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Queer And Gender Theory In Relation Io Theodora And Eleanor

Shirley Jackson's *Haunting of Hill House* tells a story of three people who are chosen by a doctor to reside in Hill House. The story inspects the nature of this house, characterizing it while exploring the relationships built between the individuals who are temporarily inhabiting this peculiar home. According to Darryl Hattenhauer, the characters of the story can be seen in doubles, Theodora and Eleanor, Eleanor and her sister, Eleanor and the house, and so on.

Hattenhauer's theory explores the idea that Theodora and Eleanor as a double are actually just different versions of the same person; Theodora is Eleanor's mirror. However, in this this essay I will not be exploring Theodora and Eleanors relationship as two sides of the same stone, but instead investigate the intimacy and feelings implied between the two and how queer and gender theory support a version of the text where this is a possible narrative.

Queer theory is "the radical deconstruction of sexual rhetoriric" (Hopkins, *Queer Theory*, 418). There are many things that go into breaking down a text in order to dig up and find the underlying sexual rhetoric the author may be trying to convey, whether their decision to do so is intentional or subconscious. The author in and of themselves is one of the first things looked at when breaking down a text. According to Hopkins, "Feminist critiques of the representation of women in canonical male-authored texts and the rediscovery of marginalized female authors, while criticized as essentialist or humanist by later feminists and gender theorists, nevertheless made important steps in historicizing--and gendering--the supposedly neutral categories of truth,

beauty, and so on, that had been the bedrock of academic literary study..... Studies... revolutionized literary criticism and established gender as a legitimate foundation for the analysis of authorial tradition and textual reception.” (Gender Theory, 421). In this section, Hopkins explains the way criticisms have shown the importance of depicting the voice of which the story is being told from. If the *Haunting of Hill House* had been written by a man, the implication of Theodora and Eleanor’s relationship being more than platonic would not be a possibility because of how women are represented in canonical male-authored texts. The reality of the author being female poses a queer relationship as a possibility because of the implication; due to the way women are socialized in our modern society, what can be read as a queer relationship through the feminine lens, can be missed to the untrained masculine eye.

One of Eleanor and Theodora’s first intimate interactions happens when they are standing outside by the veranda after a brief conversation about Mrs. Dudley when Theodora says, “‘Don’t be so afraid all the time,’ she said and reached out to touch Eleanor’s cheek with one finger.”(Jackson, 22). This occurs on the first day of the two girls meeting for only maybe a couple of hours and they are already connecting on a physical level. These brief moments of minor intimacies continue when the two are startled by something in the grass, “Frozen, shoulders pressed together... ‘What is it?’ Eleanor said... and Theodora put a strong hand on her wrist.”(Jackson, 24). Jackson picks her words carefully when depicting this moment and choosing which moments to hone in on. In Hopkins reading, he states, “Queer theory rejects any notion of stable identity and instead pursues the spectacular though often vigorously concealed and disavowed contradictions of desire with a particular interest in how such disavowal can highlight the fissures in traditional conceptions of sexual ‘normality’” (Gender and queer theory, 422). Once again, through the heteronormative masculine eye that views the world in a way that

forces on us this idea of the traditional sexual 'normality', one would perceive these moments of intimacy as predictable. Women have a reputation of being more affectionate than men, therefore any form of affection is just a feminine characteristic instead of an intimate one if not happening between a man and woman (the traditional sexual normality).

Jackson pushes the theory of Eleanor's relationship with Theodora not only with the suggestion of her feelings, but by establishing roles in their relationship. After Dr. Montague tells the group the history of Hill House, the four are sitting by the fireplace. Jackson writes, "she likes attention, Eleanor thought wisely and, without thinking, moved and sat on the floor beside Theodora." (Jackson, 39). Eleanor without thinking moves to sit beside Theodora the way a girl would for a crush. The wording does not imply it was an intentional and consciously made decision, but an act of impulsions. It is Eleanor seeking or chasing after Theodora who is leading her on. The exchange continues with, "I'm terrible aren't I?" Theodora moved quickly and put her hand over Eleanor's... 'Tell me how horrible I am.' And in the firelight her eyes shone with delight. 'You're horrible,' Eleanor said obediently." (Jackson, 39). According to Hopkins, "...some queer theorists have also been inspired by psychoanalysis's invention of the unconscious, its rich interpretive strategies, and its sophisticated theorization of connections between desire and language." (Queer Theory, 419). At this moment, the language used by Jackson implies that Eleanor is the subordinate (*'obediently'*) and Eleanor's unconscious decision making abilities to act on her feelings. Although establishing a queer relationship is outside the traditional societal norm, the relationship still follows traditional roles of the dominant or leading character and their submissive counterpart (often seen in male and female dynamics).

There are far more moments in *The Haunting of Hill House* by Shirley Jackson between Theodora and Eleanor that can be closely examined and overanalyzed. Queer and gender theory offer new perspectives and encourage the reader to not take literature just at face value the way many would when presented with a complex double like Theodora and Eleanor. Whether or not one wants to view Theodora and Eleanor's relationship as queer, there is no denying that this double definitely had something going on between them.