The Architecture of Evil: 
H. P. Lovecraft’s ‘The Dreams in the Witch House’ and Shirley Jackson’s
The Haunting of Hill House

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Abstract:
This paper proposes that H. P. Lovecraft’s ‘The Dreams in the Witch House’ (1932) and Shirley Jackson’s The Haunting of Hill House (1959) embody the Gothic idea of subversion through their use of space. Specifically, both texts are set in a house that is shaped according to a scale unknown and repulsive to humans, suggesting that the architecture of evil is out of scale literally and metaphorically. Walter Gilman’s room in the Witch House is strangely shaped and represents a passage into a parallel world which Gilman, a mathematician firmly set into the world of scale, first believes to exist only in dreams. Similarly, the interior of the Hill House is off centre and disjointed. People get physically lost as the rooms are set in strange concentric circles which defy traditional architecture; more importantly, characters’ subjectivity is consumed and appropriated by the house. By depicting protagonists as scientists deeply invested in the research of the occult, both Jackson and Lovecraft juxtapose science, which is marked by taxonomies, systems, and scales, with entities and rituals that transcend scalable knowledge. As their projects fail, the perceived harmony and knowability of life is revealed as false. The collapse of scale in both texts unsettles the reader, as it suggests that evil refuses to comply and be contained within a specific human-designed system of measurement or value. With this, the texts confirm the Gothic genre’s countercultural position within the literary canon.

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Certain houses, like certain persons, manage somehow to proclaim at once their character for evil.
– Algernon Blackwood (2013: 276)

Introduction: Architecture and the Gothic

Since its inception the Gothic genre has challenged social, cultural, and literary practices. The challenge arises from what might be seen as the inherently subversive propensities of the Gothic. There are two aspects of those propensities that concern this article. Firstly, the Gothic takes root in a particular kind of architectural space; the founding text of the Gothic, Horace Walpole’s The Castle of Otranto, published in 1764, positions, both with its title and content, medieval architecture and settings as one of the chief referents of the genre. Much of Gothic fiction retains this concern with architecture and specifically with places and spaces devoid of architectural harmony or beauty. In fact, the beautiful is countered by ugliness—not least, by disproportion or out-of-scale appearance—as a dominant principle, which highlights the second aspect: namely, a countering of what is usually set as the norm (the good, the beautiful, the moral). By depicting the opposite—the evil, the ugly, the immoral—the Gothic produces a disconcerting, unsettling effect on the reader, testing the limits of what is tolerable in art and experience. The Gothic poetics of excess and transgression—across themes, motifs, characters, settings—tends to subvert social and literary order and convention, indicating that certain aspects of extreme experience undo the ideal. In other words, what becomes desired, in the Gothic, is dark, excessive, and transgressive. In a fine irony therefore, the Gothic, itself conventionalised, consistently counters conventions and norms of beauty, goodness, morality. It is in accordance with this dynamic that the house, one of the key Gothic (and horror) tropes, ceases to be a home, a place of safety, and becomes instead an oppressive, claustrophobic space and the nexus of secrets, sins, and crimes. Configuring an architecture of evil, it is metamorphic, bringing radical transformation of the spatial into the psychological and the metaphysical. In this fashion the Gothic’s intrusion of the unappealing...
or downright sinister into the most intimate spheres of human existence contributes to the destabilisation of the illusion of ordered and governable life. In fact, as will be argued, it seems that the continuous relevance of the Gothic relies precisely in its counter-cultural, counter-literary, and, most obviously, counter-aesthetic stance.

Here it is relevant to recall that Gaston Bachelard’s *The Poetics of Space*, a seminal study of intimate places and ‘the space we love’, posits the thesis that ‘there is ground for taking the house as a tool for analysis of the human soul’ (1994: xxxvi–xxxvii), explicitly establishing a connection between the psychological, or spiritual, and the spatial, or architectural. Bachelard concludes his study by suggesting that, metaphorically and phenomenologically speaking, life, happiness, and perfection are *round*, invoking the sphere as an ideal meditative object (1994: 232–35). Gothic spaces, by contrast, are associable with edge, sharpness, angularity, corners. Although Bachelard’s study excludes ‘hostile space’ (1994: xxxvi), his views seem to hold some implications even for the representation of malevolent spaces, which are the focus of this article as it discusses the Gothic’s countering sensibility as it emerges in H. P. Lovecraft’s short story ‘The Dreams in the Witch House’ (1932) and Shirley Jackson’s novel *The Haunting of Hill House* (1959).

The interconnectedness of safe and sinister spaces is familiarly evidenced by the concept of the *uncanny*, as it is precisely on the notion of home and homeliness (*unheimlich*, literally: ‘un-homely’) that the concept is established. According to Freud, *das Unheimliche* represents anything that is unknown, but still unconsciously related in some way to what we know well, or in turn, something that is perceived as familiar and close that suddenly becomes a source of fear and dread (1955: 220–3). Significantly, Freud acknowledges the precedence and the key influence of Ernst Jentsch’s paper, ‘On the Psychology of the Uncanny’ (‘Zur Psychologie des Unheimlichen’), in which Jentsch explains that ‘the word suggests that a lack of orientation is bound up with the impression of the uncanniness of a thing or incident’ (1997: 7; emphasis in original). Following Jentsch, Freud also designates the epistemological uncertainty that arises from the feeling of the uncanny as having both a psychological and a spatial quality; the uncanny would always be ‘something one does not know one’s way about in’ (Freud 1955: 221), such that the inability to become orientated in space will provoke an uncanny feeling.
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By commenting on Lovecraft’s and Jackson’s narratives, both of which rely on the upsetting of architectural proportion as a means for the literary figuration of evil, this article proposes that evil or haunted spaces in horror literature are more often than not based on, and expressed through, the deliberate destruction of proportion and scale, which contributes to the sense of the uncanny and to the physical and mental undoing of the protagonist, countering the idea of a house as a known, safe, and governable place. The contention is that literary depictions of the architecture of evil rely on creating confusing, irregular places in which the protagonist fails to find his way (out), providing the converse to Freud’s suggestion that ‘[t]he better orientated in his environment a person is, the less readily will he get the impression of something uncanny in regard to the objects and events in it’ (1955: 221).

The Architecture of Beauty

According to Andrew Herod, ‘until the 1980s [scale] had largely been a taken-for-granted concept used for imposing organizational order on the world’ (2008: 218). In fact, in the Western world, beauty and aesthetic harmony have been related to scale and proportion since Ancient times, suggesting implicitly the existence of intelligent design, be that Nature’s or God’s, and with it the reassuring idea of benevolent purpose. For example, in Book III of Marcus Vitruvius’s *On Architecture (De Architectura)*, a connection is drawn in that context from Roman antiquity between architecture and the human body. According to Vitruvius, people should learn about timeless beauty from nature because nature’s designs are based on universal laws of symmetry and proportion (1914: 72–5). Consequently, he uses the proportions of the idealised human body as models for perfection in proportion. The suggestion is that for a building to be a eurythmic structure, it must reflect (rather than counter) the natural laws of beauty and harmony as manifested also in that idealised body, since ‘Without symmetry and proportion there can be no principles in the design of any temple; that is, if there is no precise relation between its members, as in the case of those of a well shaped man’ (1914: 72). Similarly, as his numerous sketches and designs prove, Leonardo da Vinci drew from Vitruvius, suggesting that the mechanics of the human body bear analogy with the mechanics of the universe, and ‘that geometry and proportion
were key in creating a structure and that their proportion should reflect the human body’ (da Vinci 2008: xxi), as did Francesco di Giorgio Martini, a fifteenth-century Italian sculptor, painter, and architect, famous for his anthropomorphic architectural designs (see di Giorgio Martini 1993). Da Vinci appears to have countenanced the idea that the workings of the universe were apprehensible and that they were a part of a grand design for existence more generally. In fact, the dissections of the body and the obsessive sketching were part of his attempt to discover more about the perfect geometric proportions and relations that governed the natural world, and that were reflected in the human body, too. Da Vinci’s Vitruvian Man, a famous depiction of an ideal(ised) human body framed within a square and a circle, reinforces the view that proportion and evenness contributes to the perception of the beautiful. This extends to art and architecture, too, where the golden ratio is more often than not taken into consideration in the process of planning and construction (see Livio 2002 and Hemenway 2005).

Furthermore, fine proportion, as mathematical (geometrical) and aesthetic means of expression of harmony, came to transcend the mere physical or material concept of beauty, and began to be linked to moral goodness, which, like a house, is built and constructed over time through different trials in life. For instance, Plato’s term kalon can be translated as both ‘beautiful’, referring to an aesthetic category as it does when Socrates describes a beautiful tree in the Phaedrus (Section 230b), and as ‘upright, noble and admirable’, which are distinctly ethical terms. An example of the latter is the part of Plato’s Symposium where Diotima explains that wisdom and love are directed to what is ‘beautiful’ (2005: 49–50). Even more relevant for this discussion is Plato’s assertion that to construct an ideal society, as he proposes to do in The Republic, one must live and act in line with the rules of society and art, because this will provide good influence on the young (Section 400d–401c). He establishes a connection between literal and moral construction (architecture and ethics), both of which have to arise from and rely on the specific rules (scales) for social behaviour and creative production in order to be aesthetically and ethically ‘beautiful’. In Part I of his Summa Theologica (‘Question 5. Of Goodness in General’), Thomas Aquinas also brings beauty and morality in correspondence by suggesting that beauty is a result of form (proportion) and content (morality, integrity) combined (2007: 23–8). Similarly, Immanuel Kant, in his Critique of
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Judgment, famously asserts that ‘the beautiful is the symbol of the morally good’ (2007: 180).

But such focus on the beautiful and proportional and on the equivalence with morality and goodness will inevitably be countered: the ugly, the disproportionate, is an existential given, and will find its representations in literature and art. Nor is it a case of straightforward binarism. It was Aristotle who asserted that people enjoy mimetic representations of horror if they are beautifully reproduced (2006: 22–3). In addition, Umberto Eco, who has contributed fascinatingly to debate on the cultural resonances of ugliness, recalls Marcus Aurelius’s claim that the ugliness of a feature can in fact ‘contribute to the agreeability of the whole’ (2011: 30), as they counter each other and thus create a pleasing disruption of scale. With the Gothic, however, the effects at work tend to be rather different.

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According to David Punter and Glennis Byron, ‘Gothic has always had to do with disruptions of scale and perspective’ (2004: 50). In other words, horror upholds the perception of scale and proportion as helpful to structural rightness and goodness, but represents the opposite, countering architectural, social, and aesthetic norms. Instead of representing beauty that is reassuring and life-affirming, horror’s aim is to provoke uneasiness, to scare and unsettle readers, testing the limits of the readers’ tolerance for deviance.

To produce the necessary unsettling effect through architectural setting, early British Gothic situates the protagonists in old and decayed castles and monasteries, or claustrophobic and suffocating castle prisons, dungeons, secret passages, and catacombs. The setting is, according to Lovecraft, crucial for horror narratives which rely heavily on the achievement of specific atmosphere and mood, because distinct instincts and emotions spring from people’s ‘response to the environment’ in which they find themselves (Lovecraft 2008b: 1042). The insistence on crumbling architecture not only invokes the paradigm of goodness and beauty’s oppositionality to evil and ugliness, but also tends to serve as a reminder of Europe’s long and complicated past, filled with horrific stories of death and torture, both historic and those that are the stuff of legend and folklore. Hence the referencing in some tales of motifs of dogma and superstition,
sin and punishment, persecution and incarceration. Clearly, the feudal and aristocratic markings of Gothic tradition had to be somehow domesticated in North American contexts to reflect settings lacking medieval castles and ancient monasteries. Thus, American Gothic and horror literature adapted the setting in such a way that the family house, rather than a castle, monastery, or ruin, coincides with the nexus of evil, making the haunted house motif one of the staples of contemporary horror (Botting 2005: 80), even as the tense relationship between belief and superstition, between observance and transgression of decree and rule, remains strong.

The horror effect of a haunted house arises primarily from the fact that ‘the dialectics of outside and inside’ is shattered because evil intrudes into domestic space, perverting safety inside ‘the space we love’ and bringing alienation from what is seen as good or acceptable (Bachelard 1994: 211–31, xxxv). The dimension of safety is countered by an ‘overshadowing malevolence’ (Lovecraft 2008b: 1072). The house’s evil nature is reflected in its external and internal appearance and construction, as well as in its effect on the people who live inside. In line with this, Lovecraft’s Witch House and Jackson’s Hill House represent examples of the architecture of evil, which stands as a visual reminder of the fact that evil is ‘out of scale’, or more specifically, that it shapes itself according to a scale – and a (meta)physics – both inscrutable and repulsive to humans, all the more so when the houses display what comes across as an uncanny subjectivity, as well as a will of their own.

In both of the texts under consideration, it is not surprising then that factual knowledge and science, combined with blueprints, calculations, and drawings as material evidence, seem to be pivotal. Architecture requires very precise mathematical and technical knowledge, and the skill to translate geometrical variables into an aesthetically pleasing and functional space. Both protagonists are scientists who are looking for answers about the unknown, their search resulting in shattering realisations. Jackson’s Dr John Montague is an anthropologist dedicated to the research of the occult and his current project is the investigation of strange occurrences in the infamous Hill House, with the aim of finding scientific proof for the supernatural. The juxtaposition of science, marked by measurable, empirical knowledge organised by the help of taxonomies, systems, and scales, and entities and occurrences that transcend scalable knowledge, reveals the countering potential of the Gothic. A similar juxtaposition is to be found in Lovecraft’s
short story, the protagonist of which, Walter Gilman, is a student of ‘non-Euclidean calculus and quantum physics’ who ‘mixes them with folklore, and tries to trace a strange background of multi-dimensional reality behind the ghoulish hints of the Gothic tales’ (Lovecraft 2008a: 859). The fact that both their projects fail – Gilman is murdered by a strange malevolent creature (a rat with a human face), and Dr Montague is forced to leave the Hill House with his project unfinished as one of his assistants is killed under ambiguous circumstances – reveals the presumed knowability of the world to be deceptive and the methods and scales of science inadequate in measuring and containing a gruesome metaphysics.

In his discussion of twentieth-century Gothic, Andrew Smith argues that postmodernism is especially suited to the genre precisely because it places such a strong emphasis on questioning the idea that humans inhabit a coherent or rational world (2007: 141). Yet Gothic had been contesting the idea from the outset, as can clearly be recognised in both Jackson’s and Lovecraft’s treatment of science and its ultimately rationalist – and therefore inadequate – methods. This point can be illustrated in a scene in Lovecraft’s story where the protagonist, Gilman, retrieves a strange artefact from one of his trips into the fourth dimension (this last being referred to in the text more than once by that very term). None of the scholars in local museums are able to determine anything about the object’s origins, its culture, or history. It is then subjected to chemical analysis, ostensibly an objective and fail-safe method to determine the object’s nature, which also turns out to be limited in its capacities to rationally explain the phenomenon at hand:

Professor Ellery found platinum, iron and tellurium in the strange alloy; but mixed with these were at least three other apparent elements of high atomic weight which chemistry was absolutely powerless to classify. Not only did they fail to correspond with any known element, but they did not even fit the vacant places reserved for probable elements in the periodic system. (Lovecraft 2008: 876)

Professor Ellery’s failure to determine the exact composition of the artefact confirms the inadequacy of human knowledge as well as of the scales and instruments developed by science, which is one of Lovecraft’s chief motifs in creating the atmosphere of horror. On the one hand, human ignorance makes humans easy prey to the evil forces of the universe, but on the other, the realisation of the truth cannot save them as there is no shelter from evil.
This, in turn, is illustrated by breaking the illusion of the house as home or a place of safety.

Lovecraft’s Witch House

The protagonist of Lovecraft’s short story, Walter Gilman, is drawn to the Witch House because of its strange history. The house was once inhabited by Keziah Mason, a woman tried in 1692 for witchcraft, who admitted to being involved with the occult. She spoke ‘of lines and curves that could be made to point out directions leading through the walls of space to other spaces beyond’, admitting to the practice of black magic in the security of possessing secret knowledge that would enable her to escape prison by disappearing into another dimension (Lovecraft 2008a: 860). Being a scholar working on the intersection between hard science and metaphysics, Gilman is fascinated by the fact that ‘a mediocre old woman of the seventeenth century [had] an insight into mathematical depths perhaps beyond the utmost modern delvings of Planck, Heisenberg, Einstein, and de Sitter’ (2008a: 860). Keziah’s knowledge suggests, as does the failure of Dr Montague’s team in Jackson’s narrative, that there are forces that cannot be rationalised or explained by logic, and that any attempt to explain them by means of conventional science will ultimately fail. In addition to this, it seems that these forces are inevitably evil and destructive, which is illustrated by means of the strange geometry of the room in which Keziah once performed her rituals. The inexplicable nature of these geometrical shapes undermines the perception on mathematics and science as firm foundations for the knowability of the world, and highlights the subversive nature of the story and of Gothic poetics more generally.

The room, now infamous as ‘no one had ever been willing to stay there long’, is hardly ever rented out, but Gilman is adamant in wanting to live precisely where Keziah had once practised her spells. Upon moving in, he is immediately struck by the room’s unusual architecture:

Gilman’s room was of good size but queerly irregular shape; the north wall slanting perceptibly inward from the outer to the inner end, while the low ceiling slanted gently downward in the same direction. Aside from an obvious rat-hole and the signs of other stopped-up ones, there was no access—nor any appearance of a former avenue of access—to the space which must have existed between the slanting wall and the straight outer wall on the house’s
north side, though a view from the exterior showed where a window had
been boarded up at a very remote date. The loft above the ceiling—which
must have had a slanting floor—was likewise inaccessible. (2008a: 861)

The suggestion of space that should be there but is not, or is not visible
under ordinary circumstances, is reminiscent of the tower in which the old
library is situated in Jackson’s Hill House, and which cannot be observed
from Theodora’s and Eleanor’s room in that story. Such geometrical ‘tricks’
unnerv e the inhabitants of these spaces and shake their belief in their own
senses and sanity. Because of this, the everyday life of the researchers at
the Hill House becomes filled with a sense of apprehension, of terror at
something vague but terrifying that may happen any instant. In addition,
it instigates doubt about the characters’ expectations and their perception
of reality. In fact, in order to deal with the counterintuitive architecture
of Hill House, they become aware that they cannot trust the input of
their own senses, which the mind is trying to override in order to keep
a sense of ‘normalcy’: ‘We have grown to trust blindly in our senses
of balance and reason, and I can see where the mind might fight wildly
to preserve its own familiar stable patterns against all evidence that it
was leaning sideways’ (Jackson 2013: 101). Similarly to this, Gilman
becomes so completely absorbed in the strange geometry and its hidden
meanings that he finds himself ‘staring more and more intently at the
corner where the down-slanting ceiling met the inward-slanting wall’,
ultimately developing a set of psychosomatic symptoms which include
brain-fever, an exaggerated sense of hearing, an acute feeling of dread,
and what he believes to be strange dreams marked by a distinct collapse
of scale.

In these ‘dreams’, which are in fact reality, since his room is effectively a
passage into a parallel, menacing world, Gilman experiences the intrusion
of the fourth dimension where he sees Brown Jenkin, a tiny, half-rat
half-human blood-sucking creature, and witnesses the ultimate collapse
of the laws of nature: ‘limitless abysses of inexplicably coloured twilight
and bafflingly disordered sound; abysses whose material and gravitational
properties, and whose relation to his own entity, he could not even begin
to explain’ (2008a: 862). Gilman here loses the sense of coherence and
full command of his body, which he perceives from a kind of anamorphic,
Cubist perspective, with all sense of proportion or scale upset:
He did not walk or climb, fly or swim, crawl or wriggle; yet always experienced a mode of motion partly voluntary and partly involuntary. Of his own condition he could not well judge, for sight of his arms, legs, and torso seemed always cut off by some odd disarrangement of perspective; but he felt that his physical organisation and faculties were somehow marvellously transmuted and obliquely projected—though not without a certain grotesque relationship to his normal proportions and properties. (2008a: 862–3)

He finds himself in the realm of otherworldly organic and anorganic entities, strange creatures and geometrical shapes, colours, and sounds which he cannot identify or describe, but which cause in him ‘a constant sense of dread’ (863). The room in the Witch House, rather than being sentient and a manifestation of evil like Hill House, represents a portal into the fourth dimension, a space where ‘a primal evil too horrible for description’ (867) resides when it is not invading and violating the world of ordinary humans. It is this aspect of the story—Lovecraft’s use of geometric imagery in depicting the space where the malevolent, the unknown (a word that appears often in the text) resides—that most Lovecraft’s critics have found to be the most valuable, as opposed to its arguably poor and overblown style (see Mariconda 1991: 192; Leiber 1966: 173–3; Joshi 2001: 317–8).

But what unites the two stories is the fact that evil, as an ethical concept, is being figured in anti-aesthetic terms. As Rasmus Ugilt Holten Jensen has it, evil will tend to be depicted as ‘disgusting, degenerate, revolting or otherwise aesthetically unacceptable’ (2012: 53). Both the Hill House and the Witch House have unpleasant histories, but it is their appearance and the fact that they give off an air of hostility that makes people avoid them. The Witch House is mouldering, musty-smelling, eldritch, and has an impossibly angled interior (Lovecraft 2008a: 860–1); the Hill House is vile, diseased, marked with an ‘unhappy coincidence of line and place which suggests evil in the face of a house’ (Jackson 2013: 32). Both embody some kind of ‘aesthetic violence’, as Jensen puts it, which bears unsettling connections with the Kantian sublime: ‘the excessive externality which seems to be beyond the reach of our cognitive capacities’ (2012: 60). It is the combination of the houses’ counter-aesthetic features and the feelings that these features provoke that accentuates the architectural quality of evil; it is something at once familiar and unfamiliar, something that cannot be comprehended and which therefore provokes ‘wonder and fear’ (Jensen 2012: 62).
Consequently, Dr Montague and Gilman, both of them scholars and in pursuit of more substantial knowledge about the seemingly supernatural phenomena that provoke wonder and fear, respond to a kind of calling they feel, a need to clarify the obscure nature of the strange events connected with the house they respectively encounter. They voluntarily engage in some level of interaction with the evil, a move on which horror literature relies. Such interaction typically leads to premature and violent confrontation with death, or its likelihood; this, in turn, frequently serves as punishment for desiring and acquiring forbidden knowledge. According to Eric Savoy and in line with this, American Gothic represents the dark underside of the American dream, in which the individual is trapped in a web of his or her desires. More importantly, he suggests that the desire to ‘know the traumatic Real of American being’ and the struggle to unveil hidden truths complicates the protagonists’ lives rather than clarifying them, even as they are simultaneously attracted to and repulsed by the unbearable and remote knowledge of monstrous history (2002: 167–9). As the dark and mysterious events connected with the two houses surpass human cognitive abilities, malevolence takes the form not only of an unscalable house but also of unscalable knowledge. Additionally, in both stories, the evil takes a life in order to reassert itself as supreme. In Jackson’s novel, interestingly, the victim is not the researching scientist, Dr Montague, but the mentally unstable Eleanor Vance, who gives in to the vibrations of the Hill House, and who, rather than leave, drives her car into a large oak tree outside the house. Darryl Hattenhauer explains this by suggesting that Eleanor is filled with hate, morbid self-consciousness, and an obsessive desire to belong, and is thus more susceptible to the negative influence of the house, which stands for the collapsing coherence of the subject’s identity. As her personality disintegrates, she is unable to ‘keep herself together’ and gives in willingly to the powerful influence of the house (2003: 159). In Lovecraft’s short story, the effect of punishment is much more straightforward: after Gilman refuses to participate in the violent rituals of black magic which enabled Keziah’s and her familiar Brown Jenkin’s immortality and kills Keziah, Brown Jenkin kills Gilman in retribution.

Jackson’s Hill House

Echoing Lovecraft’s treatment of the Witch House, but dispensing with the obvious reference to witchcraft and superstition, Jackson describes Hill
House as ‘a masterpiece of architectural misdirection’ where everything is ‘off centre’ and ‘disjointed’ (2013: 105–6) and where people get literally lost as the rooms are set in strange, impenetrable, concentric circles which defy traditional architecture:

[E]very angle is slightly wrong. Hugh Crain must have detested other people and their sensible squared-away houses, because he made his house to suit his mind. 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. (Jackson 2013: 100)

The surprising geometry forces Dr Montague and his team to rely on the floor plan of the house in order to get some sense of stability (2013: 84). Even then they hardly ever have the sense of having fully mastered the layout. The confusing disjointedness of Hill House is consistent with what Punter and Byron recognise as the lack of stability of the map in contemporary horror, which suggests an unsettling lack of coherence and logic:

No point on the map is exactly where or what it seems; on the contrary, it opens into other spaces, and it does not even do that in a stable fashion. What might have been an opening last night into another world may now be closed, absent, terrifying in the quality of its unyieldingness. (2004: 50–1)

The continuous shifting of location only serves to further emphasise the helplessness of the team, who seems to be slowly consumed and appropriated by the house physically and psychologically. But it is not only the unstable location of individual rooms that is unsettling; the house somehow seems to animate its doors, stairs, drapes, and even the figurines on the shelves, all of which inexplicably move or change their position when no one watches, suggesting either group hallucinations or supernatural animation of inanimate objects (Jackson 2013: 100–108). So, when Dr Montague explains to Luke that ‘If we let you go off wandering by yourself we’d very likely never find you again’ (2013: 79), the reader cannot help but understand this as a warning against the influence of the house’s negative energy and its transformative effect rather than a mere warning against getting physically lost. Hattenhauer suggests that Jackson’s Hill House should be read ‘as a metaphor for the disunified subject’, which is supported by the story’s emphasis on its unreliable, delusional focaliser (2003: 155) and its ambiguousness in certain crucial plot events, which
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further underlines the threat that the house poses for its tenants. The unsettling effect arises from the sense that a non-human entity, such as a house, might display human characteristics but also the ability to ‘live’ the lives of its tenants, which counters any reasonable expectation.

The aesthetically displeasing effect of the house’s appearance seems to be deliberate, so much so that the house is from the start represented as being alive and with a will of its own—its sinister aspect an expression of its nature:

No human eye can isolate the unhappy coincidence of line and place which suggests evil in the face of a house, and yet somehow a maniac juxtaposition, a badly turned angle, some chance meeting of roof and sky, turned Hill House into a place of despair, more frightening because the face of Hill House seemed awake. (Jackson 2013: 32)

The possibility of the house exerting some sort of deliberate malevolent influence on its tenants means it can well be regarded as a protagonist rather than a mere, passive setting for the novel’s events. Early on, the protagonists learn that ‘Hill House has a reputation for insistent hospitality; it seemingly dislikes letting its guests get away’ (62), which at first sounds like a humorous remark arising from local folklore rooted in superstition and rumour. But soon enough, they cannot help but take the house’s personified existence as a fact: ‘The house. It watches every move you make’ (80). In fact, Jackson describes the house as sentient in rather unambiguous terms by saying that ‘the house brooded, settling and stirring with a movement that was almost like a shudder’ (86).

The house’s malevolence and its brooding nature gradually become a more important problem for the tenants than its unsightly appearance and architectural disjointedness, which appears to be an external manifestation of the house’s evil personality: ‘The house was vile. She shivered and thought, the words coming freely into her mind, Hill House is vile, it is diseased; get away from here at once’ (31). Yet despite being unpleasant-looking and emitting distinctly negative vibrations, the house possesses a strange attraction which makes it hard for anyone to resist its influence. The principal attractiveness of evil may be said to be based on the fact that evil does not seem to require conscious effort, as virtue or critical thinking might, but rather relies on a person’s ‘thoughtlessness’ and simple yielding
to the evil’s demands (Arendt 1994: 287–8). In other words, under certain circumstances it will be easier for an individual to uncritically accept evil than to counter it. The concepts of radical evil and the banality of evil as Hannah Arendt uses them in her discussions of the Holocaust might seem incongruous in a context like this one, but they are useful in the attempt to reflect on the dynamics and causes of the events in Hill House. The House may be said to represent the physical manifestation of ‘radical evil’, a kind of essential evil which is otherworldly but which in Jackson’s story takes the form of a house, and which, as Arendt explains it, reduces human beings to empty husks who lack judgement, freedom, and will, but simply follow the evil’s calling. What is more, Hill House lacks any apparent or understandable motive for wanting to scare, imprison, or kill its tenants other than exercising some kind of ultimate, totalitarian control over their lives (Arendt 1985: 437–59). Being evil for evil’s sake is in the very character of Hill House: ‘The evil is the house itself, I think. It has enchained and destroyed its people and their lives, it is a place of contained ill will’ (Jackson 2013: 77).

Although Dr Montague has informed the tenants, all of them participants in his research of the supernatural, of the house’s known history and its builder, the house still possesses some kind of primordial quality which makes it hard for them to accept the fact that any person would have purposely planned and constructed such an edifice. In fact, to them the house’s origin also seems to be affected by the sheer willpower of the house, or the ultimate evil force that animates it and that creates only to be able to destroy:

This house which seemed somehow to have formed itself, flying together into its own powerful pattern under the hands of builders, fitting itself into its own construction of lines and angles, reared its great head back against the sky without concession to humanity. It was a house without kindness, never meant to be lived in, not a fit place for people or for love or for hope. Exorcism cannot alter the countenance of a house; Hill House would stay as it was until it was destroyed. (Jackson 2013: 32–3)

The idea that the house willed itself into existence by manipulating people to build it according to scales unknown, and that it continues to ensure its survival by killing anyone who threatens its existence, is a deeply unsettling
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one. The sense of ultimate defeat and the realisation of human weakness and inadequacy in the face of the Unknown is, in fact, what Gothic is about.

Conclusion: The Countering Gothic

Both Jackson’s and Lovecraft’s texts suggest that evil can have a willed and all too physical character, and that it may take various forms, human or alien. Evil, as depicted in the two stories discussed here, represents a negation of proportion, scale, and harmony, and very often also of logic, suggesting that real as it may be, evil is unfathomable to the human mind. Thus, the stories tend to counter any perception that the world can be knowable or controllable. The evil at work in the stories manifests itself through an architecture which unsettles the readers and protagonists alike, producing the effect of the uncanny, as the collapse of proportion and correct construction serves to reveal the unfamiliar in what is believed to be familiar, collapsing rationality and sanity. Moreover, the architecture of both houses suggests that evil will refuse to comply with or be contained within human-designed systems of measurement or value. Indeed, even though it mocks and rejects the dictates of logic and hard science, it is perfectly able to master and exploit it, exerting a dominance that shatters any sense of control that humans may believe they have over their lives.

In literary terms, the countering nature of Gothic as a genre (and the numerous subgenres that it has spawned over the centuries) resists literary decorum. Perceived historically as merely sensationalist, the genre was in fact from its outset very much concerned with the realisation that few things are fixed or anything but inscrutable in human existence, most prominent among them the (in)ability to handle instincts, the desire for power, the lure of troubling knowledge. Accordingly, the Gothic retains its capacity to unnerve, to subvert any supposition of the very possibility of balance, regulation, order. By suggesting that there is more to reality than is properly discernible, it erodes security in the inevitability of knowledge and its progression. In the poetics of the Gothic this is abetted, as this paper has proposed, by the representation of malevolence through what has been referred to as the architecture of evil, whose aggressively and unambiguously violent aesthetics speaks for the genre’s countercultural position within the literary canon—a position that is incontestable and secure, even as, or because, it undoes securities.
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The Architecture of Evil


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