

Fear and insanity  
gothic literature: why  
'the haunting of hill  
house' and 'the li...



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Over the past three decades, films in the genre of horror and suspense have been among the top grossing movies with relation to volume of tickets and amount of movies made. According to a 2004 paper in the Journal of Media Psychology by Dr. Glenn Walters, the three primary factors that make horror films alluring to society are tension, relevance, and unrealism. This alluring effect is also translated in both modern and historic literature through the gothic genre. This genre combines fiction and horror, death, or romance, creating eerie tension and ambiguity for those reading. Shirley Jackson and Sarah Waters are two prominent authors whose works exudes this gothic nature with regards to the plot and characters. The idea of fear vs. insanity is present within both books at all major, comparable points. Although they are contrasted by different story lines, there are a plethora of instances, which expose the similarities within and can be categorized by either fear or insanity.

The colors in both *The Haunting of Hill House* and *The Little Stranger* are typically dark and caliginous, and this adds to the gothic effect for the readers. In *The Haunting of Hill House*, the darkness of the house goes past colors; darkness is in the entire aesthetic. (quote of disproportionate houses and analysis) In addition, the rooms in Hill House have a significant correlation to the aesthetic. Each bedroom in which the characters stay in has a different color associated with it. The room, walls, and furniture in it are all the same color. These colors, while not necessarily dark in shade, prove to play a damaging role in the characters as the conformity of the rooms leads to the submission of Eleanor into the house at the story's conclusion. In the book's final pages, Eleanor, at night, while in her room,

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awakes to find she is no longer fearful of the house and boldly states, “ I am disappearing inch by inch into this house, I am going apart a little bit at a time because all this noise is breaking me; why are the others frightened?” (Jackson 183). The color conformity of her room and the house’s aesthetic play a significant role in not only the gothic effect that readers perceive, but goes beyond this and plays a role in her ultimate demise.

In *The Little Stranger*, the story begins when Dr. Faraday describes Hundreds Hall; the “ haunted house” of the story. He describes it in a chilling and thorough fashion that creates a understanding of the house for the reader right from the story’s embarkment. In the opening words of the novel, Dr. Faraday states,

“ I recall most vividly the house itself, which struck me as an absolute mansion. I remember its lovely ageing details: the worn red brick, the cockled window glass, and the weathered sandstone edgings. They made it look blurred and slightly uncertain – like an ice, I thought, just beginning to melt in the sun... the thrill of the house itself, which came to me from every surface – from the polish on the floor, the patina on wooden chairs and cabinets, the bevel of a looking-glass, the scroll of a frame.”

This description of the house is an effective way of giving the reader a deeper understanding of the setting in which the story will take place. In the quote, Dr. Faraday is recalling the house from when he saw it as a child.

Growing up, his mother was a servant at Hundreds Hall, so he spent much time raveling in the house’s glory. The striking details his description

includes, particularly the simile of the edging looking like ice, puts a picture  
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of a beautiful mansion in the mind of the reader. This becomes significant when Dr. Faraday sees the house again in present day, and is shocked by how the beauty of the house was replaced with a drab, atamentous skeleton of his previous depiction. The new darkness of the house carries through with the reader and makes the gothic tendencies of the novel even more prominent as new supernatural events and themes begin to unravel.

The role of the aesthetic of the houses in these stories mostly correlates with the feeling of fear within the characters. The Little Stranger begins with descriptions of the downfall of Hundreds Hall. British literary critic Joy Lo Dico writes about the protagonist of the book describing, " He remembers his first visit to Hundreds Hall, when he was a boy, the house was full of Edwardian flourish and his mother was one of the army of serving staff." For Dr. Faraday, the change from his idea of this prestigious and magnificent house to the drab, dilapidated state to which it has fallen to creates feelings of uneasiness and fear as he is now visiting a place that is so different from his memories. For the rest of the characters who live there, the neglected state and gloomy aesthetic that matched it also correlates to fear as more supernatural events begin to unfold, but never causes psychological demise in the main characters. In The Haunting of Hill House, the house's aesthetic also causes solely fear in almost all of the main characters. The doctor specifically chose the house because of its run down, " haunted" state so that he could measure its effects, and the other characters soon come to recognize this as well. Eleanor, however, associates more with the insanity of this as she feels she is actually becoming the house the more she recognizes the aesthetic aspects of it, such as her blue room and the disproportionate

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architecture. She slowly succumbs to the house itself as her sanity wanes and the starting point of this demise is from being surrounded by the haunted aesthetic.

Thematically speaking, *The Haunting of Hill House* by Shirley Jackson, and *The Little Stranger* by Sarah Waters possess much overlap. The theme of family is one that is seen in both stories. In *The Haunting of Hill House*, family is explored within the first pages as the reader is introduced to the protagonist, Eleanor, who has just lost her mother. She is not devastated by this loss however, as she came to resent her increasingly needy mother as she grew older. It is later alluded to that she may have chosen to let her mother die after ignoring her demand for medicine in the middle of the night. Eleanor also has a sister with whom she does not get along, and the only mention of her is in the beginning of the story when she patronizingly demands that Eleanor leave their shared car. After coming to Hill House, she befriends Theo and they become good friends. Eleanor, Theo, as well as the two other houseguests, Luke and Dr. Montague create their own sort of family after bonding over the paranormal activities they have to witness and survive together. When one looks further into this dynamic and the history of the house, the theme of family in the story is not comforting, but a source of confinement to the four Hill House guests. Trapped together in the house, they forget the world around them, and struggle to break the cycle of enclosure eventually leading to their psychological demise. The only mentioned character that was able to break this confinement cycle was Hugh Crain, the original house owner whose death generated gossip and rumors.

The new found family for Eleanor is what causes her to crash into a <https://assignbuster.com/fear-and-insanity-gothic-literature-why-the-haunting-of-hill-house-and-the-little-stranger-are-not-your-typical-scary-stories/>

bordering the property in the books final chapters, thus taking her life and harrowingly confining her to the Hill House forever.

The family dynamic in *The Little Stranger* can be most significantly explored in two of the main characters: Dr. Faraday and Caroline. In contrast to the “family” formed by the characters in *Hill House*, Mrs. Ayres and her children live in their “haunted” home, with Dr. Faraday as a visiting doctor and friend. Dr. Faraday grew up around the Hundreds Hall house as a child as his mother was a servant. He very clearly remembers the wonder and awe he felt when being there, but that feeling vanished as he grew older and revisited the house. Without his mother, Dr. Faraday struggles throughout the story to fit in with the rest of the family group. Unlike Eleanor who is the outsider character in *Hill House*, he is uncertain of his place in the world. Eleanor finds her place after being with the others in *Hill House*, but Dr. Faraday grapples with this consistently. Caroline is another character in *The Little Stranger* who plays a pivotal role in the story’s family theme. Although she is part of the family and house, she feels that the house has immured her childhood, and subtly but increasingly resents her family for this. Despite her wit, she is always pushed aside from attention from her mother or brother. In the end, she takes her life by leaping off the house’s balcony to her death with unclear reasoning as to why she jumped. This theme of family is a key aspect of both stories, especially when examined under fear vs. insanity.

The theme of family parallels a feeling of both fear and insanity in the case of different characters. In *The Haunting of Hill House* and *The Little Stranger*,

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it most significantly effects Eleanor and Dr. Faraday. Both of these characters feel like outcasts at times in their stories. In Eleanor's case, she has no real family and her friends at Hill House, while initially acting as a positive surrogate family, ultimately contribute to her insanity by the end of the story. Since the house targets her from her first days there, the others bond together in an effort to protect her, but this ultimately makes her feel attacked. By the end of the story, this "family" aspect leads to pure insanity as she wants to go through the house at night waking them to make them scared. She finds a new sense of family with the spirits of the house, and her demise is a result of the familial actions of the others. In *The Little Stranger*, Dr. Faraday feels a similar outcast feeling. As a child, he felt like he belonged at Hundred's Hall and would visit with his mother. Now, he visits as a guest for a different family, and always struggles to truly find his place. In this sense, family leads to insanity for him as he struggles throughout the book to interact with the family. Caroline is another example of insanity through family. When Roderick, her brother, starts to have delusions and severe PTSD from the war, she is afraid both for and of him. This concern proves to be detrimental, however, especially with her interactions with Dr. Faraday as she begins to decline throughout the story as she continues to interact with Dr. Faraday and her family and ultimately commits suicide.

Both *The Haunting of Hill House* and *The Little Stranger* have sudden, shocking, and ambiguous endings that leave the readers perplexed and interpreting the characters' actions. Both end with main characters taking their own lives with their mansions seemingly being to blame. Ambiguity in conclusions is not an uncommon trait in gothic stories. The death present in <https://assignbuster.com/fear-and-insanity-gothic-literature-why-the-haunting-of-hill-house-and-the-little-stranger-are-not-your-typical-scary-stories/>

the endings is both a result of comparable psychological demise, but the demise itself is caused from anthitical forces. Eleanor struggles throughout the story to fit in with her newfound group of friends, especially as the house increasingly seems to be “choosing” her. Early into her time at Hill House, the magic realism begins to haunt and torture all of the new inhabitants, but specifically Eleanor. Right from the start, the doctor is concerned and warns his guests saying, “Promise me absolutely that you will leave, as fast as you can, if you begin to feel the house catching at you” (Jackson 46). The magic realisms begin soon after, but no one wants to leave. After their first night there, Luke asks all of them to go with him into the hallway. There, they find writing on the wall that says “Help Eleanor come home.” Eleanor is initially anxious and furious at the house for putting attention on her. She is continuously tormented by that same message in various occurrences throughout the book. Surely but slowly, she begins to change. Her changes are subtle at first, but grow in intensity as she starts to form a kind of exclusive bond with Hill House. When Luke responds in a grim tone that, “We are on a desert island” Eleanor’s response is, “I can’t picture any world but Hill House,” (Jackson 73). She starts to become more and more connected with the house, and as things happen at night that are frightful to the others, she is not scared, but annoyed and bothered by the house. After spending about a week at Hill House, her psyche is wholly damaged and she reaches the point of psychotic break. When walking to a brook with Theo and Luke, she hears her name being called and runs away from them to a clearing. The calling of her name does not frighten her now, however, as the narrator writes “[She] was held tight and safe. It is not cold at all; she



thought, " It is not cold. It is not cold at all" She closed her eyes and leaned against the bank and thought, don't let me go, and then Stay" ( Jackson 204). In this scene of the story, Eleanor stops being frightened by supernatural forces and instead finds comfort in them. She does not want them to stop being with her, and is upset when she realizes that Luke and Theo are not with her. After that incident, in the middle of the night, she takes the house's role of frightening people when she leaves her room and begins to run through the house, banging on her " families" doors and yelling through the mansion. In the beginning of their stay, they complained of certain freezing spots throughout the house, but after leaving her door, Eleanor describes them as " drowsily, luxuriously warm." Within minutes, her downfall worsens when she believes her dead mother is in the house and hears a voice calling her name. After following this voice, she begins to bang on doors desperate to find the source, before the narrator writes " Poor House, Eleanor thought, I had forgotten Eleanor, now they will have to open their doors" (Jackson 219). this quote reveals the extent of her damaged psyche. She no longer even realizes who she is and who she is with, and begins to run around the house, childlike, in an effort to escape the others from capturing her. In The Little Stranger there is a similarly ambiguous ending. Throughout the story, Caroline had been consistently overlooked and confused. She was surrounded by big changes in her life, such as her brother getting sick, and meeting Dr. Faraday, whom she has an affectionate relationship with. Her mother's psychological state is depleting as she begins to believe her dead child is with her again. Caroline is always caught in the middle and by the end, she has some very big decisions that she is not

necessarily ready to make. On the day of her mother's funeral, Caroline decides to sell Hundreds Hall. At this point, she is engaged to Dr. Faraday, who disagrees with this decision and tries to talk her out of it. On the night of her wedding with Dr. Faraday, she falls to her death off of a marble staircase after exclaiming, " You!" The ambiguity in this ending raises a lot of questions for the reader. Some believe that Dr. Faraday was the " you" that she referred to, and others see it as a suicide. This ambiguity leaves a lot of unanswered questions about the mental sanity of not only Caroline, but also Dr. Faraday and offers very few answers for these key questions.

The endings in these stories are a intricate combination of both fear and insanity. In the case of Eleanor, her ending signifies insanity, but this demise is fueled by the fear of the others in the house. The commination of the house " choosing" her and her feeling ostracized leads to her final break at the end in which her final act of both creating fear in the others throughout the house and fear after new final act of suicide. They are all so shocked and frightened by what they see that they simply return home and try to forget what they witnessed. In the case of Caroline, the ambiguous ending has an effect of insanity on Dr. Faraday. He was set to marry her, and has to live with the fact that she suddenly took her own life. While it could be blamed on him, the damage it had on his psyche causes him to still visit even three years later to try and find what her last sight was that drove her to jump. He is both fearful of what it is and going insane from not knowing.

The Haunting of Hill House and The Little Stranger are two prominent gothic novels that may seem very different on a surface level, but can be quite

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comparable with regards to perpetual descriptions of house aesthetics, central themes, and ambiguous endings. The idea of fear vs. Insanity can be examined in all of these ideas. The house aesthetic and colors mostly correlate fear within the readers. They lead to uneasy feelings and by having the appearance of a “ haunted house” the characters are fearful when magic realism begins to occur. In *The Haunting of Hill House*, the house creates fear in all characters except Eleanor. In Eleanor’s case, the aesthetic leads to demise as she feels she is becoming one with the house. When examining the theme of family, the main characters from each story affiliate more strongly with insanity. In Eleanor’s case, the house “ targeting” her causes the others concern for her to feel like attacks, and she retreats to her own psyche and her demise begins from there. In Dr. Faraday’s case, he similarly feels outcasted and out of place now working for a house he used to visit and love. For Caroline, her insanity begins when her brother, struggling from PTSD, begins to exhibit symptoms that were mistaken from mental issues. That type of complex issue within her family confuses her, and she eventually demises to the point of suicide. The endings of each story are ambiguous, and can be seen with both aspects of fear and insanity. Both stories end in tragedy as the main characters take their own life after a psychological downfall throughout the books. *The Haunting of Hill House* and *The Little Stranger* are two acclaimed works of gothic literature. While they follow very different story lines, after reading, one can see the plethora of similarities within. These similarities can coincide with the idea of fear vs. insanity in all aspects on these stories. Society continues to be enthralled with works such as these as a multitude of new horror and gothic books and

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movies become released in present day, and these works of literature and the ideas they inspire will continue to cultivate for future time.