

# Shirley Jackson's the haunting of hill house: life of eleanor vance

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## **Who Is Eleanor Vance?**

In Shirley Jackson's tragic novel, *The Haunting of Hill House*, one of the main characters, Eleanor Vance, reveals herself to the reader by subtly hinting at her polite, quiet insanity. Eleanor ventures to Hill House to explore the house's confines and try to understand the terrifying stories that had been circling the house for the past eighty years. The house was not only a place for Eleanor to explore, but at first, as she thought, it was a place to meet new people and gain irreplaceable life experiences. As time progresses, the other characters in the novel begin to notice strange traits in Eleanor that they had not recognized when they met for the first time. The text's use of childish association with Eleanor creates a strange, confusing dynamic for someone reading. Through references to Eleanor's childhood, her child-like attitude and thought, and her indecisive nature, readers are left with sinking doubts from Jackson's gripping narrative that beg the question, did we ever really know who Eleanor Vance was? Do we ever truly know who we are?

Eleanor, upon her arrival at Hill House, meets Theodora, Luke, and Dr. John Montague, characters who go on the same haunting journey Eleanor has chosen to go on. In the opening pages, Eleanor and Theodora connect almost instantaneously, a hasty friendship that has obviously been built on uneven ground. Both characters gain closure through each other's company during their time at Hill House, but, as we find out, not in their time after Hill House. In the same way that their relationship was built, Eleanor turns quickly into a monstrous personality that characters become wary of. While nothing extreme makes itself present, the reader picks up on her concerning and

disturbing thoughts. If a modern day therapist were to see Eleanor's direct thought process, they might ask her to make an appointment. Remorse and sorrow cloak the inner layers of each of her thoughts, even early on in the novel. As the characters introduce themselves, Eleanor greets her friend Theodora by saying, " ' And you are Theodora,' Eleanor said, ' because I am Eleanor.' An Eleanor, she told herself triumphantly, who belongs, who is talking easily, who is sitting by the fire with her friends." Eleanor, a distracted and forgotten child clings to memories she wish she had. Her belonging, freely speaking, comforted self she wish she knew is taking over her mind, blanketing her intuitions with a false sense of hope and self-respect. When Eleanor " told herself," who she was, readers are tipped off to her clearly unstable state. This is one of the first instances where readers pick up on Eleanor's immature, childish attitude and essence. Eleanor cannot come to believe she is not normal, as many mentally unstable people tend to believe. Regarding the question posed earlier in the essay, this citation does not lead a reader to believe Eleanor has a grasp on who she is, or who anyone is. Sometimes, mental illnesses will be birthed as small issues, and snowball themselves into unstoppable monsters, such as Eleanor's did. Through Eleanor's early signs of fake assurance of personality, red flags are flown and the reader is signaled for an eerie future for Eleanor. Eleanor's surroundings did nothing to help her cause, but her condition should not have been a surprise to any of the characters. Eleanor did not know who she was upon her entrance into Hill House, and as she mends her attitude and philosophy to the aching wood of the house, she cannot help herself but to self-destruct.

Insecurities will fuel a person's actions. A paranoid man will wonder how he looks, who is watching him, and what others think of him constantly. Eleanor is no different. She wants to impress Theodora, and as their relationship advances, she gets more convinced that her actions have to please Theodora, or else they are all done in vain. If Eleanor doesn't make Theodora happy, make her laugh, or have a special and profound connection with her in each interaction, she thinks she has failed. Again, Eleanor uses the tactics of a toddler to make friends, and it does not work out well for her. The sad part of their relationship, and how Eleanor chooses to act around Theodora, is that every part of it is fake. They have both taken on a false persona, brought about because of the house and the house's intoxicating personality. As Eleanor gets into a daily routine at Hill House, she wakes up questioning herself, "she asked herself, half asleep still, What did I do; did I make a fool of myself? Were they laughing at me?" When a person wakes up in the morning, their first reaction should usually not be one of self-assessment. Her critical nature and possessive character have taken control of the other characters' attention, and they have also taken control of her. Not only does Eleanor not look on the brighter side of life, she brings herself into a negative and darker sphere, a place in which she does not need to dwell, considering where she found herself living. She continues to, once she completely awakes, consider how she should act in front of everyone that day. She tells herself that what she had said the night prior in the company of her new "friends" had made her look childish and silly, so she makes the decision of and determines what to say. She does not want to look like a child, but she wants to act like one. She acts like a child who wants to grow

up, but in her case, she only pretends to want to grow up, and stays a child in the outer shell of a grown woman. Her situation is complicated, and her critical attitude does not help her. When one is mentally ill, reasoning and decision making skills are impaired, if not completely faulty. Not only does this include action, but also thought. Even though people cannot hear your thoughts, they are visible. Eleanor's dangerous thoughts turn her into someone she does not know, making it even harder for the other characters to know who she is. These self-criticisms create an even bigger problem for her, although they appear benign and insignificant.

As the events in the novel roll further along, the problems continue to tumble even farther. Eleanor and Theodora have experienced the existential being of the house through several different forms at this point, and are severely frightened and paranoid. Eleanor has lost trust in her companions, and in herself. Her paranoia has towered, and something as little as a smile from Theodora sets her off. After Theodora does just that, she thinks to herself "I would like to watch her dying," Eleanor thought, and smiled back and said, "Don't be silly." This is terrifying. The hatred, jealousy, and lack of belonging in Eleanor has escalated to heights that would get someone in serious legal trouble. While a four-year-old would usually not think in such a manner, the fact that her hatred roots itself in petty matters makes the situation worse. She now wishes physical pain upon Theodora, an undesired fate that Eleanor admits to deriving pleasure from. The fact that Eleanor would mentally enjoy the sight of who she thought was a great friend dying should send more red flags in the mind of readers. This is a sickening and gruesome

comment that gets skimmed over by other characters because it is merely a thought. However, when a thought turns into something larger, it turns into an action. And in this case, a very serious and hazardous action could be on the horizon.

As it might seem, Eleanor's life was polluted by confusion and disturbed thoughts, making it hard for her to find herself, not just at Hill House, but anywhere. As Eleanor journeyed and struggled to know herself, readers can glean a message from this novel: life, as a whole, will never be perfect. When examining Eleanor's thoughts and actions, her unrealistic expectations are apparently detrimental. Knowing that not everything will go your way comes with maturity, something Eleanor never truly gained. Did Eleanor ever really know who she was? No, she did not. A novel such as "The Haunting of Hill House" might scare a reader and make them doubt themselves even. Diversity and difficulty collide in everyday life, and the reaction a person gives to that challenge makes that person who they are. For Eleanor, one chance at life is not enough, because she cuts her life short due to her insanity. Eleanor Vance has become another lost soul on the long list of lost souls on the haunting grounds of Hill House.