WHEN FEAR BECOMES HOME: PSYCHOLOGICAL HORROR IN SHIRLEY JACKSON AND PETER STRAUB

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Abstract

The most unsettling thing about psychological horror may be how fear moves in and settles. It becomes part of the place where a person lives, thinks, remembers and builds an identity. This essay reads Gothic novels by Shirley Jackson and Peter Straub to show how fear gets internalised and then turns familiar, even comfortable. It traces how domestic space, personal relationships, memory, isolation and uncertainty add to the psychological nastiness of a place, and turn somewhere safe and comforting into somewhere that torments.

Keywords: *Psychological horror; Gothic fiction; Shirley Jackson; Peter Straub; domestic space; the uncanny; memory; isolation; supernatural ambiguity.*

The Gothic tradition has long asked whether places thought to be safe might hold danger. Castles, mansions, family homes, remote villages and respectable communities are all places where the past will not stay past and where social order hides violence. In psychological horror this old design turns inward. Fear grows out of what characters perceive, remember and worry about, and out of the relationships they are caught in. It does not need a monster, a ghost or an obviously menacing building.

Shirley Jackson and Peter Straub are useful writers for tracing this shift. Their styles and historical moments differ, but both treat horror as a strain placed on everyday life. Jackson often writes about fragile identities, people isolated by family demands, gender roles, social suspicion or their own shaky reading of reality.

Psychological Horror and the Gothic Home

Unlike narratives about physical danger, psychological horror makes the mind both the instrument of perception and the place of vulnerability. The reader shares the character's uncertainty and usually gets no reliable answer that would restore order. Fear can come from a sound whose source is unclear, a repeated word that seems to carry an unspoken meaning, a gesture that could be kind or hostile, or a memory whose details shift under pressure.

Theoretical Framework: The Uncanny, the Fantastic and Abjection

Freud's essay "The Uncanny" is a useful place to start in asking why familiar places become frightening. The uncanny is not simply the unfamiliar. It happens when something once intimate comes back in a disturbing form, so that the familiar looks alien. Repetition, doubles, uncertain agency and the return of repressed

material can all produce the effect. A Gothic home suits it well because it is full of personal history.

Shirley Jackson: Domesticity, Isolation and the Unstable Self

Jackson is known for a restrained style and for her attention to the violence that can sit under ordinary social behaviour. Her characters live in worlds governed by rules that seem natural to the people who enforce them. Politeness, family obligation, concern for the neighbours and respectable behaviour can all turn into instruments of control. There is often no easily identified villain, which sharpens the fear.

***The Haunting of Hill House*: A House That Enters the Mind**

In *The Haunting of Hill House*, the house's physical structure and its psychological influence become harder and harder to tell apart. Eleanor Vance arrives hoping to escape a life of obligation, loneliness and dependence. Her earlier experience has left her little room for an independent identity. The invitation to join an investigation of the house offers a short adventure and perhaps a chance to belong to a group.

***We Have Always Lived in the Castle*: Family as Enclosure**

In *We Have Always Lived in the Castle*, Jackson moves Gothic terror from an apparently supernatural mansion to a family home ringed by suspicion. Mary Katherine Blackwood, known as Merricat, lives with her sister Constance and their uncle Julian. A poisoning has killed several relatives, and the village treats the surviving women with a mixture of fear and fascination. The house shelters them from this hostility, but it also keeps the family isolated.

Peter Straub: Memory, Community and the Return of the Past

Straub's fiction often widens the Gothic field from one person's uncertain perceptions to a web of relationships, histories and shared secrets. His narratives can be formally elaborate, shifting among voices, memories and layers of time. The complexity is not decoration. It mirrors how hard it is to understand events blurred by shame, self-protection and the passing of years. A Straub character's fear may begin privately, but it rarely stays that way.

***Ghost Story*: Collective Guilt and the Haunted Community**

In *Ghost Story*, four old friends in the town of Milburn meet to trade ghost stories. They call themselves the Chowder Society, and the evenings feel harmless: drinks, a fire, a good scare. The stories are not harmless. They circle a secret the men have kept since youth, the death of a young woman, Eva Galli, which they covered up and never discussed. When something starts to come for them, the storytelling that kept the guilt at arm's length turns out to have been a way of rehearsing it. Each tale edges closer to what they will not say aloud.

***Shadowland*: Initiation, Identity and the Unstable Boundaries of Reality**

Shadowland sends two schoolboys, Tom Flanagan and Del Nightingale, to spend a summer at Del's uncle's farm in Vermont. The uncle, Collins Rawlins, is a magician, and the boys come to learn his craft. What begins as tricks and patter slides into something harder to explain, and Tom and Del stop being able to tell where performance ends and the real begins. The novel keeps pushing them

across lines they cannot easily step back over, from boyhood towards something older and from the explicable towards what they were warned off.

Comparative analysis: Two Ways of Making Fear Domestic

The clearest difference between Jackson and Straub is the scale and movement of their narratives. Jackson narrows the reader's attention to a few characters and a limited setting whose meaning shifts as psychological pressure builds. Her prose can make a room or a conversation feel ominous without explaining why. Straub more often builds a wide structure of intersecting histories, memories and supernatural patterns.

Gender, Power and the Meaning of Belonging

Gender is central to what home means psychologically in Jackson's fiction. Domestic space has historically been tied to women's duties and to ideals of care, purity, obedience and emotional service. Jackson exposes the coercion hidden inside those ideals. Eleanor's life before Hill House was shaped by caring for her mother, a duty that limits her independence and leaves her unsure what she wants for herself.

Narrative Form and the Reader's Experience of Fear

Technique matters a great deal in how psychological horror works. Jackson's controlled perspective keeps readers close to a character's interpretations while small contradictions pile up. The prose can stay calm while the events disturb, which opens a gap between restrained style and emotional intensity. Because of that restraint, readers cannot treat overstated description as a signal of danger. Ordinary details turn unsettling through repetition, arrangement and context.

Why Fear Becomes Home

The phrase "fear becomes home" can be read as describing a set of connected processes. First, fear becomes habit. Characters arrange daily life around a threat, whether it is a haunted building, hostile neighbours, a family secret or a concealed history. Repeated defensive acts make the frightening environment familiar. Second, fear becomes identity. Characters define themselves through the struggle to stay safe, to protect a private world, or to keep painful knowledge from returning.

Conclusion

Jackson and Straub show that psychological horror gets its force when fear is lodged in the places and relationships that promise safety. In *The Haunting of Hill House*, Eleanor's longing for recognition makes a threatening house look as if it could give her the home she has never had. In *We Have Always Lived in the Castle*, the Blackwood home shields its occupants from a hostile community while keeping them isolated and dependent on a closed domestic world.

Kristeva's theory of abjection accounts for the horror that appears when the boundaries between self and other, home and outside, or past and present collapse. Read together, they show that the Gothic house is more than a building. Jackson's particular contribution is her treatment of the quiet violence of domesticity and social conformity. Her horror grows out of the everyday structures through which people are judged, confined or denied recognition.

Straub widens haunting into a collective process that unfolds over time, and links individual fear to shared secrets and unresolved history. Both challenge the idea that danger can always be placed outside ordinary life.

When fear becomes home, safety and danger stop being opposites. A character may be most frightened where she feels most attached, and most isolated where she believes herself most protected. In both writers the wish for home can be exploited by supernatural forces, by oppressive social systems and by the mind's own defensive habits. Their Gothic fiction offers no easy remedy, because recognition can hurt and escape may cost the familiar self.

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