (p. 245-6). Eleanor is powerless to the house's supremacy. In its ending, *Hill House* comes full circle as the opening page is repeated. Crucially, 'whatever walked there, walked alone.' (p. 246), is retold. The ghost of Hill House still walks alone, it has rejected Eleanor, she has not been absorbed into Hill House at all. Hill House ceases to become a redemptive space; it remains a patriarchal one.

Conclusion

While the women of Jackson's texts attempt to find safety, inclusion and liberation in their dwellings, such abodes undeniably continue to reiterate patriarchal norms. The spaces they attempt to rebuild or claim are still constructed and envisioned through a patriarchal lens. Simone de Beauvoir writes that women 'still dream through the dreams of men'³⁶, as is evident of Jackson's protagonists' home-bound dreams. Considering this, the concluding line of *Castle*, "'we are so happy.'" (p. 146) should not be taken at face value just as Eleanor's final act should not be taken as a truly autonomous one. Merricat's happiness is both delusional and ironic, grounded in a domestic, make-believe world just as Eleanor is under the spell of Hill House. As such, they are both blind sighted to the patriarchal structures that underscore their abodes and shape their subjectivities. But as either a site of entrapment or a stage of potentiality (even if dreamed 'through the dreams of men'), the heterotopic nature of the haunted house narrative succeeds in reconfiguring the romanticised notion of the home as a static, 'politically neutral space', revealing that space can be deconstructed and reconstructed. The haunted house as a historic and

³⁶ Simone de Beauvoir, quoted by Gilbert and Gubar, p. 76.

heterotopic site has revealed its entanglement in spatial patriarchal politics, a finding that could be applied to Female Gothic more widely. As such, shifting perspectives and increasing female awareness of the disorderly and misconstrued nature of the spaces of domestic life.

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