

## Eleanor's Entanglement: Quantum Perspectives on Trauma and Space in Shirley Jackson's *The Haunting of Hill House*

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### ABSTRACT

Quantum theory gives us a surprising idea: the observer influences what's being observed, meaning that reality is not fixed. It is flexible, shaped by who is watching and from what angle. This can also be applied to literature, where characters' perceptions and surroundings are influenced by their inner world. Trauma theory adds yet another layer, showing how unhealed psychological wounds shape our views, often distorting reality and, sometimes, even our sense of who we are. In *The Haunting of Hill House*, Shirley Jackson brings these theories together in the haunting relationship between Eleanor Vance and the house. Hill House is not just a setting but it seems to respond to Eleanor's emotions, subtly shifting and twisting as her mental state changes. The strange events can be seen as manifestations of Eleanor's trauma, making the house a living mirror of her fractured mind. This perspective indicates that the haunting in Hill House is not just about ghosts or some supernatural force; it's deeply tied to Eleanor's mind blending with the house itself. Exploring this connection between trauma and perception helps us see Hill House not only as a frightening place but as a reflection of Eleanor's fragile sense of self. Through Eleanor's unsettling journey, Jackson invites us to question what's real, and what's imagined, and how our fears and identities shape the world we see around us. It's the kind of story that stays, raising questions about reality and self that linger long after the final page.

**Keywords:** *Eleanor Vance, Hill House, Quantum theory, Entanglement, Trauma theory, Psychological horror, Gothic Fiction, Shirley Jackson.*

The Central figure of American Gothic literature, Shirley Jackson, explores the themes of psychological horror, social alienation, and female identity in her works. Traditionally gothic literature often deals with castles, dark landscapes, and external supernatural dangers, on the other side Jackson's work brings modern, familiar settings- such as small towns and ordinary houses creating a defamiliarized version of familiar things bringing the uncanny in the

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mundane. “Her most memorable work shows women in the process of disintegration, often through the lens of trauma, emphasizing how their desires – for love, sexual union, knowledge, creative freedom – curdle into despair and terror under the relentless, venomous drip of sexism and misogyny” (Hand).

Jackson in 1959, published *The Haunting of Hill House*, considered to be among the top scariest novels of all time. It also deals with a similar theme of desire for affection, need of kinship and fear and trauma. In The New Yorker, Zoë Heller explores how Jackson herself had traumatic experiences and mental health struggles from her mother, resonating to how Eleanor her character faced in the novel. “She told Jackson that she was the product of a failed abortion and harassed her constantly about her bad hair, her weight, and her “willful” refusal to cultivate feminine charm” (Heller). *The Haunting of Hill House* is the story of a doctoral scholar Dr. Montague, who wants to research supernatural manifestations in a haunted house for his publication on, “the causes and effects of psychic disturbances in a house commonly known as ‘haunted’”(Jackson 1) For his assistance, he invites three other common folks, one among them is the protagonist Eleanor Vance thirty-two years old. She has a genuine dislike for her own family members seeking to establish her social identity and find her purpose in life. Others include Theodora, a rich and jolly woman and Luke Sanderson, a thief and future owner of the Hill House. They all enjoyed their stay until the house with no one to live in selected its owner among them to live in it.

The novel left an ambiguous remark among its readers and critics because of its uncertain, open and vague plotline, and still with its mystery intact it is loved by gothic lovers and its analyst. Moreover, it is the mystery which makes the novel exceptionally remarkable. The uncanniness and disorientation in the house design itself create a sense of folly and a haunting that increases with the progress of the story. The fascinating character of Eleanor Vance stands out because of her skeptical behaviour. She is portrayed as a vulnerable and emotionally fragile character who is desperate to form a connection, as the story progresses she becomes increasingly unpredictable. The end of the novel, where Eleanor kills herself leaves readers in a baffled state.

Though *The Haunting of Hill House* comes under the genre of Gothic literature, however, the beauty of Jackson’s writing is that she straightly nowhere mentions anything ghostly or supernatural. It leaves us in a perplexed state with multiple unanswered questions. Here,

quantum theory becomes relevant; its principle of entanglement suggests that the observer influences what's being observed, meaning that reality is not fixed. It is flexible, shaped by who is watching and from what angle. Indicating that Eleanor's perception of Hill House shapes her reality. Her internal struggles and traumas become entangled with the house, making it an object which reflects her psychological state. Trauma theory further expands on this exploration by revealing how Eleanor has unsettled emotional wounds which were distorting her living, and understanding of her own self-esteem and her surroundings. In this way, Hill House surpasses to be just called as a haunted location; it evolves into a manifestation of Eleanor's broken identity and her needs. Not only Eleanor but people who lived in the house shared similar mental and emotional needs leading to shared tragic fate. Like the little companion who was in need of a home too, and belonged to an unfortunate background, was involved in her manifestations for the house as well. Jackson in the story has not provided any detail about the history of the house, however this puts lights on it a little. It can be said that the story invites readers to confront their own perceptions of reality and identity.

Quantum theory is more than just any other physical theory, discovery of this has explained many mysteries in the past and led to several inventions. It is studied commonly by students of Sciences and Mathematics, however, its philosophical interpretations have also been explored by many scholars of humanities and social sciences. The word Quantum is magnanimous in itself, which surmises thousands of theories, principles and equations in it. Nevertheless to introduce Quantum theory to those who are unfamiliar with it, here are a few definitions in easy words as defined by the US Department of Energy and Caltech respectively, "Quantum mechanics is the field of physics that explains how extremely small objects simultaneously have the characteristics of both particles (tiny pieces of matter) and waves (a disturbance or variation that transfers energy). Physicists call this the "wave-particle duality (DOE)." "Quantum physics is the study of matter and energy at the most fundamental level. It aims to uncover the properties and behaviours of the very building blocks of nature (Caltech)".

To understand the point made in this paper, one should be aware of two key principles of Quantum theory— Entanglement and Mutability. Copenhagen Interpretation, Many-World Interpretation and Spontaneous collapse theory are the different interpretations of quantum mechanics each suggesting the mutability concepts and entanglement theory as their outcomes. Entanglement "is a phenomenon that occurs when two or more objects are connected in such a way that they can be thought of as a single system, even if they are very far apart. The state of

one object in that system can't be fully described without information on the state of the other object. Likewise, learning information about one object automatically tells you something about the other and vice versa (8)".

Mutability in quantum mechanics usually refers to the observer effect, "in which a change in outcome may be caused by the interaction between the quantum phenomenon and the external environment, including the device used to measure the phenomenon (12)". The observer here plays a significant role in deciding which state the system will ultimately adopt. It causes superimposition or spontaneous collapse.

On the other hand, Trauma theory has more to do with the world wars which left people in an abyss of shock and agony. Especially soldiers who were in after-shock of the war and other similar grieving events like holocausts in history led to the discovery of this trauma theory in literature to understand yet another perspective of characters. An interdisciplinary study was conducted by Cathy Caruth with her collection *Trauma: Exploration in Memory* (1995). She can be called the founder of trauma theory in literature when she further wrote, *Unclaimed Experiences: Trauma, Narrative, and History* in 1996. "Trauma theory is perhaps, at root, an attempt to trace the inexhaustible shapes both of human suffering and of our responses to that suffering (Buelens, Durrang & Eaglestone)." Michael T. Wilson writes in "Transformation of Trauma in Women's Writing", about Eleanor as how the ongoing effects of childhood and teenage trauma entangles and problematizes her adult life. In doing so Jackson incorporates her own acute view of American culture and human psychology of that time. Both Eleanor and Theodora experience their own forms of trauma in the novels, however, Theodora and other characters are able to process their trauma more successfully, unlike Eleanor.

This paper attempts to bring out the nuanced idea of reconsidering one's boundaries between the self and the environment. Positioning the Hill House as a powerful reflection of Eleanor Vance's inner struggles, the house offers not only a setting for the plot to commence but acts as a living entity which responds to Eleanor's emotional state, incorporating her unsettled past trauma. By applying quantum concepts of mutable reality, this paper attempts to demonstrate how Eleanor shaped her own identity and accepted herself within the walls of Hill House. Highlighting the fluid nature of reality as it shifts in response to Eleanor's psychological struggles.

The novel *The Haunting of Hill House* has been analyzed through various lenses, including psychological, psychoanalytical, feminist, post-humanist, homosexual, Gothic Tropes, Abjection, maternal malignancy, trans-subjectivity and as a metaphor for mental illness already. While the previous analyses of *The Haunting of Hill House* have explored various lenses —this paper integrates the principle of Quantum theory and trauma theory to bring a fresh perspective that deepens the understanding of Eleanor Vance’s character and her relationship with the Hill House. Drawing on inspiration from works of Bessel Van Der Kolk and Kren Barad on quantum entanglement. Barad’s agential realism stresses that entities are inherently interconnected, and observation itself changes reality, highlighting the mutual influence between observer and observed. Similarly, the paper “To ‘see’ is to break an entanglement” discusses how acknowledging trauma can help release these bonds.

Earlier studies explored interpretations that focus on static elements of horror or psychological trauma without addressing how reality itself can be built. The highlighted application of the concept of mutable reality and entanglement from quantum theory illustrates how Eleanor’s perceptions of the house evolve in response to her psychological state. It also takes the help of trauma theory, the emotional and psychological stakes of her journey, filling a gap in understanding the details of her character. The relationship between the physical space of Hill House and Eleanor’s mind, suggests the house itself becomes an extension of Eleanor’s mind. This approach to the environment, connected to identity, may not have been fully explored in previous studies.

The methodology used here is interdisciplinary, combining trauma theory, body-space perception, and metaphorical applications of quantum theory. Trauma theory provides basics to understand how Eleanor’s past experiences shaped her present action, while quantum theory’s principle of observer effect serves as a metaphor for how her subjective reality becomes one with Hill House’s structure and her physical environment mirrors her mental instability. The clear link between quantum measurement principles and Eleanor’s fragmented, trauma-driven experiences in the Hill House can be examined from the following statements from the Internet Encyclopaedia of Philosophy,

In any quantum measurement, there are generally multiple measurement results occurring on distinct “branches” of reality. According to hidden variable theories, the quantum state is a partial description of the system, where the rest of the description is given by the values of one

or more “hidden” variables. The solution to the puzzle in this case is that the hidden variables pick out one of the physical states described by the quantum state as the actual one. According to spontaneous collapse theories, the quantum state is a complete description of the system, but the dynamical laws of quantum mechanics are incomplete and need to be supplemented with a “collapse” process that eliminates all but one of the terms in the state during the measurement process.

We see that measurements can result in multiple branches of reality, with hidden variables influencing which branch is considered as ‘real’. In *The Haunting of Hill House*, Eleanor’s experience of the house can be seen as a series of psychological ‘measurements’ where her traumas act as hidden variables, gradually converting her perceptions into a haunting, altered reality. Similar to spontaneous collapse theories suggesting that quantum states need an external force to resolve into one state, Eleanor’s trauma shapes and ‘collapses’ her experiences into a single, horrifying perception of Hill House.

The Many-World Interpretation (MWI) Theory from Quantum theories adheres best to understand the condition of Eleanor’s state of mind, where she becomes one with the house at the end of the novel. Eleanor Vance went through a lot in her past, thus it is most certainly possible that she understood the Hill House significantly differently than others. She inhabits her own branch of reality shaped by trauma and desire blurring the lines between mind and matter. It is said that:

after a measurement takes place, there are two (or more) versions of the observer where before there was one...generating a particular outcome from the various possibilities— ‘causes a person to split into multiple copies.’ Both copies are in some sense versions of the initial observer, and both of them experience a unique, smoothly changing reality that they are convinced is the “real world” (Ball 16).

Moreover, Van der Kolk in *The Body Keeps the Score*, explains how trauma leaves an imprint on perception and emotional response, often leading individuals to re-experience their past trauma in new environments, which can feel unsafe or distorted. He says, “that the terror and isolation at the core of trauma reshape both brain and body (Kolk 2)”. He further mentions that “to overcome trauma people need to feel safe enough to open up their hearts and minds to others and become engaged with new possibilities (2)”. We see how *The Hill House* welcomes the homeless and solitary Eleanor helping her forget her past and welcome new possibilities there or with Theodora, when Theodora rejects Eleanor she commits and embraces what Hill House offers her.



The irregular architecture of the Hill House can be an allegorical representation of Eleanor's broken identity and mental health. Dr. Montague from the novel, provides us with the description of the house in the following way:

Every angle is slightly wrong... Angles which you assume are the right angles you are accustomed to, and have every right to expect are true, are actually a fraction of a degree off in one direction or another...for instance, that you believe that the stairs you are sitting on are level...—are actually on a very slight slant toward the central shaft; the doorways are all a very little bit off center—that may be, by the way, the reason the doors swing shut unless they are held. The result of all these tiny aberrations of measurement adds up to a fairly large distortion in the house as a whole. (Jackson 85-86)

The physical disorientation of the Hill House marks a symbolic representation of Eleanor's psyche. Similar to how Eleanor gradually made herself use to of slight disorientations and deceptive measurements of the house, it can be said that she imbibed her inner emotional and mental uneasiness in herself. The house thus becomes an external manifestation of her disordered mind. As she spends more time in the house, the boundary between her psychological state and the physical environment blurs. The house may symbolize how Eleanor feels disconnected, uncertain, and always on the verge of imbalance and out of her place in her own life.

Trauma theory suggests that unresolved trauma manifests as a disruption in one's perception of reality, and in her case, Hill House reflects this disruption through its architecture. Throughout the story, we see that Eleanor's mental state is similar to sinusoidal waves. Her fears and anxiety heightened at certain points while at some it went down to like nothing was happening. We see a picture of Eleanor's inner duality of thoughts related to her past experiences and how she is somewhere in the middle of positivity and negativity: hope for good and succumbing to her previous grievances, from the lines below:

It was the first genuinely shining day of summer, a time of year which brought Eleanor always to aching memories of her early childhood, when it had seemed to be summer all the time; she could not remember a winter before her father's death on a cold wet day. She had taken to wondering lately, during these swift counted years, what had been done with all those wasted summer days; how could she have spent them so wantonly? I am foolish, she told herself early every summer, I am very foolish; I am grown up now and know the values of things. Nothing is ever really wasted, she believed sensibly, even one's childhood, and then each year, one summer morning, the warm wind would come down the city street where she walked and she would be touched with the little cold thought: I have let more time go by. Yet this morning, driving the little car...(Jackson 10)

While driving for the Hill House during her journey, she dreamt of a magic-like scenario suggesting Eleanor's longing for an escape from her painful reality and her fantasy of finding a safe place, an idyllic space. In light of trauma theory, the lines below highlight her sense of

belongingness and the protection she never felt in her life and reflect on her vulnerability to the “spell” of Hill House later on:

Once I have stepped between the magic gate, will I find myself through the protective barrier, the spell broken? I will go into a sweet garden, with fountains and low benches and roses trained over arbors, and find one path—jeweled, perhaps, with rubies and emeralds, soft enough for a king’s daughter to walk upon with her little sandaled feet—and it will lead me directly to the palace which lies under a spell (14).

Eleanor’s repeated usage of a line from Shakespeare’s *Twelfth Night* (poet.org) — “journeys end in lovers meeting” and “in delay there lies no plenty” indicates her psychological state and connects to quantum ideas of entanglement and multiple outcomes. As if she is creating a bond that blurs the boundaries between herself and the house. “journeys end in lovers meeting,” symbolizes her deep need for connection and acceptance. The line originally suggests joyful reunion with love. For Eleanor, it’s like a wish to finally feel at home somewhere or with someone. Nevertheless, as she became more involved, the phrase turned to a darker meaning, that seemed to be leading her towards a dangerous bond with the house itself. Another line, “in delay there lies no plenty” shows a sense of urgency and eagerness in search of fulfillment for Eleanor. Originally it meant waiting for no rewards, however for Eleanor who has lived her life waiting for reward (happy days), this line expresses her keenness to finally seize an opportunity for change. All these indicate Eleanor’s vulnerability due to her past traumatic experiences.

The house’s shifting structure can also be said to be a response which mirrors her unstable and transforming mental state. Using Karen Barad’s concept of Quantum entanglement, we can interpret Eleanor’s trauma as being “entangled” with the House. Through the specific colours of the rooms in the Hill House like BLUE, GREEN, YELLOW and PINK Jackson possibly wanted to evoke specific feelings that could also be allegorical to the respective person’s mental condition to whom the room belongs. Like the Blue, which suggests calm yet sadness, for Eleanor matches with her melancholic, introspective personality and yet her isolation and vulnerability. The Green room of Theodora represents envy and mystery—echoing her independence and her complex relationship with Eleanor. Dr. Montague's association with the yellow room suggests intellect but also caution. Luke’s Pink room, a colour that can seem cheerful or frivolous, also reflects his outward charm and his deeper insecurities. Moreover, each room can be seen as an isolated part of Eleanor’s past and present fears. For example, the nursery could evoke childhood memories and fears.



Eleanor is the observer in the house, with her trauma-induced reality she alters the house's state, making it more unsettling and supernatural as her fears escalate. Similar to what is said in quantum theory, the "observer effect" implies that the observer's presence can influence the state of a system. Eleanor's emotional and psychological state "collapses" the reality of Hill House into a distorted version of her previous trauma. When Eleanor came into the Hill House she never thought that the Hill House would own her. During her stay, she began to establish a connection to the house and her fellow housemates. When Theodora became a little too special, many scholars have suggested that a romantic and sexual tension between them could have been possible. Eleanor wanted to live with Theodora after her stay at the Hill House, however, Theodora immediately shunned the idea of Eleanor which quickened the process of entanglement with the house for her. Eleanor was left with no choice but to accept her altered reality which the house was offering to her, or to say, which she was manifesting and the house mirrored for her. Eleanor's relationship with Theodora acts as a "quantum double," where each reflects the other's desires and fears, which intensifies her inner struggles and pushes her deeper into the reality shaped by trauma.

The mysterious phrase "HELP ELEANOR COME HOME!" found within the house also serves a strong representation of how the Hill House accepted Eleanor's needs and served for her desire for belonging. Her need for a safe environment and an identity was projected onto the environment, which the house sensed and acted accordingly as a manifesto of her inner struggle. The entangled particles influence each other's state even at a distance. Similarly, Eleanor's psyche appeared to be "entangled" with the house, creating a blurred reality where the house acted as a responsive entity.

The mystery of the history of the Hill House can also be solved with the above explanation. We see how the Hill House has embodied deaths and traumas since the time it was built by Hugh Crain:

Hill House was built eighty-odd years ago," he began. "It was built as a home for his family by a man named Hugh Crain, a country home where he hoped to see his children and grandchildren live in comfortable luxury, and where he fully expected to end his days in quiet. Unfortunately Hill House was a sad house almost from the beginning; Hugh Crain's young wife died minutes before she first was to set eyes on the house, when the carriage bringing her here overturned in the driveway, and the lady was brought—ah, lifeless, I believe is the phrase they use—into the home her husband had built for her. He was a sad and bitter man, Hugh Crain, left with two small daughters to bring up, but he did not leave Hill House (Jackson 60).

It seems to be trapped in its repetitive nature of traumatic experiences, similar to Eleanor's experiences. Eleanor's final act of merging with the house can be interpreted as her ultimate "collapse" into the trauma field symbolizing a tragic union with the very fears that defined her experience of reality. By choosing to stay in the Hill House, she attempted to break the loop, but instead, she was left with no choice but to become one with the house, highlighting the destructive nature of unresolved trauma.

Towards the end of the story we see how Eleanor fully surrenders to the house, losing her own senses when she was able to hear the sounds of things happening in the corner of the house. "Somewhere upstairs a door swung quietly shut; a bird touched the tower briefly and flew off. In the kitchen the stove was settling and cooling, with little soft creakings. An animal—a rabbit?—moved through the bushes by the summerhouse. She could even hear, with her new awareness of the house, the dust drifting gently in the attics, the wood aging (184)." This moment could signify Eleanor's dissociation, a common symptom in trauma survivors, where they lose touch with selfhood in favour of merging with an external entity. It indicates how she no longer differentiates between her thoughts and the house's influence.

The final stage of entanglement of Eleanor and the Hill House can be seen from the lines, "the little mists of Hill House curling around her ankles, and looked up at the pressing, heavy hills. Gathered comfortably into the hills, she thought, protected and warm; Hill House is lucky (189)." This "happiness" marks Eleanor's tragic conclusion— a form of delusional peace emerging in her heart to belong somewhere. Hill House finally consumed her or she manifested to be consumed to the point where her loss of identity felt like fulfillment. Her declaration that she has "broken the spell of Hill House" and feels like she has finally "come inside" represents a shift in her perception of her place in the world. Initially, Eleanor was an outsider, she felt disconnected from the world. Like everybody else, she too felt cold in the house, especially in the "heart of the house" that is the nursery. It was a symbol of malevolent energy that pervades the Hill House. This coldness mirrored Eleanor's earlier discomfort and sense of alienation.

By the end, when she proclaims that she has broken the Hill House's spell, it makes a complex moment of liberation and surrender. The house transforms into an ethereal warmth, showing her final entanglement to the house. This warmth, albeit, illusory and dangerous, reflects how deeply she was entangled within the house's hold on her. The spell she has broken is not just a literal magical force, but a psychological bond, indicating a point of no return. Just as

trauma survivors experience a disintegration of their subjective experience and struggle with the fragmentation of identity (Caruth 1996), Eleanor's sense of self disintegrates as she becomes emotionally, physically, and psychologically trapped within the Hill House. Her final acknowledgement that she is "home" in the house suggests a tragic acceptance of the trauma that has shaped her sense of identity, which is now inseparable from the trauma of the house itself.

This exploration of Shirley Jackson's *The Haunting of the Hill House* proposes a unique interpretation that haunting elements of the novel reflect Eleanor's trauma, and the ways of how her perception of reality is reshaped by her past struggles. This can reveal new insights into the text's complexities and the nature of reality in Gothic literature. It also helps to better understand the ambiguous blending of psychological and supernatural horror in the novel. The Many World Interpretation theory and other quantum key concepts improves our understanding of the novel's themes of isolation, identity and the haunting nature of unresolved trauma. Hill house becomes both a site of horror and a reflection of Eleanor's broken sense of self, eventually becoming one with her and thus becoming a metaphor of lasting influence of unresolved traumas.

Thus it is evident that, Shirley Jackson has portrayed Hill House not just as a physical space, but as a malleable subject that responds to Eleanor's inner turmoil, she crafts a narrative where the boundaries between self and environment dissolve. *The Haunting of Hill House* becomes more than just a chilling ghost story; it's a deep exploration of how trauma shapes the way we see the world. This fluidity of reality, influenced by Eleanor's trauma and mental state, transforms the house into a living reflection of her fractured sense of identity. This is where trauma theory comes in showing us how unheralded wounds shape our views, sometimes to the point where we can not tell what is real and what is imagined. Through Eleanor's experiences in the house, Jackson questions the very nature of reality itself. Is it something fixed, or is it constantly shifting based on our inner world?

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