Gothic Posthumanism

A Performative, Feminist Evaluation of Shirley Jackson's The Haunting of Hill House

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Humanity, by nature of its population numbers and distribution, transcends any monolithic way of living. Of the few things that humanity does have in common across the world, creating buildings is as innate to us as creating structured communities. While not a necessity, the buildings that humans create represent foundational conceptualizations of safety and stability. What happens, then, when buildings subvert these expectations of being orderly and compliant subjects to their human creators? The results are captured in all their disturbing glory through the literary haunted house. In a critical discussion of Shirley Jackson's *The Haunting of Hill House*, an establishing Gothic work for the archetypal haunted house, alongside Karan Barad's work "Posthuman Performativity," this essay will explore Western homes and their associations with domesticity, submissiveness, and order. A performative reevaluation of Jackson's Hill House offers the framework to reconceptualize relationships with the buildings around us, demanding consideration of the haunted house as a challenge to patriarchal anthropocentrism.

To offer a performative consideration of Jackson's Hill House, one must first understand how Barad's concepts of representationalism and performativity apply to architecture. Two key concepts underpin this: the fluidity of language, and entity interaction. First, the fluidity of language. In Barad's opening discussion of performativity, she summarizes Nietzsche's warnings against "the belief that grammatical categories reflect the underlying structure of the world."[1] In discussing Hill House (the title of Jackson's haunted house), it is worth taking note of the grammatical category of the word "house." House today is categorized as a common noun, meaning it refers to the general concept of an object and is not a term that refers to a unique entity or one with agency. The representationalism that Nietzsche and by proxy Barad are warning against, then, would hold all houses as static spaces bound to the status of "insentient object." Performativity, by contrast, allows space for linguistic and definitional flexibility that can address categorical fluidity and overlap. Posthuman performativity, in particular, addresses the entrenched philosophies of "human" and "nonhuman" as fixed categories reinforced by our linguistic norms. To discuss Hill House, we will examine how Jackson's characterization of the house pushes the boundary between "human" and "nonhuman" while simultaneously demonstrating assemblage with its human inhabitants.

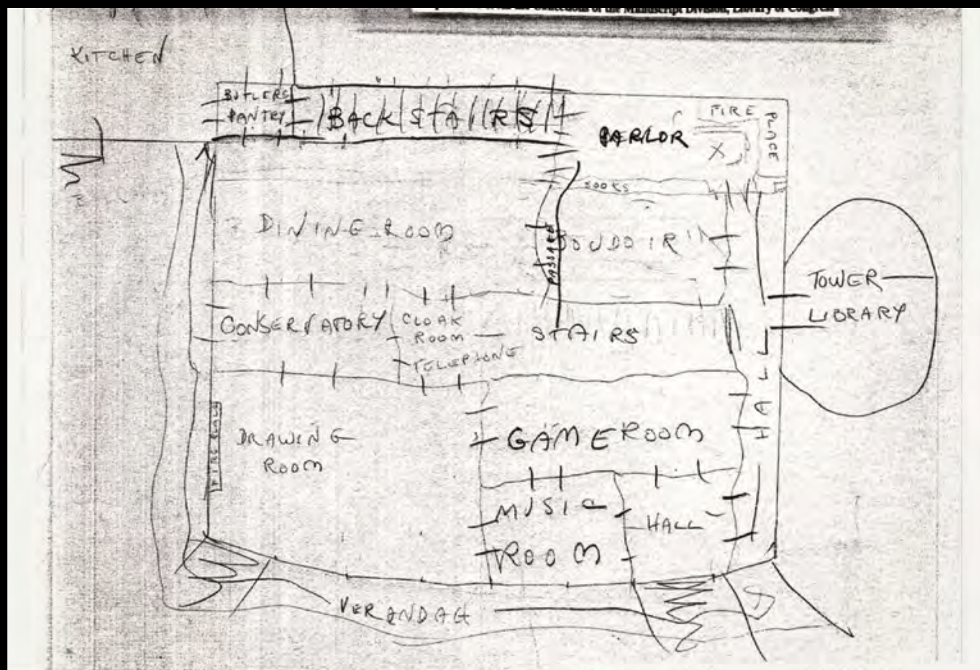
The second concept key to reevaluating Hill House is Barad's proposition that performativity offers space for entity interaction, or what this essay will refer to more frequently as an assemblage. Barad argues that in traditional representationalism "there are assumed to be two distinct and independent kinds of entities-representations and entities to be represented."[2] This assumption, founded on the power we vest in language, can be challenged through Barad's argument that the expression of agency crosses these distinctions by being "a matter of intra-acting; it is an enactment, not something that someone or something has."[3] Rather than humans being actors and houses being acted-upon objects, Barad offers a world in which the two are both actors and acted-upon in perpetuity with one another, creating an assemblage where the house and the inhabitants are "becoming with" one another.

Building on the performative relationship between Hill House and its occupants, we can turn to Ron Broglio's "Thinking about Stuff: Posthumanist Phenomenology and Cognition" to further extend Barad's performativity beyond the context of general human/non-human distinctions to what Broglio refers to as our conceptualization of "non-animate entities". Broglio acknowledges the inherent language trap in the conversational norms of our culture when it comes to discussing architecture, noting that when we refer to objects there is almost always an insinuation of lack of consciousness. Referencing Alfred North Whitehead's twentieth-century philosophy, Broglio instead proposes that we approach the buildings around us with the question "what is it fit for here?"[4] reflective of Barad's concept of posthuman performativity that addresses entities in a dynamic context rather than static space.

Utilizing this proposition, we can begin to examine how Jackson characterizes Hill House through two separate lenses: a representational, static perspective, and a performative, "what is it fit for here?" perspective. These two analyses lay the groundwork for understanding what makes Hill House, as its residents term it, "vile" and "diseased"[5] and for an alternative consideration of Hill House's character as an effective literary device poised to critique representationalism. First, from a representational perspective that perpetually expects Hill House to remain static and subjugated, much of what makes the house disturbing has less to do with a clear threat of bodily harm and more to do with intellectual or emotional discomfort. This begs the question of how Jackson's human characters discover that Hill House is, in fact, haunted and at the very least, severely disconcerting to their worldview.

Jackson's novel centers on a relatively small cast of characters. Dr. Montague is the catalyzing figure for her story, a doctor of philosophy and anthropology who is fixated on researching the supernatural by finding an "honestly haunted house"[6] He sends a slew of intentionally vague letters to candidates he believes would be qualified to assist in his research, and receives only two affirmative responses. One is Eleanor Vance, who at the age of twelve had an odd encounter with stones raining on the ceiling of her house out of nowhere and Dr. Montague believes is perhaps herself haunted by a poltergeist. The other is Theodora (no last name is ever given), an artist who Dr. Montague believes has something like telepathic abilities. Finally, the owners of the house require a member of the family to be there, which ends up falling on the shoulders of Luke Sanderson, a charismatic but sticky-fingered young socialite.[7] Alongside the house's caretakers, the Dudleys, who never stay after dark, this crew's goal is to simply live in the house for a period and observe its behavior. What, then, do these characters observe that gives them the perception of Hill House as indeed haunted (or at the least, severely disturbed)?

Three elements of Hill House are the central culprits of its disconcerting nature, and each can be tied back to ways it defies traditional, anthropocentric expectations of buildings. These elements are its design, its navigability, and its spirits. First, its design. While it takes Eleanor, our narrator, a few chapters to learn why Hill House feels so off-kilter, immediately upon entrance to the house she understands that something is wrong. She promptly describes the building as "a house arrogant and hating[...] a house without kindness, never meant to be lived in, not a fit place for people or for love or for hope."[8] She struggles to even process its architectural design beyond it being "enormous and dark"[9] which the reader learns is an intentional aspect of Hill House's construction. Dr. Montague later enlightens the group that Hugh Crain, Hill House's builder and first owner, pictured it one day being a showplace of odd design and thus chose to make every angle of the building "slightly wrong."[10] Tilted windows, an offset veranda, doorways intentionally off-center, and asymmetrically placed rooms- this information makes Eleanor, Theodora, and Luke visibly uncomfortable.[11]



Hill House floor plan sketch. Shirley Jackson Papers, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.

Odd interior design choices like giant statues and strangely colored rooms further contribute to their discomfort.[12] Western representationalism firmly associates beauty, convention, and proportionality in architecture with goodness and morality.[13] By breaking these representational rules, despite posing very little real threat to the safety of its inhabitants in this way, Hill House "stands as a visual reminder of the fact that evil is 'out of scale', or more specifically, that it shapes itself according to a scale—and a (meta)physics—both inscrutable and repulsive to humans."[14]

Not at all secondary to Hill House's distorted designs are its navigability and spirits. Eleanor, Theodora, Luke, and even at times Dr. Montague seem to be perpetually turned around in Hill House. There are two reasons for this: first, some rooms like the kitchen have multiple doors all leading to the same place,[15] and second, Hill House's rooms are layered. The doctor describes them as "concentric circles" where a ring of outer rooms allows exit from the house and a ring of inner rooms only leads to outer rooms.[16] This constant confusion leads to an air of unpredictability about Hill House, which stands in stark juxtaposition to Dr. Montague and the company's goal in the house, which is collecting ordered scientific evidence. Matek notes that this reads as an intentional choice on Jackson's part, calling into consideration how intertwined Western humanism is with ideas like order and consistency- so intertwined that its disruption is horrific.[17] The spirits of Hill House, similarly, are unpredictable, banging on doors, moving objects around, brushing up against Eleanor, and speaking to her, all of which are posited as deeply disturbing to the characters even though Theodora notes the spirits have never hurt them.[18] They show up at inconsistent hours and follow no set conventions of behavior, which is disturbing despite their lack of actual physical malice.

These characteristics of Hill House, then, are both what make it haunted and a cultural critique. Through its design, navigability, and spirits that reside in the building, Hill House "ceases to be a home, a place of safety, and becomes instead an oppressive, claustrophobic space"[19] which, through its unpredictable nature, also ceases to conform to traditional definitions of a non-animate object. Jackson's construction of sentience, also called Hill House's personality, offers commentary on both representationalism and anthropocentrism. First, representationalism. Recalling Barad's description of representational rhetoric as firmly distinguishing between the human and non-human, it becomes evident that Hill House confronts this ideology head-on. It is a character as much as Eleanor or Theodora is, explained by Eggener as a house that "all but built itself and determined its own evil nature, independent of human intent or action."[20] Not only does Hill House display sentience typically reserved for humans in representational framing, but it torments its residents responsively to their actions, defying actor/object acted upon distinctions and instead becoming with its inhabitants. Matek details that Dr. Montague's warnings about anyone wandering off alone can be read as a "warning against the influence of the house's negative energy and its transformative effect rather than a mere warning against getting physically lost."[21]

The assemblage between Hill House and the doctor's crew distinctly decenters the human. Matek, in fact, attributes the entire unsettling effect of Hill House to its "human characteristics."[22] Anthropocentrism would quite logically purport anything non-human exerting what is representationally reserved for humans over humans themselves as a threat. Through Eleanor's narration, in particular, we watch the house's apparent subversion of her free will. She speaks without remembering what she has said or who she has spoken to.[23] Eventually, Hill House's eradication of her rational thought drives her to her death thinking "Why am I doing this? Why am I doing this? Why don't they stop me?"[24] Despite this physically violent conclusion to Jackson's story, "Hill House lacks any apparent or understandable motive for wanting to scare, imprison, or kill its tenants."[25] The terror and control Hill House exerts over its subjects is, more than anything else, rooted in a lack of human control and ability to be comprehended.

If representationalism and anthropocentrism are the ideologies that make Hill House so disturbing, it begs consideration whether there is a version of Jackson's story with a less tragic ending. If the house were not expected to be domestic and submissive in order to be a desirable space, if instead, our culture shifted to be more accepting of becoming with spaces rather than controlling them, Hill House would be much less horrifying and perhaps simply curious. While buildings may at their most basic level be bricks and mortar that do not and perhaps cannot want anything,[26] they are only these elements in a vacuum. In real life, nothing is ever truly in a vacuum. Accepting this necessary interaction and intra-action between spaces and their people as they assemble together allows the exploration of an exciting philosophical concept: a house's status as haunted has very little to do with evil and much more to do with a personal relationship to the house.

Hill House, when examined through a posthuman lens, offers a powerful incentive to reconsider how we relate to the places we call home.

Beyond simple representationalism subjecting houses to our Western conceptualizations of what it means to be non-human, our anthropocentric expectations of the domesticity and safety of a home to be tied to its submissiveness have clear patriarchal undertones. Questioning these assumptions, then, is more than just an entertaining thought experiment- it is good and necessary in a larger-scale reevaluation of Western social structures. Our dwelling places inevitably act on us, Western culture simply does not ask us to consider these actions. When a piece of stained glass raises thoughts about old spiritual beliefs or when a worn-in room carries the ghost of a loved one in its arrangement, we are becoming with our homes in the same fashion that Hill House became with its inhabitants- they involuntarily affect us. This becoming-with, this "absent presence that occasionally [makes] itself felt"[27] may be disturbing, but to the same extent, it may be what makes our spaces meaningful.

Our involuntary, associative memories create haunted spaces all around us and ought to remind us of the challenges even bricks and mortar can raise to anthropocentrism. Toso suggests that as we consider our relationships with the haunted places we move through, we remain open, curious, and reflective about the assemblages we enter into. If Hill House is any indication of the consequences of an unwillingness to release representational anthropocentrism in favor of open-mindedness, it is a stark warning. Haunting is not a thing to be mapped or quantified- it may well drive one to madness in the attempt to do so. Haunting is, rather, something of "no fixed essence or substance simply there for the measuring," as Barad notes in her work on the quantum elements of spirits and specters.[28] Jackson uses the space the Gothic genre makes through horror as a vehicle for counter-cultural ideas to ask readers whether haunting is horrible of its own volition or because of human perception. Hill House is a home that "[rears] its great head back against the sky without concession to humanity."[29] Jackson's work, through a critical posthuman examination, proffers the idea that releasing our expectations of buildings to bow in concession to humanity's whims could fundamentally alter how we relate to haunted houses for the better.

Endnotes

1. Karen Barad, “Posthumanist Performativity: Toward an Understanding of How Matter Comes to Matter,” Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society 28, no. 3 (2003): 209.
2. Barad, “Posthumanist Performativity,” 211.
3. Barad, “Posthumanist Performativity,” 232.
4. Ron Broglio, “Thinking about Stuff: Posthumanist Phenomenology and Cognition,” AI & SOCIETY 26, no. 2 (2011): 187–92.
5. Shirley Jackson, Shirley Jackson: Novels & Stories, ed. Joyce Carol Oates (New York: Library of America, 2010), 264.
6. Jackson, Shirley Jackson: Novels & Stories, 243.
7. Jackson, Shirley Jackson: Novels & Stories, 245–47.
8. Jackson, Shirley Jackson: Novels & Stories, 265.
9. Jackson, Shirley Jackson: Novels & Stories, 265.
10. Jackson, Shirley Jackson: Novels & Stories, 316.
11. Jackson, Shirley Jackson: Novels & Stories, 316.
12. Jackson, Shirley Jackson: Novels & Stories, 217–18.
13. Ljubica Matek, “The Architecture of Evil: H. P. Lovecraft’s ‘The Dreams in the Witch House’ and Shirley Jackson’s The Haunting of Hill House,” CounterText 4, no. 3 (2018): 406–23.
14. Matek, “Architecture of Evil,” 406–23.
15. Jackson, Shirley Jackson: Novels & Stories, 320.
16. Jackson, Shirley Jackson: Novels & Stories, 312.
17. Matek, “Architecture of Evil,” 406–23.
18. Jackson, Shirley Jackson: Novels & Stories, 384.
19. Matek, “Architecture of Evil,” 406–23.
20. Keith Eggener, “When Buildings Kill,” Places Journal (October 2013).
21. Matek, “Architecture of Evil,” 406–23.
22. Matek, “Architecture of Evil,” 406–23.
23. Jackson, Shirley Jackson: Novels & Stories, 408.
24. Jackson, Shirley Jackson: Novels & Stories, 417.
25. Matek, “Architecture of Evil,” 406–23.
26. Eggener, “When Buildings Kill.”
27. Tricia Toso, Kassandra Spooner-Lockyer, and Kregg Hetherington, “Walking with a Ghost River: Unsettling Place in the Anthropocene,” Anthropocenes—Human, Inhuman, Posthuman 1, no. 1 (2020).
28. Karen Barad, “Quantum Entanglements and Hauntological Relations of Inheritance: Dis/Continuities, SpaceTime Enfoldings, and Justice-to-Come,” Derrida Today 3, no. 2 (2010): 240–68.
29. Jackson, Shirley Jackson: Novels & Stories, 265.

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The cover image is a photograph of the Winchester Mystery House, a real life example of a very odd and allegedly haunted house (rooms and doors to nowhere added continuously by a grieving widow). The Winchester house would have been built in California around the same time Shirley Jackson's grandfather, an architect, built houses in California that served as inspiration for Hill House. "Winchester Mystery House" by HarshLight is licensed under CC BY 2.0.

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Eleanor Israel is a senior biology student in the Randall and Blount programs at UA. She grew up reading every *Scary Stories to Tell in the Dark* her library had and everything remotely like it she could get her hands on. As a college student, she has stayed engaged with her favorite genre by designing an indie horror game, delving into the use of posthumanism in horror novels written by women, and studying the representation of microbial pathogens in all forms of media. Unsurprisingly, her goal is to work in infectious disease research and remind people that plague stories aren't always historical fiction.