



Haunted By Memory: Trauma In Shirley Jackson's The Haunting Of Hill House And Laura Purcell's The Silent Companions

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Chapter I: Introduction

1.1 Background and Context

The Gothic literary tradition has long served as a vessel for the unspeakable, a repository for anxieties that resist articulation in the realm of the rational. From its eighteenth-century inception, the genre has utilized the architecture of the haunted house not merely as a setting, but as a psychological container for the return of the repressed. In the twenty-first century, this trope remains a vital instrument for exploring the fractures in the human psyche caused by catastrophic loss. This dissertation, entitled *Haunted by Memory: Trauma in Shirley Jackson's The Haunting of Hill House and Laura Purcell's The Silent Companions*, posits that the haunted house functions as a structural analogue for the traumatized mind, where the *ghost* is less a supernatural entity and more a manifestation of unassimilated memory. By juxtaposing Shirley Jackson's mid-century masterpiece (1959) with Laura Purcell's contemporary Neo-Victorian novel (2017), this study tracks a critical evolution in the representation of trauma: from the ambiguous, psychological interiority of the mid-twentieth century to the material, historical exteriority of the modern Neo-Gothic.

To understand how these novels operate as trauma narratives, it is necessary to trace the evolution of trauma studies itself, a field that has shifted from early psychoanalytic models to complex structural and historical theories. The theoretical lineage begins with Sigmund Freud's seminal 1919 essay, *The Uncanny (Das Unheimliche)*. Freud identifies the uncanny not as something new or foreign, but as that class of the terrifying which leads back to something long known to us, once very familiar (Freud 220). Etymologically, the German word *heimlich* (homely, familiar, secret) develops an ambivalence until it coincides with its opposite, *unheimlich* (uncanny, exposed). For Freud, the uncanny experience arises when repressed infantile complexes are revived or when primitive beliefs we have surmounted seem once more to be confirmed (249). This concept provides the foundational mechanism for the Gothic: the haunted house is terrifying

because it brings to light the *heimlich* (secret) trauma that ought to have remained hidden.

Following the World Wars, the understanding of trauma shifted from the individual neuroses of the Victorian era to the collective shattering of the self-observed shell shock and combat neurosis. Judith Herman, in her foundational text *Trauma and Recovery* (1992), systematized this evolution, arguing that the study of trauma has a history of episodic amnesia, where insights are discovered and then repressed by society (Herman 7). Herman defines the central dialectic of psychological trauma as the conflict between the will to deny horrible events and the will to proclaim them aloud (1). She notes that certain violations of the social compact are too terrible to utter aloud: this is the meaning of the word *unspeakable*. However, Herman insists that atrocities refuse to be buried, appearing instead as symptoms—a formulation that perfectly mirrors the Gothic trope of the restless ghost.

In the 1990s, the ethical turn in literary theory produced a new framework for understanding trauma, spearheaded by Cathy Caruth. In *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History* (1996), Caruth argues that trauma is characterized by *belatedness*. She posits that the traumatic event is not fully assimilated as it occurs and therefore returns to haunt the survivor later in the form of repetitive nightmares or flashbacks (Caruth 4). For Caruth, the pathology of trauma lies in the structure of its experience or reception: the event is not assimilated or experienced fully at the time, but only belatedly, in its repeated possession of the one who experiences it (4). This theory of *unclaimed experience* is crucial for analyzing the protagonists of Jackson and Purcell, who are possessed by pasts they cannot fully integrate.

However, the field has continued to evolve through the critiques of historians like Dominick LaCapra. In *Writing History, Writing Trauma*, LaCapra warns against the *traumatopism* of modern theory—the tendency to convert trauma into a sacred or sublime source of identity (LaCapra 81). LaCapra introduces a vital distinction between *loss* (historical, specific events) and *absence* (tranhistorical, structural gaps in existence) (46). He argues that conflating the two leads to endless melancholy and impossible mourning. Furthermore, LaCapra distinguishes between *acting out*, where the past is compulsively relived as if it were the present, and *working through*, a process of gaining critical distance that allows for re-engagement with life (22).

This dissertation utilizes these theoretical developments to analyze how Jackson and Purcell navigate the memory-trauma nexus. Jackson's *The Haunting of Hill House*, written before the formalization of PTSD as a diagnosis, anticipates Caruth's theory of the *unclaimed experience*. Eleanor Vance's dissolution into the house represents a failure to work through the absence of a life she never lived, resulting in a fatal acting out of her trauma. Conversely, Purcell's *The Silent Companions* reflects a twenty-first-century understanding of trauma as inherited and material. In Purcell's narrative, trauma is not just a ghost in the mind but is embodied in objects—the wooden silent companions—reflecting a shift toward what might be termed the materiality of memory. By reading these texts through the lens of this evolving theoretical framework, this study aims to demonstrate that the Gothic horror novel is not merely a genre of scares, but a sophisticated medium for the narrativization of the unspeakable wounds of the psyche.

1.2 Abstract

This research investigates the haunted house within Gothic fiction as a physical representation of the traumatized female mind, illustrating how unprocessed memories manifest as supernatural horror. Through a comparative study of Shirley Jackson's *The Haunting of Hill House* and Laura Purcell's *The Silent Companions*, the dissertation traces the evolution of the memory-trauma connection from internal psychological ambiguity to external, material history. By applying the psychoanalytic and trauma frameworks of Cathy Caruth, Dominick LaCapra, Sigmund Freud, and Judith Herman, the analysis decodes

these spectral environments. Jackson depicts repressed trauma as a spatial emptiness, whereas Purcell projects historical trauma onto eerie physical objects; nevertheless, both authors construct their domestic settings as patriarchal snares. By actively stripping away the clinical requirement for safety, these environments structurally inhibit the heroines from successfully *working through* their tragic histories. In the end, the Gothic home operates as a mechanism for perpetual trauma, locking its female subjects in a destructive loop of *acting out*.

1.3 Research Problem

The central research problem addressed in this study is the mechanism by which haunted spaces manifest personal and inherited trauma. Specifically, it investigates how memory—suppressed, fragmented, or distorted—returns as horror within the domestic sphere. In both *The Haunting of Hill House* and *The Silent Companions*, the protagonists are not merely victims of external supernatural forces; they are active, albeit often unconscious, participants in their own haunting.

This research problematizes the distinction between the internal landscape of the mind and the external reality of the house. If trauma is an experience that is not fully assimilated as it occurs, as Caruth argues, then the haunting can be understood as the belated arrival of this experience (Caruth 4). The problem, therefore, is to decipher the specific language of this arrival. How does the architecture of Hill House or The Bridge articulate the silence of its inhabitants? How do objects—a cup of stars, a wooden dummy board—become repositories for grief that cannot be mourned? Furthermore, this study grapples with the distinction Dominick LaCapra draws between absence (transhistorical structural trauma) and loss (historical specific trauma) (LaCapra 46). A critical tension arises in determining whether the characters in these novels are suffering from a specific loss that can be mourned, or a structural absence that leads to endless melancholia and self-destruction.

1.4 Objectives

The primary objective of this dissertation is to analyze psychological trauma not merely as a thematic backdrop, but as the central narrative force driving the structural and atmospheric tension in Shirley Jackson's *The Haunting of Hill House* and Laura Purcell's *The Silent Companions*. Drawing on Cathy Caruth's concept of *belatedness*, this study aims to demonstrate how Gothic narrative structures mimic the repetitive, intrusive mechanics of unassimilated trauma.

A key comparative goal is to examine the evolution of trauma representation across the two distinct eras of the novels (1959 and 2017). The research contrasts Jackson's mid-century reliance on architectural ambiguity—where the house functions as a psychological mirror for Eleanor Vance—with Purcell's neo-Gothic shift toward object-haunting, where trauma is externalized into the material forms of the silent companions.

Furthermore, this study investigates the intersection of female subjectivity, domestic confinement, and Freud's concept of the uncanny (*unheimlich*) to understand how domestic spaces transform into sites of psychological siege. Finally, utilizing Dominick LaCapra's distinction between *acting out* and *working through*, the dissertation evaluates the protagonist's psychological trajectories to determine whether the Gothic genre inevitably precludes recovery by trapping its heroines in cycles of traumatic repetition.

1.5 Methodology

This dissertation employs a qualitative methodology centered on symptomatic reading and comparative literary analysis, underpinned by psychoanalytic and trauma theory. The core theoretical framework is derived from Cathy Caruth's concept of the *unclaimed experience* (Caruth 4), which frames trauma as a belated event that returns via repetition, allowing an analysis of the hauntings in both texts as structural manifestations of unprocessed history. To evaluate the protagonists' psychological trajectories, the study utilizes Dominick LaCapra's distinction between *acting out* and *working through* (LaCapra 22), alongside his critical differentiation between structural *absence* and historical *loss* (LaCapra 46). These concepts help determine whether the characters are engaged in mourning or trapped in melancholia. Additionally, Sigmund Freud's essay *The Uncanny* provides the mechanism for decoding the domestic dread, interpreting the haunted house not as an alien space but as the return of the repressed *unheimlich* (Freud 241). Finally, Judith Herman's clinical stages of recovery—safety, remembrance, and reconnection (Herman 155)—serve as a diagnostic counterpoint, illustrating how the Gothic environments of Jackson and Purcell systematically block healing, trapping their female protagonists in a cycle of failed recovery.

1.6 Literature Review

1.6.1 *The Haunting of Hill House*

Since its publication in 1959, Shirley Jackson's *The Haunting of Hill House* has generated a dense body of criticism, pivoting largely on the ambiguity of its supernatural elements. The central critical debate concerns the ontology of the ghosts: are they external manifestations of a sentient, malevolent house, or psychological projections of the protagonist, Eleanor Vance? Early scholarship, influenced by Edmund Wilson's reading of Henry James, often pathologized Eleanor, viewing the novel as a case study in female neurosis rather than a literal ghost story. However, the rise of trauma studies has shifted this discourse, reframing Eleanor's dissolution not merely as madness, but as a response to the erasure of the self within the domestic sphere.

A dominant strain of criticism, exemplified by Roberta Rubenstein and Judie Newman, utilizes feminist-psychoanalytic frameworks to interpret the house as a monstrous reconfiguration of the maternal bond. In this reading, Eleanor's trauma stems from the *root trauma* of her eleven-year subjugation as her mother's caretaker. Newman argues that the source of the text's terror is the dynamics of the mother-daughter relation, characterized by psychic annihilation and vexed individuation (Newman 121). The house, with its embracing chairs and motherly suffocation, offers a symbiotic unity that Eleanor craves but which ultimately necessitates her death. Newman posits that Eleanor's suicide is a regression to an undifferentiated state, a suicidal sacrifice to the mother-house entity rather than a liberation (125). This interpretation leans heavily on object relations theory, suggesting that the haunting is the return of the repressed pre-oedipal desire to merge with the mother.

However, recent scholarship has complicated this tragedy model. Brittany Roberts offers a subversive reading that challenges the LaCaprian imperative to work through trauma and return to society. Roberts argues that viewing Eleanor's end as a tragedy imposes a heteronormative and patriarchal value system on a character who explicitly rejects the nuclear family (Roberts 67). Instead, Roberts posits that the novel functions as a *traumatic fairy tale* where the house is not an abuser, but a lover offering the romance of isolation that Eleanor was denied in life (75). By crashing her car, Eleanor refuses to return to a society that views her only as a vessel for caretaking; thus, her death is a successful claim to a home of her own. This creates a critical tension in the field: is the Gothic ending a failure of recovery (as Herman or LaCapra might argue) or a radical, albeit fatal, act of agency?

Furthermore, the architectural uncanniness of Hill House has been analyzed as a reflection of postwar American anxieties. Richard Pascal argues that the house conjures disturbing anxieties about the modern family, serving as a critique of the insular, pressurized domesticity of the 1950s (Pascal 464). Bernice M. Murphy extends this, suggesting the house possesses a growing knowledge of its inhabitants, acting not just as a mirror for Eleanor's psyche but as a predatory entity that exploits the unilluminated corners of the human mind (Murphy 134). This supports the view that the house is not sane, creating a structural analogue for the traumatized mind where reality is subjective and fluid.

1.6.2 *The Silent Companions*

As a twenty-first-century Neo-Victorian text, Laura Purcell's *The Silent Companions* (2017) has invited a different, though complementary, critical conversation. While Jackson's horror is often located in the nebulous and atmospheric, scholarship on Purcell focuses on the materiality of trauma. The novel is frequently situated within the resurgence of the Gothic that explores historical trauma through the lens of gender and class.

Critics highlight Purcell's use of the silent companion—a wooden dummy board—as a quintessential embodiment of Freud's *unheimlich*. These objects, hovering between the animate and inanimate, generate intellectual uncertainty and function as trauma magnets that absorb and reenact the violent history of the estate. Unlike the intangible disturbances in Hill House, the horror here is solid and tactile. The critical consensus suggests that Purcell uses these objects to externalize the *abject*, blurring the boundaries between subject and object, life and death.

The narrative structure of *The Silent Companions*, which interweaves a 17th-century diary with a Victorian timeline and an asylum frame, is widely interpreted as a textual representation of traumatic memory. The nonlinear narrative mimics the intrusive nature of trauma described by Judith Herman, where the past interrupts the present without warning. The asylum frame, where the protagonist Elsie is mute and accused of murder, engages with the Victorian medicalization of women's trauma. Critics note that Elsie's silence is not merely a plot device but a thematic echo of the *unspeakable* nature of domestic abuse and historical misogyny. By stripping Elsie of her voice, the novel critiques the patriarchal systems—represented by Dr. Shepherd—that demand a rational narrative from a subject whose reality has been fractured by the supernatural.

Furthermore, the novel is read as an exploration of intergenerational or structural trauma. The Bainbridge estate is not just a haunted house but a historical archive of dynastic madness and witchcraft. The diary of Anne Bainbridge serves as a testimony that arrives too late to save the present protagonist, reinforcing the Gothic trope that the past is a physical weight that crushes the living. This scholarship positions Purcell's work as a bridge between the classic ghost story and modern trauma theory, where the ghost is a symptom of unresolved historical violence.

1.6.3 Gap in Research

While *The Haunting of Hill House* and *The Silent Companions* have been analyzed individually, there remains a significant gap in comparative research that rigorously applies the *acting out* versus *working through* framework to these specific texts. Existing comparisons often remain at the level of surface tropes—noting the haunted house or the unreliable narrator—without interrogating the deeper structural differences in how trauma is embodied.

Specifically, there is a lack of analysis regarding the shift from the psychological haunting of the mid-20th century (Jackson) to the material haunting of the 21st century (Purcell). Scholarship has not sufficiently addressed how Eleanor Vance's internalization of the house contrasts with Elsie Bainbridge's externalization of trauma into objects. This dissertation addresses this gap by positing that this evolution reflects a broader cultural shift in the understanding of trauma: from an individual neurosis rooted in the nuclear family to a material legacy rooted in historical and systemic oppression. By juxtaposing Jackson's ambiguous supernaturalism with Purcell's literal object-horror, this study will illuminate how the Gothic genre adapts its mechanisms to represent the changing face of the *unspeakable*.

Chapter II: *The Haunting of Hill House*

2.1 Introduction: The Architecture of the Uncanny

In Shirley Jackson's *The Haunting of Hill House* (1959), the titular edifice functions not merely as a setting for supernatural occurrences, but as a structural analogue for the traumatized human psyche. Unlike the traditional Gothic castle, which often houses an external, historical antagonist, Hill House operates as a mirror for the internal disintegration of its protagonist, Eleanor Vance. The narrative mechanics of the novel suggest that the horror experienced by Eleanor is less an encounter with a spectral other than a confrontation with the fragmented remnants of her own self—a self-eroded by years of servitude and repression. To understand the specific nature of Eleanor's dissolution, one must view the hauntings through the lens of trauma theory, specifically Cathy Caruth's concept of *unclaimed experience* and Sigmund Freud's theory of the *unheimlich* (uncanny). In this framework, the supernatural events of the novel—the cold spots, the writing on the wall, the banging doors—are not discrete ghostly interventions but rather the belated return of traumatic memory that Eleanor failed to integrate at the moment of its occurrence. The house, described in the opening paragraph as not sane, holding darkness within, becomes the externalized theatre for Eleanor's internal psychological collapse, transforming her *root trauma*—the years of isolation and her mother's death—into a consuming, spatial reality (Jackson 3).

2.2 The Uncanny Mirror: Hill House as Psyche

From the outset, Jackson establishes Hill House as a sentient, malevolent entity that defies the laws of rational architecture and, by extension, the laws of sanity. The novel's famous opening declaration that No live organism can continue for long to exist sanely under conditions of absolute reality immediately posits a tension between sanity and the absolute reality of the house (3). This description aligns with Freud's concept of the uncanny, or *unheimlich*, which he defines as that class of the frightening which leads back to what is known of old and long familiar (Freud 220). The uncanny is not the unknown, but the repressed familiar returning in a distorted form. Hill House, with its walls continued upright and floors... firm, presents a facade of domestic normalcy—the *heimlich* (homely)—that conceals a profound structural wrongness (Jackson 3).

Dr. Montague notes that every angle of the house is slightly wrong, creating a sensory distortion where angles that appear to be right are actually a fraction of a degree off (86). This architectural dissonance mirrors Eleanor's own fractured psyche. Just as the house is not sane, Eleanor arrives at Hill House in a state of suspended development, her identity fractured by the years spent nursing her invalid mother. The house functions as a mirror stage gone wrong; rather than allowing Eleanor to integrate a cohesive self-image, the house reflects her fragmentation back to her. Freud argues that the uncanny effect is often produced by inanimate objects that appear animate, a dynamic evident when Eleanor perceives the watchfulness from the blank windows (Jackson 33). This animism is a regression to what Freud calls the *omnipotence of thoughts*, where the internal state of the subject—Eleanor's guilt and fear—is projected onto the external

world, endowing the house with a sentient malevolence that mimics her own internal landscape (Freud 240).

The face of Hill House, which Eleanor perceives as vile and diseased, is essentially her own reflection. As she approaches the house, she thinks, vile, it is diseased; get away from here at once (Jackson 33). Yet she does not leave. This inability to depart signals the activation of the death drive, or Thanatos, as the house begins to exert a magnetic pull on her repressed guilt. The *unheimlich* nature of the house lies in its ability to be simultaneously a strange, hostile environment and the only place that feels like home to Eleanor. It is the *heimlich* (secret/private) chamber of her trauma made manifest. The house steadied and located the group, but for Eleanor, it locates her within the geography of her own pathology (67).

2.3 "I Have Waited So Long": The Root of Trauma

To understand why Hill House claims Eleanor, one must examine the *root trauma* that defines her existence prior to her arrival. Eleanor's life has been defined by childhood isolation and the long-term care of her invalid mother. In the car with her brother-in-law, she asserts, It's half my car... I helped pay for it, only to be dismissed (Jackson 9). This scene encapsulates her powerlessness and the erasure of her agency. She has lived in a state of *constriction*, a term Judith Herman uses to describe the numbing and isolation that often follows prolonged trauma. Herman notes that the traumatized person feels like a refugee entering a new country, which perfectly characterizes Eleanor's journey to Hill House (Herman 133). She creates elaborate fantasies on the road—imagining a life as a fortune teller or a princess—attempting to forge a new identity. However, these fantasies are fragile defences against the *absence* at the core of her being.

Dominick LaCapra distinguishes between *absence* (transhistorical lack) and *loss* (historical event). Eleanor suffers from a profound *absence*; she has never possessed a life of her own. She tells the others, I have waited so long, a statement that reveals her existence as a void waiting to be filled (Jackson 17). Tragically, she interprets this structural *absence* as a *loss* that can be recuperated through the house. She seeks a home and a mother in Hill House to replace the ones she never truly had, falling into what LaCapra terms *traumatropism*—turning the site of trauma into a sacred source of identity (LaCapra 81).

Caruth's theory of *unclaimed experience* suggests that trauma is not known in the first instance but returns to haunt the survivor later on (Caruth 4). Eleanor's caretaking years were an experience of slow erasure that she could not fully process while they were happening. The event of her trauma was not a single shock, but the chronic negation of her selfhood. Hill House becomes the space where this *missed experience* finally catches up to her. The haunting is not an external invasion but a *belated* arrival of her own history. The cold spot outside the nursery serves as a somatic manifestation of this trauma. It creates a physical sensation of the numb/constricted state that Eleanor lived in for years. The cold is not merely a ghostly drop in temperature; it is the temperature of her own emotional stasis, a void where no live organism can exist.

2.4 Acting Out: The Haunting as Repetition Compulsion

The mechanisms of the haunting in Hill House—specifically the banging on the walls and the writing in the hallway—can be read as literalizations of what LaCapra calls *acting out*, or the *repetition compulsion*. In this state, the past is performatively regenerated or relived as if it were fully present.

The banging on the wall is perhaps the most terrifying sequence in the novel, yet its terror lies in its familiarity to Eleanor. During the night, the characters hear a crashing sound that destroys the house's silence. Eleanor wonders, How can the others hear the noise when it is coming from inside my head? This thought betrays the internal origin of the sound (Jackson 129). It is an auditory flashback to the invalid mother banging on the wall for medicine—a summons Eleanor failed to answer on the night of her mother's

death.

The supernatural force of the house amplifies this memory, turning a private guilt into a public terror. Eleanor is trapped in the fidelity to trauma; she cannot *work through* the guilt of her mother's death because she is compelled to repeat the scenario of being besieged by a demanding, overwhelming force. The house, acting as the mother, demands her attention, banging on the walls of her psyche just as the invalid banged on the partition wall.

This repetition escalates with the appearance of the writing on the wall: HELP ELEANOR COME HOME (Jackson 106). The message is written in chalk, described as large and straggling, like the work of a child. This scene dissolves the boundary between the subject and the object. Is the writing a message from the house, or a projection from Eleanor? Freud suggests that the uncanny arises when the distinction between imagination and reality is effaced (Freud 244). The message creates an intellectual uncertainty regarding who is speaking. From a trauma theory perspective, the writing is a symptom surfacing because the verbal narrative was suppressed. Eleanor cannot verbalize her desire to belong, nor her guilt; therefore, the text manifests it externally. The message is a plea for home, but it is a twisted version of home—a return to the womb/tomb of the mother. Herman argues that the will to deny and the will to proclaim are the central conflict of trauma (Herman 1). Eleanor denies writing the message (I didn't do it!), yet the message proclaims her deepest desire: to be claimed, to be held, to return to a state of dependency.

The ambiguity of the Help in the message is critical. Is it a plea for help, or a command to give help? Is Eleanor the victim needing rescue, or the servant being called back to duty? The text supports both readings, reflecting Eleanor's confusion between her role as a victim of her mother and her role as the caretaker. The HELP ELEANOR COME HOME scrawl is the ultimate *acting out*: a compulsive return to the site of her subjugation.

2.5 The Failure of Witnessing: The Climax

As the novel progresses, Eleanor's identity dissolution accelerates. She begins to merge with the house, losing the ability to distinguish her own thoughts from the atmosphere of the building. She surrenders to the hauntological pull, engaging in what might be called a *traumatic fairy tale* (Roberts 75). While Brittany Roberts argues that Eleanor's isolation is a subversive alternative route to female happiness, a trauma-informed reading suggests this is a *traumatropism*—a fatal romanticization of her pathology. Eleanor believes she is finding a home and a mother who will finally appreciate her (The house is waiting for me... it wants me) (Jackson 182), but she is merely succumbing to the death drive.

Dr. Montague, the figure of patriarchal authority and scientific reason, fails completely as a therapeutic witness. Herman emphasizes that recovery requires safety and remembrance and mourning (Herman 155). Montague provides neither. He invites vulnerable subjects into a dangerous environment (violating the safety stage) and treats the hauntings as scientific data rather than psychological symptoms. He fails to hear Eleanor, dismissing her increasing instability as mere eccentricity. Without an empathetic witness to hear her testimony, Eleanor is left alone with her ghosts.

The climax of the novel—Eleanor's ascent of the iron staircase—is a physical enactment of her psychological collapse. She climbs the rotten library staircase, dancing dangerously, believing she is effectively home. When the other characters force her to leave for her own safety, they are essentially expelling her from the only self she has managed to construct—a self defined by the house. LaCapra warns that for the trauma survivor, fidelity to trauma often feels like the only way to maintain an identity. To leave Hill House would be to return to the empty *absence* of her former life.

Consequently, Eleanor's suicide is the final, tragic fulfilment of Caruth's theory of the impact of reference. As she drives her car toward the great tree, she is repeating the accident of her arrival (the carriage accident mentioned in the house's history) and the accident of her mother's death. In the final split second, she thinks, Why am I doing this? Why don't they stop me? (Jackson 182). Caruth argues that the traumatic event is not fully perceived as it occurs. Eleanor's final lucid thought is a moment of witnessing that arrives too late. She sees the reality of her self-destruction only in the instant of its completion. The *unclaimed experience* of her life is finally claimed, but only in the moment of death.

2.6 Conclusion: The Silence of the Stone

In conclusion, *The Haunting of Hill House* presents a narrative where trauma is not exorcised but embodied. The house functions as a sentient unconscious, a material space that absorbs and reenacts the repressed histories of its inhabitants. Eleanor Vance does not merely encounter a ghost; she encounters the void of her own life, reflected back to her by a house that is not sane. Through the lens of Caruth and LaCapra, we see that Eleanor is trapped in a cycle of *acting out*, unable to *work through* the *loss* of her mother or the *absence* of her own identity. The tragedy of the novel lies in the collapse of the temporal distinction between the past and the present; for Eleanor, the past is not a memory, but a living, breathing house that demands her total surrender. Silence lay steadily against the wood and stone of Hill House, a silence that represents not peace, but the final, suffocating triumph of trauma over the speaking subject (Jackson 182).

Chapter III: The Silent Companions

3.1 Introduction: The Materiality of Trauma

While Shirley Jackson's *The Haunting of Hill House* locates trauma within the dissolving architecture of the mind, Laura Purcell's *The Silent Companions* (2017) anchors it in the heavy, inescapable materiality of history. Writing in the Neo-Victorian mode, Purcell interrogates the Gothic tradition by shifting the locus of horror from the purely atmospheric to the tangible object. In this narrative, trauma is not merely a psychological residue but a physical presence—a wooden figure, a locked door, a diary entry—that refuses to decay. The novel operates on the premise that the past is not a ghost that fades, but a solid object that endures, occupying space and demanding accommodation. Through the lens of Dominick LaCapra's trauma theory, specifically his distinction between *loss* and *absence*, and Sigmund Freud's concept of the uncanny (*unheimlich*), this chapter examines how *The Silent Companions* dramatizes the failure to *work through* historical trauma. The protagonist, Elsie Bainbridge, trapped between the ancestral crimes of the Bainbridge family and the patriarchal constraints of Victorian society, becomes the vessel for a *repetition compulsion* that transcends her individual lifespan. The silent companions—wooden dummy boards painted to resemble people—serve as the uncanny embodiments of this unassimilated history, *acting out* the violence that cannot be spoken.

3.2 The Asylum Frame: Silence as Symptom

The novel's structure immediately establishes a dialectic of silencing and forced narration. Framed by Elsie's incarceration in St. Joseph's Hospital for the Insane, the narrative begins at the site of trauma's aftermath. Elsie is mute, a condition the text presents not merely as a physiological injury from the fire that destroyed her home, but as a somatic manifestation of the *unspeakable*. Judith Herman posits that certain violations of the social compact are too terrible to utter aloud: this is the meaning of the word *unspeakable* (Herman 1). Elsie's silence is the ultimate *constriction*, a defensive shutdown of the self in the face of overwhelming horror.

Dr. Shepherd, the psychiatrist tasked with her care, represents the failure of the clinical/rational gaze to comprehend Gothic excess. He attempts to initiate a *talking cure* by forcing Elsie to write her history, believing that The truth will liberate her. However, as Herman warns, attempting to reconstruct the trauma narrative (Stage 2 of recovery) without first establishing safety (Stage 1) is a therapeutic error that leads to retraumatization. Elsie is not safe; she is surrounded by the cold grey hours of silence and the label “murderer” hissed by staff and patients (Purcell 3). In this unsafe space, the act of writing becomes a torture, a pulse pounding crawl back into the charnel house of her memory.

The asylum frame also serves to destabilize the reliability of the narrative, invoking LaCapra's concept of *acting out*. Elsie is trapped in a loop of reliving the past, unable to gain the critical distance required for *working through*. Her narrative is not a coherent history but a fragmented re-experiencing of the events. When Dr. Shepherd forces her to recall the fire, he suggests her amnesia is a repression of unpleasant emotions. Yet the text suggests something far more sinister: that the trauma is not repressed inside Elsie, but exists outside her, in the material reality of the companions. By diagnosing her with a split personality—suggesting that the character Sarah Bainbridge is merely a double consciousness of Elsie herself—Dr. Shepherd attempts to pathologize the supernatural, reducing the historical trauma of the house to a single woman's hysteria. This medical gaslighting mirrors the patriarchal oppression Elsie faces throughout the novel, where her perceptions are consistently denied by male authority figures.

3.3 The Uncanny Object: The Silent Companions

The primary engines of horror in the novel are the silent companions themselves. These 17th-century dummy boards are quintessential examples of Freud's *unheimlich*. Freud defines the uncanny as the intellectual uncertainty regarding whether an object is alive or inanimate, a fear often associated with waxwork figures, dolls, and automata (Freud 226). Purcell exploits this uncertainty to its breaking point. When Elsie first encounters the companions in the locked garret, she is struck by their inscrutable wooden faces (Purcell 112). They are familiar (representations of the human form) yet alien (flat, wooden, motionless).

However, the companions are more than just spooky objects; they are trauma magnets, absorbing and re-enacting the violence of the Bainbridge lineage. Unlike the ephemeral ghosts of Hill House, the companions possess a terrifying materiality. They scrape against the floorboards; they can be locked away, burned, and chopped, yet they persist. This aligns with a Neo-Victorian interest in the thinness of history. The trauma of the house is not an atmospheric vapor but a solid block of wood that moves when unobserved. The recurring auditory hallucination—or reality—of the hiss, hiss sound serves as the sensory bridge between the object and the trauma. It mimics the sound of a saw, linking the companions to the physical act of their creation (and the mutilation associated with it). This sound functions as a *repetition compulsion* in the strictest Freudian sense, forcing Elsie to involuntarily return to the site of the trauma (the garret, the saw) over and over again.

The first companion Elsie encounters, a gypsy boy, and later the girl who resembles a fey child from a painting, are not random figures. They are the revenants of a specific historical trauma detailed in the 1635 timeline—the mute daughter Hetta and the gypsy lover Merripen. Their transformation into wooden figures is a literal objectification of the traumatized subject. Hetta, unable to speak in life, becomes a silent companion in death, a mute witness who can only communicate through displacement and violence.

The companions, therefore, represent the *return of the repressed* in a physical form. They are the *unclaimed experience* of the 17th century asserting its presence in the 19th. When Elsie notices their eyes moving or their positions shifting, it is a manifestation of the *omnipotence of thoughts*, where the internal terror of the

observer seems to animate the external world (Freud 240). Yet, Purcell insists on the material reality of these movements, suggesting that in the Gothic space, the boundary between the psyche and the physical world is porous.

3.4 The Diary and Historical Trauma: Absence vs. Loss

The inclusion of Anne Bainbridge's diary from 1635 introduces an intergenerational dimension to the trauma, allowing for an analysis through LaCapra's distinction between *loss* and *absence*. The diary reveals the origin of the companions: they were commissioned to impress King Charles I but became the obsession of the mute, cursed daughter Hetta. The trauma recorded here is specific and historical: the death of children, the fear of witchcraft, and the dynastic pressure to produce a healthy heir.

For Elsie, reading the diary is an attempt to convert the *absence* of knowledge about the house into a specific historical *loss* that can be mourned. She seeks to understand what is wrong about The Bridge. However, the diary acts not as a tool for *working through*, but as a vector for infection. The more Elsie learns about the past, the more the past encroaches upon her present. The diary entries reveal a mother (Anne) terrified of her own child (Hetta), mirroring Elsie's own growing fear of her pregnancy.

LaCapra argues that conflating specific historical losses with a transhistorical absence (a general state of anxiety or lack) leads to a state of endless melancholy where healing is impossible (LaCapra 46). The Bainbridge family treats the specific tragedies of their line (miscarriages, madness) as an inherent, structural curse—an *absence* of God's favour—rather than events to be processed. By accepting the curse narrative, they trap themselves in a cycle of *acting out*. The companions are the physical residue of this failure to mourn. Because Hetta and her traumas were never properly grieved or integrated into the family narrative (she was locked away, silenced), she returns as a silent companion, a monstrous embodiment of the unmourned.

The dual timeline structure reinforces the concept of *belatedness* (Caruth 4). The trauma of 1635 is not past; it is waiting in the woodwork. The hissing sound that plagues Elsie is the echo of the saw used in 1635, collapsing the two centuries into a single moment of traumatic time. The narrative suggests that time in the Gothic house is not linear but recursive; the same tragedy is being performed by different actors on the same stage.

3.5 The Maternal Object and the Foreign Body

Elsie's trauma is profoundly gendered, rooted in the vulnerabilities of the female body under patriarchal control. Like Eleanor Vance, Elsie is defined by her domestic role, but unlike Eleanor, Elsie's body is literally occupied by the foreign body of her unborn child. The pregnancy becomes a site of abject horror, linked inextricably to the companions. When Elsie feels the baby flutter or bubble inside her, it echoes the unnatural liveliness of the wooden figures.

The *maternal uncanny*, as derived from Freud, suggests that the home is a substitute for the womb—a place that is simultaneously familiar (*heimlich*) and terrifying (*unheimlich*) (Freud 245). The Bridge becomes a monstrous womb that threatens to consume Elsie. The climax of the novel, the fire in the library, serves as a violent birthing scene where the house expels its secrets. Elsie's discovery of the splinters on her husband Rupert's body and later the realization that the wooden baby was sliced in two conflates the destruction of the companions with the destruction of her own family.

The fire is the ultimate act of *acting out*. Unable to articulate or resolve the threat, the characters resort to annihilation. Elsie attempts to destroy the companions (the trauma objects), but in doing so, she precipitates the destruction of her home and her own sanity. The revelation that she may have inadvertently caused the death of her brother Jolyon—believing him to be a companion in the dark—is the tragic culmination of her inability to distinguish between the living and the dead objects. Her trauma has overridden her perception of reality to the point where she destroys the only person she loves.

3.6 The Failure of Resolution: A Cycle of Acting Out

The novel's conclusion offers a bleak assessment of the possibility of recovery. In the asylum, Dr. Shepherd presents Elsie with a rational explanation: Sarah Bainbridge never existed. She was a splinter of Elsie's own mind, a dissociated personality created to hold the dark emotions and guilt Elsie could not face. This explanation attempts to drag the Gothic narrative into the realm of clinical psychology, reducing the supernatural to the pathological.

However, Purcell subverts this closure in the final moments. The Sarah personality—or the ghost—reasserts control. When Dr. Shepherd leaves, Elsie is left alone, or so she thinks. The ending implies that the companion (the wooden figure, or the entity Sarah) is still with her, or that she has become the companion. The final image of the silent companion is not one of objects put to rest, but of a force that has successfully colonized the subject.

If Sarah is a projection, then Elsie has been *acting out* her trauma by creating a double to bear the burden of her anger and fear. If Sarah is a ghost, then the past has successfully invaded the present. In either case, the result is the same: the total collapse of Elsie's identity. She remains trapped in the *acting out* phase, mute and incarcerated, while the voice of the trauma (Sarah) speaks for her.

The ending validates LaCapra's warning about the dangers of confounding loss and absence. Because Elsie could not mourn the specific losses of her life (her parents, her husband), she succumbed to the structural *absence* of the Bainbridge curse. The asylum becomes just another version of *The Bridge*—a space of confinement where the silent companions of memory continue to watch, unblinking. The novel concludes not with the restoration of order, but with the triumph of the uncanny. The trauma has been neither integrated nor expelled; it has simply changed venues, moving from the wooden effigy into the living flesh of the protagonist.

3.7 Conclusion

In *The Silent Companions*, Laura Purcell constructs a narrative where trauma is rendered inescapably material. Through the silent companions, she gives shape to the *unclaimed experience* of history, demonstrating how the past refuses to remain abstract. By filtering this horror through the consciousness of a woman trapped by the legal and medical structures of the Victorian era, Purcell critiques the silencing of female pain. The novel ultimately suggests that in the face of such overwhelming, intergenerational trauma, the *talking cure* is insufficient. Words fail; the diary ends; and only the silent, wooden witness remains, a testament to a grief that cannot be buried. The transition from Jackson's psychological ambiguity to Purcell's material horror marks a shift in the Gothic sensibility: trauma is no longer just a ghost in the machine of the mind; it is the machine itself, grinding on, indifferent to the fragile human subject caught in its gears.

Chapter IV: Comparative Analysis

4.1 Introduction: The Trajectory of the Uncanny

The juxtaposition of Shirley Jackson's *The Haunting of Hill House* (1959) and Laura Purcell's *The Silent Companions* (2017) reveals a distinct evolution in the Gothic representation of trauma. While both novels utilize the domestic space as a crucible for female disintegration, they diverge fundamentally in their location of the traumatic experience. Jackson, writing at the height of psychoanalytic influence in mid-century America, locates the haunting primarily within the fractured subject; the ghosts are ambiguous, psychic projections of a mind unable to cohere. Purcell, writing in the twenty-first century's material turn of Gothic fiction, externalizes trauma into tangible objects—the wooden companions.

This chapter argues that while Jackson presents trauma as a crisis of interiority (an *absence* of self that the house fills), Purcell presents it as a crisis of exteriority (an excess of historical *loss* that invades the subject). Despite these structural differences, both novels converge on a single, pessimistic conclusion regarding the processing of trauma: for the female Gothic subject, the *working through* of traumatic memory is rendered impossible by the very architecture of the domestic spaces they inhabit. Through the lens of Cathy Caruth's concept of *unclaimed experience* and Dominick LaCapra's distinction between *acting out* and *working through*, this comparative analysis demonstrates that both Hill House and The Bridge function not as sites of recovery, but as machines for the infinite repetition of injury.

4.2 Mechanisms of Haunting: The Ethereal and the Material

The primary distinction between the two texts lies in the mechanism by which memory returns to haunt the living. In *The Haunting of Hill House*, the haunting is atmospheric and auditory, resisting visual confirmation. The terror relies on the dissolution of boundaries between the mind and the house. Freud's definition of the *unheimlich* (uncanny) as something which is familiar and old-established in the mind, and which has become alienated from it only through the process of repression is perfectly realized in Jackson's narrative (Freud 241). The haunting is not an invasion from the outside, but a projection from within. When the words HELP ELEANOR COME HOME appear on the hallway wall, the horror stems from the intellectual uncertainty regarding their source (Jackson 106). As Luke suggests, I didn't even notice it until I was coming back, implying the message manifests only for Eleanor's perception (106). The haunting operates through Caruth's logic of *belatedness*—Eleanor's childhood trauma and the repression of her mother's death are not fully experienced at the moment of occurrence but return later as the sensory fragments of the house (Caruth 4). The cold spots and the banging on the walls are somatic manifestations of Eleanor's internal freeze and the memory of her invalid mother's demands. The house does not haunt Eleanor; Eleanor haunts the house, filling its empty shell with the darkness of her own arrested development.

Conversely, *The Silent Companions* rejects ambiguity for materiality. The trauma is not a vaporous atmosphere but a solid block of wood. Purcell utilizes the uncanny not through the ambiguity of the mind, but through the *automaton*—the inanimate object that appears animate. The silent companions—wooden dummy boards painted to look like people—serve as vessels for a historical trauma that exists independently of Elsie's psyche. Unlike Hill House, which requires Eleanor's psychic energy to function, the companions possess an autonomous agency. They move, they hiss, and they bleed. The hiss, hiss sound of the saw is an external reality, an acoustic residue of the physical violence enacted on the wood and the bodies of the Bainbridge ancestors (Purcell 212).

Where Jackson's horror is centripetal, pulling everything into the vortex of Eleanor's mind, Purcell's horror is centrifugal, radiating outward from the objects to infect the protagonist. This shifts the theoretical framework from Caruth's *missed experience* of the subject to a materialist reading where the object itself claims the experience. The trauma in Purcell is not unclaimed because it was missed; it is unclaimed because it has been locked away in the attic, physically separated from the narrative until Elsie unlocks the door.

4.3 Space as Psyche: The Womb vs. The Archive

The architectural logic of the two novels further delineates their divergent approaches to memory. Hill House functions as a sentient maternal womb, whereas *The Bridge* functions as a patriarchal archive. Jackson describes Hill House as not sane, emphasizing its walls continued upright and floors... firm in contrast to the disordered minds entering it (Jackson 3). The house's layout, with its concentric circles of rooms and the heart of the nursery, mimics the biological structure of a body. For Eleanor, who has waited so long for a life to begin, the house becomes a surrogate mother (17). The cold spot outside the nursery is not merely a ghostly phenomenon but a manifestation of the *maternal uncanny*—the desire to return to the womb, which Freud notes is the ultimate *heimlich* (familiar) place that becomes *unheimlich* (terrifying) through repression (Freud 245). Eleanor's trajectory is a regression; she does not seek to master the house but to be absorbed by it. The cup of stars she fetishizes represents a desire for an idealized, infantile wholeness she was denied (Jackson 17). Therefore, the space of Hill House acts as a mirror stage gone wrong, reflecting not a unified self but a fragmented psyche seeking dissolution.

In contrast, *The Bridge* in *The Silent Companions* operates as a historical archive that crushes the subject under the weight of accumulated time. The house is cluttered with the detritus of the Bainbridge lineage—journals, portraits, and the companions themselves. While Hill House is timeless (standing for eighty years and might stand for eighty more), *The Bridge* is obsessed with specific dates (1635, 1865) and genealogies (Jackson 3; Purcell 18). Elsie attempts to read the house like a text, diving into the diary of Anne Bainbridge to decode the trauma. However, the space resists interpretation.

The attic where the companions are found is not a womb but a vault of evidence. The trauma here is intergenerational in the strictest sense; Elsie is persecuted not by her own past (as Eleanor is by her mother), but by the *phantom* of the Bainbridge ancestors. As Nicolas Abraham and Maria Torok suggest, the *phantom* is the presence of a gap in the knowledge of a previous generation (Abraham 286). *The Bridge* forces Elsie to inherit a trauma that is not her own, transforming the domestic space into a museum of atrocities where she is a curator held hostage.

4.4 The Failure of Working Through: Absence vs. Loss

Dominick LaCapra's distinction between *absence* and *loss* provides a critical framework for comparing the protagonists' psychological failures. LaCapra argues that *loss* is historical and specific, whereas *absence* is transhistorical and structural (LaCapra 43). Eleanor Vance's tragedy in Hill House is rooted in the conflation of absence and loss. Eleanor suffers from a fundamental absence of being she has no home, no profession, and no voice. She mourns what she never had rather than a specific lost object. As LaCapra warns, converting absence into loss leads to endless melancholy because one cannot mourn an object that never existed (46). Eleanor attempts to fill this structural void with Hill House, mistaking the building for the home she lacks. Her *acting out* takes the form of a manic identification with the house (I am home, I am home), culminating in her suicide. Her death is not a resolution but a final collapse into the *death drive*—an attempt to return to the inorganic silence of the house because the labor of constructing a self is too great. She fails to *work through* because there is no self to do the work; there is only the vacuum of absence waiting to be filled by the house's malevolence.

Elsie Bainbridge, however, deals with specific, tangible losses: the death of her husband, the loss of her financial agency, and the death of her father. Yet she is prevented from *working through* these losses by the intrusion of the supernatural. The *acting out* in *The Silent Companions* is forced upon her. She attempts to engage in the remembrance and mourning stage of recovery by writing her story for Dr. Shepherd, staring into the void of white paper (Purcell 3). But the narrative refuses to be contained. The *acting out* is literalized: the companions physically reenact the violence of the past. Elsie cannot mourn her husband because the supernatural mechanics of the house render the dead undeniably present.

LaCapra posits that *working through* requires the ability to distinguish between past and present (LaCapra 22). The material horror of the companions erases this distinction; the past is physically sitting in the room. Elsie's final incarceration in the asylum, mute and possibly possessed, signifies the total victory of *acting out*. She does not dissolve like Eleanor; she is petrified, becoming a silent companion herself—an objectified monument to unhealed trauma.

4.5 Female Subjectivity and the Gothic Trap

Both novels ultimately use the Gothic mode to critique the patriarchal containment of female agency, though they utilize different temporal anxieties. Jackson's 1950s setting reflects the anxieties of the feminine mystique—the pressure of domestic containment and the infantilization of unmarried women. Eleanor is trapped by her role as a caregiver and a daughter. Her journey to Hill House is a failed flight from the domestic prison of her sister's household to the absolute reality of a house that enforces an even stricter containment (Jackson 3). The house seduces her with the promise of belonging, only to consume her. This reflects the mid-century anxiety that independent female identity is impossible outside the family structure; without a husband or child, Eleanor has no place in the symbolic order, and thus she must be absorbed into the imaginary order of the house.

Purcell's Victorian setting (written from a 21st-century perspective) engages with the historical erasure of women. Elsie is legally erased by coverture; she is property first of her father, then her husband, then the state (the asylum). The silent companions are grotesque parodies of the ideal Victorian woman: silent, decorative, and immobile. The horror lies in their mobility—they transgress the boundary between object and subject, just as Elsie attempts to transgress her role as a widow by managing the estate.

The novel suggests that the only way for a woman to have agency in this structure is to become monstrous or to be silenced. Anne Bainbridge's diary reveals that the root trauma was the silencing of her daughter Hetta (who was mute). The trauma cycle repeats as Elsie is silenced in the asylum. While Jackson's Eleanor escapes into death, Purcell's Elsie is denied even that release; she remains a prisoner of a patriarchal medical establishment that misdiagnoses supernatural trauma as hysteria, a clear critique of the historical pathologization of female experience (Herman 12).

4.6 Conclusion: The End of the Story

In the final analysis, the comparative study of Jackson and Purcell reveals a shift in the Gothic conceptualization of trauma from a psychological puzzle to a material burden. Jackson's *The Haunting of Hill House* leaves the trauma unresolved and ambiguous; silence lay steadily against the house, suggesting that the cycle of absence and intrusion is eternal and internal (Jackson 246). The horror is that the mind cannot escape itself. Purcell's *The Silent Companions* offers a resolution that is equally bleak but materially concrete: the trauma is transmitted to the next generation (the reader/visitor) through the survival of the objects.

Both novels demonstrate that within the Gothic framework, the *working through* of trauma is structurally blocked. For the female protagonist, the domestic space is not a site of safety (Herman's first stage of recovery) but the source of danger. Whether through the dissolution of the ego (Jackson) or the invasion of the object (Purcell), the outcome is the annihilation of the subject. The comparative reading underscores that while the mechanisms of haunting may evolve from the psychological to the material, the function of the haunted house remains constant: it is a machine that converts the *unclaimed experience* of the past into the destruction of the present. The absolute reality of Hill House and the wooden reality of the Companions both insist that for the traumatized woman, memory is not a ghost that fades, but a predator that waits.

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