

# Essay on two versions of the film the haunting in 1963 and 1999

[Literature](#), [Novel](#)



Shirley Jackson's 1959 novel *The Haunting of Hill House* was one of the best works of horror ever written, and two film versions entitled simply *The Haunting* were made in 1963 and 1999. Both follow a plot very similar to the novel in portraying a team of four investigators, led by a university professor, who are researching Hill House to determine whether it is haunted, but there are some major differences in the use of special effects and well as in the climax and resolution of the story. Most importantly, the 1963 version was closer to the novel in that it offers no final answers about who (or what) is haunting Hill House, only that it is evil, while the 1999 movie makes it clear that Hugh Crain, the original owner of the house, is the main cause. In addition, it was made in color while the 1963 film was in black and white, and also makes far more use of special effects and computer animation than was possible in the 1960s. For the 1999 film, DreamWorks developed many special effects that are genuinely frightening, particularly the appearance of Hugh Crain in the final scenes, but it was not as terrifying in the psychological level as the 1963 version, where no ghosts put in an actual appearance at all. In both movies, the protagonist Eleanor dies in the end, but in the 1963 film she basically allows the house to kill her by crashing her car into a tree, while in the 1999 one she dies a heroic death confronting the evil ghost of Hugh Crain and freeing the spirits of the children that he was holding prisoner in Hill House.

In both movies, the same four characters visit Hill House, although their leader in the 1963 version was named Dr. Markway and in 1999 this was changed to Dr. Marrow. Eleanor (Nell) and Theo are recruited because they have psychic abilities, while Luke is a young man related to the family that

owns the house, and does not even believe in ghosts or the supernatural at first. He ends up being killed by the house in the 1999 movie, while in 1963 he survives to pronounce the final line that Hill House should be burned down and the ground sewn with salt. This is quite a transformation on his part, since initially in both movies he is only concerned with selling the house and its contents for whatever price they will bring, and laughs at all the ghost stories associated with it. Eleanor is depicted as a deeply unhappy and emotionally disturbed young woman in both movies, as someone who is basically homeless and has nowhere else to go and who becomes most deeply attached to Hill House and whatever ghosts or evil forces are really at work there. In the earlier version, it is her wish to stay in the house forever and it arranges the car accident that kills her. She allows this happen, thinking that as the house takes control of her car that “ something is finally happening to me”, although when she has second thoughts at the last minute, it is too. She dies by crashing into the same tree where the original Mrs. Hugh Crain died in a carriage accident, on the first day that she arrived at Hill House. In contrast, the 1999 Eleanor turns out to be a far stronger character, and battles the evil spirit of Hugh Crain for control of the house, freeing the souls of all those trapped there.

In both movies, it is clear that Hugh Crain is somehow involved in the haunting, although the 1963 version is far subtler and more ambiguous about exactly how he might be responsible for these events and whether there are other ghosts. He was a wealthy industrialist in Boston who built a Victorian country house that appears to be of a very unusual design and the type of place that has secret passageways and doors that open and close on

their own. Although he does not appear at all in the 1963 film, except in a flashback narrated by Dr. Markway, it is clear enough that he was a evil and twisted man, possibly mentally unbalanced, while in the 1999 movie he turns out to have been a pedophile who tortured and murdered the children of the local millworkers. There is not a hint of this in the novel or the 1963 version, which begins with Dr. Markway stating off camera that the house was “ born bad”, and that it somehow killed both of Hugh Crain’s wives, while he also died under mysterious circumstances in England. His daughter Abigail grew up alone in the house and in her old age was attended to by a nurse, who stayed on in the house after her death and finally hanged herself there. In 1963, the entire science of special effects was very limited and computer animation did not exist, so the mood of intense fear and eeriness conveyed in the film is done more by techniques of lighting and shadow, as well as banging sounds and some chalk writing on the wall asking Eleanor to “ come home”. In 1999, the special effects and animation make the house come “ alive” (so to speak) such as when it lashes out at Luke and chops his head off, or when the huge ghost of Hugh Crain confronts Eleanor at the end and she dies shouting at it to “ go to hell!”

Although the 1963 version of The Haunting is generally rated one of the best horror films ever made, and one that was so frightening that audiences often would not stay to watch it to the end, the 1999 remake achieved no such distinction and was rather quickly forgotten. Even though it was in color and had a huge budget for special effects, it was somehow not as frightening and disturbing on the psychological level as the one in 1963. In the older film, it really is not clear whether the creepy Mr. Crain alone is haunting the house,

or if his deceased wives and daughter Abigail are also with him “ in spirit”— so to speak. Perhaps there is simply some force at work in Hill House that was never human at all but is still evil, and like the original novel, neither Dr. Markway nor the audience are given any real answers. There is only Eleanor’s ghostly voice intoning that “ we who walk here, walk alone”. She came to the house totally alone in the world and so she will remain there forever, perhaps as another wife or daughter to Mr. Crain. In the 1999 film she turns out to be a far stronger and more heroic character, and there is no doubt at all about the resolution of the story or the Hollywood ending in which she gives up her life in the final battle with Hugh Crain.

## **REFERENCES**

The Haunting. Dir. and Prod.: Robert Wise. USA: MGM, 1963.

The Haunting. Dir. Jan de Bont. Prod. Donna Rath and Colin Wilson. USA: DreamWorks, 1999.