Introduction

The Subject of the House in Gothic Narratives

Gothic narratives have long privileged the house as one of their principal tropes. From its inception as a genre with Horace Walpole’s *The Castle of Otranto* (1764) to the latest Hollywood horror parody like *Haunted House 2* (2014), the Gothic has consistently depicted the house not only as a setting for the unspeakable, but, in less clearer terms, as a site that actually invigorates it. Arguably, that many of its narratives identify the house in the title seems to suggest that the architecture’s prominence exceeds its function as backdrop but is in fact the very thing that engenders terror. Throughout its tradition, the Gothic has consistently recognized a quality invested in domestic space that has the power to unnerve, fragment, and even destroy its inhabitant unless something is done to arrest it and restore order and normalcy back to the house. The most obvious representation of such a circumstance is, of course, the haunted house tale; leaving aside haunted house films for the moment since I will be specifically discussing them in Chapter 3 (and Chapter 4), it is evident that within the Gothic canon are numerous works that noticeably or obliquely fall within this category of narratives, including Anne Radcliffe’s *The Mysteries of Udolpho* (1794), Charlotte Perkins Gilman’s frequently anthologized “The Yellow Wallpaper” (1892), Shirley Jackson’s *The Haunting of Hill House* (1959), Toni Morrison’s *Beloved* (1988), and Sarah Water’s *The Little Stranger* (2009). A variant of the haunted house tale are stories involving an occupant or a family whose state of being cursed—usually implied and/or considered metaphorical—invariably also affects the condition of the house within which they occupy, sometimes for generations. Walpole’s
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quaint novel is arguably the precursor of this narrative type; other well-known examples include Poe’s “The Fall of the House of Usher” (1839) and, in the case of film, *The Old, Dark House* (1932).

More interestingly are Gothic narratives that feature a house whose ominousness is not the result of a curse or possession by an unseen, alien presence, but stems instead from its very own self; that is, the house is itself the very source of strangeness or anomaly, and whoever occupies it will be inevitably engulfed by its power to become part of its mysterious establishment. Examples are William Hope Hodgson’s little known *The House on the Borderland* (1908) and Mark Danielewski’s dizzying novel, *The House of Leaves* (2000). Then there are narratives whereby the articulation of menace by the house is highly indirect and thus often easily (dis)missed, because of the architecture’s seeming function as mere passive setting. Of the various narrative types mentioned thus far, this category of Gothic writing foregrounds the house most ambiguously in terms of its dialectical relationship with the subject as it fluctuates between a protective haven and a hostile space threatening her existence. Indeed, it is this Janus-faced aspect of the house that underscores Freud’s formulation of “the uncanny” (1919), the concept most often evoked in psychoanalytical exegesis of narratives with an aberrant, usually haunted, house, that he derived from reading a Gothic tale, E.T.A Hoffman’s “The Sandman” (1817). In his essay, Freud identifies a characteristic of this intimate space that contradicts the traditional view of the house as a place of refuge, comfort, and rest, for corresponding with the familiar (*heimlich*, or the homely) that promotes these signifiers of home is also the unfamiliar (*unheimlich*, or the unhomely) that directly disperses them. The uncanny, in other words, points fundamentally to a shift in terms of the relationship between the house and its inhabitant, whether this shift is paranormally induced, or the result of more mundane circumstances such as familial conflict, a crime, or an unwelcomed intrusion, the contention with private property (see Chapter 3), or even a change in housing laws. This shift, moreover, is often rarely noticed initially due to the familiarity by which one is conditioned and thus affects the occupant in subtle terms, only becoming unmistakable (usually) by the time it is too late.

It is therefore unsurprising that many Gothic works linking the supernatural to the house are susceptible to a psychoanalytical reading: the protagonist wavering between belief and disbelief as the haunting intensifies is certainly an effective metaphor for a patient struggling with irrationality as he becomes increasingly unable to differentiate between what is real and otherwise. This is especially evident in a