Home is Where the Horror is: The Representation of American Domesticity in the Post-War Horror Literature of Shirley Jackson, Stephen King, and Danielle Valentine

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Abstract

In this thesis I explore the American horror genre's consistent interest with the private domestic sphere through post-war fiction from my selected authors. I use theories of authorship from Iser and Daseler to consider the authors' apparent biographical connection to their novels and the implications of these connections as they pertain to the contextualization of each novel within its contemporary society. In addition to contextualizing these novels through their authors, I consider the sociological context of each decade from which the novels were written. I use sociology to interpret the critiques and commentaries being illuminated through the authors' uses of the generic conventions and traditions of the horror genre as they derive from the American Gothic genre and explore how these conventions contribute to the deeper sociological meaning of each text.

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Introduction

"Sometimes human places create inhuman monsters" – Stephen King, *The Shining*

The home, a space meant to provide safety to those who live in it, is often the subject of horror literature and film; its occupants are terrorized by forces of evil, both supernatural and human. This tradition is carried over from the Gothic genre, which also focused largely on the home and the families residing in it. Both the American Gothic and American horror genres have constructed images of fear, anxiety, and tension around the one institution that typically is a symbol of security, defamiliarizing what is most familiar to us through hauntings, monsters, killers, gore, and other such images of terror. Authors of the horror genre both adhere to and challenge the conventions of the genre they write within, which have been made familiar to us by the horror and Gothic genres alike. While horror has made these conventions seem more like clichés, each convention and cliché has its own purpose within horror films and literature and contributes to the interpretation of the media at hand. In this thesis, I will be focusing on post-war American horror literature to explore the themes of domesticity and family as they are represented by the genre.

The three novels I have chosen to use as examples of American horror literature carry the ideas present in the Gothic tradition into their work. Each of them have biographical information attached to their novels which connect to the novels' contemporary societies. Shirley Jackson's *The Haunting of Hill House* (1959), Stephen King's *The Shining* (1977), and Danielle Valentine's *Delicate Condition* (2023) are unified by their concerns regarding the domestic sphere and their societies' views and expectations on behavior within the home. They each use traditions and conventions of the horror and Gothic genres to critique the problems they present surrounding these

topics. Each of their authors have some inspiration derived from their personal experiences, some more obviously than others, as will be explained further in their respective chapters.

The aim of this paper is to explore the way these authors have used the horror genre and the inherent fear and anxiety which accompanies it to discuss the home and domestic sphere. I ask why horror seems to be a genre in which this conversation feels at home. How is fear used constructively to portray these anxieties and prompt thought in the readers' mind concerning home life and the expectations that come with it? How can horror provide social solutions to the problems they present to their audience? How have authors continued to raise these concerns as American society has continued to develop? While some of these questions may not be able to be answered in full, I will use them to guide my examination of the genre and its tendencies.

In entering the discussion within the American Horror genre, in which the supposedly personal and private nature of the domestic is revealed by authors, it feels necessary to discuss theories of authorship in their relation to biography as they will be applied to this examination of the genre, as the tendency has grown in which readers psychoanalyze the horror authors that bring the private to the public. Each of my selected texts has been quite openly influenced by the authors' lives in some way. Critics have pointed out that many of Shirley Jackson's novels mimic areas of her own life, particularly her heroines and their domestic situations. Stephen King and Danielle Valentine, meanwhile, have more openly admitted their writings, which I am focusing on, to have been, consciously or unconsciously, influenced by their experiences. I think that these traces of biography in fiction are important to track as one's experiences are directly affected by the social atmosphere of the larger society. I am interested in the link between

experience and fiction and, while there are other meanings in these texts that, as I will point out, may or may not have been intentional, being aware of these influences can inform us about experiences within worlds that we are not privy to elsewhere. I myself was not alive during the 1950s or 1970s, but in reading the works of Jackson and King and their presentations of these times within their novels, I feel as though I have gained, if narrow, access to parts of these eras of American societies through the literature produced at this time.

One of the more common theories of authorship which has been regarded widely by critics is that of the "death of the author," which asserts that once an author releases their text to the public, they are, in turn, forfeiting their rights to the piece to the interpretations put forth by their readers and are therefore considered "dead" to the text. This may be because, as Robert Daseler puts it

> If the author's intentions have to be, at the very least, considered, the reader's (that is to say, the scholar's) field of operation is accordingly narrowed, whereas if the author's intentions can be ruled out of court as inadmissible, the reader may do as he pleases with the text. Indeed, the reader may consider himself to be as necessary to the text as the author, which amounts to a substantial advancement of the reader's prestige and a concomitant devaluation of the author's.

It appears that many readers do not like the idea of giving up some of their power within their position of active readers and their interpretations to the possibilities of what authors may have intended or to the authors' authorities over their own work. Some critics assert that the "death of the author" is a drastic view on authorship versus readership. Daseler goes on to explain, "the author's intentions, even when confidently known, do not *wholly* explain or justify a literary work, but they do more or less illuminate it, and to rule them inadmissible is perverse and

foolhardy." Here, Daseler gives some credit to the idea that the author's intentions are not entirely reliable, yet asserts that they do help readers to understand and contextualize what they are reading and to inform their interpretations of the text. In the discussion of the relationship between author, reader, and a text, Wolfgang Iser asserts: "literary work has two poles…the artistic refers to the text created by the author, and the aesthetic to the realization accomplished by the reader…the literary work cannot be identical with the text…but in fact, must lie halfway between the two" (50). This means that the work the author does in creating the text is then met with the work readers do as they read and give the text meaning. Therefore, the author is not dead, but remains a part of the reading process.

The worldly context and intention with which an author has penned a piece of writing gives readers much to learn about why the text was written, as well as what it may be commenting on, yet gaps and ambiguities left by the author allow for the reader to become more active in interpreting the work differently from another reader. I am therefore inclined to take a middle ground stance on the idea of authorship versus readership. I do not believe that the author must be considered "dead" to a text, nor do I believe that their world and intentions are the entire beginning, middle, and end of how we may be allowed to interpret a text. Rather, it seems to me that authorship and readership must meet each other somewhere in the middle. It is important to note that the readings of my selected texts in this thesis are just that: readings and interpretations by an individual.

This idea that we can learn about the society in which authors find themselves based upon their writing is applicable to any and all genres of fiction. As our American society has changed and still continues to change, our awareness of these changes appear differently within our literature across many genres.

The horror genre may, at first, seem like an odd choice for authors to choose to comment on and critique society's ills, as horror is often associated with cheap thrills, gore, and fantastical supernatural evils that might seem superficial or gratuitous. However, the more closely we examine the purpose of horror as a genre, the more fit the genre feels to comment on these issues, be they private, public, or both. Looking at the popularity of horror, we can see that the genre often provides ways that we can experience or express our fears and anxieties in relation to the world around us. They naturally vary and shift as our society changes according to the times. By watching horror films, for example, audiences are able to experience their fears from the safety of their couch and watch as a hero prevails over, or fails to conquer, the uncontrollable supernatural evil – often a symbol for a real world evil which they are afraid of. These supernatural (or non-supernatural) evils take control out of the hands of the protagonists we root for and create a highly intensified and fantastical obstacle for the protagonists to face. I believe the same goes for horror literature. Writing may also offer authors a more therapeutic stance as they can work through their own anxieties and fears through the power of the pen, writing a hero or victim with an outcome much different from theirs. The horror genre seems to follow this literary pattern in allowing its author to work through particularly tense and intense life experiences through the genre's similarly intense tropes and traditions. If we are to read horror literature, as previously stated, in the middle of the authorship theories, assuming that the authors' experiences have informed some aspects of their texts while also allowing room for active readership and interpretation, then it seems that, while all genres are used in different ways to comment on society's effects on the individual, the horror genre seems to be particularly suited to the discourse about the tensions within the relationship between the private domestic world and the larger society which surrounds it. Critics like Marko Lukić have noted that,

> By following the historically established pattern of alternating economic crises and recessions, mainly from 1973 until 1975, as well as from 2007 until 2009, the horror genre produced a number of titles focusing on the subjective experiences of American families during these difficult financial times. (102)

Lukić points to "narratives such as *The Amityville Horror*, Stephen King's (or Kubrick's) *The Shining*, as well as the more recent James Wan's *The Conjuring* or Derrickson's *Sinister*" (102) to explain this connection often made between current events and the works of horror they produce. Critics have also often pointed to horror's undying pattern of referring back to the home and domestic sphere in their work as the center of fear and terror for families: "After all, one of the great truths of the horror genre is that every era gets the monster it needs, and…our need for the horrific home is great" (Miller 4). This need to continuously relive what Miller refers to as "the horrific home" poses an interesting question: Why the home? Gina Wisker writes of this, "What is terrifying is often that which is most familiar: we fear potential disruption to our security of self, of place, and of relationships" (2). Put simply, we are most afraid of our homes, or safe spaces, losing the security they are ideally meant to provide us. I argue, too, that our society's idealized versions of the home, when confronted with the reality of the home, leaves a gap between the expectations and reality which horror seeks to fill in exploring the anxieties of what happens when these expectations are not met. Critics such as Ruth Goldberg have added: "horror narratives respond to the unconscious conflicts within the family, which is often depicted as confronting changing societal values and structures. The encounter with the monstrous element has the potential to restore the human family to balance" (103). I hope to look at the dynamic between the protagonist and the "monstrous element" to examine how my chosen

authors use them to "restore the human family to balance" in a variety of ways, if balance is restored at all.

It is important to note that, while these commentaries on the domestic and the private sphere do not belong to only one type of author, and that both male and female authors write about the domestic, horror is a highly gendered genre, with male and female authors writing these stories in different ways, and both male and female characters being represented differently. There is a long and notorious history of horror, especially in film, victimizing the female body in ways that follow a certain line of sexuality. We often see female victims killed in sexual ways. A common example of the sexualization of female victims' deaths in film is the female victim's screams often mimicking sexual sounds. A likely reason for the sexualization of violence targeted towards women is that horror films were, if not still are, targeted towards a male audience. While the treatment of the female body within the horror genre is something that I think is changing, it is important to note that many of our favorite horror films (*Halloween* (1978), *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre* (1974), *The Exorcist* (1973)) were created with a masculine audience in mind. Carol J. Clover writes of the audience, though it is important to note her specific focus on the slasher subgenre of horror films, "The audience… is by all accounts largely young and largely male…groups of boys who cheer the killer on as he assaults his victims, then reverse their sympathies to cheer the survivor on as she assaults the killer" (192). She later explains, "while it may be that the audience for slasher films is mainly male, that does not mean that there are not also many female viewers who actively like such films, and of course there are also women, however few, who script, direct, and produce them" (214)[1] to explain that there is also a wide female audience for these films and females involved in the making of them,

[1] Clover looks much more closely at the dynamics of the male viewership of slasher films in her chapter, but I do not plan to explore the entirety of theories in this thesis.

but the movies have been largely targeted towards the male viewership. Regardless of who consumes the genre though, all cinema including that of the horror genre is reflective of its contemporary society and its ideals. Within literature, however, female and male horror authors write within the genre very differently. Both are capable of using the genre and its conventions, for example, to critique the patriarchy, but these come from very different viewpoints, as will be clarified through my readings of the selected novels. Female victimization has not fully left the circle of horror literature, especially those written by men. Feminist readings of horror are also very common, often critiquing the male perspective on the topics at hand and how these perspectives are illustrated on the page.

It is also important to note that horror is gendered and a "body genre" – a genre with the purpose of creating a physical sensation in viewers of film or readers of novels. Carol J. Clover explains, "But horror and pornography are the only two genres specifically devoted to the arousal of bodily sensation. They exist solely to horrify and stimulate, not always respectively, and their ability to do so is the sole measure of their success" (189). Horror's categorization as a "body genre" has therefore often linked it closely to pornography, horror trying to scare while pornography tries to arouse, as Clover has pointed out. Horror's association with pornography, in turn, has caused many to think of horror as a low art form, one worthy of little, if any, critical attention. Linda Williams points out, "pornography is the lowest in cultural esteem, gross-out horror is the next lowest" (269). It can be hard, though, to draw lines within the horror genre between what is simply "gross-out horror," or as some film junkies call it "gore-porn," and what horror is more useful and cathartic for audiences. Just as beauty may be in the eye of the beholder, I argue that fear and anxiety are in the eye of the horror fan. The thought of horror literature and film as a low art form implies that there is no psychological depth or complexity to

the horror genre. This is not a belief I will be subscribing to in this thesis. Just because something is bloody or gross, does not make it less worthy of thought and, while much of the horror I am discussing in this thesis is not considered overly gory, the goal of the literature still remains true to the horror genre—to elicit a physical response in the audience. However, I believe that both the physical response and the ways authors achieve this response are useful in portraying the many readings and interpretations of the text. We are forced to ask why something has been made to scare us or to elicit the response it does and wonder what point the author is making in creating fear around an aspect of the text.

I believe, though, that the horror genre has largely changed over time and, while much of horror's films and literature have been created with a male audience in mind, especially literature written from the male perspective, the horror genre seems to be in the midst of a reclamation, in which the victims of the genre, women, are writing more and more about the feminine experience with less and less subtlety than before. While it may not be too difficult to read Jackson's *The Haunting of Hill House* from 1959 as a feminist piece of literature, Valentine's *Delicate Condition* from 2023 explicitly foregrounds more taboo issues that female authors may have been discouraged from tackling in previous decades, such as miscarriage and the horrifying aspects of pregnancy.

American horror literature has its foundations in the traditions put forth by American Gothic literature, a form of Romantic literature. Similarly to horror, Gothic literature is highly gendered. However, while horror has seemed to favor the male narrator, with its objectifications and torments of the female body, the Gothic genre has often been considered more feminine in its writing, using emotion and feeling to present a narrative, and tend to draw a line between the "male" and "female" Gothic. The Gothic, as a Romantic genre, is often considered to be

> the black sheep of the family, an illegitimate cousin who haunts the margins of 'literature' pandering cheap and distressingly profitable thrills…delighting in the forbidden and trafficking in the unspeakable ("Gothic Fiction's Family Romances" Williams 4).

While the Gothic genre is difficult to define as it has continuously changed and shifted with the times, there are things that are undeniably a part of this genre. One such part is its contradictory nature in which it is considered inherently gendered while also reifying the patriarchal male view. Critics have also noted the Gothic's tendency to focus on the family and its constructs with the family relations doubling as metaphors or using the relationships to portray other literary abstractions. This tradition has carried into the horror genre as we read it today, as the family continues to be at the center of our minds. The horror genre and its tendencies to create fear have also carried over from the Gothic. Anne Williams points to a list of "Gothic paraphernalia: fatal women, haunted houses, bleeding corpses, and mysterious warnings," (4) all of which are recognizable tropes within horror as well. One thing is for sure: the Gothic genre has long focused on psychological and emotional complexities in its characters in regards to identity and family relationships, a focus which, I argue, has carried into the horror genre, one of several genres that has emerged from the classic Gothic genre, and continues today. These themes of identity and the family continue to be communicated through the "paraphernalia" such as haunted houses, body horror, ghosts, and the like by some of our favorite horror authors.

The Haunting of Hill House (1959) by Shirley Jackson provides a feminist critique on the expectations placed largely on women in 1950s America, a time

characterized by urbanization, a return to the home, high birthrates, and high expectations of female domesticity. Jackson uses this novel to express the ways in which post-war America is not as it is in the shows and movies that romanticized the family structure of the time; rather, she paints a horror story that evokes the sense of what being a woman within the domestic sphere often felt like. Her utilizations of the conventions of horror, like haunted houses and isolation, portray a much different image than the cultural atmosphere of this time, which romanticized the era's social expectations for domesticity.

Stephen King's 1977 novel, *The Shining*, explores and deals with the structure of the nuclear family and the social pressures exerted onto each family member and their role – mainly that of the parents. The novel delves into one family's experiences when these expectations are imposed upon an already-deteriorating family and a father undergoing a crisis of masculinity and his attempt to reassert himself as the ideal masculine family patriarch of 1970s America. King's setting of the Overlook Hotel condenses the home and workplace to further drive tensions and insecurities within the family unit and provides a supernatural backdrop for the Torrence family to face their private history and attempt to face the horrors that have both passed and continue to haunt them.

In *Delicate Condition* (2023), Danielle Valentine offers a new take on the American horror novel, revisiting and subverting some of horror's iconic conventions, like the isolation of the home, the representation of evil, and the unreliable female narrator/protagonist. Her novel builds upon these traditions in order to comment on the domestic through reproduction. Valentine asserts an explicit feminist critique on America's beliefs about and treatment of reproductive health for minorities, largely

women. In creating these subversions, Valentine builds upon classic horror films and novels like *Rosemary's Baby* (1967 novel and 1968 film) and introduces her readers to what I argue appears to be the future of horror literature.

Looking at the horror literature I selected with the mindset that the reader and author meet in the middle of the discourse to understand a text, I plan to use what biographical information we have on each of these authors to illuminate my interpretations of the text in regards to the conversation which considers horror to be a response to societal changes and anxieties through the common symbols and traditions of the genre. I plan to use sociological texts to provide historical context in order to ground the novels I am exploring within their contemporary social settings. These contextualizations will then assist my readings and interpretations of the novels as I read them as commentaries on their social and cultural surroundings. The three novels I am using, *The Haunting of Hill House* (1959), *The Shining* (1977), and *Delicate Condition* (2023) are all post-World War II novels, which I have chosen given the prominent shift back into the home which occurred at this time in American history, resulting in much literature that became reflective of this inwards movement. *The Haunting of Hill House* is contextualized within a society soon after this shift occurred, *The Shining* as the gendered social norms within the home were beginning to shift due to the women's movements during the 1970s-80s, and *Delicate Condition* being published within our own contemporary society, allowing for the social changes which have occurred between each novel to become more apparent. As the most recent of the three novels, *Delicate Condition* reflects many of the changes that have happened since the other novels' publications as well as the change we can see happening around us today in a post-Roe

social climate. It is by far the most different of the three novels and, I believe, therefore also provides insight into the changes which have taken place within the horror genre. The literary criticisms I am applying in this thesis also provide much context into the different readings of the novels in their relation to the domestic. Additionally, I am applying biographical readings of each author in the form of biography, memoir, and a personal author's note, to illustrate the apparent relationship between horror, biography, and social critique.

"COME HOME ELEANOR": Women in the Romanticized 1950s American Domestic in Shirley Jackson's *The Haunting of Hill House (*1959)

As a mother of four, Shirley Jackson would often run their family into debt for, and would spend large amounts of time, energy, and money on birthdays and Christmases doting on her children. It can be hard, at times, to imagine that the same woman that wrote "The Lottery", in which a woman is stoned to death by her village as a sort of sacrificial ritual, also spoiled her children and found happiness in being a mother and comfort in being in the kitchen. Much of these feelings have made their way into her short stories and novels such as *We Have Always Lived in the Castle* (1962) and *The Haunting of Hill House* (1959). While motherhood was a joy for Jackson, marriage and the gendered roles that came with being a wife in the often romanticized 1950s was very much not. Her writing is often critical of her society's views and practices within the domestic realm with the Gothic and horror genres as vehicles for her to deliver these critiques of the world she lived in. *The Haunting of Hill House,* widely regarded as one of the greatest horror novels of the 20th century, particularly uses many of the generic conventions of the American horror genre to illustrate Jackson's complex viewpoint on domestic life. Biographers often draw parallels between Jackson's female protagonists and herself. The main protagonist, Eleanor, serves as a sort of stand-in for Jackson herself to work through the challenges domestic life posed for women of this era. As a piece of domestic horror literature, *The Haunting of Hill House* takes a feminist view on the domestic realm for women in the 1950s. I argue that her novel, *The Haunting of Hill House*, while drawing inspiration from her own life, also draws on the social atmosphere of Jackson's contemporary society and comments on the positive aspects and shortcomings of the domestic realm, particularly focusing on its treatment of young women and the expectations placed on young women through the 1950s, a time in

American history that is often idealized by the country's citizens and government. Her novel uses tension, fear, and anxiety through the horror traditions to illustrate to her audience a hasher reality about home life during this time period.

The Haunting of Hill House follows Eleanor Vance, who has just spent years caring for her ill mother and has no other close relationships, as she joins a small research group set on investigating psychic phenomena and their possibilities in Hill House. She meets Doctor Montague, the leader of their group, Theodora, an outgoing young woman, and Luke, the future inheritor of Hill House. The group plans to live in Hill House throughout their investigation. As the infamous haunting becomes more apparent and uncomfortable, Eleanor pressures herself to stay and see the investigation through to the end. As the investigation wears on and the haunting intensifies, Eleanor begins to feel as though the house is targeting her. Some nights, there is a knocking on the doors of the house, reminding Eleanor of her mother knocking on the wall for help throughout her illness. The hauntings of Hill House continue to target Eleanor and create paranoia in her mind that drives her to become more isolated from the group. After not finding any comfort from her newfound group, Eleanor becomes enamored with the house until she does not want to leave Hill House at all even in death.

Critics and biographers such as Zoë Heller and Ruth Franklin have pointed to Jackson's life and drawn comparisons between her and her protagonists, particularly between her and Eleanor in their attitudes towards domestic life. While Shirley Jackson was married with four children with literary critic Stanley Edgar Hyman and Eleanor is a young bachelorette, much of the way Eleanor moves about her world and experiences domestic life within Hill House reflects Jackson's experiences and attitude towards the matter. I tend to agree with Heller and Franklin and believe that Eleanor acts as a sort of stand-in for Jackson within this novel, as though

Jackson is using the horror genre to fictionalize her experiences and make her audience understand the complications of domestic life, both its toxicity as well as in its small comforts. Jackson uses the horror genre and its conventions to achieve a sense of foreboding and doom surrounding the domestic realm, particularly its expectations and societal pressures that often left women trapped in their families at this time.

One staple of the American horror genre as carried over from the American Gothic genre is the classic image of the haunted house as a setting and stage for the characters to operate within. Marko Lukić explains that the physical representation of the haunted house has changed over time to suite the new narratives and stories within horror, but asserts that "regardless of the presented visuals, the deeply imbued sense of historical gravitas, and metaphoric or actual 'wrongness' of the proposed space…assured both a specific atmosphere and approach to the proposed storylines" (94). In other words, whether the haunted house is the Gothic castle or traditional mansard house does not matter. What does matter is that the house in question feels unnatural and a sense of "historical gravitas" to show that the house has its own past. These two characteristics set the stage for the haunting that will commence within its walls. Jackson achieves this atmospheric "wrongness" in her initial description of Hill House. She opens the novel,

> No living organism can continue for long to exist sanely under the conditions of absolute reality; even larks and katydids are supposed, by some, to dream. Hill House, not sane, stood by itself against its hills, holding darkness within; it had stood so for eighty years and might stand for eighty more. Within, 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. (1)

Jackson begins with the statement that one cannot “exist sanely under the conditions of absolute reality” so, to then make the claim that Hill House is “not sane”, Jackson is thereby stating that Hill House exists under this “absolute reality”. By writing this, Jackson is telling her readers that Hill House has no room for the relief that dreams or fantasies may provide, but that Hill House, instead, stands as is, in the brutal reality that living beings are not meant to exist under. The discomfort this statement creates is continued as she describes Hill House as “holding darkness within,” making the house a sort of container for something dark or possibly malevolent. Additionally, by saying that “whatever walked there, walked alone,” Jackson gives the house a sense of isolation as well as a feeling of occupancy and, while these cannot both be true at the same time, one can imagine the feeling of something within the house that is so “alone” in an eerie sense. Altogether, Jackson opens her novel with the sense of “wrongness” that Lukić attributes to the defining characteristic of the traditional and meaningful haunted house within horror literature and film. Claiming that the house “had stood so for eighty years and might stand for eighty more” gives the house a feeling of immortality and inability to change or resist, signifying a prevailing victory of this darkness the house is said to hold. This not only adds to the sense of wrongness in the house's inability to change or be changed, but also to the “historical gravitas” Lukić claims provides a haunted house with its own dark past. All in all, this opening introduces Hill House as the epitome of the traditional haunted house and provides for readers a setting which carries not only the “wrongness” or “historical gravitas” that should be expected when entering into a haunted house, but also a chilling atmosphere. The claimed insanity of Hill House is due to its standing in the very uncomfortable feeling of “absolute reality,” which then sets the hauntings and events that take place within the house as very much real.

Jackson's presentation of "reality," then, evokes the social environment of 1950s America in contrast to the fantasies that surround American society at this time. Stephanie Coontz writes of 1950s families and the "contemporary romanticization of the 'good old days'": "the reality of these families was far more painful and complex than the situation-comedy reruns or the expurgated memories of the nostalgic would suggest. Contrary to popular opinion, 'Leave it to Beaver' was not a documentary" (29). Jackson's portrayal of the domestic is far from shows like "Leave it to Beaver" and, instead, portrays what this time in America was like for women through her imagined scenarios within *The Haunting of Hill House*. While we can debate the reality of ghosts and understand that *The Haunting of Hill House* is a work of fiction, Jackson's writing is evocative of the very real gendered experience within 1950s American domesticity. Right from the beginning, Jackson attributes a sense of insanity, wrongness, and darkness with the image of the home.

Jackson continues to associate the home with a sense of discomfort throughout her novel with the interior of the house as well. Early into her stay at Hill House, Eleanor notices, "...the pressing silence of Hill House came back all around her. I am like a small creature swallowed whole by a monster [...] and the monster feels my tiny little movements inside" (37). Hill House, making Eleanor feel "like a small creature swallowed whole by a monster" makes Hill House, representative of the home, an oppressive environment to live in. In making her feel small, Eleanor is therefore put in a position of danger or helplessness in a much larger structure that looms all around her. In describing the house itself as a "monster," Jackson is associating the environment of the home with monstrosity, and therefore with evil and oppression. The image of the "monster" also invokes a sense of brutality and ugliness which makes Eleanor's feeling of being "swallowed whole" more violent in its oppressive nature. As Jackson refers to Hill House

as both “absolute reality” and as a “monster”, she is then illustrating the point that the real and ordinary things about the home are what make the domestic so oppressive and evil.

During their investigation of the house, the team discovers a cold spot just outside of the nursery. While explaining the significance of the cold spot in relation to other haunted houses, Doctor Montague says, “‘The cold spot in Borley Rectory only dropped eleven degrees,’ he went on complacently. ‘This, I should think, is considerably colder. The heart of the house’” (Jackson 110-111). What is so telling about this moment is that Jackson has decided to put such a dramatically significant cold spot in the same place that she describes as being “the heart of the house” showing that all of the warmth is vacant from the core structure of the house. When someone is described as having a cold heart, we often consider them to be uncaring or incapable of love. So, to describe a house this way is Jackson telling her readers that warmth and even love have no place in Hill House.

In addition to this, the cold spot being placed just outside of the nursery, illustrates a lack of safety and an emotional vacancy once the nursery is left. The nursery, which is warmer than just outside its doors, should be the center of safety within the house, but being surrounded with a coldness that can be translated into threatening and even dangerous energy. The placement of the cold spot contributes to a number of interpretations which I believe are not mutually exclusive. For one, the cold spot outside of the nursery conveys that once the nursery, a symbol of childhood innocence, is left, the rest of the house, the adult dominion, is no longer safe. It signifies that entering into the domestic as an adult, women are treated with more coldness than the innocent and precious children they once were. Since the house is haunted more overtly by a patriarchal energy, the cold spot may also represent the danger of the domineering family patriarch over both his children and his wife. Reading Hill House as representative of her ideas

about the home in general, then she is essentially saying that the home is not a place to find warmth and love, but to be met with coldness and indifference.

This reading of *The Haunting of Hill House* can be taken from Jackson's own experiences within domesticity both in childhood and adulthood. According to Ruth Franklin in her biography of Jackson, *Shirley Jackson: A Rather Haunted Life*, Jackson was not loved entirely unconditionally by her mother and in her marriage to Stanley Edgar Hyman, was met with a similar coldness as well. In a letter to Hyman regarding his many affairs, Jackson wrote that these affairs, "leave[s] no room for other emotional involvements, not even a legitimate one at home" (Franklin 408) showing that loveless and cold homelife reflective in the way in which Hill House is devoid of love and warmth.

In the same scene, Jackson writes, "the nursery was warm, it smelled musty and close, and the cold crossing the doorway almost tangible, visible as a barrier which must be crossed in order to get out" (111). While the outside of the nursery, or the "heart of the house" is where the cold spot is, the nursery itself, though "musty" from disuse, is described by Jackson as warm. Jackson is, then, equating the nursery and therefore children as the source of warmth within the home. Despite Jackson's often loveless marriage, she found more fulfillment in the idea of being a mother. Franklin writes of Jackson, "Her best hope – for companionship, for fulfillment, for love – was the child she was carrying. 'Maybe when I have my baby…I can talk to it and it will love me and it won't grow up mean.' In motherhood, perhaps she would find the stability she longed for" (156-157). Later Franklin notes that her children became the center of Jackson's life as a wife and mother so much so that she would put the family in debt over birthdays and Christmas and she tried her best to nurture their imaginations (168). The warmth and fulfilment Jackson found in her role as a mother more than her role as a wife is projected, then, onto Hill

House. She has written the nursery, or the children's room, as being a place of warmth within the house. Leaving this place of comfort and happiness, then, would be like crossing this "barrier" she describes in her novel between the nursery and the rest of the house.

Despite Jackson's positive outlook on being a mother and motherhood, she demonstrates conflicting views on mothers in general. While the nursery is a spot of warmth and love within Hill House, Jackson often writes more negatively of mothers themselves. This more negative view of mothers begins with our very first impression of the protagonist, Eleanor. Jackson introduces Eleanor by stating: "Eleanor Vance was thirty-two years old when she came to Hill House. The only person in the world she genuinely hated, now that her mother was dead, was her sister" (4). Right away, Jackson sets up her protagonist with a negative relationship with her mother, as we are informed that when her mother was alive, Eleanor hated her. We learn that Eleanor had spent time previously taking care of her mother when she was ill, despite these feelings of hatred. Eleanor spends much of her initial time at Hill House doing things that would be going against her mother's wishes and ways of life. When thinking about the slacks she had packed for herself for the trip, Eleanor thinks, "Mother would be *furious,* she had thought, packing the slacks down at the bottom of her suitcase so that she need not take them out, need never let anyone know she had them, in case she lost her courage" (Jackson 36-37). Eleanor's act of packing the slacks is done as a way to rebel against the attitude her mother had about such things. The fact that she packed them in a way to hide them, "so that she need not take them out, need never let anyone know she had them, in case she lost her courage" shows that the way her mother raised her leaves Eleanor with a lot of self doubt and a lack of self-confidence surrounding her actions and choices. She hides the slacks in the bottom of her suitcase, even though her mother is dead and has no way of protesting this choice with the fury that Eleanor

would have expected her mother to have about this choice, demonstrating that the strained relationship with her disapproving mother has affected the way that Eleanor sees herself. Despite this, though, Eleanor is still not scared out of packing the slacks at all, and still takes this small act of rebellion to herself. This relationship strain is theorized by some to be inspired by Jackson's relationship with her own mother. Franklin writes of their relationship: "Jackson's awareness that her mother had never loved her unconditionally – if at all – would be a source of sadness well into adulthood" (25). So, while Eleanor's mother may have been a projection of Jackson's own strained relationship with her mother, with Eleanor as Jackson's 'stand-in' throughout *The Haunting of Hill House*, Luke makes a comment about the design of Hill House that also reflects the nuanced look Jackson takes on motherhood. "'It's all so motherly,' Luke Said. 'Everything so soft. Everything so padded. Great embracing chairs and sofas which turn out to be hard and unwelcome when you sit down and reject you at once-'" (Jackson 197). This description that Luke provides serves two functions. The discomfort and feeling of rejection of the furniture within Hill House elicits and reifies the 'wrongness' previously discussed which adds to a feeling of disconnect between the haunted house and its new inhabitants. Secondly, the description serves to think of the house as a mother, but then describes the feelings associated with mothers to be, "hard and unwelcome" and to "reject you" when you feel welcome. The association between motherhood and the traditional 'wrongness' of Hill House further complicates Jackson's views on mothers and motherhood when put in conjunction with the warmth of the nursery.

Eleanor's relationship with her mother becomes more important as the notorious haunting of Hill House wears on. Critics of modern horror novels and films, such as *The Haunting of Hill House*, speak of hauntings less in a way of the presence of individual spirits, but rather as a

presence of energy that often mirrors characters' pasts through supernatural means. Lukić explains that a haunting is oftentimes triggered by the characters' engagement with the haunted house or space and "the engagement activates the suppressed and condensed memories that now function as a conduit for the reemergence of the haunted past" (102). In other words, when a character with their own dark or troubled past enters into the supernatural space of a haunted house, the haunting is then 'activated' and acts as a mirror to the characters' individual pasts. Jackson uses this idea in her novel with the investigative team that enters into Hill House, but primarily focuses on Eleanor, as the haunting targets her and her more recent past concerning her mother. During their first night at Hill House, the team is woken up by the sounds of knocking on their walls and Eleanor initially mistakes it for her mother. Eleanor tells herself, "It is only a noise…a noise down the hall, far down at the end, near the nursery door, and terribly cold, *not* my mother knocking on the wall" and then calms herself by thinking, "I am calm…the noise is only a kind of banging on the doors…it sounds like something children do, not mothers knocking against the wall for help" (Jackson 119). The haunting forces Eleanor to begin to confront her buried emotions about her mother's illness and death through the ghostly knocking on walls and doors. The haunting pulls from Eleanor's recent past and guilt of failing to take care of her mother.

In this way, the haunting also serves as a way for Jackson to illustrate the responsibilities placed upon women of this time period and the idea of punishment if women failed to comply within these allotted roles. Care work, or the work of providing care for a family member, though often in reference to the care a parent provides to children can also refer to caring for an older family member. This type of work is often socially assigned to women based on the gendered stereotype that women are nurturing. Given this gendered assumption, it would make

sense that Eleanor would have been expected to take care of her ailing mother, as her sister was already married with a husband to care for. As we learn later in the novel, Eleanor blames herself for her mother's death. She tells Theodora and Luke, "'She knocked on the wall and called me and called me and I never woke up. I ought to have brought her the medicine; I always did before. But this time she called me and I never woke up'" and then goes on to say, "'But of course no matter when it happened it was going to be my fault'" (Jackson 199-200). This assumption that guilt would be assigned to her in conjunction with the ongoing events of the haunting communicate the social ramifications women experienced as expected caregivers and the heavy emotional toll that accompanies the feelings of failure at this role. Nina K. Martin writes about female characters in horror, "The hauntings that these women undergo appear to be directly linked to how defiant and/or inadequate they are at maintaining their proper feminine roles as parent and caregiver" (130).[2] In Eleanor's failure in her role as a caregiver to her mother, she is forced to experience the mirrored haunting upon her arrival at Hill House. After the initial event involving the knocking on walls and doors, the investigative team is surprised to find blood covering the walls of the bedroom and "all of them stood in silence for a moment and looked at HELP ELEANOR COME HOME ELEANOR written in shaky red letters on the wallpaper over Theodora's bed" (Jackson 145). The haunting progresses in this way to particularly target Eleanor's history and guilt. Jackson's usage of Eleanor as a failed caregiver and this failure as a focus for the haunting within Hill House illustrates the deeper reflection of American society's concern with women and their roles.

Jackson further uses Eleanor as an unconventional female character in horror as a way to reflect other issues concerning American society in the 1950s and its views on women's

[2] Although Martin is writing here about horror films, I believe that her criticisms are applicable to literature as well, and will therefore be applying her writing to the novels I discuss.

livelihoods. Coontz writes of 1950s America: “For the first time, men as well as women were encouraged to root their identities and self-image in familial and parental roles,” explaining the magnification of the “novelty of these family and gender values” post World War II (27). Eleanor’s choice to deny these roles forces her to stand out in the late 1950s as “defiant”, as Martin might say. This defiance, or nonconformity to the social roles she is expected to perform within makes Eleanor a target within traditional horror. Martin’s assertion that the hauntings of these spaces are linked to the female protagonist's nonconformity also applies here. Not only has Eleanor failed in her role as a caregiver to her older mother, but she has also rejected the gendered expectations for her to search for a husband and begin a family, instead, trying to find her independence and individual identity at Hill House. Jackson’s portrayal of Eleanor as trapped within Hill House as a result of her rejection of societal normalities surrounding marriage and motherhood is not to say that she is wrong for choosing this lifestyle, as Martin might believe. Rather, it is a statement that the life Eleanor chooses for herself would not have been deemed appropriate for her by her surrounding society.

It is not only through Eleanor, but also through Hill House’s dark history that Jackson gives insight into her critiques on the environment that the home provides for women especially. As Doctor Montague explains the story of Hugh Crain, a former resident of Hill House, and his wives, the negative effects domestic life has on women become more apparent, especially considering the ways in which his wives died and his treatment of his daughter. Doctor Montague explains, “‘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…The second Mrs. Crain died of a fall…The third Mrs. Crain died of what they used to call consumption, somewhere in Europe” (Jackson 68-69). These three wives had especially tragic and possibly

even telling deaths when looked at more closely. The first wife dying before even seeing Hill House serves almost as an omen, warning against their moving to Hill House. The second wife dying of a mysterious fall is simply tragic in itself and adds to the dark history of the house that Eleanor and the rest of the investigative group is forced to face upon their arrival. The third wife's dying of consumption seems representative of women wasting away under the constraints of domestic life. When the three are looked at together, Hill House, as a representation of domestic life, is often tragic and unsafe for women. In addition to the tragedy of Hugh Crain's wives, the research group also finds a book made by Hugh Crain for his daughter with religious and moral teachings. The lessons he wishes to teach his daughter read, "'Daughter hold apart from this world, that it lusts and ingratitudes corrupt thee not; Daughter, preserve thyself" and burned a part of the page with a candle to teach her to, "consider, Daughter, that the heat of this candle is to the everlasting fires of Hell as a grain of sand to the reaching desert, and, as this paper burns…so shall your soul burn forever" (Jackson 158-159). This moment of what is posed as a parental lesson being passed from father to daughter is loaded with horrific religious imagery, likely meant to scare his daughter into living in the way a religious woman of her time would have been expected to. In including this detail Jackson seems to be showing that it is not only mothers and wives that suffer within the domestic realm with coldness and misery, but also children who encounter fear within the home. While she uses Hugh Crain and his writings to demonstrate the pressures that are then put on women to act within their allotted roles in society not just from the society itself, but also from within the family they more importantly illustrate the patriarchal power and control exerted over women and children in the home. Crain's position as the family patriarch granted him power over his private domestic sphere. The journals he left for his daughter evoke a sense of total control over the family. In addition, including the journals

of Hugh Crain also contributes to the atmosphere of Hill House, adding a dark past fraught with hellish imagery. In adding to the unsettling atmosphere, Jackson further creates tensions within the spaces for the protagonists to move and act within.

Despite the largely critical outlook Jackson takes on domestic life she does hold space for a nuanced view in relation to the home and the small comforts domesticity has to offer. As previously discussed, Jackson presents the nursery as a source of warmth within Hill House, this warmth demonstrating a comfort of love that can be found in being a mother, even while all other aspects of domestic life seem cold and unloving. The other aspect of domestic life that Jackson seems to find comfort in is that with food and home cooked meals. Franklin writes in Jackson's biography, "She felt at home in the kitchen and took pride in having all the latest appliances. 'If you wanted to spend time with my mother, you would go to the kitchen…. It was always very comfortable and emotional, a warm and safe kind place,' Barry [her son] recalls" (376). Jackson's inclusion of food in her fiction mirrors this. Throughout the novel, Mrs. Dudley, the cook at Hill House, prepares regularly-scheduled meals for the guests at Hill House. Even throughout the more intense moments of the haunting, Mrs. Dudley follows her schedule of breakfast and dinner for the group at Hill House. Writing this largely gendered expectations for women to cook for their families, which is largely associated with the 1950s, as a source of positivity adds a nuanced look at the role Jackson and her contemporaries were expected to participate in as the women of their households. Jackson uses this singular aspect of what a women's role was in her society as a source of wellness for her characters. While the comfort of food adds a sense of relief for the characters from the horrors they face, Jackson makes it clear that this small comfort is not enough to save Eleanor from the overbearingly negative aspects of domesticity within 1950s American home life.

There is, though, a reason to pause at this reading of Mrs. Dudley's scheduled cooking. While the connection between Jackson's more positive feelings within the kitchen and the stable, home cooked meals within Hill House illustrate a positivity and comfort around some aspects of domestic life, there is an unsettling aspect to these meals as well, which complicate the scenes' interpretations. While the meals may provide a certain level of relief to the living inhabitants of Hill House, there is also a strictness to the meal times which communicates a pressure to maintain the schedule of the meals, even in the face of the horrors being met within the house's walls. Firstly, the necessity to meet the schedule's demands evokes a feeling of pressure many housewives in the 1950s would have experienced as they must have done the domestic chores as well as putting a meal in the table for their family, while also facing the horrors of domestic life common to women of this era. Additionally, the schedule of the meals within Hill House remains the same regardless of what the investigative team are experiencing, even later on in their stay at the house. The disregard for their experiences makes them feel as though these experiences are commonplace and not worthy of attention from those not also experiencing them. This communicates the idea that there is a normalcy and everyday-ness associated with the horrors and dangers of domestic life.

At the end of *The Haunting of Hill House*, Eleanor no longer wishes to escape Hill House. When the rest of the group tries to make her leave, Eleanor gets into her car and begins speaking to herself: "'Go away, Eleanor, we don't want you any more, not in *our* Hill House, go away, Eleanor you can't stay *here*; but I can,' she sang, 'but I can…I won't go, and Hill House belongs to me'" (Jackson 232) before driving her car into a tree in the driveway, killing herself so she can remain in Hill House. However, the novel ends just as it begins: "Hill House itself, not sane, stood against its hills… and whatever walked there, walked alone" (233), showing that

in the end, Eleanor did not join Hill House in death, making her suicide futile. The futility of her suicide in being unable to join the ghosts of Hill House, even in death, speaks to a lack of solutions surrounding women's choices of lifestyle in the 1950s, as Jackson herself had faced. Ruth Franklin pulls from Jackson's writing a letter stating that she wished she had never married her husband, divorce not yet seeming like a possibility, and that the one path to happiness she saw was that of her unborn child (156-157). In other words, Jackson was supposed to have married and found happiness with her husband, which she did not. At the time, divorce itself would have presented challenges. While Jackson would have made a reasonable income with her writing – she was the breadwinner of her family – she would not have been able to have a credit card until the 1970s or open a bank account until the 1960s just following the publication of *The Haunting of Hill House*, which would have made life as a single mother more complicated. For her character Eleanor, however, both marriage and singledom would pose inescapable issues of misery, as it did for many women in similar positions who did not wish to marry, but were socially deviant for not marrying. The ending of the novel, therefore, carries with it a sense of doom for many women at this time, unable to escape what is expected of them within the domestic realm. Additionally, the permanent state of Hill House as it stands alone in its state of "absolute reality" suggests that the real world in which Jackson is writing is unforgiving for women.

While Shirley Jackson's horror writing in relation to the domestic sphere of 1950s America seems autobiographical, the representation of the domestic realm in *The Haunting of Hill House* draws on her contemporary society's outlook on the domestic sphere, especially in regards to gender. Jackson's novel suggests a nuanced and complex view of home life at this time for many women like her, especially with divorce increasing in acceptability, but not as

accessible to some women as it was to others, an option that would improve in the coming decades. In its portrayal of the haunted house as a place for Eleanor to confront the guilt that came with her mother's death, the novel suggests that the shift that placed women back into the home post World War II was not as smooth or enjoyable for women as the nostalgia for the 1950s might imply. Rather, the newer push for men and women, particularly women, to base their individual identities in their roles as mothers and wives, rather than these roles being a mere part of their identities, is illustrated as an unwelcome social change for women that forced them back into the homes and into subservience to their male counterparts. The ending of *The Haunting of Hill House*, as it relates to the opening, portrays Jackson seeing a lack of solutions for women who had become trapped within the home, just as she had seen herself. Eleanor's death provides a pessimistic outlook on the domestic realm and suggests that, even with the small comforts that domesticity has to offer women, these are not enough to provide women with the freedom, individuality, and contentment that they were in search of. Jackson's usage of the conventions of the horror genre produced tension and anxiety in regards to the way women were treated in the home and in regards to how they were expected to act within the home. By making the readers feel the dread of these dramatized situations, Jackson is able to communicate the struggles that characterized homelife for women at this time.

Jackson's novel, though, offers one perspective on domestic life during one particular era in American history. Moving forward, these expectations and challenges shift and change, some for the better and some simply in regards to the way they are presented and discussed in American society. While *The Haunting of Hill House* answers some of our questions about the representation of domesticity through horror literature, we are still left with some questions. How does this representation change as the social climate changes? What about a male perspective? Is

the American horror genre able to offer or suggest social solutions to the problems that it presents to the audience, or is there no possible way to fully resolve the issues that fear communicates? To answer these questions, or to attempt to explore the multiple possibilities that can be found in answering these questions, it is important to look at other perspectives within the horror genre from other socially relevant times.

"Mr. Torrence…Drink Your Drink": The Masculinity Crisis within the 1970's Nuclear Family in *The Shining* (1977) by Stephen King

Both of Stephen King's sons, Joe Hill King and Owen Phillip King, are novelists with their names attached to famous works of horror (his daughter Naomi Rachel King is a minister). Being both an author and a father, it seems natural that reading and writing would be something that King would share with his children. His two oldest children (Naomi and Joe) were born before the publication of his novel, *The Shining* (1977). A common theme between King's life both before and after the publication of the novel and the novel itself is family. Though King undoubtedly was the reason his sons are authors today, it goes without saying that home life is not without its struggles. An alcoholic and addict, King understood the other, harsher realities of family life, sobriety, and what his contemporary society expected of him and men like him as fathers and husbands. *The Shining* works as an examination of these states of being within domestic life. What happens when society expects too much of someone? What makes *The Shining* particularly interesting is that it has remained King's—the King Of Horror's— best-selling novel of all time, out-selling *IT* (1986) and *Pet Semetary* (1983), making it his crowning achievement, while also being a continuation of the domestic horror tradition as it has appeared in American Gothic and horror literature. The novel, then, feels like a perfect example of horror's long-running discourse about domestic and home life. What, then, allowed for King to use his mastery of the American horror genre to magnify and examine domesticity of the 1970s? What makes *The Shining* so terrifying? Why does this novel in particular have such a stronghold on readers through its discourse on the domestic? While some of these questions may not be able to be answered in full, I plan to

explore King's use of the Horror genre and its generic traditions, as passed down to it from the American Gothic genre, to continue Horror's ongoing need to discuss and critique society's changing views and expectations surrounding domestic life. *The Shining* enters this discussion within the context of 1970's American family life, a world in which fathers were still considered breadwinners, mothers were not encouraged to work, domestic violence was not as openly discussed, and divorce was not always the socially easiest or most accessible option for many. This was also the world in which Stephen King and his family lived while he wrote *The Shining*.

The novel follows the Torrence family: Jack, the father and recovering alcoholic, Wendy, the mother, and Danny, their 5-year-old psychic son, as Jack takes on the role of the hotel caregiver for the large and looming Overlook Hotel during its wintry off-season in an attempt to provide his family with a nice place to live, money, and security he had previously failed to provide them when he lost his job teaching at a preparatory school. Jack sees the Overlook Hotel as a chance to do right by his family in several ways, such as family bonding, secure work, time to write a play he hopes will bring in more money, and a perfect opportunity to fully commit to his sobriety, which he forced himself into after drunkenly hurting Danny in a moment of anger, a moment of regret that continues to haunt each member of the family in its way. The Overlook Hotel is haunted by its past. The last time the hotel hired a caretaker, Delbert Grady, who brought his family with him, he murdered his family before committing suicide. Despite this dark history, Jack is determined to make the assignment work for his family and drives them deep into the Colorado mountains to reside at the Overlook for the winter. As the novel progresses, the hotel targets the Torrences, driving a wedge between Jack and his family until he believes that they have turned against him. Trapped by a blizzard, Wendy must protect

her son and herself from her now murderous husband within the confines of the hotel. Jack, on the other hand, is visited by the ghost of Delbert Grady, who tries to convince him to succumb to his alcoholism and murder his wife to hand over Danny to the hotel as it becomes more and more apparent that Danny has certain psychic abilities the hotel perceives as a threat.

As a tale of domestic horror, *The Shining* has been widely popularized and consumed by many audiences. In 1980, *The Shining* was adapted into a film directed by Stanley Kubrick, featuring Jack Nicholson as Jack Torrence and Shelly Duvall as Wendy Torrence. The film itself is quite different from the novel it was based upon. The most notable difference is the characterization of Jack Torrence himself especially in regards to his attitude towards his family.[3] In the novel, he is a warm and loving father and husband trying to overcome his struggles with alcoholism, his resentment towards his family growing as tensions grow, while in the Kubrick film, he is initially annoyed with and resentful towards his family. For this chapter, I will be focusing on the characterization of Jack, as well as the rest of King's novel, not the Kubrick adaptation, as these differences do change the overall meaning and interpretation of the narrative, especially as it pertains to the novel's placement as a domestic horror tale.[4] I plan to look at *The Shining* in relation to its contemporary society of 1970s America for context. However, since the Kubrick film has become one of the most recognizable horror films, many of the critics discussed in this chapter who refer to *The Shining*, refer to the film rather than the novel. Despite the major differences from the novel-to-movie adaptation, much of their analyses are still applicable to the novel and are worthy of consideration within this conversation.

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[3] Later in 1997, *The Shining* became a mini-series, though the mini-series did not receive as much mainstream attention as the Kubrick film.

[4] In 2013, King also published the novel *Doctor Sleep* as a sequel to *The Shining*, following Danny into his adulthood. I will not be reading *The Shining* as it relates to *Doctor Sleep*, but rather as a stand-alone novel as it was published.

The most notable difference between King's novel and Kubrick's film is the characterization of Jack Torrence, a difference that must be addressed to properly present *The Shining* in the context of domesticity and families in its contemporary world of 1970s America. In Kubrick's film, Jack is introduced to the audience as an irritable man, holding contempt and annoyance for his family right from the beginning of the film. In a scene where the Torrence family is driving towards the Overlook Hotel in the snow, Jack talks in a dry voice and appears to be rather uninterested in much of what his family is saying and doing. When Danny complains he is hungry, Jack tells him he should have eaten breakfast. When Wendy asks Jack if the Donner Party was lost around the area they are driving through, Jack corrects her and Danny begins asking what happened to the Donner Party. Jack gives a rather forward explanation that the hikers had to resort to cannibalism for survival, and when Danny explains that he knows about cannibalism from watching television, Jack replies to Wendy's worries with a heavily sarcastic reassurance.

In the novel, this scene is portrayed much differently and shows Jack as a more family-oriented man who loves his wife and child despite their past troubles. Although he has anger problems and a problem with authority, Jack is much happier with his family on the car ride to the Overlook Hotel. During the car ride, Jack "kept putting his hand high up on her leg and she kept laughing and brushing it off, saying Get away, fly" (*The Shining* 85) as a romantic sort-of game between him and Wendy. Later in the same scene, when Jack decides they should pull over to give their car a break from driving, "He craned his neck over his shoulder at Danny, who was sitting on a pile of blankets. 'What do you think, doc? We might see some deer. Or caribou'" (King, *The Shining* 88) as a way to engage further with his son on their long trip. In both instances, Jack shows affection toward his family, which is very much absent in the Kubrick

film's version of the car ride, which is filled with tension and even resentment on Jack's part towards the rest of his family. This difference is important to note, as it can completely change the reception of the story. In the film, Jack is already resentful towards his family and does not appear to even enjoy their company, which takes away the shock and terror created by his transformation at the hands of the hotel. In King's novel, on the other hand, Jack appreciates his family's company, despite their financial stress, dark past, and even conversations of divorce between Jack and Wendy, and openly shows it throughout the beginning of the novel, even when he is stressed or preoccupied with other things. The transformation from a haunted, but loving family man into a monster hunting his family down through the twisted halls of the Overlook Hotel allows the novel to carry as much weight as it does. It is because of this change in Jack's character that the difference between the novel and film must be noted, as the novel carries with it more implications of a family trying to stay together and falling apart, rather than a family that is already very clearly divided, succumbing to the inevitable. Within the novel, it feels that there might be a chance at happiness for at least some of the characters, creating more of a tragedy in comparison to the film in which the family is engulfed in misery with no hope to fix things, as Jack has in the novel. I believe that this is also an important difference to keep in mind, given that the novel could be argued to be, unconsciously, King's expression of his struggles with alcoholism and the way it affected his family.

In his memoir, *On Writing: A Memoir of the Craft*, Stephen King admits to his struggles with alcoholism. He writes about the night he realized he was an alcoholic and notes that he "was, after all, the guy who had written *The Shining* without even realizing (at least until that night) that I was writing about myself" (95). While this was a moment of reflection on King's part, as he did not recognize *The Shining* as based on his life and struggles with alcohol when he

was writing the novel, it is not difficult to see the parallels: Jack a struggling writer, trying to remain sober for the sake of his family while also being forced to function under the patriarchy of the 1970s, which demanded that men be the breadwinners for their families. However, the film characterizes Jack as a man put under this pressure and resenting his family for his tense position before they even arrive at the hotel. When King wrote *The Shining* in 1976, he had yet to be a highly successful writer. While his first novel, *Carrie*, was successful, *The Shining*, his second novel, was his best-selling novel of all time. Before these novels King would have been no stranger to the financial struggles of an author. *The Shining* was also written amid his struggles with alcohol. King tells us, "the deep part that knew I was an alcoholic as early as 1975, when I wrote *The Shining* wouldn't accept that Silence isn't what that part is about. It began to scream for help in the only way it knew how, through my fiction and through my monsters" (*On Writing* 96). Here, King is not only admitting to the fact that his fiction, especially his novels *The Shining* and *Misery*[5] were cries for help as he suffered through alcoholism and addiction, but he also tells us that his fiction, "especially [his] monsters," were therapeutic in their own way as they had clearly helped him process what was happening to him. Thinking about King's writing as a subconscious reflection on his personal life and troubles, *The Shining* can be read as a "what if" from Stephen King's perspective on sobriety. What if he had not gotten sober? How far would he have gone? Could he have turned violent against his family and children? Jack and King share many similarities and Jack's descent into a cold-blooded killer could have been an exaggerated representation of a real fear for King to have had to process within his writing. However, we cannot begin to assume this is the reason King wrote the novel, we can only infer that his writing in some way reflects him and his life experiences in the way

[5] In *On Writing*, King admits that *Misery* was reflective of his struggles with drug addiction and the title was meant to describe the state he himself was in at the time.

that he himself has told us. This fear of a family man turning into a monster is something that can be seen in *The Shining* and possibly was a fear of King's. The same can be said for what essentially saves Jack at the end of the novel: his family, like King's family, staging his intervention. In his memoir, King tells his readers that his wife, Tabitha, "said I had my choice: I could get help at a rehab or I could get the hell out of the house. She said that she and the kids loved me, and for that very reason, none of them wanted to witness my suicide" (*On Writing* 97), which was what set him on the path of healing. Although his protagonist does not survive the novel, Jack is similarly saved by his family.

The Shining, though, is not a direct retelling of Stephen King's biography, but a fictionalized scenario that allows King to express the anxieties and other emotions behind his biography in a creative and expressive way. This invented scenario raises questions about the distance between public and private spheres or personal versus societal. While the situation Jack Torrence is written into seems quite specific to King, writing that conveys personal preoccupations also conveys wider social concerns within the authors' contemporary society because, while authors are individuals with their own personal experiences, they (like all of us) are naturally members of a larger society and therefore exist within the context of that society and its social history. Therefore, in writing about themselves, they also must be writing about the world in which they live. These larger concerns are then demonstrated through the authors' uses of their genre and its traditions. This means that *The Shining* is King's use of the American Horror genre and its conventions, whether he adheres to them or challenges them. Using these traditions, King is able to convey to us a portrait of the society that he is a member of through a fictionalized scenario within these genres.

The haunted house has remained a staple of both the Gothic and Horror genres. Shirley Jackson's *The Haunting of Hill House* depicts the 'haunted house' in a traditional sense of a house with odd angles that looms over its inhabitants as ghosts haunt its rooms. In *The Shining*, however, King presents the iconic haunted house not in the shape of the typical mansard-style house, but in the shape of the Overlook Hotel. While the use of a hotel as the main setting for a domestic horror novel, rather than the traditional house, may seem counter-intuitive, critics like Marko Lukić assert that the outward appearance of the building does not matter and that the mansard house, which had often been used as the prototype for the traditional haunted house, had gone out of style in literature, "mostly due to its overly popular and even comic representation within contemporary popular culture" (102). Despite the traditional depiction of a haunted house falling out of use, "the sense of isolation and abandonment remains" (Lukić 102) in *The Shining*. This "isolation and abandonment" that Lukić refers to is more important than the appearance of the house, or in this case, the hotel, itself. In fact, when the Torrence family sees the Overlook Hotel together for the first time, Wendy and Jack talk of its beauty. King writes "The Overlook. Seeing it, she found breath and voice once again. 'Oh, Jack, it's gorgeous!' 'Yes, it is,' he said. 'Ullman says he thinks it's the single most beautiful location in America. I don't care much for him, but I think he might be…'" (*The Shining* 89-90)[6]. The initial description of the Overlook Hotel as "gorgeous" and "the single most beautiful location in America" is not one that creates fear or anxiety in a reader, especially because so much of Horror literature has cemented the idea of a visually-scary building in our minds as the norm for a haunted house, castle, or hotel.

How does King create the Overlook Hotel as the setting of *The Shining* to elicit fear in his audience? Rather than use the physicality of the hotel itself, King uses the underlying issues

[6] Here, Jack is interrupted by a distraction, hence the ellipses.

of the hotel to create fear. Instead of describing the hotel as a looming and evil building right away, as Jackson does in *The Haunting of Hill House*, King only alludes to the doom and anxiety that the hotel is capable of imposing on its inhabitants. Following Jack's reluctant agreement with Ullman in regards to the Overlook Hotel's beauty, Danny has a less-than-enthusiastic reaction to seeing the hotel for the first time. Danny's thoughts juxtapose Wendy and Jack's as he sees

> ...the Overlook Hotel, its massive bank of outward-looking windows reflecting back the sun. It was the place he had seen in the midst of the blizzard, the dark and booming place where some hideously familiar figure sought him down long corridors carpeted with jungle. The place Tony had warned him against. It was here. It was here. Whatever Redrum was, it was here (90-91).

This image is drastically different from the previous reaction we get from Jack and Wendy. The juxtapositions between "gorgeous" and "the dark booming place" as well as "the single most beautiful location in America" compared to "long corridors carpeted with jungle" create a sharp change in the mood of the scene that lays before the Torrence family. In addition to the change in mood from awe to terror, the image of being followed down these halls that are already described as ominous adds a sense of dread to the Overlook that does not align with the beautiful exterior that Wendy and Jack are reacting to. Much of Danny's reaction to the sight of the Overlook Hotel relates to a psychic experience he went through previously in the novel which showed Danny the hotel and events that are meant to occur within it in the future, such as the "hideously familiar figure" looking for him through the hallways. In referring back to this experience, King is showing his audience that Danny is already aware of the darkness that resides within the hotel before he even goes inside and is, therefore, aware of a terrifying and

possible reality of what may occur during their stay that his parents are not aware of, as they enjoy their initial sight of the Overlook Hotel together. By putting these two reactions back to back, interrupting Jack's agreement with Ullman's sentiment on the building's beauty, King also draws a sharp contrast between the level of awareness Danny and his parents' experience. By making the most aware character the most helpless character, a child, King creates anxiety in both Danny, as he is forced to stay at the hotel he is so afraid of entering for the possibilities of his future, and within his audience, readers are forced to witness the family walk into what can be assumed to be their imminent demise.

Additionally, the isolation the Overlook Hotel provides for the Torrence family, as it is brought up both in conversation and through the characters' internal dialogues, is a source of tension and anxiety. In a conversation regarding the job of hotel caretaker, Ullman refers to the isolation as a danger of the job and, when Jack questions him, "Mr. Ullman looked pained. 'Suppose your son or your wife tripped on the stairs and fractured his or her skull, Mr. Torrence. Would you think the place was cut off then?'" (King, *The Shining* 11), a reply that both asserts the issue of isolation in the winter months and causes Jack to go through the ways to get off of the mountain, especially in the already-promised event of a snowstorm. Later, when driving to the Overlook Hotel through the Colorado mountains, Wendy contemplates the tragedy of the Donner Party through the Sierra Nevada mountains and comes to the conclusion that "the mountains did not forgive many mistakes," (King, *The Shining* 87) hinting that, should any of them need to get down the mountain to the surrounding towns for help, there were still many dangers that could and probably would prove fatal, which could deter them from leaving and further pushes the feeling of isolation on the characters and the readers as we both understand how far the hotel is from any sort of real help. This intensified state of isolation for the

protagonists, as Lukić had stated, is more important than the visual aspect of the house. I would go so far as to argue that the sense of abandonment and isolation that Lukić refers to is the key purpose and function of the haunted house as a setting within the horror genre as it is then used to further drive fear and tension within its confines for the protagonists, as they are left with little to no contact with the outside world. The intensity of the novel, therefore, is largely derived from the idea of being 'trapped' within the nuclear family with no real outside support or escape.

The Torrence family is not only trapped in the Overlook Hotel by the oppressive Colorado weather but also by their economic situation. In his discussion concerning haunted houses, Lukić asserts that haunted houses also work to financially trap the protagonists of their stories. Lukić points out that, during economic crises and recessions, the horror genre typically produces many narratives that revolve around the struggles of American families during these times of hardship. He writes, "This experience, mostly constructed around the idea of a family moving in or already living within a problematic house, focuses on the tension rising between the gradual realization of the perilous spaces they are inhabiting and the financial inability to move away and find a new home" (102). While the Torrence family does have a home to go to other than the Overlook Hotel, they are trapped within Jack's decision to take the job as hotel caretaker, which is less of a decision than him admitting that he needs the job. The family, though later trapped by a snowstorm as the novel reaches its climax, is initially forced to reside in the "problematic" Overlook Hotel because they need the money and are faced with economic displacement if Jack does not take the job. By limiting the Torrence family's options to the Overlook Hotel or economic displacement, King uses the preexisting anxieties surrounding financial struggles to make Jack's decision, while carrying a sense of impending doom for him and his family, understandable in his readers' eyes. King had begun writing the novel in 1975,

right at the end of an economic recession. Publishing *The Shining* in 1977 meant that King was reaching an audience, particularly in America, that was very much aware of the economic state of the country and likely affected by the recession. He draws upon these lingering anxieties to create tension within his novel. Lukić discusses these real-world anxieties, writing

> While the screens and pages presented the viewers and readers with dangerous or victimized individuals or groups exposed to often absurd levels of peril, it is in fact the conscious and subconscious economic fears and anxieties of the viewers that were becoming the actual sites of horror. The economy, and the related fears of disenfranchisement, were the actual monsters, the monsters that transcended the medium, and, unlike the ones portrayed on the pages of the book or on the screen, they were much harder to confront and destroy (100).

Here, Lukić asserts that the real monsters of domestic horror, particularly domestic horror that is centered upon haunted houses, are the "economic fears and anxieties of the viewers", rather than the "absurd" horrors of monsters and ghosts. If Lukić's claim about economic anxiety is applied to *The Shining*, the novel becomes a story about the way these economic crises disrupt the functionality of the nuclear family by further driving tensions. The fear King's audience feels, especially his contemporary American audience of 1977, is grounded in reality. However, to say that "the economy and the related fears of disenfranchisement, were the actual monsters" and the only monsters, would be disregarding many of the other causes of fear, tension, and anxiety surrounding the domestic realm that authors like King have explored in the horror genre.

Ghosts have haunted American horror literature as a tradition carried over from the Gothic. Ghosts and haunting within the home are often used within the space of the haunted house to force protagonists to face or contend with the skeletons in their closets. The hauntings

of these locations often reflect or mirror the haunted pasts of the families living in these spaces. It is often when the protagonists interact with or acknowledge the supernatural events that "activates the suppressed and condensed memories that now function as a conduit for the reemergence of the haunted past" (Lukic 102). In other words, hauntings work to force the protagonists to come face-to-face with their darker pasts and confront them as they are brought up. This can be seen in the scene in the ballroom in *The Shining* when the ghosts of the hotel convince Jack to drink. King writes:

> 'I want to see the manager. I… I don't think he understands. My son is not a part of this. He…' 'Mr. Torrance,' Lloyd said, his voice coming with a hideous gentleness from inside his plague-ridden face, 'you will meet the manager in due time. He has, in fact, decided to make you his agent in the matter. Now drink your drink.' 'Drink your drink,' they all echoed (*The Shining* 508-509).

This scene shows how the ghosts within the Overlook Hotel force Jack to face his alcoholism and what he had done to Danny. Rather than actually facing the weight of the situation, Jack succumbs to the pressure and begins to drink, making him more and more liable to continue drinking as the scene progresses. The pressure put on Jack followed by his immediate failure to resist the pressure can be read in two ways. The first is that the ghosts are to be read as a metaphor for stressors and factors in Jack's life at the current moment that might cause him to break his sobriety. When King has Grady mention Danny, he is essentially reminding Jack of his biggest responsibility: his son. It also reminds both Jack and the audience of Jack's feelings of inadequacy. King writes Jack's private thoughts on this: "*It's me they must want…isn't it? I am the one. Not Danny, not Wendy…I'm the one who…practically sold my soul…What can they want with him?*" (507). Here, King displays Jack's internal anxieties and frustrations concerning

how hard he works and has tried to work for his family. When King writes that Jack thinks that he "practically sold [his] soul" for working here to keep his family afloat, it shows just how much Jack feels he has put into his family. The stress of the responsibility and then feeling as though he looks inadequate despite all of the work he has put into his job, Jack would be inclined to drink to soothe his nerves. The second way this scene can be read is as if the ghosts were actually there and pressured him to drink. This is followed by Jack promising himself that, "Those days were behind him now. He would never hurt Danny again. Not for the world," (King 510) which shows that Jack truly believes that he has faced the issue with drinking, especially concerning his son, and has won the battle when, in reality, he has just lost it. Jack, therefore, faces his past, but does not come out better or having learned from it, he only thinks he does. Whether the ghosts are read as real or not at this point ceases to matter—they can even be read as both really there and also metaphors for Jack's dark past and current stress. What does matter is that, now having drunk, Jack has made himself a threat to his family. Later, when Jack is locked in the pantry, Grady questions his abilities to complete the task at hand. When Jack asks Grady to help him out of the pantry, Grady replies, "'You let them lock you in?...Oh, dear. A woman half your size and a little boy? Hardly sets you off as being a top managerial timber, does it?'" and when Jack says he will take care of his family, Grady says, "'I'm pained to say that I doubt it. I – and others – have really come to believe that your heart is not in this, sir. That you haven't the…the belly for it'" (King 565) and makes Jack promise to kill Wendy. Here, King is using Grady's ghost as a tool to remind the audience—and Jack—of Jack's masculinity crisis that informs much of his decisions throughout the novel. In using the fragility of Jack's masculinity against him and using it at this point in the narrative, the audience is able to watch Jack's need to assert his power. The way King writes Jack's need to assert his masculinity as all-absorbing

shows the way he feels pressured by others to perform as the stereotypical male. The ghosts, whether read as real, metaphorical, or both, serve to remind the audience of Jack's fatal character flaws and forces Jack to act based on his confrontation of his own dark history. The fear created in these scenes derives from Jack's inability to fully confront and process his own struggles. King showing Jack's resistance to positive character development, stirs our commonly shared hope that people will change for the better followed by our fears of what happens when the people around us do not change or, in Jack's case, change for the worse.

So, while the novel does not take place in a traditional house, the Overlook Hotel still has a roof, four walls, and a bountiful history to meet the Torrences and force them to confront these memories they would likely rather not. In leaving them all alone for the winter, the hotel provides an isolated space that can easily mimic their domestic lives, with Jack at work and Wendy serving as a traditional housewife and mother, as they had before. Additionally, King uses the Overlook Hotel both as a place of work for Jack and as a living space for the entire Torrence family. In condensing labor and domesticity, which are often kept ideologically divided so that the public labor and private domestic do not socially intersect, into the same sphere, King demonstrates the work day blending into the safe space that the domestic ideally provides. This compounding of settings illustrates the crisis Jack is facing, as he is directly watching his job affect his family with no buffer between the workplace and the home. The Overlook Hotel, therefore, demonstrates that Jack's employment crisis is very much a domestic crisis, creating further tension as the two spheres exist in the same space. Facing this domestic situation, given the Torrence's history as a family, is cause for fear in itself.

The haunted setting of the Overlook Hotel creates a mimicry of the traditional gothic setting, such as a haunted house or haunted castle, in which the Torrence family must face their

own dark family history, fraught with tension and violence. According to Elizabeth Hornbeck, "In both Kubrick's film and Stephen King's 1977 novel, from which the film was adapted, the Gothic genre becomes a vehicle for a serious tale about violence within the family" (689). Hornbeck's reading of *The Shining* focuses on the issue of family violence, which surfaced more clearly in the 1960s and grew in terms of awareness surrounding the issue[7]. Hornbeck goes on to say that *The Shining* "invited readers and audiences to think about, even to experience vicariously, the horror of male violence in the family, not just as fiction but as a frightening and disturbing reality" (697). This is seen at multiple points within the novel, as some parts are focused more on Danny's personal experiences of the events that take place, referring to Jack and Wendy as "mommy" and "daddy", rather than their actual names, despite not changing the point of view to first person. The first time this switch is made, Danny's thoughts are focused on the fact that he can tell, due to his psychic abilities, that his parents have considered and possibly are still considering getting a divorce as a result of Jack breaking his arm in a drunken rage. King writes, "It had been that way after Daddy punished him for messing the papers up in his study and the doctor had to put his arm in a cast. That memory was already faded, but the memory of the DIVORCE thoughts was clear and terrifying" (*The Shining* 39). Here, we get a much different perspective as to what happened immediately following the incident in which Danny had gotten into Jack's office and messed up his papers, spilling beer on them, to which a drunken Jack responded by angrily pulling Danny away and accidentally breaking his arm than we would have gotten from Jack or Wendy's perspective or even from an objective third-person perspective. Instead of thinking about the danger Jack had put him in, or the pain he had felt when his arm broke, Danny is more in fear of his parents getting a divorce, the idea of a

[7] Hornbeck refers to Kathleen J. Tierney's, "The Battered Women Movement and the Creation of the Wife Beating Problem," in the discussion of the "discovery" of family violence in the 1960s and 1970s

separated family that does not love each other remaining more fearful for him than the possibility of the abuse continuing because Danny clearly loves his dad and does not believe that the abuse can or will continue. The audience assumed to be much older than Danny upon reading *The Shining*, would know that this is not the case, though. Towards the end of the novel, King provides another look into Danny's perspective. While the hotel is in search of Danny, "for the first time in his life he had an adult thought, an adult feeling, the essence of his experience in his bad place – a sorrowful distillation: *(Mommy and Daddy can't help me and I'm alone.)*" (633).This feeling of helplessness from Danny furthers the way in which the audience "experiences vicariously" the violence and even plain terror that can occur within the home and adds a level of anxiety to what would be an already tense moment and furthers the horror King portrays. Therefore, reading about the aftermath of the whole incident from a naive child's perspective brings that "disturbing reality" that Hornbeck refers to the forefront of the reader's mind as they "experience vicariously" the aftermath of this event in the Torrence's household.

The 1970s was a time of great social change in America in regard to gender and domesticity. The women's movement of this time was pushing for women to enter the workforce and gain financial independence from their male counterparts. In 1974, only three years before the publication of *The Shining*, women finally gained the right to own a credit card in their own name. Though there was a strong push for women's rights and freedoms in the 1970s, much of the media, like novels, movies, and TV shows, remained ambivalent towards these changes, and the horror genre was not an exception. Gender is a widely discussed topic when thinking about Stephen King and his writing, as he is infamous for his less-than-tasteful writing surrounding

women as well as his common depiction of grotesque violence toward their bodies.[8] While much of this conversation is worth having and being brought to the forefront of our attention, if we are to become more progressive within media such as literature, as male authors continue to write female characters, *The Shining* takes a much different look at the patriarchy, as the protagonists try their best to adhere to the prevalent social normalities and expectations that were expected of families in the world in which the novel was written. In fact, much of the novel focuses on what is expected of families from the 1970s and what happens when families fail to meet these expectations.

Scholars such as Nina K. Martin have pointed out the way women are often treated in horror stories, whether they are novels or films. She writes, "the price these heroines pay through their confrontation with the haunted house, and their own past, seems far too dear…The hauntings that these women undergo appear to be directly linked to how defiant and/or inadequate they are at maintaining their proper feminine roles as parent and caregiver" (Martin 130). If we are to look at *The Shining* through the lens of Martin's analysis, it is not difficult to apply this to Wendy Torrence's character. The "price" Wendy pays for her family is not simply limited to being chased by her husband as he tries to kill her with a roque mallet and having to not only save her own life but her son's life as well. From the very beginning of the novel when the audience is first introduced to Wendy, we are aware of her suffering for her family and the reminders of her shortcomings as a mother to her five-year-old son, which weighs heavily on her. When Wendy is first introduced, she and Danny discuss Jack's recent job loss and Danny asks Wendy if she wants to go to the Overlook Hotel for the winter if Jack gets the job. King

[8] One example of this is in king's novel *Misery* when describing how Paul Sheldon, the novel's protagonist, defeats Annie Wilkes. The description contains many mentions of sexual brutality towards Annie, which can be read as the idea that the only way for the hero to win was to violate the feminine body.

writes Wendy's response: "Now, which of five thousand answers should she give to that one? The way she had felt yesterday or last night or this morning? They were all different, they crossed the spectrum from rosy pink to dead black. She said: 'If it's what your father wants, it's what I want'" (*The Shining* 20). Here, we can see that Wendy is completely torn in her thoughts about the Overlook Hotel and if this new job is what is best for the family, plagued with overwhelmingly different opinions on it that range from "rosy pink to dead black", or from hope and the idea of security for the family to failure and fear that the family will wind up worse off than they already are. The answer that Wendy gives Danny, "'If it's what your father wants, it's what I want'," works in two ways. The first shows that Wendy is putting on an act for her son to make things seem as though they are more stable and safe than things really are. The second thing this small moment of dialogue does is show that Wendy is still attempting, despite her doubts and unhappiness, to adhere to her role as a wife and mother, or "parent and caregiver", as Martin had put it. The role of a mother as a "caregiver" in the 1970s, despite the progress that was being made at this time, was defined by sacrifice. A woman was considered a wife and mother first and foremost, rather than as an individual woman with her own freedoms, and was therefore expected to put her family first. In adhering to this strict role, Wendy's "shortcoming" is shown quite clearly: her inability to help and protect her son. This is a shortcoming that American society did not, and still does not, take lightly, which is a cause of much anxiety. King uses Wendy's failure to help her child—despite her best efforts—to create a sense of anxiety and helplessness within the Torrence family. As can be seen in Wendy's forced complacency in Jack's decision for the family to spend the winter in the Overlook Hotel, she is desperate to find something to help her child, above all else, as mothers both in the past and even in the present day are often expected to do. Even though she adheres to her role as best she can, given their

circumstances, she and the audience are aware that this is ineffectual on her part, especially regarding her child. After their conversation about Jack and this new job opportunity, Danny decides to sit outside and wait for Jack to get home from his job interview, and Wendy watches him from the kitchen window and, "the tears which had threatened all day now came in a cloudburst and she leaned into the fragrant, curling steam of the tea and wept. In grief and loss for the past, and terror of the future" (*The Shining*, King 21). Here, King is creating fear, or "terror" by showing the lack of control Wendy feels within their lives. The fact that "the tears…had threatened all day" and only fell once Danny could not see shows the incredible emotional and physical effort that Wendy is making for her family to hold herself together and her attempt for Danny to remain a stable parent, as we are later shown that Jack is not fully capable of showing his son this stability. The fact that the tears fell shows the audience that Wendy is not in as much control as she wants. The "grief…for the past" Wendy feels in this moment, related to the events that led to their current living situation linked with her "terror of the future" hints that the Torrence family is at a complete loss for the stability expected from families of the 1970s. Wendy's feeling of "terror" for the family's future also foreshadows the events at the Overlook Hotel and leaves the audience with a feeling of dread as they anticipate what is to come of this struggling family, as well as watching Wendy essentially fails in her role as mother when it comes to keeping her child safe. As Martin had suggested, Wendy's suffering later in the novel appears to be a sort of punishment for her failure to leave her marriage for the betterment of her and her son. Despite her struggles to keep her son safe throughout the novel, through actions and decisions such as staying married to Jack, agreeing to go with him to the Overlook Hotel, even after their thoughts on getting a divorce, and her failure to protect him within the hotel for a large portion of the novel, Wendy does save Danny, with the help of the

hotel's chef, Dick Hollorann, and escape the Overlook Hotel with him safely. King, therefore, is using Wendy as a tool to reflect women's fears about their own shortcomings or struggles within the realm of motherhood as well as society's fear of watching a woman fail at motherhood, despite its complexities and difficulties. King takes this out of our control and forces us to read on as a mother does not continuously succeed in providing for and protecting her child (though, largely due to her husband's inability to provide stability), the reader experiences anxiety until, of course, Wendy and Danny are safe from Jack and the rest of the Overlook Hotel's evil.

Jack also experiences the weight of the patriarchy and its expectations based on gendered roles for families in the 1970s. While it is much easier to see the way the patriarchy judges and enforces its roles upon Wendy, the same is done to Jack throughout the novel. In the 1970s in America, while women were fighting for their equality, many of the social rules for both men and women nevertheless prevailed. Not only were women supposed to be mothers and wives first and foremost, but men were also expected to be the sole breadwinners for their families and be able to support their families on one salary alone. Jack's interactions with and existence within the patriarchy of the mid-1970s are debated among some critics of King's work, some looking into the way the patriarchy conditioned men and others disregarding this.

Mark Jancovitch reads Jack's response to the world around him as Jack, "find[ing] himself unable to resolve the various social roles allotted to a man within his culture. Economic and ideological pressures make him feel obliged to provide materially for his family, but his apparent inability to do so frustrates him and fills him with self-hatred" and "make him feel that his family is a weight around his neck that prevents him from obtaining the independence appropriate to him as a man. As a result, he comes to resent their dependence on him" (103-104). Jancovitch assumes that this denial of his "independence appropriate to him as a man" and

inability to perform his “various social roles” leads to Jack's “homicidal rage at himself, his family and the world in general” (104). Jancovitch sees Jack’s transformation from a family man into a homicidal man as a direct result of the social pressures placed on him by his contemporary society. This is debated by Gina Wisker, who claims that this reading of *The Shining* is, “very much a masculine reading” and asserts that she finds, “the need Torrance has for control of his family, his self-deception, and deception of others terrifying. He deceives himself that he is working, dominates and bullies his wife, lies to and terrifies his son, and tries to chop the family into messes” (4). Whisker’s interpretation (as she is referring to the film, rather than the novel) asserts that the fear is within Jack’s abusive tendencies. While Wisker admits to Jack’s transformation, “from nurturer and provider to destroyer”, she also claims that Jack, “is a monster parent” (4-5). While Wisker makes a point that Jancovitch’s reading is from a masculine point of view, her views on Jack as a “monster parent” who needs to “control” his family through various means of deception feels overly-simplified. While Wisker is correct that a lot of the fear within is created in Jack’s treatment and abuse of his family, he is not as intentionally evil as she seems to view him as, and, similarly to Jancovitch’s reading of Jack, a look at the way the patriarchy viewed men and their success in their allotted roles as fathers and husbands needs to be considered to understand Jack as a man of his contemporary society. Taking a step away from Jack as a character and looking at King’s novel as a whole, it seems as though there is something far less black and white, feminist or anti-feminist, happening in the novel. Jack is portrayed as the new generation of abusers and violent men in two instances, the first being that his father was abusive towards his mother, and the second being that Jack is the new hotel caretaker at a hotel with its own history of violence and abuse. King, then, sets up not one, but two cycles of violence surrounding Jack and his family, one from within the domestic sphere (Jack’s father)

and the other from work (Delbert Grady) and, when these two spheres are condensed into one setting as they are in the Overlook Hotel, the cycles also seem to become one cycle representing the cycle of abuse which the patriarchy allows to continue to repeat. Neither of these cycles, then, are broken by the end of the novel. Rather than answering the question of whether Jack is simply a perpetrator of abuse or also a victim of the patriarchy caught in the cycle of abuse until he becomes an abuser, King prompts us to question our understanding of the patriarchy as it was in 1970s America.

The success of a man has been historically measured by his ability to provide for his family, which is something that Jack Torrence struggles with right from the beginning of the novel. The novel begins,

> Jack Torrence thought: *Officious little prick*. Ullman stood five-five and when he moved it was with the prissy speed that seems to be the exclusive domain of all small plump men…As he listened to Ullman speak Jack admitted to himself that he probably could not have liked any man on that side of the desk – under the circumstances (3).

Stephen King introduces Jack to us as someone bitter toward authority figures. Here, Jack is looking down on the man who is interviewing him for a job. While we do not know what "the circumstances" Jack is under right away, the audience can feel the tension between him and this idea of an employer because he admits "that he probably could not have liked any man on that side of the desk." The fact that he uses the phrase "could not" instead of "would not" shows that it is not just a disdain for having to get a job, but an uncontrollable feeling of bitterness towards someone interviewing him for a job, "under the circumstances" that placed him in that interview. Right away, the audience understands that Jack is under stressful circumstances forcing him to sit down for a job interview that he does not want to do. Another interesting idea brought up with

this admission to himself, is that it shows a self-awareness that seems to show Jack taking the blame for the fact that he does not like Ullman. His attempt at this self-aware admission to himself shows that Jack is trying to take on a certain responsibility and is forcing himself to sit through the interview to take the job at the Overlook Hotel not because he wants the job, but because he must need the job under these particular "circumstances", which we are told later is because of his past trouble both with employment and within his family.

When looking around their new house, Wendy thinks to herself, "Jack and his pride! *Hey no, Al, I don't need an advance, I'm okay for a while*," (King 15) which tells us Jack finds this "pride" important to him and does not want outside help from people when it comes to taking care of his family. Jack's "pride" is likely less about actual pride and more about avoiding shame for not being able to care for his family the way a man was expected to in the 1970s, which was largely financially. Therefore, instead of accepting financial help from a friend who can likely afford to help, Jack decides that the financial burden must rest upon his family and only his family – and the large majority of that burden belongs to Jack, rather than to Jack and Wendy equally or near-equally. Previously, Wendy had had a job at the college she and Jack went to together, typing for the English department. However, years later now, the financial responsibility rested on Jack's shoulders. At the end of the job interview at the Overlook,

> Ullman stood. "I hope there are no hard feelings, Mr. Torrence. There is nothing personal in the things I have said to you. I only want what's best for the Overlook. It is a great hotel. I want it to stay that way." "No. No hard feelings." Jack flashed the PR grin again, but he was glad Ullman didn't offer to shake hands. There were hard feelings. All kinds of them." (King 14)

This reaction from Jack is important to show that he is capable of resentment and is holding some anger towards Ullman because of the conversation they had in the interview in which Ullman was, according to Jack's perspective, harsh and even judgmental based on his history of alcoholism and even violence. While this is something that many employers would naturally raise concerns about, Jack responded poorly and takes these things that Ullman claims are "nothing personal" are very personal and holds onto these judgments. Based on the idea that Jack is meant to be the breadwinner for his family and needs the work, in addition to his history at Stovington and his history of alcoholism, Jack is fighting extremely hard to continue to provide for his family and to fill the highly gendered role of a father both for his family and for the rest of the society expecting him to do this, which is why having those judgments passed onto him feel as personal to him as they do. Regardless of his feelings towards Ullman and the job, Jack still maintains a kind and loving relationship with his family at the beginning of the novel. However, as the novel progresses, it becomes clear that the weight of these expectations is too much, and Jack begins to fold under the pressure. However, this is where Jancovitch's reading of the novel falls short. Jack is not simply growing more frustrated with himself and his family as they are locked away, but the haunting of the hotel adds pressure as well as then exposing Jack, a recovering alcoholic, to alcohol during a time of heightened stress, when he is at his most vulnerable and is more likely to give into his addiction. When the ghosts convince Jack to take a drink after months of sobriety, Jack

> hesitated. He heard the hard, horrible snap as Danny's arm broke. He saw the bicycle flying brokenly up over the hood of Al's car, starring the windshield. He saw a single wheel lying in the road, twisted spokes pointing into the sky like jags of piano wire…

> ‘Drink your drink,’ they all echoed. He picked it up with a badly trembling hand. It was raw gin. He looked into it, and looking was like drowning. (King 508-509)

It is only once he drinks that the Overlook Hotel has real, assertive, control over Jack. Even as he drinks now, under the hotel’s control, Jack “hesitated” and could hear “the hard, horrible snap as Danny’s arm broke,” which shows that Jack knows what he is doing is wrong. The idea that looking at the gin, “was like drowning” for Jack shows that even though he wants to fight it and still wants to take back how he hurt Danny and fix all of that, he still feels the overwhelming pressure to drink, which we can assume is also largely due to the amount of stress based on the events in the novel until the point, both supernatural and not. The stress of finding a job that he does not really want and having to take it due to the expectation of supporting a family that he cannot provide for and struggling to fill the role of a provider while also struggling with sobriety and being isolated from the outside world with his family, who would then serve as a constant reminder of his shortcomings within that allotted role of ‘provider’ would be stressful for anyone. Then, when Danny’s psychic experiences in the hotel lead him to be hurt, new tensions between the family members are created. Jancovitch was right in a sense that Jack is cracking under societal pressure, but fails to acknowledge the way alcohol further adds to the issue, as it not only makes Jack more susceptible to the hotel’s ghosts and their demands, but if we are to read the ghosts as not real, then alcohol still brings out a violence in Jack that he does not seem to feel otherwise.

However, suppose we read the ghosts literally. In that case, the problem doubles, as Jack is usually careless and violent when drunk, but now is open to suggestions from Delbert Grady, who wants Jack to repeat the bloody history of the Overlook Hotel and deliver his son to the hotel. The fear that the readers feel while enduring Jack’s unraveling is not due only to Jack

responding negatively to the pressures 1970s America placed on men, nor is it solely in Jack's treatment of his family, which doesn't become scary until much later in the novel. Instead, the fear King creates in his novel comes from a middle ground. Jack is not, as Wisker argues, "a monster parent," but is also a victim of his circumstances. He is both the victim of the intense societal pressures and a perpetrator of violence as a result. If we are to refer to Jack as a "monster," then his is an ordinary, every day, very human monster that can be seen in the real world. While Wendy and Danny suffer at the hands of the patriarch of the family, Jack is also suffering under the larger pressures allotted to him by the society he finds himself stuck in. He cares deeply for his family and holds regret and self-hatred for the way he has caused pain for his entire family, yet is not able to stop the cycle from continuing as the novel continues, given the horrific circumstances the family is subjected to within the confines of the Overlook Hotel. Jack fails to meet both his standards and the standards surrounding society within his performance as a father, as Jancovitch asserts. Watching him fall short of these expectations repeatedly until it begins to wear him down, resulting in his relapsing into alcoholism and the constant threat of domestic violence, as pointed out by Wisker, is where the audience's anxiety lies. As more often than not, a reader is supposed to find some sort of identification with or simply root for the protagonist, we must endure as this figure in literature fails at their allotted roles, which we have also been conditioned to fear. The audience waits in anticipation as Jack drinks at the hotel bar for two reasons. The first reason is that we know he is violent when he drinks and we fear what he will do to his family, as Wisker explains the fear of domestic violence. The second reason Jack's drinking becomes such a fearful event is that this is the epitome of his failure in his roles as a father and husband, as alcohol is what has kept him from fulfilling his role as he is expected to. Jack's inability to break the cycles of abuse once inside of the Overlook Hotel and being

forced to confront his history of abuse and alcoholism reflects the deeper fears his audience may have internalized – confronting one's shortcomings, failures, or the pain one has caused others head-on and then the work it takes to stop this from repeating. King's novel presents us with a literally explosive ending concerning the crises these confrontations may leave us with and searches for solutions to these conflicts.

` The final scenes of the novel present the audience with a lasting image of the Torrence family in their respective familial roles. When Danny meets Jack in their final moments together, Danny watches Jack drop the roque mallet and,

> suddenly, his daddy *was* there, looking at him in mortal agony, and a sorrow so great Danny's heart flamed within his chest. The mouth drew down in a quivering bow "Doc," Jack Torrence said. "Run away. Quick. And remember how much I love you" [...] "No," Danny said. He took one of his father's bloody hands and kissed it. "It's almost over." (King 632)

This final meeting between Jack and Danny demonstrates the humanity Jack still has left in him. While the Overlook Hotel has transformed Jack into what Wisker refers to as "a monster parent," it is significant to one's understanding of the novel that, in Jack's last moments, he attempts to fulfill his job as a father and protect his son from the evil of the hotel. Once he has reclaimed power over himself from the grasp of the Overlook, Jack shows that despite his failures as a parent, he still loves his son and is willing to continue to do anything for him, even if it means dying. Though this does not erase the other things Jack has done to his family, sharing this moment with his son shows that Jack is not a black-and-white monster, as Wisker reads him. Danny's willingness to stay by Jack's side is also a testament to how he trusts his father. By showing Jack as "quivering," King reveals a far more human side to Jack that displays that he is

also scared. Danny stepping up to comfort his father also demonstrates yet another way Jack falls short of succeeding as a parent, as his son is providing safety and comfort to his father, instead of the other way around. This demonstrates the final step of Jack's masculinity crisis – accepting the support from others and allowing for a moment of vulnerability even if it is brief. By writing Jack as allowing this moment, King shows that this acceptance of what might have been considered to be a less-than-masculine encounter provides Jack with a moment of clarity that ultimately allows Danny time to escape. Shortly after Jack's moment of clarity, the hotel regains control of Jack:

> Its hands closed around the mallet again, but instead of aiming at Danny, it reversed the handle, aiming the hard side of the roque mallet at its own face. Understanding rushed through Danny. Then the mallet began to rise and descend, destroying the last of Jack Torrence's image…But when it turned its attention back to Danny, his father was gone forever. What remained of the face became a strange, shifting composite, many faces mixed imperfectly into one…" Masks off, then," it whispered. "No more interruptions." (633-634)

The Overlook's ability to visually become an amalgamation of the evil Danny has faced in the hotel, along with its declaration that it is taking off the mask that was one Jack shows that the Overlook did not have to uphold the image of Jack for as long as it did but that it chose to. The being that is the Overlook Hotel, therefore, made the conscious decision to use Jack's image to torment his family, rather than any other image it could have as a way to create terror at the sight of the family patriarch – the family member tasked with creating security and safety for the family – committing atrocities towards the family members that are meant to rely on him. By perverting this role, King strikes fear in the audience as their key to safety – family – becomes a

mortal danger to the rest of the family. In “destroying the last of Jack Torrence’s image,” the hotel is essentially showing Danny that Jack can no longer protect him. Danny’s realization that “his father was gone forever” reveals to him a vulnerability that he was not yet familiar with because, while Jack had lashed out at Danny in the past, it is clear that Danny continued to trust Jack with his safety. In this moment, the audience watches through the eyes of a child as their parent becomes a real threat with no hope of returning. The idea that Jack was truly “gone forever” poses a problem the audience must contend with: there may be no social solution for Jack. When the supernatural evil of the novel prevails over the protagonist that has fought hard through their personal crises as Jack has, the audience is left to wonder if there is a resolution to win over the metaphorical evil. Jack’s death makes the possibility of resolution ambiguous.

The destruction of the Overlook Hotel represents Jack’s ultimate failure to adhere to the expectations of a father in 1970s America. As the hotel’s evil continues to search for its victims, the boiler explodes. The explosion is caused by Jack’s continuous inability to maintain and function within a job. The events of the entire novel are set into place when Jack accepts the job as caretaker of the Overlook Hotel, his family relying on him succeeding through the hotel’s off season to maintain the boiler. The fact that, after everything that occurs within the novel, Jack does not properly maintain the boiler leading to the destruction of everything around them is representative of his failures to provide for his family. Jack’s death in this explosion may be the only way for Jack to have an ending, further demonstrating a lack of social solution at this time. Critics such as Fredric Jameson have made reference to, “Levi-Strauss' notion of the imaginary resolution of social contradictions,” (559) or the idea that narrative often attempts to provide social solutions for complex problems, such as the one posed by King in *The Shining*. Does the absence of a solution for Jack, then, suggest that there is no answer for men in these situations?

Or does it suggest simply that King himself could not fathom one reasonable answer for himself and, instead, poses Jack's situation to his audience as too complex to attempt to provide a neat and clean solution?

For Wendy and Danny, however, the social solution is found in unconventionality or possibly independence. Their ending in the novel implies that their family is whole again once Wendy takes on the role of a single mother. Previously, the idea of a divorce had been pushed to the side by Jack and Wendy. In denying the option of single motherhood, Wendy subjected herself and Danny to an unhealthy family dynamic that caused destruction and terror. Now, Wendy is forced to accept this new reality which, while daunting, offers room for growth. Hollorann explains this opportunity for healing when he says to Wendy, "'You and him, you're coming back. Different, maybe, but okay. You ain't what you were, you two, but that isn't necessarily bad'" (King 654). Having a character that is not Wendy or Danny comment on the state of their family and their healing journey allows for King to show his audience an outsider's perspective on their healing. Had this moment come from Wendy or Danny, the audience would have seen their state of mourning anxiety, and self-doubt towards this resolution. Hollorann expressing this change shows the audience that it is not just an objective healing from an omnipotent narrator, but that the growth was also noticeable to other characters within the narrative. Additionally, Hollorann saying, "'different, maybe…but that isn't necessarily bad'" also expresses the drastic change it would have been for an American family in the 1970s, but offers to both of the other characters and the audience a sense that the alternative family structure does not indicate they must therefore suffer for these changes. Accepting this change as a solution is hinted as being what will allow them to heal as a family, rather than the anxiety it may have caused for a family in the novel's contemporary society. In 1970s America, divorce was not

an easy solution for women to resort to. As previously stated, women were not able to attain credit cards without their husbands until 1974, only five years before *The Shining* was published. The inability to have credit in their name often forced women to remain in unhealthy and abusive marriages with no other options. Even after this was changed and women could more easily divorce their husbands with the ability to monetarily provide for themselves as well as children, divorce was still not easy socially for women. As a single mother, Wendy would have also to have been a working mother, the idea of which was not normalized until the 1980s and still faced some criticism for the following years and was met with ambivalence in the media. Is King, then, using the end of *The Shining* to advocate positively for single motherhood as an option for women in unhappy marriages? It seems more that, instead of advocating for single motherhood, King is giving his readers a look into Wendy and Danny's ability to heal and move on without Jack in their lies, more showing that the two of them are better off alone in what could be unconventional or even difficult when compared to a violent family patriarch. Instead of single motherhood, perhaps King finds that the social solution for the many families living with a violent father or abuser is to leave them in order to keep the family safe. While we cannot tell for sure, King's writing seems to present single motherhood as what should be an acceptable option for families struggling within the confines of unhappy marriages.

It may be easy to read *The Shining* as an unconscious fictionalized semi-autobiographical Horror novel due to the parallels between Jack and King's struggles with alcoholism and its effects on their relationships with their families in 1970s America, however, the novel encapsulates something much, larger than this. Although King may have been using his time writing the novel for some sense of introspection, it is just this that allows *The Shining* to represent the social atmosphere as it pertains to domesticity in its contemporary era of the mid to

late 1970s. The changing perspectives throughout the novel place the readers in the shoes of husbands and fathers, wives and mothers, and children as they each experience the looming expectations placed on the family and the fallout of these high-pressure expectations. While *The Haunting of Hill House* offered the perspective of women, *The Shining* gives the often-seen male perspective, but still addresses the negative aspects of the patriarchy as it affects the whole of the family. Jack's crisis of masculinity is told through what is essentially a ghost story, yet the haunting is what forces Jack to wrestle with his identity as an individual and his identity as a husband and father in a male-dominated society which had a clear and idealized idea of what a father should be and should not be. Wendy's role, though somewhat stereotypical of the role women often take in male-oriented horror stories, explains that imperfections of parents were often seen as failures that were to be punished or feared, rather than understood. In using fear, both from the perspective of the characters as well as simply through his descriptions and implications, King allows his readers to sit with the discomfort and unease that have often accompanied the idea of failing to meet these often unrealistic expectations of perfect parents.

From the ending of *The Shining* there begins to emerge Horror's ability to suggest or imply imagined social solutions to the issues the authors present through their usage of the tension and fear that is natural to the Horror genre. While there is no real solution posed for Jack and his crisis, *The Shining* offers a possible solution for Wendy and Danny: single motherhood. This solution, though not an easy one for the 1970s, presents as a better alternative to staying in a difficult or unhappy marriage. Many critics, though, have commented on and critiqued *The Shining* from a feminist perspective, one that was not quite as common in American Horror in the 1970s as it is in the 2020s, as it comments on the issues of domesticity from a male-centered perspective. While there may be some shortcomings to this, I believe that *The Shining* comes

from an important perspective to understand as well, as the patriarchy has not always been beneficial for men, as we often assume. Looking forward in time as the Women's Movement and the feminist movements progressed and took effect in America, there are still questions we can ask ourselves about the representation of this sphere within the Horror genre. How do these social changes appear in American Horror literature today? How does Horror literature of our contemporary society compare to its predecessors? Is Horror able to offer more concrete solutions to the ongoing struggles within domestic life? To begin to answer these questions, it becomes more important to look at the changes in domestic life from alternative perspectives, such as the feminist perspective.

"I'm so sorry": A New Approach to Domesticity in Horror in Danielle Valentine's *Delicate Condition*

Danielle Valentine, a contemporary author best known for her young adult horror novels, has openly spoken about her experience in writing her first adult novel, *Delicate Condition*, as having been cathartic. The novel allowed her to express her feelings about pregnancy and reproduction through her protagonist, Anna. *Delicate Condition*, published in 2023, crosses into the thriller genre, but calls upon traditions from the horror and Gothic genres in new ways. The novel uses the traditions of emblematic horror novels to enter into the discourse about the domestic sphere, particularly commenting on reproduction within a domestic setting. While the novel speaks less to an established family unit than the previously discussed novels—*The Haunting of Hill House* (1959) by Shirley Jackson and *The Shining* (1977) by Stephen King—offers a perspective on how contemporary American society regards the early stages of building a family. The novel revisits and subverts many traditional horror conventions, such as the representation of the house and witches[9] in order to offer a pointed feminist critique of our current society's treatment of the beginnings of family life, particularly the highly gendered ideas that influence the way American society treats reproductive health. It is because of the novel's difference in perspective that *Delicate Condition* steps away from some of the well-known horror traditions such as the haunted house and takes on other conventions to illustrate its commentaries and represents the future of the horror genre.

Due to the recency of *Delicate Condition*'s publication, there is no real literary criticism of the novel itself. But we might locate it in relation to a foundational novel within the context of Roe V. Wade-era pregnancy horror, *Rosemary's Baby*. While both the novel and film

[9] Although the presence of witches as a trope within horror has not been established previously in this thesis, they are acting as the supernatural entity of the novel and will be important for the argument to come.

Rosemary's Baby drew upon its contemporary social world in relation to Roe V. Wade and the abortion debate, *Delicate Condition* was published in the wake of the overturning of Roe V. Wade and as the debate surrounding the legitimacy of IVF (in vitro fertilization) begins to grow.[10] Dealing with topics such as pregnancy, miscarriage, and IVF, Valentine's novel is written through a feminist lens to shed light on topics which are little spoken about. Sociologists, like Linda L. Layne, have pointed out that

> Even though in the vast majority of cases, miscarriages take place early in a pregnancy, most popular pregnancy guides follow the model of obstetrical textbooks such as *William Obstetrics* and discuss miscarriage at the end of the book along with other "complications of pregnancy" like stillbirth, after having first presented "normal" pregnancy and birth. (294)

Layne's discussion surrounding how pregnancy loss and other "complications of pregnancy" are treated points to an ongoing problem regarding the treatment of pregnant people in America. In addition to opening the conversation about miscarriage, Valentine's exploration of the traditions of the horror genre also contribute to the conversation surrounding the highly patriarchal branch of obstetrics in medicine. Judy Wajcman, a professor of sociology, writes that obstetrics, "is clearly an area where male doctors can have no personal experience of the 'condition' being treated. So their claims to expertise might appear tenuous to women" and reproductive technologies, "enable doctors to claim to know more about the welfare of the developing fetus than the women themselves" (165). The compounding of the largely patriarchal branch of obstetrics and the silence surrounding pregnancy loss – or what may be considered abnormal

[10] While Valentine wrote the novel for seven years before its publication, so likely did not draw on the overturning of Roe V Wade for inspiration, this is the time in which the novel enters into the conversation concerning reproductive rights.

pregnancies by doctors – prompts *Delicate Condition* to enter into the often difficult conversations surrounding women's reproductive health as it pertains to the family through the horror genre and its conventions in order to critique American society's views and practices regarding reproduction. The topic of reproduction plays into the broader conversation within this thesis about the social influences on the domestic realm. In examining *Delicate Condition*, we get a closer look at one particular topic under the umbrella of the domestic or private sphere, and simultaneously gain more specific insights into the way American horror literature discusses the problems and possible social solutions within this sphere.

When *Delicate Condition* was published, the novel was advertised using a quote from Andrea Bartz, a contemporary thriller author, on its cover referring to the novel as, "'The feminist update to *Rosemary's Baby* we all needed'". As it deals with pregnancy and reproduction within the family unit, *Delicate Condition* echoes the horror classic *Rosemary's Baby* (the novel by Ira Levin and the film directed by Richard Polanski) in its use of the horror genre to critique American society's ideas about pregnancy and childbirth. Both the novel and the film, released in 1967 and 1968 respectively, belonged to a pre-Roe V. Wade American society in which women's reproductive rights, particularly abortion, were still up for debate legislatively (though the legislative debate has continued with the Dobb's decision in 2022). The story of *Rosemary's Baby* entered into the Pre-Roe world as a "story of a frightening pregnancy" which "evokes feminist arguments for sexual and reproductive freedom" (Valerius 119) through its use of horror with Rosemary herself being the victim of bodily violations which begin the pregnancy and continue through her pregnancy. The heroines of both *Delicate Condition* and *Rosemary's Baby* seek out their pregnancies and want to start families, making their discussions less about unwanted pregnancies in relation to abortion and more about the social atmospheres in

their contemporary societies which exert control over pregnant people and their bodies.[11] As Valerius puts it, "Even for a woman who welcomes pregnancy…the experience may produce anxiety, fear, and ambivalence towards her own body, particularly if she is worried about the outcome of her pregnancy" (119). Both stories, then, enter into the conversation of reproductive rights from a place that is less directly about wanting or not wanting to be pregnant, but rather about the pregnant person's body and the other ways in which their bodies are controlled by those around them, particularly men and doctors. Whereas *Rosemary's Baby* entered into pre-Roe V. Wade America, though, *Delicate Condition* enters into the conversation in a Post-Roe V. Wade climate in which women's reproductive rights have once again been up for legislative debate and other reproductive technologies, such as IVF, have also been called into question. As *Rosemary's Baby* discusses reproductive rights and dynamics within marriage from the perspective of 1960s America, *Delicate Condition* is the feminist update to the story. One aspect of this that cannot be overlooked is who is writing these stories. While *Delicate Condition* was written by a woman who has experienced pregnancy, miscarriage, and birth, both versions of *Rosemary's Baby* were written by men, who see these parts of reproduction from a removed distance, which informs their writing and how the protagonist Rosemary and her experiences are depicted.

Delicate Condition follows Anna, a 39-year-old actress who dearly wants to build a family with her husband, Dex. Due to her difficulties with pregnancy, Anna has begun the process of IVF, which has already been shown to be difficult and, until now, unsuccessful. She suspects that someone is trying to sabotage her attempts at pregnancy, but no one, not even Dex,

[11] In *Rosemary's Baby*, Rosemary wants to have a baby with her husband, Guy, but is drugged for the ceremony in which she is impregnated by the devil. Her pregnancy, while having resulted from a violation of her body, is one that she decides she wants.

believes her. At long last, Anna and Dex are pleasantly surprised to find that the most recent round of IVF has worked, and Anna is finally pregnant. While cryptic messages from someone whom Anna believes to be her stalker continue, she attempts to balance her idealized family life and her career. Anna's happy image of a family is shattered when she is brought to the hospital and informed that she has had a miscarriage, but she is not so sure. Her pregnancy symptoms continue in increasingly worrying ways, but Dex and her doctor refuse to listen, and Anna is left to question her sanity. Then, Anna discovers that Dex is cheating on her as a result of the failures of the IVF treatments and, upon confronting him, goes into labor. A car wreck kills Dex and leaves Anna at the hands of a coven that is working a spell, to her surprise, to save her and the baby. At the hospital, Anna learns more about the coven and that many of the people she had previously seen as threats to her pregnancy, such as her ultrasound technician and even her stalker, were working to control and manipulate her pregnancy in order for it to be carried out to labor. Her closest friend, Siobhan, a source of comfort and a safe place from Anna's otherwise isolated circumstances, had died in order to save her baby from the miscarriage as she convinced the coven to bring it back to life. One of the coven members, Olympia, visits Anna at the hospital after her daughter is born to explain the intentions of the coven and asks Anna to join them. Anna joins the coven with her baby to help other women in IVF support groups.

Similarly to the previously mentioned horror novels, *The Haunting of Hill House* by Shirley Jackson and *The Shining* by Stephen King, *Delicate Condition* draws inspiration from Valentine's personal experiences. While there is not extensive biographical information about Valentine, as there is for both King and Jackson, Valentine provides autobiographical information as it relates to the novel in her author's note at the end of the novel. She opens her author's note:

> At *Delicate Condition*'s inception, I was seven months pregnant with my first child. This was my second pregnancy, my first had ended in a devastating miscarriage but, otherwise, I had no major complications, no genetic scares and my daughter arrived within a day of her due date, healthy and perfect, after a mere ten minutes of pushing. Even my miscarriage was about as standard as it was possible to be, occurring early in my first trimester, the symptoms textbook. I'm, perhaps, the last person who has a right to complain about pregnancy. And yet, I was shocked by how difficult miscarriage was, both mentally and physically, not to mention how difficult a perfectly average pregnancy could be. (406)

Here, Valentine is giving us insight into the fact that her personal experiences really did inform her writing, adding a layer to the novel as we understand it as it now feels more grounded in reality. She later writes, "Drafting this book has been a cathartic experience for me, allowing me to put all my fears on the page, but there's not an easy or even a clear solution…But I hope that all pregnant people will read this book and feel seen. I hope that men will read this book and feel a little less comfortable with women's suffering" (409-410). Here, in contrast to the previously discussed novels, we are told directly from the author her intentions in writing this novel and what the author hopes to communicate through her usage of the horror genre. Of course, the reader and author must meet half way to create a new reading and interpretation of the novel, as I will be demonstrating. However, the admission that this novel was written with the particular intention for Valentine to experience the catharsis through writing as well as what she hopes we gain through reading the novel is noteworthy. It illuminates the lens through which the novel 'should' be read. This poses an interesting problem regarding authorship theory, as the audience is told directly the meaning and context of the novel. While the afterword of the novel provides

some deeper insight into the circumstances under which the novel was written and, therefore, allows the reader to look at particular uses of horror traditions, tropes, and conventions as tools in order to communicate the critiques offered by Valentine, it could seem that it does not allow much room for individual interpretation. However, readers are still bound to develop their own readings of the novel as they will relate to it through their individual lenses based on their personal experiences, and the novel must still be analyzed in regards to how it fits within the larger horror genre. If anything, the direct connection made between the fictional events of *Delicate Condition* and Valentine's personal life within the afterword insists that Valentine's work is personal and has a strong link to the biographical. I will be applying this knowledge, in addition to the sociological contexts I will be providing, to inform my presentation of this novel as it finds its place in the American horror genre.

What sets *Delicate Condition* apart from the other novels explained in this thesis is largely the presentation of the supernatural forces at play. While *The Haunting of Hill House* and *The Shining* are located in Gothic-like haunted spaces with ghosts to force their protagonists to confront their pasts, *Delicate Condition* has no haunted houses or ghosts to do this. Instead, as in *Rosemary's Baby*, the supernatural force takes the form of a coven of witches and their spell work. Throughout the novel, Anna resides in two places, her apartment in New York City, and her friend Talia's house near the beach, where she and Dex move as her fears surrounding her pregnancy intensify. The move to Talia's house away from New York City provides a similar sense of isolation that is characteristic of the traditional haunted house. After her miscarriage, Anna walks the halls of Talia's house and notes that, "the hall was dark, Talia's family staring at us from photographs lining the walls, their still eyes seeming to follow wherever I went, like the house itself was tracking my movements" (Valentine 112). Valentine is able to provide a heavy

and unsettling atmosphere. When Lukić writes, "Although many of the presented houses [....] do not necessarily follow the aesthetic qualities of the mansard house, mostly due to its overly popular and even comic representation within contemporary popular culture, the sense of isolation and abandonment remains" (102), he is referring to haunted houses in the horror and Gothic genres and their conventional physicality and purposes. However, he explains that, despite the houses' presentations, "the sense of isolation and abandonment remain[s]", meaning that these moods within the house are more important than the physical house itself. Valentine uses these isolated and abandoned feelings common to the Gothic haunted house while still maintaining her more contemporary story as it revolves around supernatural forces separate from ghosts and hauntings. So, while the house itself is not haunted and has no supernatural essence of its own, the estranged feeling of being in a house that is not one's own still adds an isolated and uneasy feeling. Being a stranger to the house one is living in may also make those temporarily living in the space feel less comfortable or autonomous, adding to the eerie feeling Anna is already experiencing. The lack of autonomy is a theme that is consistent throughout the novel and is demonstrated to both Anna and the reader in numerous ways.

Instead of a haunting forcing protagonists to face their dark pasts and confront the issues present within their family structure, *Delicate Condition* presents its readers with the supernatural force of a coven of witches to convey its underlying critiques of its contemporary society. Typically in horror, witches have come to represent a monstrous feminine energy often linked with evil and seduction. Barbara Creed explains the character of 'the witch' as, "usually depicted as a monstrous figure with supernatural powers and a desire for evil. Her other social functions as a healer and seer has largely been omitted from contemporary portrayals" (75). Even in *Delicate Condition*'s predecessor, *Rosemary's Baby*, the monster that is manipulating

Rosemary and her pregnancy is a coven of witches. Their evil portrayal in modern and contemporary horror have contributed to witches being something to be feared and associated with sexuality, control, and power, rather than their initial roles in their societies as the "healer and seer". Danielle Valentine takes the readers' expectations for the witches in *Delicate Condition* to be evil and manipulative and subverts them, complicating the portrayal of evil and control in her novel. This complication stems from the idea that, while the coven in *Delicate Condition* did cause Anna physical harm and remind her of her loss of autonomy through their spells, their end goal was to help her with her miscarriage, rather than to harm her. In a conversation between Anna and Olympia, a member of the coven, after Anna has given birth, Olympia explains that each of the things that Anna thought had been put in place to hurt her was actually to help such as the herbal cookies being meant to help with her hallucinations or the dolls she had found being meant to draw the pain away from the supernatural pregnancy (390). She then tells Anna, "'It never should've been this painful, Anna. I'm so sorry. I wish you hadn't gone through it alone. The rest of us should've been there to help you'" (391) as a way to express their otherwise well-meaning intentions and remorse for her suffering through the terrifying and horrific pregnancy she went through due to the spell they had to complete to bring Anna's baby back from the dead.

After having asserted the coven's intentions and removing them as the black-and-white antagonists of the story, instead placing them as a morally gray entity, Valentine further complicates the idea of the story's antagonist as a way to fully critique contemporary America's treatment of pregnant people, particularly women. She does this when Anna asserts that her other doctor, Doctor Hill, had been trying to help her through her pregnancy and Olympia challenges her by asking,

> "Did she? Or did she ignore you when what you were saying wasn't convenient? Dr. Hill might have personally meant you no harm, but she's part of a system that regularly ignores women and other marginalized people. Think about it, Anna. Did Dr. Hill listen to you when you told her you were in pain? Have any of your doctors listened to you?" (Valentine 391)

Olympia's line of questioning and Anna's subsequent reflection on these questions speak to a pattern of behaviors often enacted by the medical community within the branch of obstetrics of not listening to women's claims about their bodies in regards to pregnancy. Carol A. Stabile explains the tendency within obstetrics which largely, "dismiss[es] women's experience and knowledge of their bodies" (193) and trust that the medical technologies are more trustworthy than what the women are describing in their experiences. Valentine writes her characters' discussion surrounding this idea blatantly as a way to directly bring these behaviors within medicine to the forefront of her readers' minds and, therefore, creates a new and nuanced antagonist within the medical community. While Olympia tells Anna that her doctor, "'might have personally meant you no harm," she still places her within the system that allows pregnant patients to suffer. Similarly to the witches, Anna's doctors did not mean her direct harm, but their actions separate them from the witches in their refusals to listen or believe what Anna was relaying to them about what she was going through. This places the medical community, while not in a position of evil, in a place to be critiqued for their often patriarchal practices. While these institutions, ideally, work to solve problems concerning the body, horror uses the body to work through social problems.

Horror has long been referred to as a 'body genre' by critics such as Carol Clover and Linda Williams. Clover explains horror as being a 'body genre,' "Thus in horror-film circles,

"good" means scary, specifically in a bodily way (ads promise shivers, chills, shudders, tingling of the spine [...] The target is in both cases the body, our witnessing body" (189)[12]. Clover refers to horror films in her analyses of horror as a 'body genre,' yet this also holds true in horror literature as well, as horror literature also elicits similar physical responses in readers, but does this through words on a page, rather than visuals and sound in film. Horror, as a body genre, elicits bodily reactions as it is consumed by the audience, whether by reading or watching. In the subgenre, what is referred to as 'body horror' by many, the physical body becomes a vehicle for the fears, anxieties, and physical reactions elicited in the readers in horror stories. The definition of 'body horror' as a subgenre has undergone many changes and much debate amongst horror film critics. Despite the lack of a standard definition, 'body horror' is often described as being associated with the fear surrounding "'one's own body of how one controls and relates to it'" and a defamiliarization and violation of the human body (Dudenhoeffer 7). Some critics have also discussed 'body horror' in relation to the monsters of horror and their physical representations, but for this chapter, I will be focusing on the previously mentioned associations. For instance, the audience of the film *Rosemary's Baby* experience horror as a body genre, as their heart rates increase through tense and horrifying scenes, but also experience 'body horror,' as much of the fear they experience drives from Rosemary's physical sensations and the precariousness of her pregnancy throughout the film. Horror remains a body genre, but body horror forces the audience to focus more specifically on what the physical body experiences. While body horror is often used in film, Valentine uses moments of body horror in her novel to not only create a sense for

[12] The "both cases" that Clover is referring to here is that of horror and pornography, as both are considered to be 'body genres', each eliciting different types of physical responses from audience members, however, the focus here remains on horror as a 'body genre'.

the readers of physical sympathy for Anna, but also to demonstrate particular commentaries regarding the treatment of the conversations surrounding pregnancy both socially and medically.

One of the most commonly discussed symptoms of pregnancy is cravings, which Anna is no stranger to. In multiple instances, after she believes the baby is still alive after her miscarriage, Anna finds herself looking at a raccoon that had died at the bottom of the drained pool behind Talia's house and finds herself craving the meat. To resist the temptation, "I clenched my eyes shut and forced myself to breathe through my mouth so I wouldn't smell him. But that intoxicating scent made its way into my mouth and down my throat. My stomach rumbled" (183). These cravings grow stronger when Anna sees a cat. She describes the cat's scent as, " like the smell of the richest stew boiling on the stove, all simmering onions and meat and tomato sauce…Saliva filled my mouth. My heart started beating faster. As though sensing it was in danger the cat looked up at me, tensing. It knew something was wrong finally. But it was too late" (303). Then, the next chapter begins: "I slept deeply that night, the kind of all-consuming sleep that I hadn't experienced since I was a little kid on Christmas day, my belly full of ham and mashed potatoes" (304), implying that she has succumbed to these grotesque cravings. The sensory descriptions, between the scent of the cat and the feelings of satisfaction she gained from eating it produce the physical reaction associated with horror as a body genre. Readers can relate to and imagine the smells and satisfaction and then imagine these in relation to what has occurred on the pages, making it both physically evocative and repulsive.

The repulsiveness evoked from this scene paints a more nuanced picture of pregnancy cravings and the feelings that may accompany them for pregnant people, asserting that even the more common symptoms of pregnancy are not enjoyable. Anna's description of her feelings in the night after she is assumed to have eaten the cat as experiencing an "all-consuming sleep" and

relating her feeling of fullness with her "belly full of ham and mashed potatoes" mirrors the way one would experience when they have eaten to excess. The more extreme feeling of fullness and satisfaction that Anna feels adds to the horror experienced by readers as the protagonist is satisfied by the act. The excess followed by her deep sleep seems almost gluttonous. In satiating her body by feeding her cravings, Anna is pushing against the state of purity which is also associated with the creation occurring during pregnancy. As Anna moves away from the purity associated with pregnancy, she also moves closer to the coven, since she is giving into the cravings created by their spell. With Anna's rejection of purity, in combination with the implied act of devouring a cat, Valentine makes the pregnant body one full of need, rather than one of purity and, therefore, represents a more natural idea of pregnancy than the highly idealized image of what pregnancy should look like. While craving the cat is a much dramatized scene, Valentine is able to communicate to her audience a natural feeling of craving often weird or gross food combinations that many pregnant people experience. By having her protagonist move closer to the witchcraft for help and leaning into the more natural rhythms of her pregnancy, Valentine has communicated a more revisionist and feminist statement on the often female-led practice of witchcraft as being more helpful than the patriarchal obstetrics branch of medicine.

Additionally, Dex tries to make Anna drink smoothies to give her body nutrients through the later stages of her pregnancy, despite her body telling her as directly as it can what it needs from her. The contradiction between what she wants or needs to eat and what she is being told to eat is a common one often seen when pregnant people are told by their doctors what diets to follow, which often come off as controlling. While her husband and doctors stress what they believe she needs, Anna must then rely on herself to give her body what it actually needs. Not only does Anna's eating habits comment on society's tendency to rely on medical technology

and information, rather than the pregnant person's body, but it also comments on the isolation created by Anna having to rely on herself to give her body what it needs when others will not listen or consider her knowledge of her own body. The way Anna is treated by her doctor and husband evokes moments from *Rosemary's Baby* as well, such as when Rosemary's doctor tries to continue to make medical suggestions for her and the baby's wellbeing, despite the issue of her health during the pregnancy originating from the pregnancy itself with the spell the cult worked, and when a member of the cult gives Rosemary smoothies that are supposedly good for her pregnancy as a means to control her. In both instances, the pregnant woman is being told how to take care of her body, rather than being allowed or trusted to know what her body needs. Anna's and Rosemary's mirrored experiences relate to the previously mentioned idea by Carol A. Stabile that doctors do not trust what a pregnant woman may know about her body and, instead, rely on their medical knowledge and technologies. The food that pregnant people are told to and not to eat is also a way that control is often exerted over pregnant people, instead of being trusted to know what their body does and does not need. When Valentine writes that Anna has given into her craving and is less interested in the smoothies Dex is giving her, she is becoming a more active participant in her pregnancy, rather than being compliant. Anna's resistance against her husband and doctor also reinforces the novel's stance as feminist in its topics surrounding reproductive health, particularly for women.

While the level of her cravings are multiplied by the coven's spell, Anna is not warned of these symptoms in the same way that many women are not fully warned before they become pregnant. Anna's cravings make the reality of pregnancy symptoms more unpleasant and even horrific. Other symptoms Anna experiences, though dramatized to create the sensations of body horror, shed light on symptoms that people are often not warned about before they begin. In one

scene, Anna gets out of bed and sees what she describes as "*scales*," only to realize, "It was *me*. There were no scales that had been a trick of the light. A rash covered my legs. The skin was sunburn red and raised, as thick as a callus, and it was everywhere, covering my legs" (Valentine 305-306). She describes that it "looked nothing like skin was supposed to look. It was deeply strange, bright red and thick. It didn't itch, but when I ran my hand over it, it felt coarse as sandpaper, bits of skin flaking away. The feeling of my hand brushing over the skin felt muffled, as if that red-scaled leg belonged to someone else" (Valentine 307). The description being so detailed is an example of the way body horror creates sensory-heavy descriptions to illustrate what the character is experiencing. In focusing on the details of this rash, Valentine uses body horror to make her readers able to imagine this physical experience for Anna, so that they can relate to the emotions Anna explains feeling during this. She explains her feelings as "horror and disgust and horror again" (Valentine 306), as she endures these terrifying symptoms. In her author's note, Valentine explains, "No one tells you your skin can get so dry it cracks…Why don't doctors tell women about these symptoms?" (406). When this idea of the unexpected dry skin is examined in comparison to the scene in which Anna discovers the rash, the connection between the two seems to become more apparent. Valentine highlights the rash to the degree of physical horror that she does to demonstrate the shock and fear many women may experience when they are not warned about these strange symptoms of pregnancy. In doing this, Valentine brings the shock and fear many pregnant people feel during this time to the forefront of the reader's mind and forces them to sit with the discomfort as they read. Anna even goes so far as to explain, "As if all of me (my skin, my cravings, my thoughts) had somewhere along the line slipped out of my control. My own body had become completely alien to me" (307), demonstrating how out of control and "alien" a pregnant person's body can feel to them in

experiencing these symptoms. The way Anna experiences these symptoms also seems to serve as a reminder to her that her body truly is not in her control, whether that is because symptoms cannot be fully controlled or the way in which American society continues to exert control over pregnant people's bodies through suggestions and comments about how to maintain their bodies throughout their pregnancy.

After her miscarriage, Anna still believes she is pregnant and experiences these horrific symptoms due to the witches' spell to bring her baby back, as mentioned before. One of the scarier aspects of this moment within the novel is not just her symptoms, but also that she is ultimately alone in her experiences. As her isolation within her experiences is a given, as Dex cannot experience this with her, he and the other doctors are also not sympathetic or willing to believe Anna's retellings of these experiences. When Anna initially feels fetal movement after her miscarriage, she calls her doctor, Doctor Crawford, to ask if there was a possibility that the miscarriage was misdiagnosed. Doctor Crawford tries to tell her this may be in her mind and when Anna questions what he is insinuating, he says, "'I never said *hysterical* [...] What I was going to say before you got so upset is that I'd be happy to help you find a psychotherapist. If you decide to pursue the pseudocyesis diagnosis once you calm down, please let me know'" (Valentine 172). Here, Doctor Crawford questions whether she is telling the truth or if she may be imagining the fetal movement she felt as a result of other causes more easily explained by medical science, but also plants seeds of doubt in the readers' minds as to how much of what Anna is experiencing is real. In addition to creating doubt surrounding Anna's tellings of her experiences, Doctor Crawford also diminishes Anna's feelings and belittles her, saying that he will help once she calms down, writing her off as the stereotypical emotional woman. Dex also

questions whether Anna is a reliable source of information on her own body, making her seem untrustworthy as a narrator to both him and Doctor Crawford and to the audience.

The idea of an unreliable or untrustworthy female is not new to the horror genre. Nina K. Martin writes within the context of horror films, though also applicable to literary horror, that

> This distrust frames the female protagonist as always potentially unreliable as a source of identification. These films also demand that the heroine's authority be tested and questioned by characters within the diegesis principally by their husband, who constantly give them concerned looks and ask them if they are taking their medication. Such tests solidify the filmic dread tied to spectatorial distrust of these female protagonists. (129)

This common theme of the "unreliable" female protagonist within film can be applied to novels as well. There is a distinction here to make between "protagonist" and "narrator". While films cannot have a narrator, as the camera is telling the story, novels must establish both a narrator and a protagonist. In *Delicate Condition,* Anna acts as both the narrator and the protagonist, meaning that the readers must initially grapple with the idea of an unreliable narrator as their protagonist, especially given that, as Martin suggests, horror often poses women as untrustworthy. The question of reliability is reflective of both *Delicate Condition* and *Rosemary's Baby*, but in different ways, as Rosemary is the female protagonist, but Anna serves as both the protagonist and the narrator of her novel (she is not the narrator in the novel, which was written in third person). When the film *Rosemary's Baby* was released in 1968, "more than one reviewer of the film dismissed Rosemary as delusional and classified the plot as a paranoid fantasy" (Valerius 120). This consistent distrust for the female protagonist which led the audience of *Rosemary's Baby* to actually believe that the coven's plot against Rosemary was no more than a paranoid delusion is something that Valentine turns on its head. While Anna is left

by her doctors and Dex to believe that the baby's return is a delusion brought upon by grief, Valentine forces these moments into reality for the "concerned" husband character that Martin refers to. The film *Rosemary's Baby* allowed for viewers to believe Guy over Rosemary[13]; by contrast, Valentine proves her heroine trustworthy and reliable. Anna forces Dex to feel her stomach where she has claimed to feel the movements from her baby and "Inside me, something twisted. It was subtle, subtle enough that Dex might not have felt it. But he went still, his eyes widening. 'What was that?'... More movement, a tumling, motion sickness-inducing motion" followed by her describing Dex's voice as "high-pitched, hopeful" once he realizes she was telling the truth and their baby is alive (Valentine 200-201). Here, Valentine takes the often problematic tendency for both literature and films of horror to make both characters and, in turn, the audience, doubt the female protagonist and subverts it by solidifying Anna as not only genuine but also correct, and therefore reliable in her retellings of her experiences. This forces the audience to, as the novel continues and her symptoms grow in intensity, believe her narration of these experiences and feel as though we can reasonably trust her as a narrator. This confirms the claim about the novel being a "feminist update" of the story of *Rosemary's Baby*, as the female protagonist is left empowered as a trusted source of information for readers. In addition to this, Dex's distrust in Anna being shown to be misplaced also pushes against the narrative that pregnant women cannot be trusted to know or understand what is happening within their own bodies that is often pushed by American society, particularly within the medical community and obstetrics.

Even after Dex knows Anna really is still pregnant, he dismisses many of her experiences as being in her head and unrealistic, refusing to listen to his wife that there is something wrong

[13] Valerius refers more to the response from the 1968 film, rather than the novel in terms of reliability of the characters.

with the pregnancy, as Anna believes there to be. In one instance, Anna narrates, "my belly bulged, and then I felt a blistering pierce of something barbed splitting my flesh. Something black appeared, small and burrowing out of my skin like an insect" (Valentine 274-275), which naturally horrifies her and her screaming alerts Dex. While this is explained later to have been a hallucination due to the spell that was cast on Anna, Dex does not believe anything has occurred at all, and dismisses her. He says, "'I still don't understand why you were screaming like that'" (277), not trusting in what Anna has told him and, instead, treating her fear like an inconvenience to him. These continuous dismissals cause Anna to begin to doubt herself. She thinks to herself: "the worst part was that it made me doubt everything else I'd experienced [...] What if none of it happened? Or, if it had happened, what if it hadn't happened like I'd thought it had? What if my brain was tricking me, making things seem different that they were in reality?" (Valentine 278), casting more doubt as to what is real and not for the reader. Since the novel is written in first-person, the readers get a closer, more personal look at Anna's questioning of reality in the face of not being trusted by anyone around her, even her husband. The point of view of the novel, then, allows readers to experience the distrust almost for themselves, creating more tension and, therefore, communicating the breakdown of trust within the home and isolation as a way to magnify the anxiety these scenes produce.

The horror produced through the novel is not just from its more obviously 'horror' moments, but also from the dynamic which plays between Anna and Dex that leaves Anna further isolated and alone. Towards the end of the novel, when Anna discovers that Dex is cheating on her, we are let into her innermost thoughts and feelings as she explains, "my blood was racing hard and fast through my veins. It made me feel like a live wire, one spark and I'd explode. He…he *cheated* on me… And it wasn't a one-time thing. He *really* cheated. He brought

her into our *home*" (Valentine 333). Cheating is not a tradition used within the horror genre to elicit fear but here in Anna's thoughts, the otherwise dramatic situation becomes scarier as she stresses the woman's invasion on their home as well as the intensity of her emotions. While the intensity seems to be what makes this moment of truth so horrific as it adds to the already-present anxieties the more fantastical horrors have produced, Dex's cheating adds to Anna's feeling of abandonment and lack of safety within the home, the place we are meant to feel our safest and most secure. What is scary about this situation is not the same fear that is elicited during moments of body horror, when Anna has lost autonomy and is subjected to the physical symptoms she experiences. Rather, "what is terrifying is often that which is most familiar: we fear potential disruption to our security of self, of place, and of relationships" (Wisker 2). In other words, Dex's cheating peels away yet another layer of safety for Anna and furthers her feelings of isolation during a time in which the safety of the home is something that should be expected more. Additionally, it is not every day we are met with witches, spells, or ghosts, but anyone we decide to begin a life with, as Anna had chosen to start her life with Dex, can cheat and abandon. This fear is a very real fear for most people and, so, when it is added to the fantastical horrors presented within *Delicate Condition*, the security of the home is shown to be truly absent from Anna's marriage.

The last chapter of *Delicate Condition* is titled, "Lena Kayne, Many, Many Years Later" and introduces a new perspective, that of Lena Kayne, a reluctant new member of an IVF support group (Valentine 400). Here, she meets Anna, who is now much older and her daughter is fully grown. When they meet, Lena confides in Anna about her stress regarding her PCOS diagnosis and confusion, to which Anna replies, "'I understand…but you might be surprised by what finding the right support can do. I found an amazing group of women right after the birth of my

daughter, and they've become lifelong friends. Maybe something similar can happen to you'" (Valentine 404). The novel concludes with Anna offering one of the magic cookies to Lena. These cookies, which were once something that created intense anxiety for Anna as she did not know who was leaving them for her, have now become a way for Anna to extend a sort of olive branch and to offer comfort to women in similar positions as she was in the beginning of the novel. As Anna has either joined the coven or continues to work closely with them, Valentine yet again subverts our expectations as they have been set up for us by other horror stories both in literature and film. Ruth Goldberg claims, "horror narratives respond to the unconscious conflicts within the family, which is often depicted as confronting changing societal values and structures. The encounter with the monstrous element has the potential to restore the human family to balance" (103). In other words, confronting the monster or supernatural being can create balance in the family that was once disturbed, though this balance seems to be found by disrupting the nuclear family and relying on less traditional family dynamics. The expectation for the protagonist to have to confront or even prevail over the monstrous element of its film, or in this case the novel, is what allows the protagonist to restore their family to balance. Instead, however, Valentine uses what would be assumed to be "the monstrous element", the witches, as the social solution for Anna. Instead of Anna having to, in some way or another, prevail over or escape the coven, she finds comfort and a new type of home with them. As Goldberg explains, in horror films, this return to balance also requires, "a return to more traditional family structures and values" (103). Valentine pushes against this, ending her novel with Anna turning to what may be considered the unconventional domestic structure. Rather than finding her balance within a traditional form of domestic life, Anna's balance is returned to her through single motherhood and this strong connection to the coven, which then acts as her support system, rather than a

spouse. In this way, the supernatural and unconventional is the protagonist's way out. Valentine, then, seems to be asserting to her readers that the unconventional family structure is an acceptable way of life for women who need support. In the coven being composed of women, Valentine also asserts the necessity for women to create bonds with and to support each other.

Danielle Valentine's novel *Delicate Condition* enters into the conversation about reproduction and family planning from a feminist perspective that utilizes horror to shock readers into paying attention to the otherwise silenced discussion about the feminine body and pregnancy. The novel is very explicitly inspired by the biographical, as Valentine has stated in her author's note what the novel is about and the message that she wishes to convey in regards to the patriarchal branch of obstetrics and its continuous oppression of pregnant people throughout pregnancy, whether that is through a lack of communication before pregnancy symptoms occur or simply not trusting pregnant people to be in touch with the changes that are occurring in their own bodies. This does, though, still leave room for some interpretation, especially concerning how the novel relates to the wider genre of horror and its usage of the genre's conventions to make these points. Valentine uses body horror as well as psychological horror to create fear and anxieties to bring more attention to the topics at hand. The final chapter of the novel offers the imagined social solution of gender minorities supporting each other under the patriarchal aspects of society that continue to prevail in these contemporary times. Valentine also uses Anna's ending to suggest that unconventional living situations, such as single motherhood or creating a tight-knit group of support rather than remarrying, is also an option that may provide some relief to women and their children.

The novel's significance within its wider genre is found in its demonstration that the horror genre, which has historically been considered to be a low art form because of its often

being categorized as a body genre, is worthy of critical thought and shows psychological and sociological depth. This is not just a horror novel that happens to comment on the shortcomings of society as it deals with reproductive health and family planning. Valentine uses the conventions and traditions within the genre to make the point, rather than them being two separate entities within the novel – each moment of horror contributes to the novel's critique on the way our society treats family planning. There is also significance to what is being said in the novel regarding reproductive health and practices. Valentine is able to use body horror and witches not only to scare and create discomfort within her audience but also to use those moments of fear and discomfort to communicate her critiques of America's practices surrounding reproduction. She opens the usually closed conversations regarding pregnancy and pregnancy loss and puts them out in the open to be read and understood by a larger audience that may previously have not been able to speak about or even understand the issues that she brings to the forefront of our attention. In her discussion of miscarriage, Layne refers to Foucault's "triple edict of modern puritanism- 'taboo, nonexistence, and silence'" (291) as a way to describe the silence created in the consideration of miscarriage as "taboo". The words "taboo, nonexistence, and silence" can be attributed to much of the conversation regarding pregnancy, reproduction, and family planning. However, Valentine uses *Delicate Condition* and its moments of horror to open the conversation that the social taboo closes for many who are silenced or not heard. The novel's ability to do so may point to horror's ability to continue to open these conversations in shocking and uncomfortable ways to make lasting impacts on how we view social problems in the future.

Conclusion

The horror genre has long been considered to be a low-brow genre of literature, largely due to its classification as a body genre and its focus on shock and its ability to invoke fear and anxiety in its readers. The genre's consideration of being a low-brow genre also suggests a lack of psychological and sociological depth and usefulness. However as examined in this thesis, the horror genre seems to be one of sophistication with much to say about the world. While the horror genre does elicit bodily reactions through moments of shock and terror, it is these moments that horror authors use to communicate their commentaries and critiques to their readers. The very aspects of the horror genre that classify it as a body genre are what make it psychologically and socially relevant. Authors like Jackson and King call back to the Gothic genre in their usage of the haunted house to drive tensions and comment on the state of the American nuclear family. They use blood, fear, isolation, and ghosts to reach into their readers' anxieties and force them to sit with physical and psychological discomfort. This is not for naught. Rather, this brings the authors' proposed problems to the forefront of our attention and makes us more actively engaged with the anxieties of our world. What seems to set the horror genre apart from other similar genres, like science fiction, crime fiction, or thrillers, seems to be its willingness to cross boundaries. The horror genre regularly crosses the boundaries both in terms of what forces are at play, such as ghosts, demons, witches, and pure evil and boundaries of the body in terms of control over one's body and violations enacted on the body in order to elicit physical responses from the audience. Authors like Valentine take the body genre to another level, using body horror and gross-out horror to create sympathy for the protagonists, creating stronger attachments to the character and commenting on the way their society (and therefore ours) treats people in their conditions. In addition to creating sympathy for the

protagonists, horror authors' use of body horror elicits physical visceral responses to the presented horrors and force readers' attention to the problem at hand. Each of these authors, while writing within the horror genre in their own time and style, all use the traditions of the genre, as they hail from the Gothic genre, to create a sense of defamiliarization around the domestic sphere, opening a conversation about domestic life and forcing the reader into an estranged perspective from their own to gain a new perspective on domesticity in America.

These novels also prompt us to call into question the relationship between authorship and biography. While literature is open to individual interpretation once it is published to the public, the novels that have been examined in this thesis are linked to their authors' biographies, whether through similarities between the authors' lives and their characters, or if the authors have more explicitly stated this link. While Shirley Jackson's *The Haunting of Hill House* seems to echo her life, as explained through biographical information, Stephen King has come out to explain that *The Shining* was unknowingly influenced by his struggles with alcoholism in the 1970s, making his connection to the novel more retrospective than intentional. Danielle Valentine stands out among these three, as she has the most explicitly stated that her novel *Delicate Condition* was written with her own experiences with pregnancy, miscarriage, and birth in mind in order to bring American society's treatment of pregnant people to her readers' attention. This may allow for less interpretation as to the meaning of the novel overall, but still leaves room for the readers to interpret scenes and the craft of the novel to their own ideas as well as leaving open the examination for how *Delicate Condition* fits within its genre. Valentine's explicit explanation of her novel suggests that the future of horror novels, and therefore possibly the future novels of many other literary genres, lies within the autobiographical, in which authors may have more of a voice in regards to the interpretations of their novels. I think that this possible trajectory is an

interesting one. On one hand, it may allow for authors, such as authors within the horror genre, to more explicitly utilize the genre and its conventions to work through posed and imagined problems that mirror or evoke some real life issues in a more open and direct way. On the other hand, however, this change may pose questions to the roles that authors and readers play in the production of a text and its meaning and authors may have to find more ways to force readers into a more active role as they read. If readers are no longer reading to interpret or relate to a text on a more individual level, much of their role has been contradicted. In order for this change to occur and remain a good thing, I believe that there still must be some room for interpretation left to the reader or some tension between the line of biography and fiction in which the author may explicitly communicate the purpose of their writing, yet allow some room for readers to be active participants in the text. It should be stated that readers may still interpret a text as they will, regardless of any explanation or context provided by the author. Still, though, Valentine's more explicit explanation for her novel has the potential to limit readers' variations of interpretations of her novel and if this is pushed farther, such limits may also be imposed on some readers.

The future of the horror genre, though unknown, seems to be progressing socially to search for social solutions for the very issues the genre has historically confronted. As we have seen through the evolution of the genre beginning in post-World War II and ending within the post-Roe era, horror literature has become increasingly concerned in not just pointing out the social issues that affect individuals within our society, but also with imagining solutions to these problems. While works of fiction cannot literally propose solutions to the issues they explore, they can pose these issues within a fictional world and express a desire to solve these problems. The imagined solutions allow for the conversation surrounding the author's critique to permit readers to think through these problems as they may present in the real world. While these

solutions are not meant to be taken literally, we can still learn from what they may symbolize or suggest, as well as open the conversations surrounding more taboo topics. As Shirley Jackson pointed to the women who are often doomed by the patriarchal domestic expectations placed upon them, Danielle Valentine suggests that women support each other and find a support system separate from those who continue to feed into the patriarchy's beliefs and attitudes. While Valentine's imagined solution involves joining a coven of witches for this support, there is still weight to her desire for a real solution that can be translated – by the reader – into the idea of alternative support systems. Again, though I cannot begin to claim full certainty in the trajectory of the horror genre as it continues to progress, I believe that the genre will continue to comment on the issues that face our society in ways that force its readers to listen, as well as grow in its ability to allow authors to discuss more taboo issues, bringing them into the open out of their silence and then to propose resolutions to fix the problems at hand.

The horror genre, due to its ability to physically affect its readers through the crossing of boundaries, feels uniquely fit to continue to comment on the problems of the home. In evoking discomfort within its readers, horror is able to force us to ask ourselves why we feel such discomfort and why horror authors have decided to create discomfort within certain scenes of their novels. Regardless of the trajectory of the American horror genre, I do not doubt that the genre will continue to offer critiques of our society by uniquely defamiliarizing what is closest to us and terrorizing us to our cores.

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