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THE FEMALE FIGURE AT THE HEART OF THE GOTHIC TRADITION: A COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS OF WORKS BY SHIRLEY JACKSON AND LAURA PURCELL

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This study is devoted to the analysis of the traditional role of the female figure in the Gothic novel and its symbolic reinterpretations in contemporary literature. At the center of the research are the works of contemporary women writers Shirley Jackson and Laura Purcell, who simultaneously continue and transform the Gothic tradition. The study traces the evolution of classical Gothic motifs, including physical and psychological isolation, fear of the unknown, and the dangers posed by the surrounding space, within a modern cultural context.

*Through a comparative analysis with the ideas argued by Betty Friedan in her seminal work *The Feminine Mystique* alongside the broader context of second-wave feminist thought, the research demonstrates that architectural space in the contemporary Gothic novel functions not merely as a setting but as an active force embodying mechanisms of patriarchal control over women. In Shirley Jackson's *The Haunting of Hill House*, the house represents a form of "domestic captivity" that Friedan described as the product of mid-twentieth-century social and gender expectations: in her longing to find a home, the main female character is consumed by a space that ultimately erases her identity and isolates her from the outside world. A parallel dynamic unfolds in Laura Purcell's *The Silent Companions*, where the estate becomes a symbol of ancestral memory and history of generations, subsuming the main character's personal experience and silencing her voice, until she becomes a mute fragment of the house's inherited narrative.*

Thus, the classical theme of female vulnerability within the isolated Gothic space takes on new dimensions in contemporary fiction. In this context, architecture serves as a tool of psychological and social pressure that simultaneously revives and intensifies women's memories and traumas, but eventually obliterates them. Therefore, the modern Gothic novel not only maintains the genre's traditional elements but also operates as a critique of social and gender structures that constrain female autonomy and contribute to the marginalization of women's experience.

Key words: Gothic novel, female figure, architectural space, feminist criticism, Shirley Jackson, Laura Purcell.

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ЖІНОЧИЙ ОБРАЗ У ЦЕНТРІ ГОТИЧНОЇ ТРАДИЦІЇ: ПОРІВНЯЛЬНЕ ДОСЛІДЖЕННЯ РОМАНІВ ШІРЛІ ДЖЕКСОН ТА ЛОРИ ПЕРСЕЛЛ

Статтю присвячено аналізу традиційної ролі жіночого образу в готичному романі та її символічних інтерпретацій у сучасній літературі. У центрі дослідження перебувають твори сучасних письменниць Шірлі Джексон та Лори Перселл, які водночас продовжують і трансформують готичну традицію. Простежено еволюцію класичних готичних мотивів, зокрема фізичної та психологічної ізоляції, страху перед невідомим та небезпеки навколишнього простору, у сучасному культурному контексті. У результаті проведеного порівняльного аналізу з ідеями Бетті Фрідан (в її знаковій праці «Жіноча містика») та феміністичної думки другої хвилі можна зробити висновок, що архітектурний простір у сучасному готичному романі постає не лише тлом для подій, а й активним чинником, що втілює механізми патріархального контролю над жінкою. У романі Шірлі Джексон «Привид будинку на пагорбі» дім уособлює форму «домашнього полону», яку Фрідан описувала як результат соціальних і гендерних очікувань 1950-х років: прагнучи знайти власний дім, героїня виявляється поглинутою простором, що руйнує її ідентичність та ізолює від світу. Аналогічний мотив розвиває Лора Перселл у романі «Мовчазні компаньйони», де будинок стає символом родової пам'яті й історії поколінь, що підпорядковує собі особисті переживання героїні та стирає її голос, перетворюючи жінку на мовчазний елемент чужої історії.

Таким чином, класичний мотив жіночої уразливості в ізольованому готичному просторі отримує в сучасній прозі нове прочитання: архітектура функціонує як інструмент психологічного та соціального тиску, який одночасно актуалізує індивідуальну пам'ять і травми героїнь, але зрештою нівелює їх. У цьому сенсі сучасний готичний роман не лише продовжує традицію жанру, а й постає як форма критики суспільних і гендерних структур, що обмежують жіночу автономію та сприяють маргіналізації жіночого досвіду.

Ключові слова: готичний роман, жіночий образ, архітектурний простір, феміністична критика, Шірлі Джексон, Лора Перселл.

Introduction. In the classical Gothic tradition, the narrative center is frequently occupied by a female protagonist, a figure whose gendered vulnerability, social marginalization, and psychological complexity render her especially susceptible to the uncanny forces that dominate Gothic space. This heroine is often a young woman of modest background – a governess, an orphan, or a socially unanchored figure – who arrives at an isolated, grand estate for employment or marriage, seeking security, stability, or escape from a troubled past.

This pattern, already visible in the foundational Gothic text by Horace Walpole, *The Castle of Otranto* (1764), which established the genre's core elements of ancestral curse, haunted architecture, and persecuted female innocence, evolves across the centuries into increasingly

psychological and socially charged forms. In that early novel, the character Isabella flees through subterranean passages to escape forced marriage and male domination, setting a precedent for the Gothic heroine's entrapment within a labyrinthine domestic sphere.

A similar archetype is evident in later seminal works such as Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre* (1847), where the titular character, an orphaned governess, is drawn into the enigmatic world of Thornfield Hall and the brooding Mr. Rochester, only to discover that the house conceals a literal madwoman in the attic – an embodiment of the repressed female self. Likewise, in Henry James's *The Turn of the Screw* (1898), the unnamed governess, isolated at Bly with two children, becomes increasingly haunted by ambiguous apparitions, which may reflect either a supernatural menace or the fragmentation of her own psyche.

In such narratives, the heroine's arrival at the house (a space traditionally associated with domestic safety) initially appears to fulfill her desires: a sense of belonging, love, or elevation in social status. However, the Gothic house soon reveals its treacherous nature: it is not a sanctuary, but a psychological labyrinth, saturated with the residue of past traumas, secrets, and repressions. As the story unfolds, it becomes clear that it is not external phantoms that haunt her, but rather the ghosts of the past, often her own or those embedded in the patriarchal history of the place. These "ghosts" serve as narrative devices that awaken unresolved emotional and psychological wounds, turning the heroine inward toward self-destruction or revelation.

This dynamic is central to Shirley Jackson's *The Haunting of Hill House* (1959), where Eleanor Vance, socially alienated and psychologically fragile, is absorbed by the architecture of the haunted house that reflects and amplifies her inner chaos. Likewise, in Daphne du Maurier's *Rebecca* (1938), the unnamed narrator arrives at Manderley as a new bride, only to be overshadowed by the spectral memory of her husband's first wife – a Gothic haunting rooted not in the supernatural but in memory, social expectation, and personal inadequacy.

What unites these works is the paradoxical trajectory of the female protagonist: her attempt to flee the constraints of poverty, trauma, or invisibility often results in further entrapment. The Gothic house, while promising reinvention, instead functions as a trap – a spatial metaphor for patriarchal control, psychological repression, and historical continuity from which there may be no escape. The heroine's journey into this space becomes a descent, not only into the literal past of the house, but into the unconscious spaces of her own mind, where the boundaries between external and internal horror dissolve.

This study applies a combination of interrelated **methods**. The hermeneutical method interprets literary images and symbols, particularly the house as a character influencing the heroines' psychological states. The historical and literary method situates contemporary Gothic novels within the genre's development and allows comparison with classical works, such as *The Castle of Otranto*, highlighting shifts in archetypes and motifs. The cultural method examines texts within broader socio-cultural and gender contexts, emphasizing female vulnerability in isolated spaces. Finally, contextual analysis considers intertextual and cultural connections, including feminist perspectives, to explore how architectural space shapes narrative and symbolism in the contemporary Gothic novel.

Results and discussion. Following the traditions of the gothic novel, Shirley Jackson, in a sequence of her works, portrays women who struggle to conform to the rigid gender roles of mid-20th-century America. Shirley Jackson transposes the setting and focus of narration from dark castles and medieval secrets into the setting of the twentieth century, where ancient curses are replaced by psychological traumas, social isolation, and patriarchal norms, and where the backdrops are modern houses and closed communities that still preserve an atmosphere of anxiety and hidden menace. *The Haunting of Hill House* stands out as one of the few works

that remain as close as possible to the classic Gothic tradition. While her female characters long to break free from these constraints and define themselves through personal passions, they face strong resistance from the society around them. These struggles frequently result in psychological damage, with outcomes ranging from suicide to eventual recovery, depending on the women's resilience. In her article, Angela Hague [4] notes that Jackson's heroines often experience isolation, loneliness, and fragmented identities, coupled with an inability to function autonomously, leading to mental illness. Thus, many researchers agree that in *The Haunting of Hill House*, Jackson's depiction of women's mental health issues reflects the societal pressures described in her contemporary, Betty Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique* (1963) and second-wave feminist thought. These two works emerged from the same cultural moment: a post-war United States that idealized domesticity as the pinnacle of female fulfillment while simultaneously erasing women's autonomy and complexity. Though one is a Gothic novel and the other a work of feminist social critique, both texts diagnose the same underlying malaise: the domestic sphere, far from being a sanctuary, often becomes a site of confinement, disillusionment, and psychological breakdown.

In *The Haunting of Hill House*, the main character of Eleanor Vance arrives at Hill House with an almost desperate longing for belonging. Having spent years caring for her bedridden mother of an uncompromisingly domineering nature, Eleanor craves a home where she might finally be seen and valued. Early in the novel, she reassures herself: "*I am here, I am here...*" [5, p. 116]. This repetition, being echoed again and again throughout the novel, underscores her desire to root herself within a physical and emotional space that offers permanence.

Similarly, Friedan identifies this longing as central to the postwar feminine ideal, which prescribed that women find satisfaction exclusively through marriage, children, and the upkeep of the suburban household. In *The Feminine Mystique*, she writes: "*Each suburban wife struggled with it alone. As she made the beds, shopped for groceries, matched slipcover material, ate peanut butter sandwiches with her children, chauffeured Cub Scouts and Brownies, lay beside her husband at night – she was afraid to ask even of herself the silent question – 'Is this all?'*" [1, p. 15]. Just as Eleanor mistakes Hill House for a place of belonging, millions of women embraced suburban domesticity only to discover its emptiness. For Friedan, the suburban home could become a "comfortable concentration camp," a gilded cage in which women's lives were circumscribed by monotony and isolation [1]. This metaphor resonates strikingly with Jackson's portrayal of Hill House. Though grand and imposing, the house is labyrinthine, suffocating, and oppressive: doors swing shut without warning, hallways are disorienting, and its very architecture destabilizes the sense of reality. What appears solid and secure proves instead to be a space of psychological entrapment. Eleanor's merging with the house dramatizes Friedan's metaphor in Gothic form. The more Eleanor seeks connection and identity within Hill House, the more the house consumes her individuality: "*Hill House itself, not sane, stood against its hills, holding darkness within; it had stood so for eighty years and might stand for eighty more. Within, its walls continued upright, bricks met neatly, floors were firm, and doors were sensibly shut; silence lay steadily against the wood and stone of Hill House, and whatever walked there, walked alone*" [5, p. 3].

By placing the passage mentioned above both at the threshold and at the conclusion of the story, Jackson creates a circular structure that mirrors the inescapable trap of Hill House itself. This repetition serves as a structural and thematic frame that emphasizes the house's autonomy and endurance. This way, Jackson suggests that nothing has changed in the course of the story: Eleanor's death leaves no trace, but Hill House endures, untouched and unaltered, continuing to exert its uncanny presence. This circular structure underscores the Gothic

sense of being snared and doomed, presenting Hill House as a timeless, self-contained entity that both absorbs and annihilates its inhabitants. The house becomes not merely a setting but the true protagonist, embodying what Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar [3] identify as the patriarchal domestic space that consumes women's identities (*The Madwoman in the Attic*, 1979). The unchanged description implies that, even though Eleanor was unconsciously striving to become a part of this house, she has not transformed it; rather, the house has devoured her, reinforcing its power to efface individuality, and implying, in a wider sense, the marginality of women's role within a patriarchal order, where "bricks met neatly, floors were firm" and "whatever walked there, walked alone".

In the same vein, Laura Purcell's *The Silent Companions* (2017) develops a dynamic strikingly parallel to Shirley Jackson's *The Haunting of Hill House*. This young British novelist draws on the same Gothic toolkit as Jackson: "So many characters in Gothic fiction are processing trauma and I think fiction plays a key role in helping us explore and deal with those feelings", she mentions in one of her interviews with "The Courier" [7].

In her celebrated novel *The Silent Companions*, she depicts a crumbling estate, a solitary female protagonist, and ambiguous supernatural phenomena she has to face. The main character, Elsie Bainbridge, is sent to her late husband's ancestral home, The Bridge, a remote country house in which she is expected to recover from grief and assume the role of mistress. A clear intertextual resonance can be observed here between Laura Purcell's novel and Horace Walpole's novel *The Castle of Otranto*, mentioned before. Although Isabella is not a widow but a vulnerable bride-to-be, and Elsie in Purcell's narrative is a young widow, both women embody the Gothic trope of female vulnerability defined by their marital status. In Walpole's text, Isabella's fiancé dies suddenly under mysterious circumstances, and she is immediately pursued by his father, Manfred, who seeks to marry her in order to secure his dynasty. Purcell reworks this pattern: Elsie's isolation begins after the unexpected death of her husband, which leaves her unprotected in a hostile environment and increasingly consumed by the haunted house. In both cases, the loss of a male protector becomes the catalyst that forces the heroine into a threatening domestic space, where the Gothic house itself emerges as both prison and persecutor.

Elsie is isolated both geographically and socially, with only servants and a suspicious village nearby. Unlike Hill House, which reflects psychological trauma, The Bridge serves as a manifestation of historical repression, particularly of women. The appearance of the "silent companions", life-sized painted wooden figures that seem to move unaided, serves as a metaphor for voicelessness, dependence, and the spectral persistence of the female past. These figures, eerily lifelike, "watch" Elsie and reproduce the suffocating sense of female subjectivity being surveilled, manipulated, and ultimately erased. The House again becomes more than a setting but an active participant in the narrative, an antagonist, its rooms harbour secrets, its hallways echo with the unspoken pain of past generations, and make Elsie doubt her own sanity. The companions are ultimately silent stand-ins for repressed female rage and memory, just as Hill House is a spatial echo of Eleanor's disowned fears and desires.

Subsumed into the house, like Jackson's Eleanor, Elsie finds herself increasingly entangled with the house that gradually imprisons her. At first, she inhabits The Bridge as a reluctant mistress, but as the story progresses, the estate's oppressive atmosphere and the uncanny presence of the silent companions gradually take possession of her consciousness. The intrusion of the companions into Elsie's most intimate spaces, both external (her room, her body, her safety) and internal (her mind, her autonomy, her sense of self), blurs the distinction between external threat and internal fear, until she can no longer disentangle her own perception from the house's sinister influence.

Laura Purcell provides very little information about Elsie's childhood, offering only fragmented hints, rather than a fully detailed backstory. However, the text suggests that her past was also traumatic and emotionally deprived, which results in her fears and insecurities regarding her unborn child. Being pregnant with her deceased husband's child, she feels unprepared and incapable of motherhood. This sense of inadequacy implies emotional neglect or a difficult upbringing, which "brought her nothing but fear". Moreover, particular dread of having a daughter who might "look like her" indicates feelings of shame or self-loathing, possibly linked to her family legacy. The thought of "glancing upon a mirror of her past" makes her sick, suggesting unresolved trauma, likely tied to issues of female identity, abuse, or stigmatization:

Dear God, she couldn't do it... She could not be an ordinary mother to an ordinary baby. All those toys, the memorabilia of childhood. Perhaps it was different if you grew up happy, with memories of your father dandling you on his knee and your mother kissing your tears away. But for Elsie there was nothing but fear. Fear for the baby. Fear of the baby. Jolyon had turned out all right, she reminded herself. But it was easier with Jolyon being a boy. What if Rupert's baby was born a girl? She could not love a daughter that looked like her. She could not bear to glance upon a mirror of her past without being sick [6, p. 117].

Interestingly, the wooden figures are painted with unnervingly lifelike detail and operate as emblems of objectification. They obscure the line between person and effigy, subject and object. Under their gaze, Elsie is rendered passive, mistrusted by those around her, and increasingly silenced. She is reduced to something less than human, another "figure" among the house's uncanny inhabitants. In this sense, *The Bridge* does not merely contain Elsie but actively strips away her subjectivity, transforming her into part of its inanimate Gothic tableau. Elsie's psychological collapse exemplifies the Gothic trope of the house as a site of feminine dissolution. By the novel's conclusion, she ceases to exist as an autonomous self but has been absorbed into the long history of violence, madness, and silence that saturates *The Bridge*. Her story, like Eleanor's in *Hill House*, is consumed by the architecture itself: she is not merely in the house but dissolves in it, having become a character in its legend rather than an autonomous person who can escape or resist. Her life is swallowed up by the estate's dark past, leaving her indistinguishable from the previous generations of women who were silenced, destroyed, or turned into part of the house's haunting presence, folded into its ongoing legacy of destruction. In both Jackson and Purcell, the domestic space enacts the ultimate erasure of female identity, transforming heroines into spectral presences whose voices persist only as echoes within haunted walls.

Conclusions. Gothic space in contemporary literature remains closely intertwined with the female image, reflecting broader sociocultural and psychological issues. Isolated houses and estates often emphasize the dependence of women on social norms and familial hierarchies, exposing the limitations imposed on their autonomy. The comparative analysis of *The Haunting of Hill House* and *The Silent Companions* alongside classical works like *The Castle of Otranto* showcases the persistence of the archetype of the "woman trapped by the house". While in earlier Gothic works the threat was primarily external, manifesting as physical violence, dynastic intrigue, or oppressive guardianship, in modern narratives it has shifted toward psychological and emotional dimensions, exploring how isolation, trauma, and social expectation shape the woman's inner life.

Moreover, the house functions both as a symbol of generational and historical trauma and as a reflection of the main character's inner world. The integration of psychological states with architectural space allows readers to perceive the house as an embodiment of fear, desire, and conflict. Contemporary Gothic novels thus expand the traditional roles of domestic and estate spaces, transforming them into active agents that reflect, amplify, and at times consume female

identity. Future research might explore the effects of Gothic space on male characters in parallel alongside female figures, or delve deeper into the intersection of Gothic literature and feminist theory to understand how architectural spaces operate as instruments of control, psychological coercion, and social critique.

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