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# Missing Mother: The Female Protagonist's Regression to the Imaginary Order in Shirley Jackson's *The Haunting of Hill House*, *The Sundial*, and *We Have Always Lived in the Castle*

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**MISSING MOTHER: THE FEMALE PROTAGONIST'S REGRESSION TO THE  
IMAGINARY ORDER IN SHIRLEY JACKSON'S *THE HAUNTING OF HILL HOUSE*,  
*THE SUNDIAL*, AND *WE HAVE ALWAYS LIVED IN THE CASTLE***

A thesis submitted to  
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Master of Arts

In  
English  
by

Julie Ann Baker

Approved by

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## APPROVAL OF THESIS

We, the faculty supervising the work of Julie Ann Baker, affirm that the thesis, *Missing Mother: The Female Protagonist's Regression to the Imaginary Order in Shirley Jackson's The Haunting of Hill House, The Sundial, and We Have Always Lived in the Castle*, meets the high academic standards for original scholarship and creative work established by the English M.A. Program and the College of Liberal Arts. This work also conforms to the editorial standards of our discipline and the Graduate College of Marshall University. With our signatures, we approve the manuscript for publication.



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## ABSTRACT

This study examines the psyches of the female protagonists from three of Shirley Jackson's Gothic novels: Eleanor Vance in *The Haunting of Hill House*, Aunt Fanny Halloran in *The Sundial*, and Merricat Blackwood in *We Have Always Lived in the Castle*. A psychoanalytic and feminist reading is applied to the texts to elucidate the characters' rejection of the Symbolic Order and regression to the Imaginary Order, and Lacan's theories of the *Desire of the Mother* and *objet petit a* are also applied to the texts to further delineate this regression. Julia Kristeva's work regarding the lost object of the mother is drawn upon as well in exploring the characters' desires for their mothers underscoring their position within the Imaginary. Finally, the protagonists' utilization of stories in establishing psychosocial boundaries is argued as an additional means by which these women usher themselves into fantasies removed from reality.

## INTRODUCTION

### THE RETURN TO THE IMAGINARY ORDER

Three of Shirley Jackson's novels—*The Haunting of Hill House*, *The Sundial*, and *We Have Always Lived in the Castle*—work within a Gothic tradition and feature three female protagonists who are also markedly Gothic in characterization: Eleanor Vance, Aunt Fanny Halloran, and Merricat Blackwood. While early analysis of Gothic texts favored merely identifying hallmark features of the genre in a “shopping list” approach (Delamotte 5), scholars have increasingly recognized the complexity of Gothic texts warranting further examination through various theoretical models. Likewise, the three Jackson novels and protagonists that are the subject of this study also exemplify the intricacies of the Gothic genre and present readers with characters whose psyches are as mysterious and intriguing as the houses in which they reside. Considering “Gothic characterization” often results in the “decentering of the subject”; Jackson adheres to this pattern as her characters’ “psychological boundaries are usually violated by Others . . .” (Hattenhauer 5, 2). In the case of Eleanor, Aunt Fanny, and Merricat, family members and especially parent figures—both biological and surrogate—transcend the boundaries of their personhood to attempt to control, and even possess, these three women; paradoxically, however, while all three female protagonists believe their primary desire is for autonomy, their repressed desire for reunion with their mothers is ultimately revealed and results in their retreat into delusions that entrap them.

As the Gothic “is preoccupied with the home” as well (Ellis, *Contested Castle* ix), it is no surprise that Eleanor, Aunt Fanny, and Merricat “just can’t seem to get out of the house” as is the case with so many Gothic female protagonists (Delamotte 10). Yet these women do not desire to escape their homes but rather barricade themselves within them to evade their surrounding

societies. Thus, another paradox is again evident in the narratives as the Gothic house reveals that while a home can serve as a “place of security and concord,” it can also simultaneously function as “a place of danger and imprisonment” (Ellis, *Contested Castle* x). While these three women attempt to reinforce their physical boundaries and, metaphorically, their psychological boundaries of selfhood for the promotion of their safety, this effort results instead in their entrapment in homes that are consuming and inescapable. Hill House and Eleanor become indistinguishable from one another by the conclusion of the narrative. Aunt Fanny locks herself in her home while she ludicrously awaits the apocalyptic appearance of a new world, and Merricat even boards up her home and no longer feels the freedom to venture farther than a few steps beyond her door for fear of being seen by townspeople.

Also adding to the complexity of these three female protagonists is a childlike characterization that is asymmetrical with their chronological ages, especially considering their “solitary” and sometimes “mousy” behavior (Miller xi). Not only does their passivity render them as immature youths rather than the adults that they are, their embrace of—and immersion in—story and fantasy also feels childlike in nature. Eleanor maintains a “running fantasy life” in which she creates fairy tales that “end in lovers meeting” (Miller xvi; Jackson, *Hill House* 40), and Merricat continuously reflects upon her “house on the moon” while also creating elaborate rituals to ward off others (Jackson, *Castle* 15). Aunt Fanny too authors the story that is the impetus behind those living within the Halloran house to prepare for the apocalypse, describing her deceased father’s return to warn of the end of the world and provide instructions on survival; yet even Aunt Fanny questions the plausibility of her own narrative, determining that it must be true as otherwise it would indicate her insanity: “somehow it must be real because if it is not real it is in my own head; unable to move, Aunt Fanny thought: It is real” (Jackson, *Sundial* 26). Yet

despite the juvenile and implausible qualities of such stories, they should not be downplayed as unimportant to the texts themselves. Rather, the three women use their stories as a means of attempting to control others and as a means to refortify their own psychological boundaries in an effort to feel less susceptible to the demands of others.

### **The Desire of the Mother**

The childlike characterization of Eleanor, Aunt Fanny, and Merricat is also reinforced by the constant presence of parental supervision. Though the protagonists' parents are known to be deceased, their buried biological parents—or sometimes stand-in parents—populate the narratives and wield an imposing presence within the text. Though Eleanor's birth-father has died, a patriarch haunts Hill House and makes his presence known through the moral rules and regulations he decreed to his own daughters. Dr. Montague also serves as a stand-in father in Eleanor's self-identified makeshift family; while good-natured, likeable, and even henpecked by his domineering wife, he functions in the role of the father who provides rules and order. But it is not a father that Eleanor seeks: rather, it is her mother that she desperately calls out to and searches for in the halls of Hill House. Aunt Fanny's father—or at least the imagined ghost of her father—makes appearances within the novel as well and, as father figures do in Jackson's three novels, provides her with rules regarding how to manage and live her life to avoid certain death; but, like Eleanor, it is her mother that Aunt Fanny relentlessly pursues through a maze configured around her mother's name. Merricat's father is present in a metonymical manner as she utilizes his log book and watch chain within her spells; but it is Charles, her cousin and unwanted surrogate father, that Merricat attempts to eradicate as he iron fistedly lays down new laws in an effort to control both Merricat and her sister, Constance. Merricat's relationship with her mother is markedly different, however: despite her mother's death, Merricat insists on her

mother's favorite room remaining in the order that she liked in a nearly shrine-like fashion. Merricat even emulates her mother in her dress as she wears her mother's jewelry and her shoes. Constance, who serves as a doting mother-figure for Merricat more than a sisterly companion, is so desired by Merricat that she even goes to the extent of setting fire to her own home to rid it of Charles, a man she views as a threat to winning Constance's affections.

Utilizing a Lacanian psychoanalytic approach to understanding this facet of the narratives sheds a great deal of light on them and aids in elucidating how the "protagonists are borne ceaselessly into the Imaginary" (Hattenhauer 3). It is within the realm of the Imaginary that the child erroneously feels a unity with—and even control over—her mother. While the child's sense of "complete control over its world is illusory . . . it is nevertheless very satisfying and very powerful" (Tyson 27). Thus this longing, known in Lacanian theory as the *Desire of the Mother*, is initiated by the mirror stage in which the child sees herself as a unified, whole being in the mirror; important as well is the presence of another—typically the mother—that holds the child while the child gazes at herself in the mirror. As Lacan states, "This jubilant assumption of his specular image by the child at the *infans* stage . . . would seem to exhibit in an exemplary situation the symbolic matrix in which the *I* is precipitated in a primordial form, before it is objectified in the dialectic of identification with the other . . ." (Lacan 503). Through this experience, the child establishes the "Ideal-I," and "this form situates the agency of the ego, before its social determination, in a fictional direction" (Lacan 503). Thus, the child feels herself to be whole and unified, as well as one with her mother, in the Imaginary Order that predates the acquisition of language and initiates the sense of loss and separation to come. Though it be a fictitious register as Lacan indicates, the child will nevertheless continue to pursue throughout life her belief in the Imaginary Order.

As the child enters the Symbolic Order upon the acquisition of language, she is introduced to the world of culture and patriarchy—and ultimately the father—with all its societal rules and expectations. This order is one that is characterized by loss, however, and especially the loss of the maternal object as suggested in part in Lacan’s theory regarding the *objet petit a* in which Lacan writes that “a is the object of desire” and “is reinstated in the place of the Other” (quoted in Lemaire 175). Anika Lemaire posits that the *objet petit a* represents “the radical lack lived by the child who is separated at birth from the mother” while also serving as “the phallus which the child wishes to be in order to complete its mother” (174). Critic Slavoj Žižek further points to the lack inherent within the *objet petit a*: “This is the *objet a*: an entity that has no substantial consistency, which is in itself ‘nothing but confusion’” (par. 17). But while the *objet petit a* represents on one level a void, it also functions as the “metonymic object of desire” that is “deprived of its symbolic reference to the unconscious signified (the object of lack being: the phallus)” (Lemaire 174). In this conception of Lacan’s *objet petit a*, the child living within the Symbolic Order finds substitutes to sublimate her unconscious desire for her mother and particularly her desire to become her mother’s sole satisfaction.

Critic Lois Tyson adds that the *objet petit a* can serve as “anything that puts me in touch with my repressed desire for my lost object” and ultimately becomes representative of the “preverbal fantasy union with our mother” (Tyson 28-9). Žižek acknowledges as well that the *objet petit a* becomes material when filtered through the psyche of the subject as it “acquires a definite shape only when looked upon from a standpoint distorted by the subject’s desires and fears . . . *objet a* is the strange object which is nothing but the inscription of the subject itself into the field of objects” (par. 17). Objects themselves cannot fill the void experienced when separated from one’s mother, but the fantastical desire for unification with one’s mother

consequently drives the individual to seek out other objects in an attempt to fill this void. In the case of all three female protagonists in Jackson's novels, they relentlessly pursue independence through claiming their own space and, in some cases, through attempting to control others.

Eleanor wishes to live forever within Hill House and Aunt Fanny desires the Halloran mansion, the usurpation of her sister-in-law also living within the mansion, and the appearance of a new world. Merricat too seeks to claim both the Blackwood home and her sister, Constance, entirely to herself. Yet it becomes evident that this pursuit of autonomy and the "objects" of homes and relationships is in actuality rooted in the characters' desire for union with their mothers, especially as the objects metonymically embody maternal features projected upon them by the protagonists. While the objects themselves do not bear the image of the maternal, the characters imbue them with their desire.

As Eleanor, Aunt Fanny, and Merricat become more and more unable to function within society, withdrawing into their homes and attempting to return entirely to the illusion of the Imaginary Order, the narratives repeatedly question reality. The opening paragraph of *Hill House* clearly exemplifies this process: "No live organism can continue for long to exist sanely under conditions of absolute reality; even larks and katydid are supposed, by some, to dream" (Jackson, *Hill House* 1). The many members of the Halloran household in *The Sundial*—and even Aunt Fanny herself—frequently question the reality of Aunt Fanny's interactions with her deceased father and are often troubled by the "vagueness" surrounding her encounters with him (Jackson, *Sundial* 111). Merricat's sense of reality must be questioned as well in *Castle* when she shares within the first paragraph "I have often thought that with any luck at all I could have been born a werewolf, because the two middle fingers on both my hands are the same length . . ." (Jackson, *Castle* 1). Clearly, Merricat believes in the fantastical. She even accepts superstitions that most

come to realize are no more than old wives' tales: "I remember roller-skating across the crack, and being careful not to step on it or it would break our mother's back" (Jackson, *Castle* 10).

Such examples alert the reader that the narrators and protagonists are not reliable—and are even delusional—which further points to their return to the Imaginary Order.

### **Kristeva & the Mother**

Feminist theory is frequently applied to Gothic texts, which often portray a female protagonist who becomes entrapped and encounters both physical and psychological boundaries. Critic Kate Ferguson Ellis suggests that "[t]he vast, imprisoning spaces that appear so regularly in the Gothic as castle, monasteries, and actual prisons can be read as metaphors for women's lives under patriarchy . . ." ("Gothic Heroine" 458). While not written within the Gothic tradition detailing literally imprisoning spaces, Jackson's autobiographical *Life Among the Savages* nevertheless overtly addresses metaphorical boundaries placed upon women—particularly artists—living within a patriarchal society. Just minutes away from delivering her third child, Jackson encounters a clerk at the hospital and the following exchange takes place:

"Name?" the desk clerk said to me politely, her pencil poised.

"Name," I said vaguely. I remembered, and told her.

"Age?" she asked. "Sex? Occupation?"

"Writer," I said.

"Housewife," she said.

"Writer," I said.

"I'll just put down housewife," she said. (67-8)

Though meant to be a humorous sketch, the serious implications underscoring the passage are both present and intentional. Despite Joyce Carol Oates's claim that "Jackson, like other gifted women writers of her time . . . had little sympathy for feminism, which would have seemed to her a demeaning sort of conformity" (par. 40), Jackson's work indicates she was not oblivious—nor insensitive—to the limitations placed upon women by a patriarchal society. It is not

coincidental either that within the three Gothic novels investigated in this study the domestic sphere plays such a prominent role, especially as “women, in general, tend to spend more time at home than men do, and are thus more intimately connected, for better or worse, to its interiority” (Ng 10). Importantly, Jackson presents readers with characters who are a far cry from those in allegiance with the Cult of True Womanhood: instead of depicting Suzy Homemakers who happily manage their homes and rear children, dysfunctional and disturbed women more interested in their own fantasy worlds are instead presented to readers. Even so, however, the Gothicized domestic spaces function as a prison within these women’s lives despite their rejection of traditional patriarchal expectations of femininity.

Considering the disrupted psychological states of Eleanor, Aunt Fanny, and Merricat, it becomes quickly apparent that Jackson’s “unique contribution” to the Gothic includes “her primary focus on women’s lives” in which she “investigates more deeply the kinds of psychic damage to which women are especially prone” (Franklin 3). Psychoanalytic feminist theory becomes especially relevant within this context, and Julia Kristeva sheds light on the characters’ actions, particularly their desires for their mothers. Eleanor, Aunt Fanny, and Merricat are all similar in that they desire autonomy and control, but this is impossible for them to achieve as they ultimately cannot escape—and do not truly want to escape—their mothers. While all three protagonists have to varying degrees repressed this desire and superficially appear to be in pursuit of their own space rather than their mothers, Kristeva elucidates women’s unique situation regarding their mothers that lends clarity to the actions of Jackson’s characters. In *Black Sun*, Kristeva argues that a woman continuously seeks the “lost object” of her mother due to the “problematic mourning for the lost object . . . not so fully lost” as “it remains throbbing, in the ‘crypt’ of feminine ease and maturity” (30). In other words, a woman’s separation from and loss

of her mother is problematic as the psychological and symbolic “mother” is intrinsic to the psyche of all women. Kristeva further asserts that “the maternal object having been introjected” by the woman also accounts for the mother’s continued presence in her life (*Black Sun* 28). While she maintains that “[f]or man and for woman the loss of the mother is a biological and psychic necessity, the first step on the way to becoming autonomous” (*Black Sun* 27), the woman cannot truly lose the mother through her unconscious imitation of her. Though “[m]atricide is our vital necessity” in becoming autonomous individuals (*Black Sun* 27), the “depressive or melancholic putting to death of the self is what follows” for women in most cases “instead of matricide” (*Black Sun* 28); thus, women are prone to experience psychological complications as expounded upon by Oliver: “Feminine sexuality is melancholic because to identify as women, females must identify with an abject maternal body” (*Portable Kristeva* 300). Women in particular find themselves in the unique and melancholic position of both “identify[ing] and refus[ing] identification” with the mother figure, and even as women attempt to follow the “rules” of her father, “[f]or Kristeva, even when it is about the father, it is also and always about the mother and the pleasure and horrors of her body” (Oliver, “Maternal Passions” 1-3).

These horrors of the body speak to the abject nature of the mother. Kristeva defines abjection in part as that which “disturbs identity, system, order” and “does not respect borders, positions, [or] rules” (*Powers of Horror* 4). Additionally, the abject “preserves what existed in the archaism of pre-objectal relationship, in the immemorial violence with which a body becomes separated from another body in order to be” (*Powers of Horror* 10). Consequently, the mother figure is not only an abject figure because of the child’s separation from her and subsequently the daughter’s own separation from herself, but the mother figure is also something which disrupts the woman’s identity. Because the woman is both drawn toward while also

paradoxically being required to reject her mother's body in light of a heteronormative culture, the woman's identity is complicated by this relationship with her mother and even her boundaries of selfhood are violated through her unconscious introjection of the mother figure. Thus, the child—and in particular the daughter—is reminded of her inevitable separation from her mother that is necessary yet psychologically impossible.

However, marriage and motherhood are posited by Kristeva as a means to again reconnect with one's mother. Kristeva writes of marriage that "if the couple truly becomes one, if it lasts" each spouse will discover that "he and she, has married, through the other, his or her mother" (quoted in Oliver, *Subjectivity* 66-7). Oliver explains Kristeva's assertion in the following manner: "Kristeva argues that the woman finds her mother in her husband. She finally becomes the phallus (satisfaction) for her mother in the person of her (nourishing) husband . . . The woman, like the man, needs to couple to refind the lost mother" (*Subjectivity* 67). As the husband becomes his wife's "phallic mother" in Kristeva's framework, the wife can subsequently feel as if she is finally her mother's "satisfaction" (*Subjectivity* 67). Likewise, through pregnancy and birth, Kristeva suggests the woman experiences reconciliation with her mother in the following manner: "By giving birth, the woman enters into contact with her mother; she becomes, she is her own mother; they are the same continuity differentiating itself . . ." ("Desire in Language" 303). Interestingly, though counter to many other feminist arguments, Kristeva "valorizes maternity" and even "argues that without motherhood, women remain extraneous and therefore most likely paranoid or hysterical or both" (Oliver, "Maternal Passions" 5); "[t]hrough motherhood, a woman identifies with her mother and re-fuses that incestuous bond in a socially acceptable way" while also "return[ing] to her own childhood . . ." (Oliver, "Maternal Passions" 6). In Kristeva's conception of motherhood, then, it is evident that the

experience allows for a woman to once again obtain unification with her own mother while also reappropriating the mother-daughter relationship.

This argument regarding marriage and motherhood further adds to the complexity of Jackson's three protagonists and the psychosis they experience. Firstly, Eleanor, Aunt Fanny, and Merricat have all failed to separate from their own mothers. In some cases, they imitate them through wearing their clothes and jewelry, thus signifying introjection. And, in the case of all three female protagonists, they actively seek out their mothers, albeit through means that allow them to repress this primary desire for their mother. Additionally, all three of these women have remained perpetually in childhood as evidenced by their immature actions, as well as their belief in delusions and fantasies. Also because of their continued attempts to remain in childhood, none of the women have been initiated into marriage or motherhood, which would aid in allowing them to reestablish a connection with their mothers in a socially acceptable manner and successfully function within a patriarchal society. As Kristeva suggests, "[a]cting out, where a woman is concerned, is more inhibited, less developed, and consequently it can be, when it takes place, more violent . . ." (*Black Sun* 85). It is not surprising, then, that these three characters become melancholic, depressed, and even murderous.

### **Shirley Jackson's Reception**

While Jackson's work is obviously complex and worthy of scholarly study, she has not always held this reputation. Many relegated her to the position of a domestic humorist due to the comical sketches of family life she published in books and magazines. As Angela Hague suggests regarding critics' thoughts on Jackson, her "many publications in women's magazines and two books that humorously fictionalized her domestic life with her husband and children . . . caused her devaluation by traditional male critics who had difficulty reconciling Jackson's

housewife status with her production of Gothic narratives” (73). Others were wary of Jackson’s lighthearted statements regarding practicing witchcraft and casting spells on her publishers (Heller). Still others rejected her stories that involved Gothic traditions, especially considering the Gothic’s tenuous position in history as critics often regarded such works as nothing more than “popular trashy novels” (Botting 22). Jackson’s husband, literary critic Stanley Hyman, asserted that Jackson had not received the attention that was due her, writing the following: “for all her popularity, Shirley Jackson won surprisingly little recognition. She received no awards or prizes, grants or fellowships; her name was often omitted from lists on which it clearly belonged, or which it should have led. She saw these honors go to inferior writers” (quoted in Hague 73).

Critic Darryl Hattenhauer offers a contrasting point to Hyman, however, as he asserts that Jackson received numerous awards during her own lifetime: “In the 1940s, 1950s, and 1960s, Shirley Jackson was ranked among America’s most highly regarded fiction writers . . . an article in 1955 on the strength of contemporary American fiction listed her with J.D. Salinger, Ellison, Flannery O’Conner . . .” and many other noteworthy authors still known and studied today (1). Over the years, however, Hattenhauer argues that Jackson has been removed from her rightful place in scholarship due to feminism’s tendency to precedent “realism over post-modernism,” as well as feminists’ search for “models rather than victims” (8). Additionally, Hattenhauer also acknowledges Jackson’s dismissal due to “[h]er heteroglossia, particularly her Gothicism” as “[s]he cannot be inserted into the myth of Southern Gothic, which holds that American Gothic is not of the dominant culture but of the South” (7). Thus, despite some critics’ perception that Jackson has long been ignored, a resurgence of interest in her works is occurring due to a new age of scholarship prepared to tackle the complexities of her narratives exemplifying post-modernist attributes.

## Final Thoughts

In sum, while drawing upon both Lacanian psychoanalysis and Kristeva's psychoanalytic feminist theory, this thesis will examine how Eleanor in *The Haunting of Hill House*, Aunt Fanny in *The Sundial*, and Merricat in *We Have Always Lived in the Castle* regress from the Symbolic Order to the Imaginary Order. As a result, these women are unable to function within society and, in most cases, completely retreat into their isolated homes. However, this shift does not occur in one instance, but gradually takes place through the characters' attempts to gain control and independence, as well as their pursuit of an *objet petit a*—primarily that of a large, sprawling home—masking their repressed desires for their mothers. While they seek control through stories, relationships with others, or even in some cases violence, these women never truly gain the control that they hope for and are, instead, imprisoned within their own environment and are revealed to be lacking autonomy, especially from their parents and in particular their mothers. Finally, in their pursuit of the homes and relationships they desire, they continue to enact their own childhoods and attempt to establish boundaries that separate them from their communities around them. In the end, however, the three women protagonists are unsuccessful in their mission to become independent and aid instead in their own self-destruction.

## CHAPTER 1

### HAUNTED BY MOTHER: ELEANOR'S ENTRAPMENT IN *THE HAUNTING OF HILL HOUSE*

*The Haunting of Hill House* is recognized as one of Shirley Jackson's "most famous" novels (Pascal, "Walking" 465), some even considering it a "masterpiece of literary horror on par with Henry James's *The Turn of the Screw*" (Franklin 409). Nevertheless, as is the case with so much of Jackson's work, the tendency has been by some critics to label and consequently reduce *Hill House* to merely a compelling ghost story. Critic Ruth Franklin, however, suggests that "such lazy pigeonholing does an injustice to the masterly way in which Jackson use[s] the classic tropes of suspense to plumb the depths of the human condition" (6-7). Regardless of the reader's opinion regarding the likeability of the text, it is undeniably complex in its blurred division between reality and fantasy. Even the plausibility of the haunting itself in *Hill House* is intentionally left unanswered throughout the text (Franklin 409), though "most critics assume that at least some of the supernatural manifestations at Hill House are produced by Eleanor's latent psychic powers, subconsciously activated . . . in moments of extreme emotional duress" (Bailey 40). Thus careful readers recognize that it is not so much the ghosts of Hill House that should take center stage but rather Eleanor who deserves the primary attention as the narrative is filtered through her psyche. Through our immersion in her thoughts, it becomes evident that the repressed desire for her mother and the guilt she feels regarding her mother's death lead to her gradual descent into insanity. It is ultimately this haunting of Eleanor's conscience that contributes to her eventual suicide.

## **Eleanor's Mother & Hill House**

Eleanor can best be defined by paradox. Throughout *Hill House*, conflicting depictions of her arise resulting in a complex character as perplexing as Hill House itself. Just as Dr. Montague, the anthropologist studying the hauntings of Hill House, points out that within Hill House “every angle is slightly wrong” (Jackson, *Hill House* 77), so too are the inner workings of Eleanor’s mind. While she voices to her makeshift family in Hill House that she is “always afraid of being alone” (Jackson, *Hill House* 118), in other moments she appears content with isolation, even experiencing “joyful loneliness” as she eats lunch alone in a restaurant on her way to Hill House (Jackson, *Hill House* 15). Likewise, as Eleanor drives to Hill House, she happily reflects upon the car becoming “a little contained world all her own” (Jackson, *Hill House* 10). Again paradox is present in relation to Eleanor’s family; while she desires to feel a sense of familial inclusion, she seemingly rejects her own relatives. At Hill House she reassures herself that she “belong[s]” amongst the group of individuals gathered there that she labels “a family” (Jackson, *Hill House* 43, 71), yet the narrator reveals that “[t]he only person in the world she genuinely hated, now that her mother was dead, was her sister” (Jackson, *Hill House* 3). Eleanor even “dislike[s] her brother-in-law and her five-year-old niece” (Jackson, *Hill House* 3). The irony exists then that while Eleanor longs for a family, she has rejected those biologically related to her and seemingly, by her own choosing, become an isolated individual.

A deeper reading of the text reveals, however, that at the heart of Eleanor’s paradoxical characterization is the ultimate paradox of her life: wanting to both be unified with and independent from her mother. Lacan suggests that this unification with our mothers is a desire common to us all, though we do not experience this consciously and repress the desire upon our acquisition of language and initiation into the Symbolic Order. Nevertheless, the latent drive to

return to the Imaginary Order in which we erroneously felt to be one with our mothers plays out in our lives, often through the *objet petit a* that “is the signifier of desire” and “necessarily refers to the phallus . . . of the impossible unification” with the mother (Lemaire 174). On a conscious level, Eleanor overwhelmingly rejects her mother who was “a cross old lady” she moved “from her chair to her bed” (Jackson, *Hill House* 4). The “eleven years she had spent caring for her invalid mother” has left Eleanor with an “inability to face strong sunlight without blinking” (Jackson, *Hill House* 3), and this cloistered lifestyle has resulted in Eleanor’s “reserved and shy” demeanor (Jackson, *Hill House* 3). As critic Darryl Hattenhauer suggests, Eleanor has “lost her early adulthood and the chance at a career and permanent home while her older sister escaped caring for her mother and started her own family” (157); consequently, not only does she despise her mother for limiting her freedom, but she is also jealous of her sister, Carrie, who escaped the fate of becoming her mother’s sole caregiver. Throughout the narrative, Eleanor continues to reveal more information to those staying within Hill House regarding her relationship with her mother. We learn that in her mother’s home, “the kitchen was dark and narrow, and nothing you cooked there ever had any taste” (Jackson, *Hill House* 81), pointing to the lifelessness she experienced there. When Theodora, another guest in Hill House with psychic abilities, asks her if she was “sorry” when her mother died, Eleanor merely replies that her mother “wasn’t very happy” (Jackson, *Hill House* 63), thereby not answering the question and consequently suggesting that she did not grieve her mother’s death. Eleanor’s readiness to sever her life from her mother’s control is further suggested when she reveals that her mother’s home was callously sold soon after her passing.

Considering Eleanor cannot “remember ever being truly happy in her adult life” and feels that she has “never been wanted *anywhere*” (Jackson, *Hill House* 3, 154), it is no wonder that she

so willingly accepts the invitation to Hill House despite Carrie's misgivings about the intentions of Dr. Montague. Eleanor's one hope stems from her faith "that someday something would happen," thus establishing her willingness to "have gone anywhere" (Jackson, *Hill House* 4), especially in pursuit of the assurance that she is "someplace where" she finally "belong[s]" (Jackson, *Hill House* 154). Eleanor is desperate to create a new life for herself in her recently claimed independence, yet it is ironically in Hill House that Eleanor's repressed desire for her mother resurfaces; the house itself becomes a space so inundated with her mother's presence that she cannot possibly escape her mother's influence. Upon her arrival, however, Eleanor initially experiences reservations regarding Hill House, asking herself "[w]hy am I here?" (Jackson, *Hill House* 19), while even contemplating leaving entirely: "I could turn my car around right here and now in front of these gates and go away from here, and no one would blame me" (Jackson, *Hill House* 21). In an effort to subdue her fears, Eleanor attempts to romanticize Hill House through the creation of adventurous backstories, thinking "[p]erhaps Hill House has a tower, or a secret chamber, or even a passageway going off into the hills and probably used by smugglers" (Jackson, *Hill House* 23). She even reflects "[p]erhaps I will encounter a devilishly handsome smuggler" (Jackson, *Hill House* 23), consistent with Eleanor's fixation upon the idea that "[j]ourneys end in lovers meeting" (Jackson, *Hill House* 25). Yet despite these attempts to quell her fears, not even these fictionalizations are enough to ignore the realities of Hill House as Eleanor acknowledges that "Hill House is vile" and "diseased" (Jackson, *Hill House* 23).

Ironically, however, Hill House is described in terms of a mother, though a decidedly unloving and deranged one. Soon after Eleanor enters Hill House, she reflects that "I am like a small creature swallowed whole . . . and the monster feels my tiny little movement inside" (Jackson, *Hill House* 29). Such a description of the house immediately calls to mind a pregnancy,

Eleanor becoming the child that the expectant, monstrous mother feels within the womb. Just as a mother knows when her child is moving in utero, so too does Hill House sense even the “tiny” movements of Eleanor; however, considering the cold mother that Hill House is, Eleanor’s “return to the womb . . . is also a grave” in such a space (Miller xix). Luke, who is another guest in Hill House invited by the doctor and a future owner of the home, further describes the cold mother that Hill House is: “‘It’s all so motherly,’ Luke said. ‘Everything so soft. Everything so padded. Great embracing chairs and sofas which turn out to be hard and unwelcome when you sit down, and reject you at once—’” (Jackson, *Hill House* 154). The “heavy iron knocker that ha[s] a child’s face” on it (Jackson, *Hill House* 25), as well as the nursery that is the heart of the home and “larger than the other bedrooms” (Jackson, *Hill House* 87), further depicts Hill House as a mother. Yet characteristic of Hill House’s aloof atmosphere is the nursery’s “indefinable air of neglect found nowhere else in Hill House,” and the “cold barrier” felt when entering the room (Jackson, *Hill House* 87). As Hill House is an unloving mother, it is no wonder that of all places the most neglected room is the nursery.

Eleanor describes her mother in a cold manner that mirrors Hill House, though her descriptions must be inferred as Eleanor often does not complete her thoughts aloud. When Eleanor encounters the library, she says “My mother—” and then “not knowing what she wanted to tell” the others, she “presse[s] herself against the wall” (Jackson, *Hill House* 75). It is likely that Eleanor attempts to avoid this room in particular as she was required to read “[l]ove stories” to her mother for “two hours every afternoon” (Jackson, *Hill House* 62). Eleanor cannot even “bear to read in the evenings” as a consequence of this experience (Jackson, *Hill House* 62). Critic Judie Newman theorizes that “Eleanor associates the library (because her mother forced her to read to her) . . . with her unmothering mother and herself as an unmothered child”

(Hattenhauer 161). Later Eleanor shares “I don’t like to feel helpless,” and then follows this comment with “[m]y mother—” (Jackson, *Hill House* 86), implying that perhaps her mother indeed made her feel helpless, likely through the control she exacted over Eleanor’s life. When Luke later reveals to Eleanor “I never had a mother” and in turn suggests to her that “[y]ou were so lucky . . . [y]ou had a mother” (Jackson, *Hill House* 123), Eleanor makes no comment; again, the underlying implications of Eleanor’s silence points to her feelings that, on the contrary, she was unlucky that she had the mother she did.

Paradoxically, however, it is her mother that Eleanor truly desires and pursues throughout her stay within Hill House. Though father figures are present in Hill House as represented by Dr. Montague and the marble statue of the previous patriarch, Hugh Crain, Eleanor does not seek them out in the manner that she searches for her mother in the house. When knocking on the walls in Hill House wakes her from sleep, Eleanor at first believes this is her mother and replies to her. She later even finds herself entering the library that she previously avoided as, again, the desire for her mother interrupts her sleep. When she reaches the door she calls out “Mother” and, believing she hears her mother’s laugh behind her, attempts to follow her voice up the stairs (Jackson, *Hill House* 168). Eleanor observes as well that “since Mother died I must have been sleeping even more poorly than I realized” (Jackson, *Hill House* 70), which is certainly true in Hill House. Even Mrs. Montague—the wife of Dr. Montague who later visits Hill House to conduct her own ghostly research—reveals that Eleanor’s true desire is for her mother. When Mrs. Montague identifies during her planchette session that she is communicating with “Eleanor Nellie Nell Nell” (Jackson, *Hill House* 141), she asks Eleanor “What do you want?” (Jackson, *Hill House* 142). Not surprisingly, the answer that comes through the planchette is “Mother” (Jackson, *Hill House* 142).

But even as Hill House seems to be haunted, it is possible Eleanor's unconscious internalization of her mother's attitudes and behaviors are what actually manifest within Hill House. Kristeva suggests that a woman often "introject[s]" her mother (*Black Sun* 28), and many of Eleanor's thoughts sound like a scolding, "cross" inner-mother (Jackson, *Hill House* 4). When she worries that her new red sandals and sweater she specifically bought to wear at Hill House do not match in color, she reprimands herself by thinking "[s]erves me right anyways . . . for wanting to wear such things; I never did before" (Jackson, *Hill House* 33). Red is a particularly symbolic color in this instance as it represents on a small scale Eleanor's rebellious attempt to claim her independence and reject her mother's control. Thus it is likely that Eleanor's mother would have criticized Eleanor's new clothing choices, especially in light of the motivations underscoring her desire to wear them. Consequently, as Eleanor is subconsciously sensitive to her mother's reception of her decisions, she in turn reprimands herself due to the introjection of her mother. Interesting as well is Eleanor's open rejection of the love stories that she was forced to read to her mother, yet it is love stories that she tells her own self, even convincing herself that she will meet a lover at Hill House. Again, despite Eleanor's best efforts to depart from her mother, Eleanor finds herself drawn to the very stories that her mother enjoyed. Even Eleanor is surprised at times by her own thoughts that are hijacked by her introjected mother. At one point, Eleanor contemplates "I am learning the pathways of the heart . . ." but finds herself quickly "wonder[ing] what she could have meant by thinking any such thing" (Jackson, *Hill House* 121). She thinks that Luke is "so extremely vain" while again scolding herself for being "foolish or bold," only thereafter to be "amazed at her own thoughts" (Jackson, *Hill House* 121).

Even when Theodora experiences episodes with Eleanor such as the loud banging on the doors that occurs at night and seemingly legitimizes the actuality of a haunting, it is possible that

this emanates from Eleanor rather than Hill House. Eleanor reveals at Hill House that it is her “fault” that her mother passed away as she did not respond one night to her knocking on the walls, questioning if she actually did “wake up” but instead opted to ignore her mother rather than retrieve her medicine (Jackson, *Hill House* 156). In light of this fact, critic Jodey Castricano suggests “it seems likely that the sounds resonating in the hall could be an aural manifestation of her guilty conscience regarding her mother. We might even buy into the notion that the sound is produced by Eleanor’s telekinesis—even if she is not aware of it—which would explain why Theo is able to hear it, too . . .” (91). Important to consider as well is the episode of the falling stones on her family’s home following her father’s death that Dr. Montague regards as “poltergeist” activity (Jackson, *Hill House* 52). Though Eleanor suggests to him that the stones fell due to the “neighbors” who “were always against us because” her mother “wouldn’t mix with them” (Jackson, *Hill House* 53), she soon begins to consider the possibility that haunting phenomena may stem from her. When Eleanor hears laughter in the hallway, she asks herself “[a]m I doing it?” (Jackson, *Hill House* 149), only to conclude “it’s inside my head and it’s getting out, getting out, getting out” (Jackson, *Hill House* 149). Again, at a later time when Eleanor hears her name called, she reflects, that she “heard it inside and outside her head” (Jackson, *Hill House* 159). Considering Eleanor’s potential power to *create* such events, it is likely that Eleanor’s desire for her mother is the actual haunting of Hill House. It is not Eleanor’s mother writing “HELP ELEANOR COME HOME” across the walls (Jackson, *Hill House* 107), but Eleanor’s repressed guilt and longing that generates this message.

Yet despite the fact that a ghostly presence in Hill House—as well as Hill House’s sentience—is debatable, Eleanor truly experiences an acute haunting of her own mother at Hill House. Eleanor wants her mother even though she does not want her mother, and as Hill House

metonymically represents her mother, it draws Eleanor toward itself and makes it impossible for her to escape or even *desire* to escape. In this manner, the house becomes the *objet petit a* that Eleanor believes herself to be in pursuit of rather than her mother. As critic Richard Pascal suggests, “[u]nquestionably for Eleanor the allure of the house, and also its horror, is bound up with the sense that it wishes to envelop her in a maternal embrace so comprehensive that her newly won independence and all vestiges of her individuality will be subsumed utterly” (“Walking” 469). She reflects upon her happiness there, referring to the house as “[l]ovely Hill House (Jackson, *Hill House* 106), while also recognizing how “physically comfortable” the house is (Jackson, *Hill House* 66). She feels that she belongs in its environment and that, for once, she is finally wanted; consequently, she decides to “relinquish my possession of this self of mine, abdicate, give over willingly what I never wanted at all,” even determining that “whatever it wants of me it can have” (Jackson, *Hill House* 150). Because Eleanor feels Hill House *wants* something from her, she is drawn toward it. Even if it is her very life, Eleanor is willing to hand this over to Hill House in exchange for feeling desired and a sense of belonging.

Once Eleanor decides to give herself entirely up to Hill House, it is then that she believes herself to experience unity with the house itself, signifying her own insanity and ultimately her return to the Imaginary Order. Eleanor can “hear everything, all over the house” (Jackson, *Hill House* 152), and she becomes so sensitive she is able to perceive “the dust drifting gently in the attics” and “the wood aging” (Jackson, *Hill House* 165). Her sense of reality is altered as she perceives that “time, as she had always known time, stop[ped]” and later reflects that “time is ended now” (Jackson, *Hill House* 131, 172). This total identification with the house is further apparent when, racing through the halls of Hill House, Eleanor reflects that “*we* trick them so easily” (Jackson, *Hill House* 170; emphasis added). When the others in the household demand

that she leave, Eleanor's assertion "I can't leave" is not surprising (Jackson, *Hill House* 176). On one level, her statement indicates her recognition of her entrapment within a sentient house that will not permit her to leave. Yet her statement can also be interpreted to mean that Eleanor feels she herself is choosing to stay within the home, which is further suggestive of her inextricable bond to Hill House. It is within the home that Eleanor senses she is finally a person of influence as she is a shareholder of Hill House's power. Yet her perception that the home *desires* her—even if this means she is imprisoned—is alluring as Hill House metonymically points to her mother. Within this context, Eleanor is finally her mother's object of desire and her mother's ultimate satisfaction. Thus, due to her perception of more closely approximating a whole and unified Ideal-I who is the love-object of her mother, Eleanor is further delivered into the Imaginary Order.

These interlocking identifications Eleanor has made between mother, daughter, and house become the final catalyst in her decision to never leave. After she believes to have encountered her mother in Hill House during her final night there, Eleanor determines that evening that "I am home" (Jackson, *Hill House* 171). Eleanor even wishes to remain there "[w]alled up alive" (Jackson, *Hill House* 177), which again highlights the paradox of Eleanor's recognition of her entrapment balanced with her desire to stay in the house. Finally Eleanor decides that her journey will end in the meeting of her mother as she willingly commits suicide, driving her car into a tree, in an effort to forever remain at Hill House. Yet sadly, not even this action achieves for Eleanor what she hoped. As she drives toward the tree she wonders "*Why* am I doing this?" (Jackson, *Hill House* 182), seemingly to return momentarily from her insanity. But reality has returned too late for Eleanor, and readers learn that even in death Eleanor cannot remain at Hill House. The same description of Hill House that begins the novel also ends the novel; just as

before, “whatever walk[s] there, walk[s] alone” in Hill House (Jackson, *Hill House* 182). Even in death, Eleanor has not been incorporated into Hill House and whatever her fate is following her suicide, living there in the Imaginary Order with her mother has not been achieved.

### **Eleanor’s Stories**

Eleanor does not at first willingly submit herself to Hill House and her repressed desire for her mother, but attempts to control her own psychological boundaries through the stories she tells herself and others. She is aware of this desire, reflecting that “what I want in all this world is peace, a quiet spot to lie and think, a quiet spot among the flowers where I can dream and tell myself *sweet stories*” (Jackson, *Hill House* 143; emphasis added). As is characteristic of Eleanor, however, these stories again contain paradoxes. While Eleanor wishes on one level for isolation, people nevertheless populate her narratives. Important, however, is the control that Eleanor has over those in her stories and the security and protection she is afforded, often by magical means. Thus, while Eleanor celebrates isolation and living alone, she nevertheless desires a community of others in which she is respected, celebrated, and even in a position of importance and authority.

The three fairy tales that Eleanor tells herself while driving to Hill House are particularly important to consider as elements of these stories reoccur throughout *Hill House*. In the first fairy tale, Eleanor sees “a vast house” while driving to Hill House that has “a pair of stone lions *guarding* the steps” (Jackson, *Hill House* 12; emphasis added); not only do the lions offer her protection but “a nightlight” also “guard[s]” her “from the hall” as she sleeps, which offers her additional protection (Jackson, *Hill House* 12). A “little dainty old lady” is described as Eleanor’s caregiver who provides her with a “glass of elderberry wine each evening” for Eleanor’s “health’s sake” (Jackson, *Hill House* 12). Eleanor too fantasizes that the townspeople

“bow[] to me on the streets of the town because everyone” is “proud of my lions” (Jackson, *Hill House* 12). While Eleanor lives a mostly solitary life in this fairy tale, she is taken care of by others, protected, and respected by those in her community, which is precisely the opposite of her actual experiences in life. Additionally, a maternal figure—that of the elderly woman—also appears within the story and functions in the role of a caregiver, which Eleanor has not had for the past eleven years as she cared for her mother.

The second fairy tale Eleanor devises while driving to Hill House is set in a field she passes containing oleander trees that surround a “gateway” of “ruined stone pillars” also in this field (Jackson, *Hill House* 13). Again, Eleanor’s dream of protection surfaces in her fairy tale, and she imagines that the oleander trees are there due to the “gateway they protected” and even shield the land “from the eyes of people passing” (Jackson, *Hill House* 13). Eleanor imagines that if she enters “through the protective barrier,” which is “between the magic gateposts,” a garden will be revealed (Jackson, *Hill House* 13). Again, Eleanor envisions herself encountering “stone lions”— a repeated symbol of protection— as she enters this garden, and the theme of someone waiting upon her emerges: “I will walk up the low stone steps . . . into a courtyard where a fountain plays and the queen waits, weeping, for the princess to return. She will drop her embroidery when she sees me, and cry out to the palace servants . . . to prepare a great feast, because the enchantment is ended . . . ” (Jackson, *Hill House* 13). Not only does the queen await Eleanor, but Eleanor is also powerful—she alone can break a spell and establish order to a land once again. Thus, Eleanor imagines herself as an individual who others respect and who has the ability to achieve living “happily ever after” (Jackson, *Hill House* 13). Even a “prince” is enthralled by Eleanor’s power, “riding, bright in green and silver with a hundred bowmen riding behind him” to reach Eleanor (Jackson, *Hill House* 14); however, Eleanor ends her fairy tale here

and never allows herself to imagine the meeting with the prince. While it seems as if Eleanor may be looking for romance, Eleanor's conclusion of the story before they embrace suggests she is even more interested in being recognized as a powerful individual rather than finding romantic love. Additionally, it is the queen—another mother-figure—that takes a prominent role in the story. She is the one waiting, hoping that the princess will return, and she is the one that reacts overjoyed that Eleanor has returned.

Even small homes appeal to Eleanor in their ability to afford her a space of her own and, by extension, freedom and power. As she drives past a “tiny cottage buried in a garden,” Eleanor thinks to herself “I could live there all alone” (Jackson, *Hill House* 15). Eleanor determines she will “plant oleanders by the road,” again a reference to protection that shields her from outsiders. In the house Eleanor also imagines that she will “raise white cats and sew white curtains for the windows and sometimes come out of my door to go to the store to buy cinnamon and tea and thread” (Jackson, *Hill House* 15). Yet people do come to Eleanor in order to have “their fortunes told” and receive “love potions for sad maidens” that Eleanor has concocted (Jackson, *Hill House* 15). This fairy tale as well details an independent Eleanor who does not rely upon others but is instead respected by others. She is even in a position of power as others come to her to heal their relationships or to seek out their fortunes. Eleanor again imagines herself as someone that others admire and seek out for her attributes, not because they wish to control her.

The “cup of stars” episode, though not a fairy tale per se, symbolically relates to many of the themes she explores through her stories. During her lunch, Eleanor observes a mother explaining to a waitress that her daughter is crying due to “want[ing] her cup of stars,” which is a “little cup” that “has stars in the bottom” and is used when the little girl “drinks her milk . . . at home” (Jackson, *Hill House* 14). While observing this encounter and the girl's mother asking her

to compromise and drink her milk from another glass, Eleanor telepathically communicates the following to her: “[d]on’t do it . . . insist on your cup of stars; once they have trapped you into being like everyone else you will never see your cup of stars again; don’t do it” (Jackson, *Hill House* 15). Again Eleanor addresses the idea of independence in this episode and while she frames it as a teachable moment for the little girl, Eleanor is in actuality coaching herself. Now that she feels she is a “new person, very far from home” (Jackson, *Hill House* 19), this advice is directed to a future self that she is attempting to create apart from her mother.

Despite her longing for independence and power, however, Eleanor is a fearful individual who frequently experiences social anxiety. We learn that Eleanor is “afraid of strange dogs and jeering women and young hoodlums” (Jackson, *Hill House* 16). When she finally reaches the town of Hillsdale—stopping there despite the doctor’s warning to not do so, again evidencing her rebellion against paternalism—Eleanor notices a man and woman laughing amongst themselves. Her fears manifest and she thinks that her coffee may be “poisoned” as “it certainly looked it” (Jackson, *Hill House* 17). As she approaches the gates of Hill House and meets Dudley, a caretaker of the home, she will not turn back from the house—even though she desires to do so—in part because he may “laugh” at her (Jackson, *Hill House* 25). Eleanor criticizes her appearance as well, thinking that her hand is “badly shaped” (Jackson, *Hill House* 64), while also overly aware of her actions as others might take note of the “silly things” she says (Jackson, *Hill House* 68).

Nevertheless, this does not stop Eleanor from attempting to utilize stories to not only bolster her own confidence but to shape the opinions of others she is newly meeting. She tells Theodora that “I have a little place of my own” and that she “had to look for weeks before [she] found [her] little stone lions on each corner of the mantel” (Jackson, *Hill House* 64). She even

reports to Theodora that “once [she] had a blue cup with stars painted on the inside” (Jackson, *Hill House* 64). While Eleanor initially told these stories to herself, later she shares elements of these stories with others—making sure to cast them as reality—in an effort to refashion herself in Theodora’s eyes and, more importantly, to recreate her own personal reality. Eleanor even tells non-verbal stories through her wearing of red clothing and red toenail polish, which she “never did before” (Jackson, *Hill House* 33). From this, she develops new ideas regarding her personhood: “I am, she thought, going from my red toes to the top of my head, individually an I, possessed of attributes belonging only to me” (Jackson, *Hill House*). In sum, Eleanor’s fantasies allow her to feel as if she is independent and in control of her own life. It is through story that she seeks to author her own self and authorize herself to become the liberated, powerful person she wishes to be. Sadly, however, Hill House gradually breaks through these barriers she attempts to establish as it begins to possess her thoughts and derail her ability to create imaginative narratives.

### **The Imagined Partner**

Kristeva details in *Black Sun* a way in which a woman may attempt to escape the introjected mother. She writes it is “require[d] that the melancholy object”—referring to the mother—must “literally be liquefied” as she “block[s] the psychic and bodily interior” of the woman (78). She then suggests that an “imagined partner” can help a woman accomplish this “jouissance” in the following manner:

Who is capable of doing it? An imagined partner able to dissolve the mother imprisoned within myself by giving me what she could and above all what she could not give me, while remaining in a different place—no longer the mother’s but that of the person who can obtain for me the major gift she was never able to offer: a new life [. . .] The feminine interior [. . .] can then cease being the crypt that encloses the dead woman and conditions frigidity. Putting to death the death-bearing mother within me endows the partner with the appeal of a life-giver, precisely of one who is “more than a mother. (78-9)

Thus, it is another—an “imagined partner”—that a woman perceives as offering her a “new life” that permits separation from the mother. Not only does Eleanor attempt to escape the repressed desire for her mother through stories, but she also attempts to do so through her pursuit of Theodora. She is immediately drawn to Theodora upon their first meeting and observes that “[s]he is charming . . . not at all the sort of person who belongs in this dreary, dark place” (Jackson, *Hill House* 31). We also learn that opposites may in fact attract as Theodora is “not at all like Eleanor” considering that “[d]uty and conscience” are considered by Theodora as “attributes which belong properly to Girl Scouts” (Jackson, *Hill House* 5). Theodora is also much more flamboyant than the quiet, reserved Eleanor. Her world is “one of delight and soft colors” (Jackson, *Hill House* 5), and even upon her initial meeting with Dr. Montague she “go[es] laughing into the laboratory, bringing with her a rush of floral perfume” (Jackson, *Hill House* 5). When Eleanor looks at Theodora “[w]ith her eyes almost closed she could see Theodora only as a mass of color sitting on the floor” (Jackson, *Hill House* 85). Theodora even rejects tradition as she goes by her given rather than her surname. The completely self-possessed Theodora is stylish, colorful, unique, and flippant in attitude toward what many might consider serious situations. As Eleanor attempts to rebel against her previous life, stealing the car in an act of defiance of her sister and uncharacteristically wearing red clothing, it is no wonder that Theodora’s temperament appeals to her. Even Theodora recognizes the impact she will have on Eleanor, stating to her “by the time I’m through with you, you will be a different person” (Jackson, *Hill House* 85). She tells Eleanor that as she “dislike[s] being with women of no color . . . I will put red polish on your toes” (Jackson, *Hill House* 85). Again, the color red reappears, and it is no mistake that Theodora applies this symbolic hue to Eleanor’s toes, thereby demonstrating abject behavior in relishing rebellion for rebellion’s sake. Thus, Eleanor’s

friendship with Theodora is significant in that this pairing is one more avenue in which Eleanor can seek out the independence and freedom from constraint that she so desires.

Eleanor is also affected by Theodora as it is in her company that Eleanor begins to regress into more childish behavior. Critic Richard Pascal notes, “Eleanor’s gradual descent into childishness marks *The Haunting of Hill House* as a sort of *bildungsroman* in reverse: she doesn’t grow into adulthood, but rather develops her hitherto latent capacity for immaturity . . .” (“Walking” 480). Immediately after Eleanor and Theodora meet, they rush like children might down the stairs, “moving with color and life against the dark woodwork” with “their feet clattering” (Jackson, *Hill House* 34). In Theodora’s presence, even Eleanor begins to “mov[e] with color” (Jackson, *Hill House* 34), replicating Theodora’s “world” of “soft colors” (Jackson, *Hill House* 5). When they reach a brook on Hill House’s property, Eleanor tells a fairy tale aloud to Theodora, imagining “[t]his is where the princess comes to meet the magic golden fish who is really a prince in disguise” (Jackson, *Hill House* 37). Following this outing Theodora describes them both as “two *little girls* who were planning a picnic down by the brook and got scared home by a rabbit” (Jackson, *Hill House* 41; emphasis added). Later in the narrative they are described as sitting “cross-legged on the hall floor . . . playing tic-tac-toe” (Jackson, *Hill House* 110). Even Dr. Montague often sees them in terms of a “pack of children” rather than the adults that they are (Jackson, *Hill House* 104). Thus, Theodora not only represents rebellion to Eleanor but also a form of childishness that Eleanor has previously been denied in her mother’s home.

Yet this relationship begins to sour as, much like children, Theodora and Eleanor fight with one another regarding the strange events occurring in Hill House. When they first discover “HELP ELEANOR COME HOME” written in chalk in the hall (Jackson, *Hill House* 107), Theodora is the first one to suggest to Eleanor “[m]aybe you wrote it yourself” (Jackson, *Hill*

*House* 108). This enrages Eleanor, and she asserts that “I’m not the spoiled baby” (Jackson, *Hill House* 108), and soon directly criticizes Theodora’s “iron selfishness” (Jackson, *Hill House* 108). Yet as Theodora is often described as having “caught at Eleanor’s thought[s]” (Jackson, *Hill House* 36), Theodora’s accusation that Eleanor herself wrote the message is perhaps due to her psychic ability to perceive what Eleanor has left unsaid. Another pivotal moment in their relationship occurs after Theodora discovers that her clothes have been covered in blood and torn off their hangers. Written above her bed, also in blood, is the message “HELP ELEANOR COME HOME ELEANOR” (Jackson, *Hill House* 114). Again, Eleanor and Theodora respond by sparring with one another. Theodora reacts very badly, “sobbing wildly in her room and kicking at the wardrobe door” (Jackson, *Hill House* 114), and Eleanor feigns concern toward Theodora while delivering latent insults, stating that “after the sight of Theo screaming over her poor clothes and accusing me of writing my name all over the wall . . . I’m getting used to her blaming me for everything” (Jackson, *Hill House* 115). Eleanor states “I hope my clothes will be good enough for her” now that Theodora must wear Eleanor’s clothing as her own have been ruined (Jackson, *Hill House* 115), thereby speaking to Theodora’s snobbery and again insulting her in a passive-aggressive manner. Also inherent within this remark is Eleanor’s attempts to gain further power as she is dressing—and even mothering—Theodora.

When taking into consideration this stark difference between Eleanor’s initial perception of Theodora with her later perceptions of her, such episodes point to Eleanor’s introjection of her mother. As Eleanor is drawn to Theodora and sees her as a partner that can offer her a new life vastly different from the one that she experienced with her mother, Eleanor subconsciously feels guilt over this allegiance she is forming with Theodora as her mother would have felt threatened by it. Significant as well is the placement of the second message over Theodora’s bed, which

hints at Eleanor's infatuation with Theodora that goes beyond platonic feelings. Critic Dale Bailey suggests that "[a]t some level, Eleanor wishes to punish Theo for her sexual transgressions—and, by extension, to punish that aspect of her own personality which harbors similar desires . . ." (Bailey 40); yet, if Eleanor unconsciously replicates the attitude of her mother, it is more likely that it is not Eleanor herself punishing her actions but rather her introjected mother.

The color red is again significant in this scene, though it has evolved into a threatening color. While it initially symbolized independence in relation to Eleanor, it is now associated with blood and, in turn, revenge. Though Eleanor insists to herself that the red on Theodora's clothing "must be paint" as "what else *could* it be?" (Jackson, *Hill House* 114), the "atrocious" smell suggests that, as the doctor observes, it is indeed blood (Jackson, *Hill House* 114). As red is also associated with Theodora who painted red on Eleanor's toenails to give her color, it becomes even more plausible that if Eleanor is possessed by Hill House—and thereby the thoughts that she unconsciously believes her mother would have had—that she would despise Theodora who is aiding in her rebellion. Additionally, as this introjection emanates from within Eleanor rather than without, it is likely that Eleanor herself "apparently smears menstrual blood on Theodora's clothing and then blocks out any memory of doing so" (Hattenhauer 163). This reading is further strengthened when considering that during Eleanor's final night in Hill House she finds Theodora's scarf and places "one end of it between her teeth and pull[s], tearing" it (Jackson, *Hill House* 170). This destruction of the scarf occurs in the context of Eleanor's pursuit of her mother as she chases after her in the halls of Hill House, and her compulsion to destroy Theodora's possessions—especially her stylish, colorful clothing—likely stems from the internationalization of her mother's attitudes that would have rejected not only such fashions but

Theodora herself. In this sense, Eleanor ironically is becoming the monstrous mother who harshly delivers discipline to those who she perceives as strong-willed, independent, and ultimately a threat to her own authority.

Yet as Eleanor continues to lose her sense of reality throughout her stay at Hill House, her thoughts not only stem from the introjection of her mother but her own derangement as well; her introjection and derangement are especially evident as Eleanor engages in sick, murderous wishes. Regarding Theodora following the bedroom episode, Eleanor later thinks “I hate her” and “she sickens me” (Jackson, *Hill House* 117). She especially despises her as she wears her red sweater, thinking “she is all washed and clean and wearing my red sweater” (Jackson, *Hill House* 117). Eleanor even contemplates that “I would like to hit her with a stick” and then dwells on how she “would like to batter her with rocks” (Jackson, *Hill House* 117). Finally, these thoughts crescendo into Eleanor saying to herself “I would like to watch her dying” (Jackson, *Hill House* 117). Even Eleanor herself senses her own teetering between reality and delusion, stating the following to the others soon after she has these violent thoughts: “I *hate* seeing myself dissolve and slip and separate so that I’m living in one half, my mind, and I see the other half of me helpless and frantic and driven and I can’t stop it . . .” (Jackson, *Hill House* 118). This dissolution of Eleanor’s sanity may not only stem from her repressed desire for her mother, and consequently the introjection of her mother, but also her own confrontation in the house with the reality that she willingly aided in her mother’s death. In this same scene, Luke suggests that our real fear is “seeing ourselves clearly and without disguise” (Jackson, *Hill House* 118), and it is in Hill House where Eleanor confronts the possibility that she went back to sleep knowing her mother needed help. In fact, Eleanor could only know that this occurred if she *had*, in fact, woken up and ignored her mother. Pairing this with the narrator’s assertion that Hill House is

“not sane” and “[n]o live organism can continue for long to exist sanely under conditions of absolute reality” (Jackson, *Hill House* 1), it becomes apparent that Eleanor experiences the absolute reality of herself in Hill House. She realizes that she hated her mother to the extent of allowing for her untimely death, and when coupled with her paradoxical repressed desire for her mother, it becomes more understandable that this is the source of the irrational thoughts that she directs toward others and herself.

Yet despite Eleanor’s increasingly extended moments of irrationality, her longing for Theodora nevertheless persists in times when she is not as emotionally distraught and again attempts to fortify her psychological boundaries. She resorts to her stories, telling herself the following in regard to Theodora: “I will find a little house, or maybe an apartment like hers. I will see her every day, and we will go searching together for lovely things—gold-trimmed dishes, and a white cat, and a sugar Easter egg, and a cup of stars. I will not be frightened or alone any more; I will call myself just *Eleanor*” (Jackson, *Hill House* 157). Again, Eleanor incorporates her symbols of protection and independence from previous fairy tales, but Theodora does not reciprocate her feelings, asking Eleanor if she “*always*” goes where she is “not wanted” (Jackson, *Hill House* 154). Eleanor insists that she will follow her regardless and reflects “I was very right to come because journeys end in lovers meeting” (Jackson, *Hill House* 158), revealing that consciously Eleanor identifies Theodora as her object of affection. Yet Eleanor’s repressed desire for her mother and confrontation with the reality of her role in her mother’s death is what truly controls Eleanor despite her attempts to escape. Critic Laura Miller suggests the following: “Hill House will force her to acknowledge that she will never be free, that her dreams of leaving her corrosive past and her family behind are illusions, that wherever she goes she will only find the same hell she was running away from. Escape is a mirage. This is the real horror of Hill

House” (xvii). Eleanor’s mother, and by extension Hill House, have infiltrated Eleanor’s own psyche and despite her best attempts to escape—whether that be through stories or through seeking out a relationship with Theodora—Eleanor will never be freed from life as she knows it.

### **Final Thoughts**

Throughout Hill House, paradoxes abound. Eleanor is a “solitary, mousy” individual (Miller xi), yet she wishes to become rebellious and emulate others like Theodora. Likewise, she desires to be with Theodora, yet later imagines herself acting violently toward her. Hill House as well represents a paradox to Eleanor as she initially desires to run away from Hill House but, by the conclusion of the novel, is so willing to stay in Hill House—even “walled up” (Jackson, *Hill House* 177)—that she commits suicide to do so. But underscoring all of these paradoxes is Eleanor’s repressed desire for her mother. While her mother in life was cold and rejecting and Eleanor consciously desires independence from her mother and fortifies her psychological boundaries through stories, Eleanor’s repressed desire for her mother nevertheless surfaces in Hill House. She longs for the fictional sense of belonging she believed was experienced in the Imaginary Order and, ultimately, hopes that her journey will end there in meeting the lover of her mother. Through the unconscious internalization of her mother—as well as the guilt Eleanor feels regarding her mother’s death—Eleanor projects her mother into Hill House. As time stops for Eleanor in this haunting house, even death itself becomes attractive to her; in her delusion, Eleanor is born back again into the Imaginary Order, only to realize in her final moments that the Imaginary Order does not truly exist.

## CHAPTER 2

### REENACTING MOTHER: AUNT FANNY'S NEW WORLD IN *THE SUNDIAL*

Critics recognize *The Sundial* as one of, if not the most, comical works Shirley Jackson authored. Cited by Jackson's biographer Ruth Franklin as "[p]erhaps Jackson's funniest novel" (387), it details the efforts of a motley crew living within a large mansion to prepare for an apocalypse they believe is impending. Franklin further suggests that much of the hallmark "black comedy" within *The Sundial* is due to "the spectacle of how singularly unfit its characters are to contend with an event of such cosmic significance" (387). As is common with Jackson's works, however, critics at the time of the book's publication in 1958 largely failed to appreciate Jackson's novel. While admittedly critics "[a]most unanimously . . . praised Jackson's writing" (Franklin 397), the novel's conclusion—which occurs immediately prior to the apocalypse—received much criticism. Even Jackson's husband disapproved of the denouement and insisted she alter the ending, though Jackson resolutely determined "i [sic] refuse to change the ending of the book . . ." (quoted in Franklin 393). Other reviewers not only found fault with the conclusion but were mystified by the entire plot itself, one reviewer writing "[a] bizarre tale with an enigmatic ending" (quoted in Franklin 398).

Despite *The Sundial* being another of Jackson's "undervalued text[s]" (Pascal, "New World" 99), the novel is nevertheless a complex narrative that warrants further attention. Darryl Hattenhauer posits that *The Sundial* is a "comic satire" meant to provide commentary on the "central myths of America's dominant culture," especially the belief that "America is God's favorite nation" (137). Richard Pascal also reads the novel with political undertones, though viewing it in more limited terms as a "comment upon contemporary social issues" of Jackson's time in which American anxiety centered upon the possibility of bombings and nuclear war

(“New World” 99). Yet while critics largely read the text through a sociopolitical lens, utilizing a psychoanalytic approach that incorporates both a Lacanian model and Kristeva’s theory regarding the lost object of the mother sheds new light upon the narrative and especially upon the character of Aunt Fanny. Like Eleanor in *Hill House*, it is evident that Aunt Fanny desires her mother, which is even signified by her father’s prominent role in her visions. Though Aunt Fanny’s *objet petit a* is her belief in a new world and, subsequently, the Halloran mansion that will safely deliver her to this place, it is ultimately her longing for her mother and the fictitious Imaginary Order characterized by unity and control that she longs to claim.

### **Aunt Fanny & the Desire of the Mother**

Aunt Fanny is not looked upon favorably by the others living within the Halloran mansion and is often disregarded, especially by the domineering Orianna who is the newly established matriarch of the Halloran mansion. Aunt Fanny too recognizes her lowered standing under Orianna’s control, though she displays her dissatisfaction regarding this position in an “insufferably passive-aggressive” manner (Franklin 387). It is from the “darkest corner of the hall” that she reminds those around her that “*I am here . . . if you please*” (Jackson, *Sundial* 3), implying her displeasure at being ignored. When playing the lonesome game of solitaire, she is found “squinting” as she “had clearly not felt herself entitled to turn on an adequate light” in Orianna’s household (Jackson, *Sundial* 12). Orianna knows that “Aunt Fanny is at the door” based upon “her little cough,” and orders her attendant, Essex, to open the door for Aunt Fanny as “she will never bring herself to turn the doorknob” or apparently even knock (Jackson, *Sundial* 5). Yet Aunt Fanny’s actions are not motivated by a true feeling of inferiority in reference to Orianna but meant to demonstrate her wrongful treatment endured by her and gain sympathy from the others within the household. Despite Aunt Fanny’s efforts, however, Orianna

is not troubled by her actions and continues to consider the mansion entirely hers. In a display of her dislike for Aunt Fanny, Orianna considers relegating Aunt Fanny to a remote location in the home: “There is room enough for you and me in the house, Fanny . . . Do you recall the tower, Fanny? . . . The tower could be made extremely comfortable” (Jackson, *Sundial* 15). Though it is apparent that Aunt Fanny is not respected, she gains little sympathy from readers as her actions portray her as immature, petty, and childlike. Her passivity as well is no match for Orianna Halloran’s active measures to seize control.

Underscoring Aunt Fanny’s behavior, however, is a childhood need that has persisted into adulthood: the desire of the mother. While Lacan suggests that this longing never completely dissolves for anyone, most repress the desire as they enter into the Symbolic Order. Critic Kelly Oliver also posits that Kristeva suggests a woman must “abandon her mother” and “get rid” of her utilizing two different measures: either she “never does get rid of her mother but carries with her ‘this living corpse’” of “the mother’s body” while “close[ing]” her “eyes to this corpse,” or she “forms a defense against the mother” through means such as “politics, art, and science” (*Subjectivity* 63). Thus both Lacan and Kristeva are in agreement that functional individuals must separate from their mothers in order to enter into the Symbolic Order dominated by the father and cultural expectations. Yet it is clear that Aunt Fanny, despite her age of forty-eight, has never psychologically separated from her mother, nor has she “close[d]” her “eyes” to the memory of her mother that she “carries with her” (Oliver, *Subjectivity* 63). Patterning herself after her mother in terms of her dress, Aunt Fanny is repeatedly described as wearing “her mother’s diamonds every day” (Jackson, *Sundial* 43); she even attempts to preserve the diamonds in their original state as they have not been “cleaned since they were put away on her mother’s death” (Jackson, *Sundial* 36).

Aunt Fanny's actions are also an attempt to replicate the "lady" that she perceives her mother to have been. Immediately preceding Aunt Fanny's encounter with her father when she becomes lost on the Halloran property she resolves that "I may go mad, but at least I look like a lady" (Jackson, *Sundial* 24). Many times Aunt Fanny references an upbringing influenced by conceptions of femininity adhering closely to the demands of True Womanhood, which likely also stems from her mother. Aunt Fanny refers to Essex as "coarse and vulgar" (Jackson, *Sundial* 6), implying conversely she by nature is refined and pure, and she reminds Fancy—the bratty daughter of the late Lionel and granddaughter of Orianna—that she has "always observed decorum" (Jackson, *Sundial* 21). Aunt Fanny also suggests that her mother was modest: unlike a statue at the center of a maze that is named after her mother, Fanny observes that in actuality her "mother would never have permitted herself to be portrayed from life in that state of undress" (Jackson, *Sundial* 95). As Aunt Fanny views her mother as the model of womanhood, she attempts to structure her own actions in a "ladylike" fashion consistent with her mother's model. Critic Anna Smith suggests that, in Kristeva's framework, women may "idealise this mother" and "admire her life or speech" and thereby "wish in some way to emulate it through introjection" (141). Though unlikable, stuffy, and passive-aggressive in nature, Aunt Fanny's interactions with others are largely motivated by her desire to imitate her own mother.

Aunt Fanny's desire for her mother is perhaps most indisputably evident in her efforts to "reestablish the four-room apartment where she had been born" in the expansive "attic room" of the mansion (Jackson, *Sundial* 158). Of particular note regarding this room is its inclusion of the "solid, well-chosen, and real possessions" of "the first Mrs. Halloran" (Jackson, *Sundial* 157), all of which were moved from the apartment the Hallorans originally resided in before their relocation to the mansion. Even Aunt Fanny's mother viewed the apartment as more her home

than the mansion, considering that she died shortly after moving into the new home. Yet despite the first Mrs. Halloran's absence within the mansion following her death and the influence of Aunt Fanny's father on the home in terms of its design, Aunt Fanny interestingly thinks of her mother—represented metonymically by the apartment she has reconstructed in the attic—as the “core” of the “big house” (Jackson, *Sundial* 157). In this space Aunt Fanny flips through photographs of her mother in an album and reflects upon a framed “picture of her mother, cloudy-haired and idealized” (Jackson, *Sundial* 161). Aunt Fanny even occasionally stays “all night inside her dead mother's bedroom” (Jackson, *Sundial* 19), and the narrator reveals that “[i]f Aunt Fanny had cared to, she might have dropped from sight altogether into this apartment in the big house, might have left the others behind and gone into the apartment and closed the door, and stayed” (Jackson, *Sundial* 162). Thus Aunt Fanny has never truly separated from her mother, not even after her mother's illness that resulted in her death. While some women may carry the “corpse[s]” of their mothers within their “psyches” as Kristeva suggests while not actively acknowledging her presence (quoted in Oliver, *Portable* 300), Aunt Fanny not only carries her mother with her but also acknowledges her. She even attempts to enact her mother while also seeking to replicate her childhood through the recreation of the apartment that her mother considered her true home.

Aunt Fanny replicates her childhood in the apartment to the extent that she even regresses to participating in childhood activities in the space. She “foolishly” thinks that she “must bring Richard,” her senile adult brother, “up here and see if he wants to play” (Jackson, *Sundial* 161); not only does she lose her sense of time in this apartment, feeling herself again a child, but she also loses touch with the reality of her brother's illness and even their ages that require adults to no longer “play” house but to truly run a home. Aunt Fanny's attempts to reenact childhood play

are also evident when she brings Fancy to the apartment, introducing it as her “doll house” (Jackson, *Sundial* 163). This image of Aunt Fanny and her dollhouse also mirrors Fancy who is not only a child but is also frequently depicted throughout the novel playing with her own doll house. Within this space that Aunt Fanny terms her “mother’s house,” she points out the “dolls” to Fancy that are Aunt Fanny’s memories themselves (Jackson, *Sundial* 163): “‘The dolls are here,’ Aunt Fanny said. ‘I remember them. My mother sat here,’ she said, sitting down on the blue upholstered chair . . . ‘I am the mother, wearing a yellow dress. You must be me, little Frances . . .’” (Jackson, *Sundial* 163). In this moment, not only is Aunt Fanny simulating her past childhood, but she is enacting it with Fancy. Importantly, Aunt Fanny plays the role of her own mother as she instructs Fancy to play the part of her childhood self.

Aunt Fanny also reveals during this interaction with Fancy her belief that her mother’s primary desire was for her children. This understanding of her mother is evidenced when Aunt Fanny speaks to Fancy in the persona of her mother and imagines what her mother would have said to her: “Right now your father is working hard because he is dreaming of someday taking his family to live in a lovely house . . . and I am your mother and I am thinking of how strong and happy and handsome my children are. Aren’t I always thinking of you?” (Jackson, *Sundial* 164). In Aunt Fanny’s mind, her mother does not desire her father but thinks constantly about her children. Kristeva suggests that it is the father “that draws the mother’s gaze away from the child,” and the child’s realization that “the mother desires something Other than the child is what makes possible separation” from the mother (Smith 165). Considering that Aunt Fanny’s mother died when Fanny was a young girl, it is likely she never fully came to the realization that her mother’s gaze also included her father, especially as she asserts that her mother is “*always* thinking” of her children (Jackson, *Sundial* 164; emphasis added). This incomplete

conceptualization of her mother's gaze in turn could account for Fanny's childlike actions and her deranged behavior that continues to develop throughout the novel. If a hallmark feature of an individual that experiences "total immersion in the Imaginary Order" is her inability "to function as a member of society" (Tyson 33), Aunt Fanny certainly seems to be psychologically residing within the Imaginary Order not only due to her insane stories she later shares with others but also in terms of her unrepressed and oddly expressed desire for her mother.

Aunt Fanny's attempts to reclaim her childhood—and especially her childhood sense of unity with her mother—are not limited to her experiences in the apartment that she has recreated. Aunt Fanny also wanders through the maze on the Halloran property structured around her mother's name, Anna, that is "not at all frightening" to her as she "had grown up knowing its secrets" (Jackson, *Sundial* 95). The maze too becomes a symbol of Aunt Fanny's childhood and especially her mother in its patterning after her mother's name. When Aunt Fanny was "a child it had been a dear puzzle to her, and she had spent hours trying to lose herself in the maze, but she could never forget her mother's name" (Jackson, *Sundial* 95); her incapability of becoming lost in the maze frustrated her as a child, and she would "throw herself down in tears" due to her inability to "forget the answer" (Jackson, *Sundial* 95). But finally as an adult, Aunt Fanny has ironically achieved her childhood dream: "And yet now, *not a child any more*, and long forgetting the maze, Aunt Fanny was at last lost" (Jackson, *Sundial* 96; emphasis added). As she is no longer a child, Aunt Fanny cannot recall the intricacies of the maze. More importantly, however, the maze metaphorically suggests that Aunt Fanny has lost both her childhood to time and her mother to death despite her efforts to recreate them.

Aunt Fanny even experiences the reality of her absent mother within this maze scene, recalling a time as a child when she injured her hand in the labyrinth: "I cut my hand on a sharp

branch and my brother bandaged it for me, because my mother was dead. We both cried, I remember” (Jackson, *Sundial* 98). But even as Aunt Fanny is cognizant of her mother’s absence due to her death, she continues in her attempts to remain connected to her mother through the creation of substitutes ranging from her attempts to embody her through introjection, to projecting her into spaces and even objects. The statue in the center of the maze, also named Anna, serves as yet another stand-in for her mother, and Aunt Fanny perceives it as “lean[ing] down overhead, holding out bare arms of tenderness and love” (Jackson, *Sundial* 98). Though the “marble warm[ing] under her cheek” fools Aunt Fanny into believing the statue embodies her mother to the point that she even calls out to it “[m]other, mother” (Jackson, *Sundial* 98), this moment does not deceive readers and suggests instead Aunt Fanny’s unreliability and instability underscored by her desire for her mother.

### **Aunt Fanny & the Imaginary Father**

If Aunt Fanny’s true desire is for her mother, then her father’s prominent role within the text must be addressed. Aunt Fanny repeatedly references her father throughout the narrative, and her “visual and auditory hallucinations” of him warning her of an impending apocalypse become the crux of the other characters’ actions in their preparations for this event (Hattenhauer 138). Turning again to Kristeva sheds light on this matter of the text, particularly as “[f]or Kristeva, even when it is about the father, it is also and always about the mother and the pleasure and horrors of her body” (Oliver, “Maternal Passions” 3). While motherhood is one means Kristeva proposes for a woman to properly experience union again with her mother as “[b]y giving birth, the woman enters into contact with her mother” and “becomes . . . her own mother” (“Desire in Language” 303), marriage is yet another way for the woman to again find her mother. Traditionally, psychoanalysts have argued that marriage satisfies the Oedipal desire in that

women find their fathers in their husbands and men find their mothers in their wives, though Kristeva suggests a slightly different view: both women and men find their mothers in their spouses. She writes that “if the couple truly becomes one, if it lasts . . . that each of the protagonists, he and she, has married, through the other, his or her mother” (quoted in Oliver, *Subjectivity* 66-7). Oliver expounds on this idea:

Kristeva argues that the woman finds her mother in her husband. She finally becomes the phallus (satisfaction) for her mother in the person of her (nourishing) husband. Thus, her Oedipal wish, to be the mother’s phallus, is, like the man’s, satisfied in marriage. The woman, like the man, needs to couple to refind the lost mother; the mother is the “pedestal” of the couple, because the couple provides a reunion with the mother. (*Subjectivity* 67)

The mother, then, is what both males and females desire and marriage is one way to “refind” the lost mother (Oliver, *Subjectivity* 67).

In Aunt Fanny’s situation, however, she is neither a mother nor bride. Not only does her age limit her ability to experience the rite of passage of pregnancy and childbirth that Kristeva references, but her prospects of marriage also look particularly dim. As she pursues her love interest of Orianna’s attendant, Essex, he is clearly disinterested in her. In a very comical scene, Essex’s true feelings toward Aunt Fanny are revealed:

Essex lay absolutely still in the dark, thinking that if no sound or movement could be heard outside the door he would be safe; always, when he held himself this still he hoped that he might be really dead.

“Essex,” Aunt Fanny whispered, tapping softly, “Essex, please let me in?”

At first, sometimes, Essex had tried to answer her. “Go away, Aunt Fanny,” he would say; “Aunt Fanny, go away from here.” Now, however, he knew that he was safest if he did not speak or move; he might even be dead.

“Essex, I’m only forty-eight years old. Essex?”

I am enclosed in the tight impersonal weight of a coffin, Essex thought; there is thick earth above me.

“Orianna is older than I am. Essex?” (Jackson, *Sundial* 18)

Clearly, Essex prefers death over coupling with Aunt Fanny and has found ignoring Aunt Fanny as the best defense against her advances. Much like Eleanor in *Hill House* who continuously

creates stories influenced by the fairy tale genre that allow for her to alter her experience of reality—especially in her obsessive focus upon “journeys end[ing] in lovers meets” (Jackson, *Hill House* 66)—so too does Aunt Fanny create and utilize narratives in the same manner that borrow from this tradition. The romantic fantasies she creates especially add to the comedic aspect of her experience with unrequited love in light of Essex’s clear rejection of her. When she becomes lost on the property immediately preceding her first encounter with her father, Fanny thinks “I would like to give Essex a rose” (Jackson, *Sundial* 24); she then later imagines Essex’s dialogue: “‘Frances, I have waited for you so long . . .’ ‘Impatient, Essex?’ ‘Impatient? Say rather mad . . . burning . . .’” (Jackson, *Sundial* 25); but while she imagines that Essex is “mad” with love, the madness of Aunt Fanny is further revealed in entertaining such thoughts that are so clearly removed from the reality of her situation.

Even when Aunt Fanny goes to the village and brings back Captain Scarabombardon with her—who is merely “a stranger” who invents a false backstory for himself (Jackson, *Sundial* 86)—not even he is interested in her as a romantic partner. Miss Ogilvie, a servant working within the Halloran mansion, suggests to Aunt Fanny that “[w]ell, of course I know what the captain is for,” and “blushe[s]” (Jackson, *Sundial* 118), suggesting that his role is to be the father of future generations. Miss Ogilvie also states to Aunt Fanny that she has never thought of the captain “for *myself*, that is” (Jackson, *Sundial* 118), further indicating that Aunt Fanny’s plan is to attempt to establish a relationship with the captain. As Aunt Fanny has pointed out before during the preparations for the apocalypse that their “‘little group must include builders and workers as well as—’ she blushed faintly—‘the mothers of future generations’” (Jackson, *Sundial* 81), Aunt Fanny is nominating herself for this role, especially considering her pride in her own self and her lineage. While she initially hoped that she might establish a

romantic relationship with Essex, she later sets her hopes on the captain. It is only later that she discovers the captain is, instead, interested in another female resident.

In the case of Aunt Fanny, who has not successfully found a marriage partner nor has become a mother herself, the two avenues Kristeva suggests of finding the lost object of the mother while still remaining separate from her have not been viable paths for Aunt Fanny. As a consequence Aunt Fanny seeks out her mother through introjection and other substitutes, and this desire for her mother also accounts for Aunt Fanny's experience with the supernatural. Thus when Aunt Fanny believes herself to clairvoyantly interact with her deceased father, it is in actuality her mother that she is again attempting to locate. Kristeva posits that within the Imaginary Order the mother also represents elements of the father, writing that "[t]he child . . . hallucinates its merging with a nourishing-mother-and-ideal-father, in short a conglomeration that already condenses the two into one" (quoted in Oliver, *Subjectivity* 66). Oliver expounds on Kristeva's conceptualization of the child's psychological process of "condens[ing]" the mother and the father "into one" (quoted in Oliver, *Subjectivity* 66), arguing that "the logic of the symbolic is already within the maternal body" due to the "archaic 'object' relations" that are "associated with the father" (*Subjectivity* 66). As such, "this combination" of the maternal body with the symbolic "is called a father because it is a metonymic relationship in the works" (*Subjectivity* 66). The "imaginary father," then, is "the mother's love itself" that "foreshadows the symbolic and meaning in the realm of the imaginary" (Oliver, *Subjectivity* 65-6). The "imaginary father" is therefore perceived by the child to have "the characteristics of both masculine and feminine" (Oliver, *Subjectivity* 65).

As Aunt Fanny still operates within the Imaginary Order, the father that she believes herself to encounter adheres more closely to the "imaginary father" as described by Kristeva than

her actual father. In her first vision, she asserts her father issues the following warning: “Frances, there is danger. Go back to the house. Tell them, in the house, tell them, in the house, tell them that there is danger. Tell them in the house that in the house it is safe. The father will watch the house, but there is danger. Tell them” (Jackson, *Sundial* 26). From this experience, it appears her father is caring in his attempts to warn Fanny and the others in the Halloran mansion of the dangers of the apocalypse. He is also focused upon his children’s safety and happiness, which calls to mind Aunt Fanny’s statement to Fancy about her mother “always thinking” of her children (Jackson, *Sundial* 164). Not surprisingly, Aunt Fanny does feel a “fear so complete” that she “stood with nothing but ice to clothe her” when she first hears “FRANCES HALLORAN” being called out to her during her walk (Jackson, *Sundial* 25). Yet it is not her father that she fears but her own insanity: “*was* there something there? Something? Then she thought with what seemed shocking clarity: it is worse if it is not there; somehow it must be real because if it is not real it is in my own head; unable to move, Aunt Fanny thought: It is real” (Jackson, *Sundial* 25-6). Once Fanny determines she must not question the authenticity of her experience in order to preserve her sanity, she calls out “Father?” in a tone that suggests of her hope and need for it be him (Jackson, *Sundial* 26). Also important is the name that her father uses when he calls to her as Aunt Fanny was “once Frances Halloran” (Jackson, *Sundial* 25), again suggesting that Fanny is attempting to relive her past childhood.

Throughout the novel as Aunt Fanny describes her father’s vision to the others and asserts her father’s authority, she continues to depict him in a manner that contains both stereotypical feminine and masculine qualities, which is further suggestive of the fact that he represents the “imaginary father” that is an extension of the “mother’s love itself” (Oliver, *Subjectivity* 66). Immediately following her initial vision of her father, Aunt Fanny says to her

father “[y]ou were never so kind to me before” (Jackson, *Sundial* 26), implying that Fanny is not communing with her actual father but rather the kindly father of the Imaginary Order, especially as kindness is also associated with the maternal. Aunt Fanny later asserts that her father “believed that no expense should be spared on my education,” indicative of his benevolence as he sought for Fanny to become “a cultivated, gracious woman” (Jackson, *Sundial* 56). She claims that while he was “a very strict man” that he was “good to his children” (Jackson, *Sundial* 67), again describing traits that represent both a masculine and a feminine aspect to her father. Fanny even suggests that her father “was beyond all things a democratic man” and “believed in encouraging the villagers in every possible manner” (Jackson, *Sundial* 85). Overall, Fanny depicts a loving and kind father that is at times stern when necessary but is a man exhibiting the qualities of Kristeva’s “imaginary father” that is the “conglomeration” of “a nourishing-mother-and-ideal-father” (quoted in Oliver, *Subjectivity* 66). In this manner, the father of Aunt Fanny’s visions becomes an extension of her mother’s love for her children.

Aunt Fanny’s interaction with an imaginary father that is representative of her mother’s love is further evident in her rejection of the true nature of her father. While she depicts him with endearing qualities, the villagers talking amongst themselves at a party on the Halloran property reveal his actual character. One of the men recounts an episode in which “a fellow got killed” on the property during the mansion’s construction (Jackson, *Sundial* 198): “Got run over by a wagon. I was here—just a little kid. I remember the old man come over and looked down at this fellow lying there and he said—I swear I can hear him now—he said, ‘Get him out of the way,’ he said, ‘this is where the terrace has got to go.’ I can hear him now” (Jackson, *Sundial* 198). Another villager describes Mr. Halloran’s reaction to a carnival taking place near his property: “he comes raging out with his gang of bullies and chased the whole pack right off down the road.

‘Let ’em stay off *my* land,’ he says, ‘let ’em stay off *my* land’” (Jackson, *Sundial* 198). Finally, one last villager adds the following: “‘Once,’ he said, ‘I could walk you all around there where my father’s fences used to be. My father’s farm, and then one morning my father turned around and there was his farm, *inside* the old man’s wall . . .’” (Jackson, *Sundial* 198). Contrary to Aunt Fanny’s descriptions of her father, we learn otherwise from the villagers: he was a cruel, heartless man that cared more for his property and the project of his mansion than he cared about others. It is clear that Aunt Fanny does not describe “Lacan’s authoritarian father” representative of the Symbolic realm (Oliver, *Subjectivity* 65); instead, her descriptions of her family’s patriarch resemble a version of her mother as represented by an imaginary father belonging to the Imaginary Order in which Aunt Fanny attempts to reside.

The new world that Aunt Fanny believes is to come following the apocalypse also stems from the interactions she claims to have with her father via dreams; interestingly, this world is decidedly maternal and Imaginary in nature despite its delivery through the mouthpiece of the paternal. Thus this utopic vision—and the mansion as a means to arrive there—becomes Aunt Fanny’s *objet petit a* that is “distorted by the subject’s desires and fears” (Zizek par. 17), which in Aunt Fanny’s case is the desire for unification with her mother and her fear this is unachievable in the world in which she currently resides. While Lacan’s understanding of the *objet petit a* is not necessarily limited to a desire for the mother, Kristeva’s emphasis upon the mother figure in relation to stand-in objects is quite clear in *Black Sun*. Specifically, she suggests that “the lost object” of the mother is in some cases “transposed by means of unbelievable symbolic effort” that “transforms cultural constructs into a ‘sublime’ erotic object” that can be found “in social bonds, intellectual and aesthetic productions, etc.” (*Black Sun* 28). In the case of Aunt Fanny, the “cultural construct” of the home—as well as the “intellectual . . . productions”

that include the possibility of a perfect society—come to consciously supplant the loss of her mother. Even within these “objects,” however, it is apparent that the desire for the lost maternal object undergirds her own pursuit of the Halloran mansion and a new world.

Specifically, this desire for the maternal underscoring Aunt Fanny’s *objet petit a* of the family home and a Utopic society is particularly evident in her account given to the others after she has fallen asleep and “listen[ed] to her father”:

The house would be guarded during the night of destruction and at its end they would emerge safe and pure. They were charged with the future of humanity; when they came forth from the house it would be into a world clean and silent, their inheritance. “And breed a new race of mankind,” Aunt Fanny said with sweetness. (Jackson, *Sundial* 35-6)

The purity she references, as well as the focus upon the “future of humanity” and “a new race of mankind” (Jackson, *Sundial* 35-6), associates this world with the uniquely female experience of delivering new life through pregnancy and childbirth; additionally, the “purity” and “cleanliness” of the world also calls to mind a traditional view of the feminine. Her description also resonates with the child’s perception of the Imaginary Order itself in which the child believes herself to experience complete unity with its mother. Fanny states that in this promised land “[e]vil, and jealousy, and fear, are all going to be removed from us” (Jackson, *Sundial* 37), that they “will be free of pain and hurt” (Jackson, *Sundial* 38), and that the new world will be “lovely, with the loveliness of all fresh beginnings” (Jackson, *Sundial* 108). As the Imaginary Order is experienced by the child as a sort of utopia, so too is this new world promised by Aunt Fanny a replication of this realm in all its perfection.

Yet while the others in the mansion go along with Fanny in the case that she may actually be correct in her claims, they too doubt her sense of reality and sanity, which further suggests Aunt Fanny’s attempts to return to the Imaginary Order. When Fanny reports that the sky was dark during her initial encounter with her Father, Essex asserts that at the time there was “not a

cloud in the sky” (Jackson, *Sundial* 31). The narrator also postulates that “[i]t might be suggested . . . that anything, no matter how exotic, can be believed by someone” (Jackson, *Sundial* 33), further adding to the doubt surrounding the reality of Aunt Fanny’s visions. Maryjane, another of the many residing in the Halloran mansion, asks Fanny, “Did your father really tell you all this?” (Jackson, *Sundial* 37), and another overbearing resident—Mrs. Willow—states “I sure as almighty hell wish I’d been there when Daddy came” (Jackson, *Sundial* 60). Essex later bluntly declares the following: “[p]erhaps . . . Aunt Fanny has been wrong all the time; perhaps this house and everyone in it will go with the rest of the world” (Jackson, *Sundial* 94). Thus, over and over again, the characters all question the plausibility of Aunt Fanny’s claims. Mrs. Halloran even “believe[s]” Aunt Fanny has “gone mad” (Jackson, *Sundial* 35); from such assertions, it becomes even clearer that Aunt Fanny’s reality is not reflective of the actual world surrounding her.

### **Aunt Fanny’s Stories & Desire for Control**

As the individual living within the Imaginary Order believes complete control over others and her environment is possible, Aunt Fanny’s interactions with her deceased father further move her toward this register as she utilizes these experiences to gain control over the household and, in particular, her sister-in-law, Orianna. Prior to her visions, Aunt Fanny unsuccessfully relied upon her lineage and wealth to both establish boundaries against Orianna and fortify her own sense of superiority. She tells her sister-in-law that “I take wine only with my equals, Orianna” (Jackson, *Sundial* 5), and later informs her that “I was not brought up to take orders, Orianna” (Jackson, *Sundial* 6). Again, she insults Orianna’s own background: “Not everyone, Orianna, was fortunate enough to grow up in luxury and plenty. As of course *you* know perfectly well” (Jackson, *Sundial* 6). When Mrs. Willow—one of Orianna’s childhood friends—later joins

the group in the Halloran mansion, Aunt Fanny again makes a cutting remark regarding her social standing: “‘From another walk of life, I suppose,’ Aunt Fanny said with a little smile” (Jackson, *Sundial* 44).

Yet Aunt Fanny’s passive-aggressive insults rooted in social snobbery do not deter Orianna from her single-minded pursuit of obtaining and controlling the Halloran mansion. Not only is Orianna’s murderous action of pushing her own son down the steps evidence of her extreme desire for control of the mansion, but her statements also make this entirely clear. Orianna asserts to Fanny that “[i]t is *my* house now, Aunt Fanny” (Jackson, *Sundial* 7). When Richard, Orianna’s husband and Aunt Fanny’s brother suffering from dementia, asks his wife “[d]id you marry me for my father’s money?” (Jackson, *Sundial* 11), Orianna does not mince her words: “Well, that, and the house” (Jackson, *Sundial* 11). Orianna too values her authority, and even regrets that it is Aunt Fanny who has received visions from her father: “Authority is of some importance to me. I will not be left behind when creatures like Aunt Fanny and her brother are introduced into a new world. I must plan to be there. Oh, what madness . . . why could he not have come to *me*?” (Jackson, *Sundial* 41). Orianna even dreams of her own house in which she “can live alone . . . [d]eep in the forest” (Jackson, *Sundial* 101). Clearly, Orianna’s motive is money, power, and authority over all those within the Halloran mansion, even ruling over those who are blood relatives to the founding patriarch.

It is her vision that provides Aunt Fanny with her first taste of real power and influence over those in the Halloran mansion that begins to further move her toward a return to the Imaginary Order in which she believes complete control is a possibility. Fanny remarks to another resident in the mansion that “it used to be bad enough, Aunt Fanny snuffling all the time, but now that people listen to her it’s awful” (Jackson, *Sundial* 147). Because of Aunt Fanny’s

visions that she has shared, she has convinced the others to prepare for an apocalypse, even when these other individuals are not entirely certain that it is going to happen. While Essex has repeatedly questioned Aunt Fanny's reliability and the reality of her new world, he reveals that "Aunt Fanny must *not* be wrong" and that the new world she describes—one filled with "[a] lifetime of warmth and beauty and fertility"—"*must* exist" (Jackson, *Sundial* 144). Essex's observation captures the heart of what is truly going on within the home: the majority of the others, too, want to believe in this new world that Aunt Fanny promises. It is a utopic vision, and all individuals—even the most rational—long for such a world that mirrors the Imaginary Order buried deep within their psyches.

Aunt Fanny's rejection of reality is further signified as she knowingly presents such unlikely stories as absolute truths to convince both herself and others of her authority and control. While Aunt Fanny relishes her new power and reflects that "[s]he did not know why these extraordinary messages had been sent through her own frail self, but she believed that without question that the choice had been good" (Jackson, *Sundial* 36), others in the household find themselves questioning her claims. Mrs. Willow "dislike[s] the vagueness of Aunt Fanny's appointments" with her father (Jackson, *Sundial* 112), which suggests her skepticism of Aunt Fanny's visions. Later, Miss Ogilvie informs Aunt Fanny that she has learned through a villager of the True Believers who are another group of individuals preparing for an apocalypse that involves spacemen; Aunt Fanny casts off this suggestion that any other individuals outside of those in the Halloran mansion will be in this new world as she cannot imagine that her father "visit[ed] this young man's mother" and informed her of the apocalypse (Jackson, *Sundial* 85). Aunt Fanny determines they will not contact the True Believers and emphasizes her authority to Miss Ogilvie by stating "I am quite positive that my father would agree with me" (Jackson,

*Sundial* 85-6). After this statement, however, Aunt Fanny’s “voice went vague” (Jackson, *Sundial* 86), implying that even Aunt Fanny is aware of the holes in her narrative that she attempts to mask through presenting herself as overly self-assured.

Others continue to point out the gaps within Aunt Fanny’s original apocalypse narrative that further points to her unreliability and rejection of reality. Consequently, Aunt Fanny is required to quickly develop a new aspect to her original story so others—and even herself—will not doubt her sanity or her authority. As Aunt Fanny prepares for the apocalypse by ordering that the house must be “barricaded,” even her own dialogue reveals doubt in the plausibility of her vision and suggests that she is creating a larger narrative to gain control: “We have absolute faith in my father, of course, but even though his protection applies to the house and to everyone in it, I can see strong reasons for covering the windows and blocking the doors” (Jackson, *Sundial* 142). Mrs. Willow, ever suspicious of Aunt Fanny’s story, points out the flaw in her logic: “‘I am not happy about barricading the house,’ Mrs. Willow said slowly. ‘Seems to me it sounds like *not* believing in Aunt Fanny’s father, sort of. I mean, either he protects us or he doesn’t’” (Jackson, *Sundial* 142). Orianna too questions Aunt Fanny’s narrative in her response to Essex’s point that Aunt Fanny has promised them all “happiness” in the new world (Jackson, *Sundial* 150): “Aunt Fanny will promise anything to get her own way. How would she know what happiness is, say, to me?” (Jackson, *Sundial* 150). Thus, the characters also suspect the falsity of Aunt Fanny’s stories, recognizing her desire for power underscoring the stories. Nevertheless, however, they allow for the perpetuation of the apocalypse myth as they too desire to escape to a Utopian society. While Aunt Fanny is arguably “the biggest fool of all” among the entire “ship of fools” that reside within the Halloran mansion (Hattenhauer 138), she has certainly succeeded in creating a new movement that delivers the entire household back to the Imaginary.

Finally, Aunt Fanny's delusional state characteristic of one who has rejected the Symbolic Order becomes even more apparent in her likely murder of her sister-in-law. Aunt Fanny is very much aware of Orianna's plans to seize control in the new world, especially in Orianna's distribution of a list of thirteen "instructions" to be followed in the new world (Jackson, *Sundial* 171), which she later identifies as her "laws" (Jackson, *Sundial* 178). Within these instructions, Orianna states that she "will lead the way" (Jackson, *Sundial* 172), and "[n]o one except Mrs. Halloran may wear a crown" (Jackson, *Sundial* 171). Aunt Fanny is "quite angry, angrier than she had ever been before in her life" regarding these laws as Aunt Fanny has envisioned herself in total control in the paradise to come (Jackson, *Sundial* 170). Not surprisingly, Orianna is later discovered "lying in her golden gown, crumpled at the foot of the great staircase," and Mrs. Willow concludes "I expect somebody pushed her down the stairs" (Jackson, *Sundial* 215). When Aunt Fanny comments "I wonder how it could have happened" (Jackson, *Sundial* 215), it seems as if she is feigning ignorance. Her guilt is further implied when Mrs. Willow insists that "Well, *somebody* pushed her down the stairs" (Jackson, *Sundial* 216); instead of agreeing with Mrs. Willow as an innocent individual likely would have, Aunt Fanny merely replies "*That* hardly matters, does it?" (Jackson, *Sundial* 216), again seeming both too calm in demeanor and too eager in attitude to end the discussion. Thus it seems likely that Aunt Fanny's belief in a perfect world and the complete control she will experience there has resulted in Aunt Fanny's irrational decisions and lack of guilt regarding her murderous actions.

Much like Eleanor, Aunt Fanny's *objet petit a* of a new world and the Halloran mansion as a means to arrive in this utopia further results in her delusional state of mind as she views entrapment within the home as a type of freedom. Following her orders to barricade the house and board up the windows, the others along with Fanny diligently wait within the house for the

new world to come, which of course never will. Consequently, these characters will discover that their wait in the home is indefinite. Just as the novel concludes immediately before the apocalypse, so too will these characters continue to live in anticipation of a world that will never arrive. Before her death, Orianna points out this entrapment within the home, but much like Aunt Fanny, she too has deluded herself into viewing imprisonment as freedom: “We must try to think of ourselves . . . as absolutely isolated. We are on a tiny island in a raging sea; we are a point of safety in a world of ruin . . . it is the people out *there* who have to be afraid; *we*, inside here, are safe” (Jackson, *Sundial* 209).

Yet some living within the home do recognize this perceived safety and otherworldliness that both Aunt Fanny and Orianna claim to be found within the mansion as entrapment. Julia, one of the daughters of Mrs. Willow who attempted to escape with the captain at one point, states that “I want to go outside . . . I don’t want to stay in here any more” (Jackson, *Sundial* 209). Fancy too points out the flawed logic of barricading herself within the house:

“Look. Aunt Fanny keeps saying that there is going to be a lovely world, all green and still and perfect and we are all going to live there and be peaceful and happy. That would be perfectly fine for me, except right here I live in a lovely world, all green and still and perfect, even though no one around seems to be very peaceful or happy, but when I think about it this new world is going to have Aunt Fanny and my grandmother and you and Essex and the rest of these crazy people and my mother and what makes anyone think you’re going to be more happy or peaceful just because you’re the only ones left?” (Jackson, *Sundial* 148)

Aunt Fanny has entrapped herself—as well as a household full of others—in anticipation of a world that will never be. As her father attempted to leave the “other world” for his new world in the Halloran mansion (Jackson, *Sundial* 8), so too is Fanny attempting to do the same but to an even greater extreme. Yet even the founder of the Halloran estate realized that perfection was impossible through his placement of the sundial on the property: “Intruding purposefully upon the entire scene, an inevitable focus, was the sundial, set badly off center and reading WHAT IS

THIS WORLD?” (Jackson, *Sundial* 10). Though Aunt Fanny has followed in her father’s footsteps in separating herself from the world around her, her attempts to enter again into the Imaginary Order through a vision of an absolutely perfect world has driven her increasingly into insanity.

### **Final Thoughts**

Despite Aunt Fanny’s hilarious portrayal as a character that takes herself too seriously, especially as madness is at the core of her visions, the text presents a serious contemplation of the entrapment and derangement that happens when an individual pursues a return to the Imaginary Order. Aunt Fanny’s *object petit a* becomes a utopian world and the mansion that will deliver her there following a devastating apocalypse, but her vision is ultimately driven by her desire for her mother. Even the encounters with her father mirror her mother’s love rather than her actual father of the Symbolic Order. Additionally, Aunt Fanny longs for complete control of others and presents her stories as absolute truths despite her unreliability and the obvious logical flaws present within her narrative. Yet as Aunt Fanny pursues her fictitious world in which she is the ultimate authority that points to her desire for an unobtainable Imaginary Order, she not only entraps her own self within her home but also imprisons others as she has engendered within them too a desire for the Imaginary. While many possible understandings of the text exist, one is certainly Jackson’s examination of the consequences one suffers in seeking out a utopia that cannot exist within the world as we know it, nor has ever existed despite our best efforts to create such a space.

### CHAPTER 3

#### MURDERING MOTHER: MERRICAT'S LIFE ON THE MOON IN

#### *WE HAVE ALWAYS LIVED IN THE CASTLE*

While Shirley Jackson's works have often been undervalued by reviewers and critics, *We Have Always Lived in the Castle* was recognized almost "unanimous[ly]" as a "masterpiece" (Franklin 451). *Castle* even made its way onto the *New York Times* best seller list, holding its place there for five consecutive weeks (Franklin 453). Jackson too recognized *Castle* as her best work despite the fact that it is her shortest novel (Franklin 442). Interesting as well is the fact that Jackson's career concluded on such a successful note as *Castle* was the last novel she completed in its entirety before her untimely death (Hattenhauer 175). In a letter to her parents, Jackson lightheartedly describes her view on her pinnacle piece: "i do not think this book will go far . . . it's short, for one thing, and Stanley and the publisher and the agent all agree that it is the best writing i have ever done, which is of course the kiss of death on *any* book" (quoted in Franklin 451). In her letter she also references Merricat, the protagonist of the novel, suggesting that "the heroine of this one is *really* batty" (quoted in Franklin 451). In terms of the novel's larger significance at the time of its publication, some reviewers failed to look beyond the story itself (Franklin 452). Others, however, "tied it convincingly to Jackson's writings about man's inhumanity to man (or, more often, woman)" (Franklin 452). More recently, critic Darryl Hattenhauer suggests that the novel echoes the Hallorans' desire in *The Sundial* as Merricat pursues a "vision of the purified future" in her "quest for Eden" (185). Biographer Ruth Franklin applies a primarily feminist reading to the text, positing that "[f]emale power and creativity . . . turn lethal" when "bottled up too long" (450); accordingly, Franklin suggests that "[t]he happy

ending to the fairy tale requires a new definition of happiness, severed from the traditional marriage plot” (450).

A psychoanalytic reading of the novel, however, allows readers to recognize Merricat as not so much a creative artist that has been stifled but rather a deranged woman whose delusional state is the result of her repressed desire for her mother, leading to her rejection of the Symbolic Order and regression to the Imaginary Order. As is the case with Eleanor in *Hill House* and Aunt Fanny in *The Sundial*, Merricat is yet another female protagonist who cannot psychologically separate from the maternal. While paradoxically she commits matricide, she does so not only in an attempt to gain independence from her mother but also in response to her psychological distress regarding the inevitable separation from her mother. Consequently, Merricat lays claim to a surrogate mother whom she can successfully control and experience unity with: her sister, Constance. By the conclusion of the novel, Merricat experiences no psychological maturation as she remains, just as she was before, willingly trapped within her own world in the Blackwood mansion in an attempt to recreate and remain firmly rooted within the Imaginary Order.

### **A “Batty” Merricat & Her Stories**

In the opening paragraph of the novel, readers immediately recognize that Merricat is not the typical eighteen-year-old woman; her strange list of likes and dislikes, as well as her belief in the fantastical, points to an oddly childlike character psychologically residing within the Imaginary Order:

My name is Mary Katherine Blackwood. I am eighteen years old, and I live with my sister Constance. I have often thought that with any luck at all I could have been born a werewolf, because the two middle fingers on both my hands are the same length, but I have had to be content with what I had. I dislike washing myself, and dogs, and noise. I like my sister Constance, and Richard Plantaganet, and *Amanita phalloides*, the death cup mushroom. Everyone else in my family is dead. (Jackson, *Castle* 1)

Despite her adult age, Merricat wishes to be a werewolf and her aversion to baths seems very juvenile. Her lack of affect in the delivery of the news regarding her family's death is also strange and disturbing. Throughout Merricat's narration, she utilizes this evenhanded tone that adds to the reader's sense that she is, in fact, delusional. Not only does her tone suggest she truly believes what she says, but it also indicates that Merricat sees no wrong in revealing her shocking thoughts. Critic Marisa Silver points out that the "prose reports rather than lyricizes, creating a sinister counterpoint to the increasingly dark behavior of the family" (666). Thus, Merricat's unemotional narration is crucial in her characterization as both a disturbed and childish young woman.

Throughout the novel, Merricat continues to reveal her "reliance on magical thinking" that "makes her seem younger than she actually is" (Franklin 447), which further evidences her impaired sanity. Merricat determines to "[n]ever think anything more than once" in order to downplay the power she believes is inherent within a thought itself (Jackson, *Castle* 14). Merricat also subscribes to numerology as she notices that Constance, her motherly sister, has referenced venturing out of the Blackwood mansion they reside in not once but three times in one day. As a result, Merricat fears that Constance will actually leave the home since "three times makes it real" (Jackson, *Castle* 27). Merricat looks to "omens" to confirm a "change" that she senses is developing in her life (Jackson, *Castle* 40), and she frequently "examine[s]" her "safeguards" that prevent others from trespassing on their property, which includes a "box of silver dollars" that are "buried by the creek," a "doll buried in the long field," and a "book nailed to the tree in the pine woods" (Jackson, *Castle* 41). Merricat reveals as well that "I had always buried things, even when I was small" (Jackson, *Castle* 41), including her "baby teeth" in the hopes that "someday they would grow as dragons" (Jackson, *Castle* 41); alarmingly, Merricat

does not indicate any doubts regarding the impossibility of this belief despite her more mature age. She also believes that breaking objects holds a certain type of power. Upon the arrival of their authoritative cousin, Charles Blackwood, Merricat determines that she will drive him from the home when she “smashe[s]” a glass “on the floor” (Jackson, *Castle* 61). She even contemplates “smash[ing] the mirror in the hall” in an effort to rid Charles from the house (Jackson, *Castle* 71). From such examples, it becomes clear that Merricat relies on illogical thinking centered upon magic and fantasy to attempt to control others and protect herself.

Merricat also creates stories in her mind that involve magical—and disturbingly violent—thoughts to both feel more powerful and fortify her psychological boundaries against others; consequently, as Merricat does not see anything unrealistic or morally wrong with her stories, the inner narratives that she reveals further point to her delusional state of mind. She imagines herself with the ability to “walk home across the sky instead of through the village” (Jackson, *Castle* 3), and she frequently thinks to herself that she is living on the moon during moments when the villagers harass her. The story Merricat tells herself while in the grocery store is increasingly morbid, however, in comparison to her other fantasies:

I wish you were all dead, I thought, and longed to say it out loud . . . I would have liked to come into the grocery some morning and see them all, even the Elberts and the children, lying there crying with pain and dying. I would then help myself to groceries, I thought, stepping over their bodies, taking whatever I fancied from the shelves, and go home, with perhaps a kick for Mrs. Donell while she lay there. I was never sorry I had thoughts like this; I only wished they come true. (Jackson, *Castle* 8)

In Merricat’s acknowledgment that she is “never sorry” for such horrid thoughts, the reader is further chilled by Merricat’s seeming lack of morality and sociopathic tendencies. She later wishes a fatal illness on Jim Donell, a villager that especially delights in harassing her, hoping that “there was already a rot growing inside him that was going to kill him” (Jackson, *Castle* 12). Merricat even fancies a hellish fire in her deranged thoughts, contemplating how she might make

the villagers' "tongues . . . burn . . . as though they had eaten fire" and "their throats . . . burn when the words come out, and in their bellies they will feel a torment hotter than a thousand fires" (Jackson, *Castle* 17). Not only is the content of Merricat's stories disturbing as it points to her madness and her rejection of the Symbolic Order's moral expectations, but the frequency and repetitious occurrence of such stories is alarming as well.

Later in the narrative when Charles infiltrates her home, Merricat's macabre thoughts include him as well: "whenever I thought of his big white face grinning at me across the table . . . I wanted to beat at him until he went away, I wanted to stand on him after he was dead, and see him lying dead on the grass" (Jackson, *Castle* 80). Merricat even buries a rock that she draws Charles's face on after reflecting that a hole she dug "would hold his head nicely" (Jackson, *Castle* 89); as she places the effigy of Charles's decapitated head in the ground, Merricat says to him "Goodbye, Charles . . . [n]ext time don't go around taking other people's things" (Jackson, *Castle* 89). Such murderous thoughts point to Merricat's unstable mental condition made even more apparent through her creation of violent fictions designed to make her impervious to the demands of others. Additionally, her belief that thoughts themselves contain power and that, consequently, her stories are a type of reality roots her psychology in the Imaginary Order; as such, it is no wonder that she repeatedly thinks such dark thoughts to not only fortify her own psychological boundaries but to literally attempt to inflict suffering and heartache on others.

### **Merricat the Murderess**

Considering Merricat's proclivity for violent thoughts, it is not surprising when it is revealed that Merricat poisoned and murdered her family. While the community at large assumes Constance committed the crime despite her acquittal as she went to trial for the murder, readers learn that Merricat is in fact guilty. In Merricat's anger with the villagers who destroy what is left

of the Blackwod mansion following the fire, Merricat states “I am going to put death in all their food and watch them die” (Jackson, *Castle* 110); Constance asks her if she is going to do this “[t]he way you did before?” (Jackson, *Castle* 110). Despite the incident not being mentioned in the six years since her family’s death, Merricat confirms “[y]es . . . the way I did before” (Jackson, *Castle* 110). After Merricat and Constance later return to their severely damaged home once the villagers have left the property, Merricat again confesses to her sister that she mixed arsenic in the sugar, bluntly stating “I put it in the sugar” (Jackson, *Castle* 130). Constance admits that she was aware of this at the time of the murder, and Merricat—in a display of her affection for Constance—further admits that she poisoned the sugar in order to spare Constance who does not use sugar.

The question that goes explicitly unanswered regarding Merricat’s murders is the motive. As one of the Blackwoods’ few acquaintances that visit them in their home states in a darkly comedic scene, “[b]ut the great, the unanswered question, is *why*? Why did she do it?” (Jackson, *Castle* 38). Readers too find themselves asking this question, and the clues present in the text must be pieced together in an effort to understand Merricat’s actions. Uncle Julian—the only other survivor of the poisoning whose mind is addled from the arsenic—suggests during his obsessive recounting of the fateful evening that Merricat’s parents fought on the night of their death: “‘They quarreled hatefully that last night,’ Uncle Julian said. ‘I won’t have it,’ she said, ‘I won’t stand for it, John Blackwood,’ and ‘We have no choice,’ he said. I listened at the door, of course, but I came too late to hear what they quarreled about; I suppose it was money” (Jackson, *Castle* 22). Merricat is sensitive to anger and dislikes it, which is evidenced in her association of this emotion with Charles who later appears in their home, stating that because of his presence “I could feel at once the house still held anger” (Jackson, *Castle* 97). Uncle Julian also reveals that

“there were quarrels” between the entire family as “husband and wife, brother and sister, did not always see eye to eye” (Jackson, *Castle* 33). Again, the particulars of what the family fought over is not mentioned, but the reality of unhappiness is nevertheless apparent. Considering this information and Merricat’s dislike of discord, one motive behind her act of murder might have been to rid the house of anger.

Additionally, we learn that Merricat did not fare well in this household. Constance states that “Merricat was always in disgrace” and adds the following (Jackson, *Castle* 34): “I used to go up the back stairs with a tray of dinner for her after my father had left the dining room. She was a wicked, disobedient child” (Jackson, *Castle* 34). One of the visitors in the home for tea comments that it was “[a]n unhealthy environment” and that “a child should be punished for wrongdoing, but she should be made to feel that she is still loved” (Jackson, *Castle* 34). Merricat’s vision in the summerhouse later in the novel also indicates that Merricat was frequently punished, especially as her vision starkly contrasts with others’ testimonies and thereby suggesting how she *wished* her parents would have treated her. Merricat narrates what she hears as she “listen[s] to them talking” in her vision (Jackson, *Castle* 95):

“—to buy a book for Mary Katherine. Lucy, should not Mary Katherine have a new book?”

“Mary Katherine should have anything she wants, my dear. Our most loved daughter must have anything she likes.”

“Constance, your sister lacks butter. Pass it to her at once, please.”

“Mary Katherine, we love you.”

“You must never be punished. Lucy, you are to see to it that our most loved daughter Mary Katherine is never punished.”

“Mary Katherine would never allow herself to do anything wrong; there is never any need to punish her.”

“I have heard, Lucy, of disobedient children being sent to their beds without dinner as punishment. That must not be permitted with our Mary Katherine.”

“I quite agree, my dear. Mary Katherine must never be punished. Must never be sent to bed without her dinner. Mary Katherine will never allow herself to do anything inviting punishment.”

“Our beloved, our dearest Mary Katherine must be guarded and cherished.  
Thomas, give your sister your dinner; she would like more to eat.”  
“Dorothy—Julian. Rise when our beloved daughter rises.”  
“Bow all your heads to our adored Mary Katherine.” (Jackson, *Castle* 95-6).

Within this scene, it becomes clear that Merricat longs to feel loved and respected. More importantly, however, Merricat desires complete control over others and her environment that only the individual positioned within the Imaginary Order entertains as a possibility. In her imagined vision, her parents are completely focused upon her needs and even command that Thomas, her brother, give up his dinner to Merricat. Yet her desire for control becomes most apparent when at the very end of her vision her mother and father command her aunt and uncle to stand when Merricat stands as if she is royalty. We also learn from Uncle Julian that while her father seems amicable within this scene, neither he nor her brother were so as Uncle Julian reveals that Thomas was “ten years old and possessed many of his father’s more forceful traits of character” (Jackson, *Castle* 34); from this, then, readers can gather that the men of the family were domineering and controlling. Thus it seems probable that Merricat also felt unloved and rejected by her family—as well as powerless—which drove her to the decision to murder everyone in the household with the exception of her sister, Constance. Unlike the others, Constance was likely spared because she was the only one who made Merricat feel appreciated, especially in her efforts to defy their father and sneak Merricat’s dinner up to her after Merricat was sent to her room hungry.

Disturbing as well is Merricat’s seeming lack of guilt over murdering her family, which signifies her complete rejection of societal rules mandated by the Symbolic Order as she has not only committed a heinous crime but, even worse, feels no remorse. This reality is especially evident in Merricat’s interactions with the villagers who represent society at large. While they continuously remind her of her deed while she is in town—albeit they believe Constance

committed the crime—she persists in creating psychological boundaries to protect herself from their accusations through fortifying her prejudices. Merricat views the villagers as “living in . . . dirty little houses on the main highway” (Jackson, *Castle* 4), and reflects that “it was as though the people needed the ugliness of the village, and fed on it” (Jackson, *Castle* 6). Merricat’s deeply rooted prejudice against the perceived poverty and dirtiness of the villagers is especially evident when she shares her childhood imaginings:

When I was small I used to lie in my bedroom at the back of the house and imagine the driveway and the path as a crossroad meeting before our front door, and up and down the driveway when the good people, the clean and rich ones dressed in satin and lace, who came rightfully to visit, and back and forth along the path, sneaking and weaving and sidestepping servilely, went the people from the village. They can’t get in, I used to tell myself. (Jackson, *Castle* 18)

Clearly, Merricat’s economic prejudice is a means of feeling superior—and thereby impervious—to the villagers. While the “clannish disapproval” and harassment the villagers exact upon the sisters following the murders is not defensible (Silver 666), it is an important observation that Merricat does not ever respond with guilt considering the gravity of her crime; instead, she merely sees fault in the villagers themselves rather than herself, which again points to her rejection of societal demands and her preference for a fantasy world devoid of moral expectations that she creates within the Imaginary Order.

### **The Imaginary Order & Merricat’s Desire for Her Mother**

Utilizing Kristeva’s psychoanalytic perspective when analyzing Merricat’s murder further adds to the complexities of her act beyond her desire to escape her parents’ discipline. Kristeva suggests that “poisoning drink or food . . . reveals . . . a little girl deprived of the breast” (*Black Sun* 85); while “little boys are also deprived, everyone knows that man recovers his lost paradise in the heterosexual relationship,” which is not true for the woman who also participates in heterosexual relationships (*Black Sun* 85). Thus, Merricat’s poisoning is not only due to her

anger at her family that she feels rejects her and needlessly punishes her but also stems from the psychological distress she has experienced in separating from her mother. As she has not only had to separate from her mother's body—which includes both her womb through birth and her breast through her ability to tolerate solid foods—she also discovers that her mother's gaze includes not only herself but others as well. In particular, Merricat discovers that her mother especially looks to her father to implement her discipline, which is an act that points to her embodiment of the Symbolic Order. Kristeva also suggests the following regarding some women's response to this separation from their mothers: "Acting out, where a woman is concerned, is more inhibited, less developed, and consequently it can be, when it takes place, more violent. For the loss of the object seems beyond remedy for a woman and its mourning more difficult, if not impossible" (*Black Sun* 85-6). Merricat's act of murder certainly is "violent," though it is "inhibited" in the sense that she does not overtly murder her family but does so more passively and covertly through poisoning. Yet Merricat's action of poisoning is complicated by the question of why she would rid herself of her mother if that is whom she truly desires.

Again turning to Kristeva helps in understanding this particular problem of Merricat's motivation to also kill her mother. Kristeva writes in *Black Sun* that "[m]atricide is our vital necessity" as "[f]or man and for woman the loss of the mother is a biological and psychic necessity" (27); matricide, then, becomes "the first step on the way to becoming autonomous" (27). When returning to Merricat's murder—and specifically her matricide—not only has her literal and metaphorical separation from her mother psychologically traumatized her, but Merricat paradoxically desires independence, as do all individuals. In particular, she wishes to escape her parents' punishments and be free of their control. As a result of Merricat's desire to

live her life as she pleases outside of the demands of the Symbolic Order and retreat again into the Imaginary Order, Merricat rids herself of her family—and even her mother—who have come to represent culture and society at large through their discipline of her. In this manner Merricat literally acts upon Kristeva’s assertion that “matricide is our vital necessity” in gaining independence (*Black Sun* 27). Yet psychoanalyst Christina Wieland critiques Kristeva’s statement, arguing that Kristeva has not fully attended to the true consequences of a “violent” separation from the mother:

Kristeva assumes . . . that the only way a child can separate from mother is in a radical, violent and total manner which resembles a murder . . . That murder cannot lead to separation is obvious, since murder ties the murderer irrevocably to his victim. More than love or hate it creates a persecutory *present* object, rather than an absent one. This possesses a hallucinatory, psychotic quality which must be thwarted if the murderer is to remain sane. (11-12)

We see evidence that Merricat’s mother remains a “*present* object” through her “hallucinatory, psychotic” experiences throughout the text, which is especially evident in the vision she experiences in the summerhouse that she seemingly regards as a reality. Merricat also shares another auditory hallucination with readers: “I woke up on Saturday morning and thought I heard them calling me; they want me to get up, I thought, before I am fully awake and remember that they were dead; Constance never called me to wake me up” (Jackson, *Castle* 40-1). Whether it is Merricat’s guilt that inspires this hallucination, her longing for her family and in particular her mother, or her loss of reality within the Imaginary Order, her mental stability is nevertheless questionable.

Merricat’s mother also remains a “*present* object, rather than an absent one” in that Merricat continues to long for her mother despite her murder (Wieland 11), which is evidenced in part as Merricat watches her “two feet in our mother’s old brown shoes” as she goes into town for supplies that she, Constance, and Uncle Julian need (Jackson, *Castle* 5); if Merricat truly

wished for complete separation from her mother, she would not be wearing her mother's shoes into town. She also reflects while in town that the Rochester House is rightfully her mother's as it was her birthplace. Merricat describes this house that metonymically represents her mother in a positive light, suggesting it is the "loveliest in town" (Jackson, *Castle* 3). The drawing room in the Blackwood mansion also metonymically signifies Merricat's mother to both Merricat and Constance. Her mother identified it as "my lovely room," and as a result the sisters maintain it "perfectly" in honor of their mother's wishes (Jackson, *Castle* 23-4). Even their "mother's portrait" still hangs in the room (Jackson, *Castle* 23), further suggesting that her mother's presence is not only remembered but memorialized. Merricat describes as well the times when she "listens" to the "cat stories" her feline friend, Jonas, tells: "All cat stories start with the statement: 'My mother, who was the first cat, told me this'" (Jackson, *Castle* 53). As Merricat's own imagination drives her interaction with Jonas, the beginning of his stories further reveals that not only does she attempt to preserve her mother's memory within the house itself but the memory—and longing for her mother—is buried within her own mind as well.

Merricat's longing for her mother and subsequently for a return to the Imaginary Order is perhaps the most evident, however, in her allegiance to her sister, as Constance is very maternal in nature and even equated at times to their mother. Hattenhauer writes that "Constance's relation to her dead mother is to displace her by obsessively repeating her mother's domestic drudgery in all ways except marriage" (176). This similarity between Constance and her mother is captured by Uncle Julian who describes his "sister-in-law" as "a delicate woman" (Jackson, *Castle* 34), and Constance certainly matches this depiction of the ideal wife and mother within the context of the Cult of True Womanhood; while Merricat "run[s] wild" and Constance cannot remember the last time when she brushed her hair (Jackson, *Castle* 79), Constance is described

by Merricat as a “fairy princess” with blue eyes and “long golden hair” (Jackson, *Castle* 19). In contrast with Hattenhauer’s depiction of Constance reenacting her mother’s housewife role with “drudgery” (Jackson, *Castle* 176), however, Merricat suggests that “[e]ven at the worst time” Constance is “pink and white and golden, and nothing ever seemed to dim the brightness of her” (Jackson, *Castle* 20). Merricat describes the “joy” she experiences when watching her sister “moving beautifully in the sunlight, touching foods so softly” in the kitchen (Jackson, *Castle* 21). Additionally, “[a]ll the Blackwood women had made food and had taken pride in adding to the great supply of food” kept in the cellar (Jackson, *Castle* 42), and Constance is certainly depicted as yet another one of these women who is equally as gifted—as well as happy—in the kitchen. Readers also learn that their mother played the harp with a “delicate touch” (Jackson, *Castle* 48), and Constance as well gently strums the harp with “soft notes falling into the air like petals” (Jackson, *Castle* 85); Constance even plays the same songs that her mother strummed on the harp. Just as her mother used to do, Constance “serve[s] tea” to the few visiting friends “from a low table at one side of the fireplace” (Jackson, *Castle* 24). Thus, Constance not only reminds Merricat of her mother in her actions but also reenacts her mother within the context of the home.

Constance also treats Merricat like her child, which further depicts Constance as a mother figure rather than a sister to Merricat. Throughout the narrative, Constance instructs Merricat on how to react in certain situations, much as a mother does with her child. Constance advises Merricat to “[n]ever let them see that you care” when the villagers harass and bully her while she is in town obtaining supplies for their house, even instructing Merricat that “[i]t’s wrong to hate them” as it “only weakens *you*” (Jackson, *Castle* 9). When Merricat arrives home from the village, Constance tells her that “I’m always so happy when you come home from the village . . .

Partly because you bring home food, of course” but also “partly because I miss you” (Jackson, *Castle* 21), which again sounds like a mother that longs for her child while she is gone.

Constance also mothers Merricat as she looks out for her physical needs, instructing Merricat to “[w]ear your boots if you wander today; it will be quite wet in the woods” (Jackson, *Castle* 43). Constance shows physical affection toward Merricat as well, such as when she “touch[es]” her “cheek quickly with one finger” (Jackson, *Castle* 21). The pet names she calls Merricat also seem motherly in nature, such as when she refers to her as “Miss Idleness” (Jackson, *Castle* 22), “silly” (Jackson, *Castle* 51), and even a “good child” (Jackson, *Castle* 79). The use of her nickname Merricat—a “sweet moniker that also suggests the strangely childlike way she both behaves and is treated” (Silver 666)—further suggests a mother-child intimacy and affection between Constance and Merricat.

### **Merricat’s Rejection of the Father**

Merricat’s attempt to remain in the Imaginary Order is signified as well by her vehement rejection of Charles—her condescending first cousin who attempts to convince Constance to marry him—as he not only endangers Constance’s allegiance to Merricat but also threatens to again implement rules and order characteristic of the Symbolic Order upon Merricat’s life. Charles’s continuous comparison to Merricat’s father by Constance and Uncle Julian further solidifies him as an extension of the Symbolic Order, and he not only resembles Merricat’s father in appearance but quickly assumes a paternal role. Charles resides in the bedroom of Merricat’s father, and Merricat worries that he will also find his way into her father’s study as “he already ha[s] our father’s bedroom, after all, and our father’s watch and his gold chain and his signet ring” (Jackson, *Castle* 83). Charles also exerts his authority through doling out orders and reprimands to Merricat, Constance, and even Uncle Julian. When Merricat begins reciting

information about poisonous mushrooms to Charles, he responds in the tone of a disciplinarian: “‘Listen,’ Charles said. He put down his chicken. ‘You stop that,’ he said” (Jackson, *Castle* 73).

Later, Charles becomes annoyed at the manner in which Uncle Julian eats his food, and again issues orders, this time to Constance: “‘Can’t you feed him or something?’ Charles asked Constance. ‘He’s got food all over himself’” (Jackson, *Castle* 80). Charles then belittles Uncle Julian, stating he “[o]ught to wear a baby’s bib” (Jackson, *Castle* 80), which not only exemplifies Charles’s feeling of superiority but also reveals his cruelty. Even Constance falls under the influence of Charles and attempts to begin disciplining Merricat, though admittedly less harshly. She tells her sister that “we are going to have to forbid your wandering” (Jackson, *Castle* 81; emphasis added), thus suggesting her allegiance with Charles, and she later chides both herself and Merricat when she comments “I didn’t realize how wrong I was, letting things go on and on because I wanted to hide” (Jackson, *Castle* 79). As she did not “realize” this before Charles’s appearance, it is evident that Constance has internalized and is voicing what Charles has said to her.

Charles is also primarily concerned with money, which further suggests his role in introducing the Symbolic Order into the Blackwood mansion as money and wealth underscore societal expectations. When Uncle Julian first sees Charles within the home, he asks the following regarding his late brother: “He died wealthy, I trust? I was the only brother with no knack for money” (Jackson, *Castle* 63). Charles, however, merely replies “[a]s a matter of fact, Uncle Julian, my father left nothing” (Jackson, *Castle* 63). In this brief exchange, Charles’s motivations are made clear that he is there to seek out more family money as his own father can no longer financially support him. Charles’s concern with money is again highlighted as he becomes enraged when he finds that Merricat has nailed a golden watch chain to a tree:

“Charles’ hand was shaking as he held it out; I could see it shaking against the yellow of the wall behind him. ‘In a tree,’ he said, and his voice was shaking too. ‘I found it nailed to a tree, for God’s sake. What kind of a house *is* this?’” (Jackson, *Castle* 77). When Constance does not express concern regarding this event, Charles reminds her “Connie, this thing’s made of *gold*” (Jackson, *Castle* 77). Constance merely replies “[b]ut no one wants it” (Jackson, *Castle* 77), thereby jarringly contrasting the sisters’ unique economy of the Imaginary Order with Charles’s view of money consistent with the Symbolic Order. Though a “demon” like Charles gradually becomes an increasingly negative presence in their home (Jackson, *Castle* 83), he nevertheless highlights to an even greater extent the bizarre lifestyle of Constance and Merricat.

Yet Merricat’s retreat into the Imaginary Order is not only seen in her rejection of Charles but also through the complete control over Constance that she seeks to achieve, especially in thwarting Constance’s betrothal to Charles. While Constance’s marriage to Charles would likely have been an unhappy one based upon Charles’s authoritative attitude, it is evident that Constance has nevertheless agreed to marry Charles. Merricat does not respect this decision, however, and becomes fiercely jealous. When Merricat asks where Charles sat for dinner one night when Merricat opted to not attend dinner, Constance tells her “[i]n Father’s chair” and then justifies her decision by stating “[h]e has a perfect right to sit there” as “[h]e’s a guest, and he even *looks* like Father” (Jackson, *Castle* 70). When Merricat later destroys Charles’s room and describes how she “poured a pitcher of water into our father’s bed,” spread “leaves and broken sticks” throughout the room, and “tore down the curtains and threw them on the floor” (Jackson, *Castle* 87), Merricat does not clean this mess up or suffer for her actions; instead, Constance bears the burden and is the one that neatens the room and attempts to subdue Charles’s anger. Merricat also resolves to “re-seal the protection around Constance and shut Charles out” through

casting magical spells (Jackson, *Castle* 69), although it is obvious that Merricat is not so concerned about protecting Constance as she is herself and her own relationship with Constance.

Merricat later goes to such extremes as setting the house on fire in order to eradicate Charles from Constance's life. When she sweeps Charles's "pipe off the table into the wastebasket" so that it falls "onto the newspapers he had brought into the house" (Jackson, *Castle* 99), her intent is to literally smoke Charles out while disregarding the impact that this will have on Constance's happiness. After their house burns and is later further destroyed by the villagers, Constance "sigh[s]" at the sadness of the damage and realizes that "[i]t will take a great deal of scrubbing to get that hall clean again" (Jackson, *Castle* 103). Yet instead of feeling sorrow regarding her actions that have not only destroyed their house but resulted in Constance's loss of a potential romantic relationship, Merricat merely thinks "I was pleased that she thought of the house and forgot the people outside" (Jackson, *Castle* 103). Thus it becomes increasingly apparent that Merricat's primary motivation is to control her sister through isolating her and severing all her relationships with others except herself.

### **Isolation & Life on the Moon**

Though Merricat attempts to sequester herself and Constance within the Blackwood home as she desires to live in the Imaginary Order, a close reading reveals that Constance does not truly desire this life. Although Constance reportedly informed the police that "[t]hose people deserved to die" on the night of her family's murder (Jackson, *Castle* 37), which seemingly implies her relief that they are no longer present in her life, her grief is later exposed when she tells Uncle Julian "[s]ometimes I feel I would give anything to have them all back again" (Jackson, *Castle* 23). Constance clearly misses her family, and the cruelty of Merricat's murders is revealed not only in the poisoning itself but in the sadness and grief that she has caused within

Constance's life. Yet Merricat further entraps Constance within her home as she allows for Constance to go to trial for the murders that she did not commit, thereby resulting in the community's ostracizing of Constance. Consequently, Constance has no choice but to withdraw into the Blackwood mansion and later admits to Merricat that she has "been hiding" in their home to avoid experiencing the rejection of the village (Jackson, *Castle* 79). Later, it becomes even more apparent during a conversation with Merricat that Constance would leave the home if she were not viewed as a murderess. When Merricat asks Constance "[w]e'll always be here together, won't we, Constance?" (Jackson, *Castle* 54), Constance responds with the question "[d]on't you ever want to leave here, Merricat?" (Jackson, *Castle* 54). While Merricat indicates that she has no plans to leave as "[t]he world is full of terrible people" (Jackson, *Castle* 54), it is clear from Constance's response that she would venture beyond the walls of her home if given the opportunity.

Unlike Constance, however, Merricat truly desires nothing more than to live a life estranged from others, which is especially evident in her fantasy of living on the moon. She describes the moon as a quaint environment that includes a home with a "fireplace" and "a garden outside" (Jackson, *Castle* 15), and it is also a cheerful and intriguing place as "things on the moon" are "very bright, and odd colors" (Jackson, *Castle* 15). Most importantly to Merricat, however, is the fact that "[e]verything's safe on the moon" (Jackson, *Castle* 44), which is due in part to the fact that "[a]ll the locks are solid and tight, and there are no ghosts" (Jackson, *Castle* 75). Additionally, the moon is isolated and inaccessible and thereby truly removed from all of humanity. Life on the moon is also magical and eccentric, and Merricat imagines that she and Constance can wear "feathers in our hair, and rubies on our hands" while eating from "gold spoons" (Jackson, *Castle* 60). Merricat also explains to Constance the abundance of food and

plants on the moon suggesting the vitality of the location: “On the moon we have everything. Lettuce, and pumpkin pie and *Amanita phalloides*. We have cat-furred plants and horses dancing with their wings” (Jackson, *Castle* 75). Merricat even suggests to Constance that “[o]n the moon . . . [y]ou would wear our mother’s pearls and sing, and the sun would shine all the time” (Jackson, *Castle* 75), further implying that Merricat views Constance as a mother figure and wishes to seek total isolation—and in turn happiness—in a space completely removed from society.

Thus Constance not only becomes Merricat’s *objet petit a* she seeks out in lieu of her mother, but the Blackwood mansion itself also functions in this role as it is as close to the moon as Merricat can come without riding a “winged horse” to arrive there (Jackson, *Castle* 22). This sense of living removed from society as if on the moon is especially true of the home following the fire as Constance and Merricat begin to “pattern” and “shape” their days in a new way (Jackson, *Castle* 132). When they move back into the mansion, Constance resolves that “[w]e are going to lock ourselves in more securely than ever” (Jackson, *Castle* 117); in this manner, the two sisters become increasingly more isolated and detached from society, thereby replicating Merricat’s imagined life on the moon. Yet despite this cloistered and dreary lifestyle, it is likely that Merricat views Constance herself as the aspect of life on the moon that is “bright” and able to create “odd colors” (Jackson, *Castle* 15), especially as Merricat states that “nothing . . . ever seem[s] to dim the brightness” of Constance (Jackson, *Castle* 20). And while they do not wear feathers in their hair or rubies on their hands, Merricat adopts an eccentric style of dress as she wears tablecloths in the style of a “toga” (Jackson, *Castle* 136). Merricat later admits that not everything about their new life is as she “supposed it would be” (Jackson, *Castle* 133), yet she nevertheless finds herself “thinking that we are on the moon” (Jackson, *Castle* 133).

As is true of Eleanor in *Hill House* and Aunt Fanny in *The Sundial*, Merricat too willingly entraps herself—as well as her sister—within her home. Though Constance describes their damaged mansion as a “very happy place” (Jackson, *Castle* 133), the subtle hints she has given to Merricat regarding her wish to leave the Blackwood home in ideal circumstances places doubt in the reader’s mind regarding Constance’s belief in her own statement. The reader does not doubt Merricat’s belief, however, in her declaration to Constance that they “are going to be very happy” (Jackson, *Castle* 136), which further points to Merricat’s position within the Imaginary as their lifestyle is anything but ideal. Merricat’s own freedom is restricted as she no longer ventures any farther than the “edge of the woods” (Jackson, *Castle* 140), and the “narrow glass panes” on “either side of the front door” are “covered almost entirely with cardboard” (Jackson, *Castle* 140), which further severs the sisters from the outside world. Even as the villagers begin to leave food for the sisters on their doorstep in repentance of the destruction they inflicted upon the house after the fire, the sisters do not feel the freedom to retrieve the dishes in the daylight and wait until they are shrouded by night. Later, as villagers become increasingly braver and eventually approach the house to gawk at the damage, even they recognize the sadness and isolation of such a life, one villager commenting that the house “looks like a tomb” (Jackson, *Castle* 140). Ultimately, the life they lead on their imaginary moon results in an agoraphobic lifestyle that restricts the freedom of the sisters to truly live their lives despite Merricat’s warped view of happiness; yet, characteristic of Merricat’s insanity, she views this entrapment as a type of freedom, thereby further pointing to her retreat into the realm of the Imaginary Order and loss of a sense of reality.

## **Final Thoughts**

Throughout the novel, Merricat remains more firmly rooted within the Imaginary Order than either Eleanor of *Hill House* or Aunt Fanny of *The Sundial*. Even at her age of eighteen, Merricat has never embraced adulthood and continues to act in childish ways, even being treated as a child by her sister, Constance. Merricat's murder of her family points to her attempt to remain in the Imaginary Order as she violently opposes the rules and regulations of the Symbolic Order her family imposes upon her through discipline and punishment; her derangement is also further indicated by her apparent lack of guilt regarding her horrific act. Ironically, however, Merricat continues to long for her mother despite her murder as evidenced by wearing her mother's shoes and maintaining her mother's favorite room in perfect order. Additionally, Constance's role as a surrogate mother to Merricat also suggests Merricat's desire for her mother, especially as she relentlessly pursues living in complete isolation with Constance. By the conclusion of the novel, however, Merricat not only remains within the Imaginary Order but becomes entrapped within her own house as well.

## CONCLUSION

### “WRITING IS THE WAY OUT”: ESCAPING THE SYMBOLIC ORDER

Shirley Jackson's masterful novels *The Haunting of Hill House*, *The Sundial*, and *We Have Always Lived in the Castle* are unforgettable in their idiosyncratic depictions of sprawling homes and bizarre female protagonists defined by their disturbed psyches. Jackson's husband, Stanley, succinctly describes his wife's work as “neurotic modern fiction” in a biographical sketch he wrote for Jackson (quoted in Franklin 217), and Jackson herself explores in a diary entry her interest in writing about anxiety and instability: “insecure, uncontrolled, i wrote of neuroses and fear and i think all my books laid end to end would be one long documentation of anxiety” (quoted in Franklin 477). In the same diary, Jackson reflects upon the role her own lived experience plays in shaping her fiction:

if i am cured and well and oh glorious alive then my books should be different. who wants to write about anxiety from a place of safety? although i suppose i would never be entirely safe since i cannot reconstruct my mind, but what conflict is there to write about then? i keep thinking vaguely of novels about husbands and wives, perhaps in suburbia, but i do not really think that this is my kind of thing. (quoted in Franklin 477)

Though Jackson enacted the role of a housewife, her uneasiness with this lifestyle is apparent in her hesitation toward writing primarily of “husbands and wives” and “suburbia.” Jackson's biographer Ruth Franklin suggests that the “tension” she experienced between being a housewife and “an important writer” serves to “animate all of Jackson's writing” (5). Jackson references in her diary an unnamed “obsession” (quoted in Franklin 477), and Franklin's speculation regarding what this “obsession” may be further supports her claim of Jackson's unhappiness with living as a traditional woman: “She was consumed with the idea of leaving Stanley, of creating a new home for herself. She may have planned to take the children with her . . . but her fantasies are of leaving alone” (478). In this same diary, Jackson vaguely writes of a

“new life” in which she desires “to be separate, to be alone, to *stand* and *walk* alone, not to be different and weak and helpless and degraded . . . and shut out, not shut out, shutting out” (quoted in Franklin 479).

While scholars and readers should be cautious of placing too much emphasis upon Jackson’s biography in relation to her novels, her diary entries do call to mind themes found within *Hill House*, *The Sundial*, and *Castle*. Jackson’s desire to retreat into her own world of isolation is a familiar subject as Eleanor, Aunt Fanny, and Merricat all long to be “alone” and “separate.” The insecurity Jackson writes of also characterizes her protagonists as they fear—and ultimately fight against—being controlled by others. Yet just as Jackson’s inner world was one perpetually riddled with anxiety despite her hope of escape, so too do Eleanor, Aunt Fanny, and Merricat discover that achieving a sense of wholeness and completeness is at best fictional. The Imaginary Order is revealed as a space that never existed in the first place and, therefore, cannot be a space to which one returns. Consequently, the characters’ pursuit of this register results in their own delusions and insanity, and the control and stability they desire in their lives is never fully realized.

The tension of both rejecting and desiring one’s mother explored within *Hill House*, *The Sundial*, and *Castle* is another conflict Jackson dealt with in her personal life. Franklin writes that Jackson’s mother, Geraldine, “tried valiantly to shape her daughter in her image” of ideal femininity but that “it must have been clear early on that Shirley would not conform to Geraldine’s ambitions for her” (24). Even into adulthood, Geraldine continued to criticize Jackson’s nonconformity to traditional standards of womanhood in the letters she sent to her daughter, particularly focusing upon “Shirley’s appearance (especially her weight), her housekeeping” and “her child-rearing practices” (24). Surprisingly, Jackson corresponded both

“dutifully and cheerfully” to her mother (24), but her novels explored the strain of their mother-daughter relationship:

Jackson’s awareness that her mother had never loved her unconditionally—if at all—would be a source of sadness well into adulthood. Aside from a single angry letter that she did not send, she never gave voice to her feelings of rejection. But she expressed them in other ways. All the heroines of her novels are essentially motherless—if not lacking a mother entirely, then victims of loveless mothering. Many of her books include acts of matricide, either unconscious or deliberate. (Franklin 25)

This pattern of matricide is seen in *Hill House* and *Castle* as Eleanor fears that she may have unconsciously killed her mother through neglect and Merricat admits to premeditated murder, confessing to her sister she poisoned the sugar she knew her mother would use. And while Aunt Fanny did not commit matricide, she too is left “motherless” as a child after her mother died of illness; with only a cruel and exacting father to rear her, Aunt Fanny continues to long for her mother well into adulthood. Kristeva asserts that “[m]atricide is our vital necessity” (*Black Sun* 27), suggesting that “hinder[ing]” this psychological action results in the “introject[ion]” of the “maternal object” (*Black Sun* 28). As a result, “the depressive or melancholic putting to death of the self” is the outcome of unsuccessful separation from the maternal object (*Black Sun* 28). While Eleanor, Aunt Fanny, and Merricat have all been physically severed from their mothers through violence and illness, the introjection of their mothers results in psychological turmoil that leads to their delusional states and even suicide, as is the case with Eleanor. Just as they discover that the Imaginary Order is not real, so too do they discover the consequences of paradoxically desiring independence and autonomy on a conscious level while unconsciously desiring unity with their mothers.

Jackson concludes in her diary that “writing is the way out” (quoted in Franklin 479). While the life of a homemaker and the troubled relationship with her own mother were inescapable in Jackson’s own life, in her writing she could explore characters who were

empowered to do what she could not: single-mindedly pursue independence and freedom from the constraints of the Symbolic Order. As a result, Jackson wrote compelling novels that not only shaped popular culture but also presented important commentary on the negative psychological effects women in particular experience when living within a patriarchal society. And while Jackson's characters are not successful in their attempts to escape the worlds surrounding them, the fictions and stories they create are nevertheless a comfort to them and one that allows them to feel—at least for a time—as if they are in control and powerful. Jackson too seems to share this sentiment about her own storytelling and writing as indicated in her diary: “on the other side somewhere there is a country, perhaps the glorious country of well-dom, perhaps a country of a story, perhaps both, for a happy book” (quoted in Franklin 479). She concludes her diary with the repetitious, mantra-like phrase “laughter is possible laughter is possible laughter is possible” (quoted in Franklin 479). It seems that in Jackson's conception, the creative space of storytelling and writing present the female author with the possibility of finding satisfaction, independence, and control in worlds of her own creation that the Symbolic Order and a patriarchal society can never offer.

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## APPENDIX A: OFFICE OF RESEARCH INTEGRITY APPROVAL LETTER



Office of Research Integrity

February 9, 2017

Dear Ms. Baker:

This letter is in response to the submitted thesis abstract entitled "*The Writing on the Walls: Shirley Jackson's Examination of the Woman Storyteller's Experience of Boundaries in The Sundial, The Haunting of Hill House, and We Have Always Lived in the Castle.*" After assessing the abstract it has been deemed not to be human subject research and therefore exempt from oversight of the Marshall University Institutional Review Board (IRB). The Code of Federal Regulations (45CFR46) has set forth the criteria utilized in making this determination. Since the information in this study does not involve human subjects as defined in the above referenced instruction it is not considered human subject research. If there are any changes to the abstract you provided then you would need to resubmit that information to the Office of Research Integrity for review and a determination.

I appreciate your willingness to submit the abstract for determination. Please feel free to contact the Office of Research Integrity if you have any questions regarding future protocols that may require IRB review.

Sincerely,

Bruce F. Day, ThD, CIP  
Director

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## APPENDIX B: VITA

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### EDUCATION

- ❖ M.A. in English, 2017  
Marshall University  
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- ❖ M.S. in Communication Disorders, 2015  
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- ❖ B.S. in Secondary English Education, 2009  
Asbury University  
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### WORK EXPERIENCE

- ❖ Speech-Language Pathologist, PRN  
HealthSouth Rehabilitation Hospital of Huntington (Huntington, WV)  
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- ❖ Speech-Language Pathologist, PRN  
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March 2016 – March 2017
- ❖ English Teacher  
Boyd County High School (Ashland, KY)  
August 2009 – May 2012

### PUBLICATIONS, POSTERS, & CONFERENCES

- ❖ **Attendee**, West Virginia Speech and Hearing Conference, March 2014
- ❖ **Researcher**, research group member that developed the poster “Incorporating Evidenced-Based Practice into Dialect Modification Training: A Systematic Review” presented at the 2014 WVSHA conference, March 2014
- ❖ **Researcher**, research group member that developed the poster “Assessing Stages of Grief in Children Who Stutter” presented at the 2013 American Speech-Language-Hearing Association conference, November 2013
- ❖ **Attendee**, Stuttering Attitudes Research Symposium (SARS), West Virginia University, September 2013
- ❖ **Researcher**, contributed to the literature review portion for the poster “Changing Peer Perceptions of Children Who Stutter” presented at the SARS conference, September 2013
- ❖ **Book Review**, published in Arizona State University’s *education review: a multi-lingual journal of book reviews*, April 2010
- ❖ **Poem**, “Modern Jonahs” published in *The Rambler*, Spring 2008

## ACTIVITIES & MEMBERSHIPS

- ❖ **Member**, American Speech-Language-Hearing Association, 2016 – Present
- ❖ **Member**, Phi Kappa Phi, April 2013 – Present
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- ❖ **Member**, ASHA Special Interest Group 2: Neurophysiology and Neurogenic Speech and Language Disorders, March 2014 – December 2015
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- ❖ **Student Member**, Kentucky Speech-Language-Hearing Association, December 2014 – December 2015
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- ❖ **Editor**, *The Asbury Review*, Asbury University, Fall 2008 – Spring 2009
- ❖ **Leader**, Asbury University Writing Workshops, Fall 2008
- ❖ **Life Section Editor**, *The Collegian*, Asbury University, Spring 2006 – Fall 2006

## AWARDS & HONORS

- ❖ **Recipient**, American Speech-Language-Hearing Association Certificate of Clinical Competence, 2016 – Present
- ❖ **Recipient**, Harbolt Award, Marshall University Communication Disorders M.S. Program, 2015
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- ❖ **Recipient**, Maier Award, 1<sup>st</sup> Place Graduate Non-Fiction Prose, Marshall University, 2010
- ❖ **Baccalaureate Recipient**, Professional Development Award, Southeastern Regional Association of Teacher Educators (SRATE), 2009
- ❖ **Recipient**, Outstanding Academic Achievement for a Senior Majoring in English Education, Asbury University, 2009
- ❖ **Recipient**, Presidential Scholarship, Asbury University, 2005 – 2009
- ❖ **Recipient**, KEES Scholarship, 2005 – 2009
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