

Dead Letters: Random Thoughts on The Haunting of Hill House

There's no argument here that hands down this is, next to *The Turn of the Screw*, one of the most classic haunted house stories out there...undeniably, is this any surprise? Shirley Jackson is the master at examining "the hidden," "the what lies beneath." And her 1959 novel *The Haunting of Hill House* is no exception.

Never read Jackson before? You probably did in high school – at the very least, "The Lottery." Before I go into some thoughts about *The Haunting of Hill House*, I wanted to note that if you love a good short story – scary or otherwise – go beyond what you've read in high school and get your hands on some of her other work. Jackson is the master of the short story in terms of form and structure, and in today's world, when, sadly, every novelist thinks he can write a short story, it's refreshing to know that the real craftsmen are still available for us to read. If you don't believe me on that point, just read some of Amazon.com's shorts. Some of them are living proof that just because you can write a novel does not mean you can write a short story. Jackson is one of those rare people who can do both.

And now back to our story. *The Haunting of Hill House* opens right away with a reference to Dr. Montague's methods regarding paranormal research and plenty of references to the much-discussed Spiritualist movement/resurgence. Right away, we as investigators have barometers that go up: can he be trusted? In the next scene, we meet Eleanor Vance, and are introduced to her instability. Theodora's coming off a relationship-fatal argument with her lover; Luke Sanderson is characterized as "a liar." Jackson, in making us not completely trust the people who will be researching, has already asked the question: "how much of the supernatural is our own perception"?

The book, unlike the film, is more about inner psychoses and issues and their effect on the world around us. This, my friends, is where horror comes from. Edgar Allan Poe posited in his theory of perversity – which wasn't really an official theory, just something he wrote that over the years has become the perfect statement of the nature of horror – that even the most normal man has the capability, when driven by certain emotions, to go off the deep end. The reason *The Haunting of Hill House* is so effective is because it has tapped the roots of true terror: it comes from within ourselves. We are left to ask, is there something supernatural going on in Hill House? Or is Eleanor just crazy after all those years of isolation and caring for her sick mother? Is she truly the butt of ridicule and distrust among her team mates? Or has she become so socially unaware and so horrified and disrespectful of herself that she's seeing things that aren't there? Is Theo really interested in Eleanor or is she just looking for a fling because she's mad at her lover? On and on. In her characters, we recognize ourselves and situations in which we've been. *The Haunting of Hill House* is about the haunting of our own souls. Read this. Then go take a long look at yourself in the mirror. Then ask yourself, what are you really afraid of?

Oh, and just for fun? Little known fact: in Disney's *The Haunted Mansion*, the hallway of "breathing doors" was directly inspired by the "breathing door" scene in the 1963 Robert Wise film. (Shout out to Gore Girl). To purchase some of Jackson's work, or to read more about her, here's some hot spots:

The Lottery & Other Stories

http://www.amazon.com/Lottery-Other-Stories-Shirley-Jackson/dp/0374529531/ref=pd_bbs_sr_1/002-1336229-8990462?ie=UTF8&s=books&qid=1180883347&sr=8-1

The Haunting of Hill House

http://www.amazon.com/Haunting-Hill-House-Penguin-Classics/dp/0143039989/ref=pd_bbs_sr_3/002-1336229-8990462?ie=UTF8&s=books&qid=1180883347&sr=8-3

Shirley Jackson

<http://www.fantasticfiction.co.uk/j/shirley-jackson/>

Critical Essay on Shirley Jackson's Life and Work
<http://www.tabula-rasa.info/DarkAges/ShirleyJackson.html>