

# Homes for Strange Children: Shirley Jackson's Legacy in Daisy Johnson's *Sisters* (2020)

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**Homes for Strange Children:  
Shirley Jackson's Legacy in Daisy Johnson's *Sisters* (2020)**

Paige Allen

**Introduction**

It is unsurprising that the work of Daisy Johnson, particularly *Sisters* (2020), has been compared to that of Shirley Jackson. Both Jackson and Johnson write psychologically complex stories shaped by an uncanny, Gothic sensibility that explore strange houses—and the weird women within them. While Johnson's collection *Fen* (2016) features a house as alive and unnerving as Hill House, Jackson's influence on Johnson is most apparent in *Sisters*, for which Johnson was deemed “the demon offspring of Shirley Jackson and Stephen King” (Preston 2020). Early in her career, Johnson made her mark on the literary world—her first novel was shortlisted for the Booker Prize—and she became part of a broad group of contemporary women writers who reimagine Gothic forms and aesthetics for modern and global contexts. Through her engagement with uncanny domestic settings, Johnson inherits and extends a tradition that Jackson responded to and shaped anew. As Johnson writes into the space carved out by Jackson, we can see how Jackson's ideas endure and are reimagined today.

*Sisters* follows siblings July and September after an incident at their high school compels them to flee with their mother, Sheela, to a remote house. The depressed Sheela spends most of the novel in bed while the reader witnesses the intense relationship between September and July and the strange happenings of the house around them. Eventually, July faces her repressed memories: after July was publicly humiliated at school, September demanded the bullies meet her on the tennis courts. That day, a storm hit, and September was struck by lightning. July once promised her sister that if only one of them could live, it would be September. Present throughout the novel from beyond the grave, September insists on July fulfilling her promise and succeeds in possessing her sister. *Sisters* positions Johnson within the long Gothic tradition, especially the “Female Gothic” and “Domestic Gothic” traditions that Jackson shaped in the mid-twentieth century.

Johnson explicitly names Jackson as one of her influences. Johnson intended *Sisters* to be “a love letter to the horror genre” but found, as the book took shape,

the more obvious horror elements sort of melted away and what was left was a domestic menace. I think that was what I really wanted, which I suppose is stolen from Shirley Jackson; so that even as you’re making a cup of tea or sitting and watching television, there’s still that sense of tension. (quoted in Clark 2020)

This description evokes “domestic gothic,” a term L. N. Rosales uses to describe Jackson’s writings that “subvert the ordinary by uncovering the possibility of terror within the everyday domestic sphere” (2020, para. 1). Alongside this domestic menace, Johnson focuses on vexed family relationships and “trauma buried within those relationships and buried within the body” (Clark 2020). These themes reveal Jackson’s further influence on Johnson. Both authors are invested in the connections between complicated families, the domestic uncanny, and bodily experiences—core Gothic concerns.

Johnson and Jackson engage with a Gothic formula dating back to the tradition’s eighteenth-century origins: “woman-plus-habitation” (Holland and Sherman 1977, 280). This formula is especially foundational to the “Female Gothic,” a debated term used to describe Gothic stories that focus on women’s experiences and/or depict women in unhomey domestic spaces (Moers 1978; Wallace and Smith 2009). One common reading of the relationship between the woman and the Gothic house interprets the house as a “metaphor of mother-protection or mother-entrapment,” staging how “daughters, feeling both the desire to merge with the mother and the fear of entrapment, can neither leave the house nor stay in it” (Hwang 2009, 121). As Johnson’s July remarks, “it is impossible that we are here and it is impossible to stay” (2020, 13). However, Jackson and Johnson provide a twist on these formulations: the dual fears of loss and nonseparation are not presented as a daughter’s toward her mother but rather as experienced *between sisters* and *by a mother toward her children*.

This paper explores Jackson and Johnson’s Gothic intertextualities. As Susanne Becker writes, “feminine gothics are haunted houses, not only in the contextual sense of ‘experience’ but also in the intertextual sense of continuation and deconstruction of feminine textuality” (1999, 67). Through a close reading of *Sisters* alongside *The Haunting of Hill House* (1959), *We Have Always Lived in the*

*Castle* (1962),<sup>1</sup> and Jackson's nonfiction writing, we can trace Jackson's legacy within Johnson's novel and examine how *Sisters* draws upon and extends ideas from Jackson's works by staging fraught familial relationships in a strange, shifting house. Specifically attending to embodiment, Johnson writes women's houses as bodies, emphasizing the unhomely terror, not of inhabiting an uncanny space, but of being uncannily inhabited. Examining Johnson's work alongside Jackson's writings helps us recognize the continued significance of Jackson's ideas and construct a lineage of writers who employ the Gothic to explore women's experiences and stage the domestic uncanny.

### Weird Sisters

Jackson is known for writing weird women, and Johnson infuses a similar strangeness into July and September. Readers, one reviewer declares, "will not fail to be reminded of Merricat and Constance Blackwood" (Rose 2020). Just as Merricat narrates *Castle* with a distinctive, unreliable voice, July relates *Sisters* through a similarly untrustworthy perspective. Joyce Carol Oates describes Merricat as a "feral child, sulky adolescent, and Cassandra-like seer," "socially maladroit, highly self-conscious and disdainful of others" (2009, 147–48). July and September fit these descriptions; they are "different [...] from the other children at school; clever but stunted, naive, happily young" (Johnson 2020, 95). Johnson's descriptions of July and September could easily apply to Merricat and Constance: they are "isolated, uninterested, conjoined, young for their age, sometimes moved to great cruelty" (94); they "held one another inside of childhood, arms around each other, clinging on" (95). While Constance is ten years older than Merricat, her fear of people prevents her from fully entering adulthood. She, too, belongs among Jackson's "isolated and estranged hypersensitive young female protagonists," alongside *Hill House's* Eleanor (Oates 2009, 148). Like the Blackwoods, who hate and are hated by the townsfolk, and Eleanor, who grew up in a "feud with the entire neighborhood," July and September are outcasts, forced out of a hostile community (Jackson [1959] 2009, 7). After July's intense bullying and September's freak death, July and her mother escape to the Settle House.

July and September further mirror Merricat and Constance through their attempts at witchcraft, specifically protection spells. While Johnson's inclusion of folk magic reveals Jackson's influence, a comparison of magic rituals in *Castle*

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<sup>1</sup> Hereafter, *Castle*.

versus *Sisters* helps us notice how Johnson both draws upon and differs from Jackson, particularly in her treatment of embodiment. Merricat focuses her magic on protecting her sister and the house they live in. She places “safeguards” around the property, nailing objects to trees and burying “treasures” in the ground, like a box of silver dollars (Jackson [1962] 2009, 41). Arriving at the Settle House, July digs in the dirt to find the house key and instead unearths coins, recalling Merricat’s buried money. Merricat also chooses “three powerful words, words of strong protection” that will prevent change from coming to the house so long as they’re never spoken aloud (44). Merricat eats these words, writing one in the jam on her toast and whispering another into a water glass before drinking. Like the treasures placed within the ground, Merricat buries the words inside her by consuming them. Her spells thus relate to the Blackwood property and her body. Her protection is focused as much on the house as it is on Constance, who never leaves the property; in fact, they are elided in Merricat’s mind. When their cousin Charles arrives unexpectedly, Merricat thinks, “if I could re-seal the protection around Constance and shut Charles out, he would have to leave the house. Every touch he made on the house must be erased” (69). Protecting the house and protecting Constance are the same for Merricat; she could easily switch the nouns and say she wishes to re-seal the protection around *the house* and erase every touch Charles made on *Constance*.

Like Merricat, July and September perform protection rituals, but these acts are more embodied than those Jackson depicts. For example, July sees September spinning: “I close my eyes five times quickly so that she won’t fall and if she does she will land like a cat” (Johnson 2020, 9). More dramatically, September leads a ritual to curse the classmates who bully July: “We crushed coffee beans with our fists and tore strips off the bottoms of our dresses, wound them around our bare arms, wet our hair and fingers so they dripped onto the wooden floorboards” (46). Both rituals—July’s blinking and September’s curse—are enacted by and upon the sisters’ bodies. The most significant moment of witchcraft in *Sisters* is the blood promise July makes to September: “If there could be only one of us it would be you” (174). This magic is also bodily: after July accidentally cuts her thumb, September purposefully cuts hers. The open wounds emphasize the sisters’ shared blood and the permeability of July’s body, which September will eventually enter. This ritual also suggests Johnson’s treatment of bodies as houses. The girls smear blood on their cheeks like paint on walls, and they make this promise in, significantly, the spare room: July promises to be the “spare” so that September may live. This is the ultimate

protection spell. While Merricat aims to reinforce the walls around Constance, September makes July more permeable.

The separation between September and July was always thin. Johnson writes their relationship as intensely codependent. Born only ten months apart (in September, then July), they function as twins; they are all but inseparable, “unfinished doppelgängers” (Johnson 2020, 96). Their codependence, however, is defined by September’s control. More than mirror images, they are a girl and her shadow. The tentative, self-conscious July follows and concedes to the brash, manipulative September. September insists they share a cellphone—a “truly disquieting intimacy” (Wagner 2020) for twenty-first-century teens—and a birthday—of course, September’s own. Johnson writes, “they were close as they’d ever been. September answering every question for her sister, their meals carefully divided sharing platters, their heads close together on the same pillow” (2020, 99). When describing the sisters’ closeness, Johnson begins by noting how September speaks for July, signaling that what could be read as equal activities are in fact part of September’s control tactics. Here, September is named, but July is only “her sister,” a dynamic July recognizes: “I was an appendage. I was September’s sister” (184). The sisters merge into one, but with September remaining central, July an extension of her sister.

Johnson’s depiction of September and July reimagines typical elements of the Female Gothic, building upon Jackson’s own innovations. Female Gothic heroines in unhomey houses often exhibit dual desires to escape and to stay in (and, in fact, become) the home. Roberta Rubenstein reads these desires as reflecting “a young child’s urge to remain merged with the mother (who becomes emotionally identified with the ‘home’) and to separate from her, with the attendant danger of being lost” (1996, 309). Rubenstein argues that the Gothic woman’s “imprisonment in a house [...] expresses her ambivalent experience of entrapment and longing for protection” (130). Similarly, Claire Kahane reads Gothic heroines as confronting the female child’s “tenuous and fundamentally ambivalent struggle for a separate identity” from her mother that is haunted by the “fear of nothingness or nonseparation” (1985, 338). In other words, the Female Gothic often explores simultaneous fears: loss of identity through merger (with mother, with house) and loss of protection through abandonment/separation.

Jackson, and Johnson after her, explore these twin fears, but they reshape the tradition by exploring them through relationships between *sisters* rather than as a daughter’s feelings toward her mother. In *Castle*, Merricat feels no guilt for killing her mother and cares only for her sister. While Ashleigh Hardin argues that Merricat seeks to contain and “promote Constance from older sister to

‘Mom,’” the sisters do not follow those roles so clearly (2016, para. 9). Although Merricat does wish to control Constance’s behavior, this stems in part from her own sense of parental protectiveness. Merricat fears Constance will separate from her and become the “lost” child Rubenstein describes: “Constance needed guarding more than ever before and if I became angry and looked aside she might very well be lost” (Jackson [1962] 2009, 79). Meanwhile, Constance considers with trepidation and curiosity what leaving the house would mean, feeling some guilt for trapping Merricat inside with her: “We should have faced the world and tried to *live normal lives*” (82; emphasis mine). Like Constance, Johnson’s July realizes that she could live beyond the confines of the Gothic funhouse that is her intense relationship with September. Recognizing that September is dead, July is both horrified and thrilled at the prospect of life without her: “It is awful, all of this possibility. [...] And buried between each word, each possible outcome, is this: I’ll let you go. I won’t keep you. I’ll *live*” (Johnson 2020, 175; emphasis mine). But what is September’s sister, September’s appendage, without her? The anxieties surrounding separation and nonseparation, typically attributed to mother–daughter dynamics, are instead embedded by Jackson and Johnson in relationships between sisters.

In *Hill House*, Jackson directly reimagines the ambivalent relationship between female heroine and Gothic home as a sisterly one. Scholars have read *Hill House* as a maternal presence (see Rubenstein 1996; Reid 2020), and while these readings have merit, I argue that *Hill House* is as—if not *more*—interested in sisters than mothers and daughters. The novel is filled with strained sisterly relationships, including the daughters of the house’s architect who quarreled bitterly over the house. The first piece of information Jackson reveals about Eleanor, other than her age, is that the “only person in the world she genuinely hated, now that her mother was dead, was her sister” ([1959] 2009, 6). This line refocuses Eleanor’s hatred from mother to sister, potentially indicating how Jackson reframes Gothic themes. Eleanor and Theodora also develop the intimacy and rivalry of a tense sisterhood. Shortly after meeting, the pair decide they “must really be related” (53). However, after Theodora accuses Eleanor of writing her own name on *Hill House*’s wall and covering Theodora’s clothes in red paint (or blood), Eleanor feels flashes of hatred toward Theodora even as she longs for her acceptance. Forced to share a room and clothes, Theodora remarks, “We’re going to be practically twins” (158). Jackson describes the pair walking together: “Fear and guilt are sisters [...]. Silent, angry, hurt, they left *Hill House* side by side, walking together, each sorry for the other” (172). Naming fear and guilt as sisters, Jackson emphasizes the importance of sisters to *Hill*

*House*. Eleanor's dual longings for separation and nonseparation are directed not toward a replacement mother but toward a surrogate sister.

This surrogate is, on one level, Theodora; on another, it is Hill House itself. When Eleanor questions if anything is real, Montague cautions her from "venturing far too close to the state of mind which would welcome the perils of Hill House with a kind of sisterly embrace" (Jackson [1959] 2009, 140). This advice comes the morning after Eleanor and Theodora, hearing inexplicable knocking on their door, embraced each other in bed. Eleanor hugs her surrogate sister, Theodora, to hold onto reality, but as this grip slips—when Theodora abandons Eleanor by rejecting her hopes that they might share a life together—Eleanor comes to cling to Hill House instead. Jackson's Gothic house thus reflects the fears of separation and nonseparation not (or not solely) in an ambivalent mother–daughter relationship but between ambivalent sisters.

In *Sisters*, Johnson builds on Jackson's revisions. Though July and September certainly resemble, respectively, the self-conscious Eleanor and charismatic Theodora, they also each recall Hill House. September shares Hill House's capricious, mischievous personality. Johnson could be describing Hill House when she writes: "[September] was so alive then that she stole living from those around her" (2020, 184). When playing September Says—a one-sided version of Simon Says in which September commands and July obeys—September instructs July to "write your name on the wall in permanent marker" (25), perhaps a nod to Eleanor's name written on Hill House's walls.

Johnson twists Jackson's precedent: while the Settle House is appropriately Gothic, the true entrapping force is the relationship between the sisters—and, eventually, July's body itself. Playing September Says, and prefiguring the later possession, September commands July to "pretend to be a house, and July makes her body a structure for September to reside within" (Johnson 2020, 27). In *Hill House*, the horror arises from the house appearing too human—through, for example, the "icy little curls of fingers" Eleanor feels (Jackson [1959] 2009, 130). In *Sisters*, these fingers become September's pressing into July's face and breastbone as she sleeps, and the horror arises from the human treated as home, from July becoming a space for September to invade. By the novel's end, July is like Hill House, home to her ghostly inhabitant; she feels September "shift[ing] inside me" (Johnson 2020, 184). This line recalls when Eleanor imagines herself as a "small creature swallowed whole" by Hill House: "the monster feels my tiny little movements inside" (Jackson [1959] 2009, 42). This shift reveals how Johnson innovates upon Jackson's work: rather than exploring how her characters merge with the house around them, she imagines bodies as houses to be inhabited.



Johnson and Jackson further revise Gothic tropes in their treatment of feminine doubling. Reading *Sisters*, Madison Lacy points out how “the doubled sisters and the oppressing non-presence of September” evoke the “angel/monster” (2023, 63) dichotomies in Charlotte Brontë’s *Jane Eyre* (1847) and Daphne Du Maurier’s *Rebecca* (1938). September, like Bertha and Rebecca, haunts July with a cruelty and power that July both fears and envies. Yet, Lacy argues, by choosing sisters as Gothic doubles rather than first and second wives, Johnson foregrounds “a relationship completely independent of men” (2023, 64). Even a mother–daughter relationship implies paternal involvement. Johnson builds upon Jackson, who also writes sisters as doubles and, at least in *Castle*, involves men only as an outside threat to that bond rather than as a necessary factor in it. Lynnette Carpenter identifies Merricat and Constance’s “replacement of heterosexual romance with sisterhood as their central emotional bond” (1984, 35). While doubled wives, and mothers and daughters, are common in the Gothic tradition, Jackson and Johnson reimagine those dynamics through sisters.

In *Sisters*, we can best see the primacy of the sisterly bond, alongside the fears of abandonment and nonseparation, when men threaten to impact September and July’s relationship. When July secretly texts her crush, Ryan, she is “set through with guilt at doing anything – let alone this – without September” (Johnson 2020, 52). As she prepares to send Ryan a topless photo, July “could already taste September’s fury. There wasn’t anything we didn’t do together and yet here I was” (57). July fears separation from September, yet she wishes to create her own identity—and relationship with Ryan. On the beach near the Settle House, the sisters meet and have sex with a young man, John; when he comes to the Settle House and kisses July without September’s involvement, the angered September compels July to knock him out. Ryan and John parallel *Castle*’s Charles, another male interloper who threatens the sisterly relationship but is ultimately expelled. Both *Castle* and *Sisters* conclude by reasserting the dominance of sisterhood and reinscribing its power dynamics. July declares, “John is gone [...]. There has never been anyone but September. There has barely even been me” (167).

While both Jackson and Johnson depict sisterhood as a central emotional bond, Johnson writes this bond as explicitly bodily. July thinks, “I know September’s body better than I know my own. Often – looking down at myself – there is a great mass of confusion and in the mirror there is a shock at seeing my own face looking back rather than hers” (Johnson 2020, 30). The bond between the sisters is expressed through bodily knowledge. While September has sex with John, July experiences the same bodily sensations: “We lost our

virginity together” (108). Even during intercourse, the bond of sisterhood usurps, or at least exists alongside, heterosexual attraction. Speaking together, September and July describe the extent of their physical bond:

When one of us speaks we both feel the words moving on our tongues.  
[...] It would have surprised neither of us to have found, slit open, that  
we shared organs, that one’s lungs breathed for the both, that a single  
heart beat a doubling, feverish pulse. (6)

If the sisters were conjoined before September’s death, her undead nature allows them to truly merge. This physical bond culminates with September possessing July, the two sharing one body.

The intense sisterly relationships depicted by Jackson and Johnson are haunted by dual longings for separation and merger, and eventually one sister must give in to nothingness or nonseparation via replacement or possession. July gives herself up so September may live through her. Similarly, Constance sacrifices herself to protect Merricat; while Merricat is the true murderer of the Blackwood family, Constance takes on this identity. The sisters speak the truth only once, and Constance insists they will “never talk about it again” (Jackson [1962] 2009, 130). As Constance acknowledges complicity and re-affirms her sacrifice, we understand that “in her heart, she *was* and *is* the Blackwoods’ murderer, and not Merricat; that is, not only Merricat” (Oates 2009, 157). To the world, and even to the sisters themselves, Constance is the murderer: she has taken Merricat’s place. As Karen J. Hall writes, Constance and Merricat “are distinct, but they collude in their silence and the boundaries between them blur” (1993, 116). If *Castle* ends with Constance “succumbed to Merricat entirely: the ‘good’ sister [...] yielded to the ‘evil’ sister” (Oates 2009, 157), then *Sisters* literalizes this surrender through bodily possession. As September takes over July, she forces July to repeat the words “Iloveyou” (Johnson 2020, 182). These words echo Merricat’s refrain: no less than six times she tells Constance “I love you,” and although Constance usually responds in kind, Merricat always initiates. While Merricat dreams of the safety and solitude of the moon, Johnson chooses a different celestial motif: an eclipse, “the obscuring of light from one celestial body by the passage of another” (172). In her fantasies of the moon, Merricat isolates Constance from the world, but September enacts an eclipse, passing in front of July so only September is visible.

Eleanor’s choice to stay in Hill House also engages themes of self-abdication. Eleanor lets go of her identity to truly “come inside”: “I will relinquish my possession of this self of mine, abdicate, give over willingly what

I never wanted at all; whatever it wants of me it can have” (Jackson [1959] 2009, 232, 204). July echoes this language when she promises to abdicate to September: “I am a shape cut out of the universe [...] and she is the creature to fill the gap I leave in the world” (Johnson 2020, 79). *Sisters* ends with July relinquishing herself: “I lay it out now. Here is everything I have” (184). Both Eleanor and July give over their lives.

While Constance and Merricat remain inseparable within their house, and Eleanor stays forever in Hill House, July becomes the house within which she is isolated. July describes her brain as a house “with many rooms,” and she is trapped in the basement while September “lives in every single one” (Johnson 2020, 183). July becomes her own prison, the madwoman in the attic of her mind. Johnson departs from Jackson by depicting the horrors of what the body itself can house, writing July as both Gothic heroine and Gothic house. In the next section, I further explore how Johnson blurs the boundaries between house and body through the strange contours of the Settle House and her depiction of motherhood.

### Strange Homes

Just as July and September are inspired by Jackson’s weird sisters, the Settle House is influenced by Jackson’s strange homes. Both authors trouble the domestic, familial, and familiar through unhomely spaces. The Settle House inherits Hill House’s architectural disorder. Johnson’s Settle House is “rankled, bentoutashape, dirtyallover” (2020, 9); its “layout [...] feels wrong, unintuitive” (2020, 13). In Jackson’s Hill House, “every angle is slightly wrong” ([1959] 2009, 105); it is “a little bit off center,” “disjointed,” filled with “tiny aberrations” that produce “a fairly large distortion in the house as a whole” (105–07). Both the Settle House and Hill House have no permanent occupants; they are rented by people “who do not know where else to go” (Johnson 2020, 11). These tilted, transient homes keep their readers and temporary residents from getting too comfortable.

Jackson writes ambivalent, alive homes that fluctuate between protecting and imprisoning their inhabitants, and the Settle House inherits this complexity and consciousness. Like Hill House and the Blackwood home, the Settle House feels more organic than object, a shifting creature that enters into relationships with the women inside it. Hill House is a “live organism” (Jackson [1959] 2009, 3), and the Settle House has “roots in the earth” (Johnson 2020, 170). Hill House “watches every move you make,” “settling and stirring with movement

that was almost like a shudder” (Jackson [1959] 2009, 85, 92). Johnson describes the Settle House similarly: the house watches the conception of September and July’s father, and its “walls shudder, do not turn away” (Johnson 2020, 85). Jackson describes Hill House’s agency over its own construction: it “seemed somehow to have formed itself, flying together into its own powerful pattern” ([1959] 2009, 35). In an homage to *Hill House*, Johnson writes the Settle House reflecting on its own construction: “The Settle House is built though it hasn’t yet found its name. [...] [T]he build stutters, nearly fails, grinds on. This sandy earth consumes buildings like that. Yet it stands and people come and go from inside its walls” (2020, 85).

While the Settle House certainly recalls Jackson’s infamous Hill House, it also resembles the protective Blackwood home, which has its own aliveness. Merricat feels “guarded by the house” (Jackson [1962] 2009, 50). After Charles’ arrival, she hopes that “the house, injured, would reject him by itself” (78). Returning after the fire, Constance believes the house “ought surely to recognize the touch of her hand,” and it “seem[s] to shiver” as they enter (113). The protective nature of the Blackwood’s “castle” is what Sheela seeks in the Settle House: “the house would cocoon them, would protect them all” (Johnson 2020, 101–02). The Settle House is both a place to “settle,” to rest, and a place still settling, still unsettled—fighting the sand that threatens to consume it. Johnson constructs the Settle House as somewhere between the fickle, fiendish Hill House and the shielding, subtle Blackwood house; she emulates Jackson’s approach to homes as *living* spaces and leans into the ambivalence of Gothic homes as both entrapping and protecting.

The Settle House’s aliveness helps heighten Johnson’s exploration of bodies as houses. Johnson writes Sheela and the Settle House in parallel: Sheela “has always known that houses are bodies and that her body is a house in more ways than most,” while the Settle House “is, more than any other, a body” (2020, 89). Understanding Sheela and the Settle House as connected through these core themes helps us track the intertextual valences between Johnson and Jackson’s works. Susanne Becker writes that haunted houses can be “bodies that are, in de Beauvoir’s sense, not born but *becoming women*” (1999, 20). While Jackson explores these ideas through the walls of literal structures, Johnson shows us how women’s bodies, or bodies becoming women, can be haunted houses.

Johnson likens the Settle House to a body, evoking Jackson’s treatment of Hill House and the Blackwood home. Johnson describes the Settle House “[s]quatting like a child,” its “top floor sunk down onto the bottom like a hand curved over a fist” (2020, 7, 8). The house “groans,” “releasing air” (29) as

though it has lungs to breathe. Its “rooms are like organs, trembling a little under the flow of blood” (Johnson 2020, 42). Similarly, Jackson writes of the “heart of the house” in both *Hill House* and the Blackwood home ([1959] 2009, 119; [1962] 2009, 55). Merricat imagines fire “running through the bones of our house” ([1962] 2009, 104), while Eleanor regards the “amused, certain face of the house, watching her quietly” ([1959] 2009, 240). For this paper’s purposes, again, the most significant bodily description of *Hill House* (as discussed earlier) occurs when Eleanor thinks, “I am like a small creature swallowed whole by a monster, [...] and the monster feels my tiny little movements inside” (Jackson [1959] 2009, 42). This image of Eleanor as a “small creature” making “tiny little movements” inside another creature’s belly evokes pregnancy. Jackson even uses the same term, “small creature,” to describe a baby in an essay for new mothers (1960a, 112). Reading *Hill House* alongside maternal metaphors in architectural descriptions, Luke Reid argues that the house—both *Hill House* and houses in general—is a “replacement for the womb” (2020, para. 7). Johnson weaves this same comparison into *Sisters*; she highlights conceptions and births within the Settle House and describes how “Sheela dreams of her unborn children in the house, sees them as tiny smudges of charcoal on the walls” (2020, 87).

These descriptions return us to the ambivalent Female Gothic house and its interpretation as representative of the mother. Critics tend to read the house as representing the daughter’s desire for mother-protection and fear of mother-entrapment. While Johnson explores mother–daughter relationships, it is not in this typical formula. Reconfiguring the fears of loss and nonseparation, Johnson gives voice to the mother’s fears: Sheela both struggles to understand her children and is unsettled by the feeling that they wish to inhabit her. Building upon the connection between inhabited house and pregnant body, Johnson departs from a tradition of matrophobia in Gothic fiction and scholarship focused on haunted houses. Examining the body as a house, Johnson explores fear not of mothers but of motherhood.

For Johnson, pregnancy and motherhood reveal the body as a house. During Sheela’s first stay in the Settle House, her pregnancy—being “filled up with September”—allows her to understand that “the house was like her, a shifting and changing thing, awkward in its flesh, sometimes welling and bloating out from its own walls, sometimes growing so warm the sweat pooled in her eyes” (Johnson 2020, 90). Johnson switches between the pronouns “her” and “it,” blurring Sheela and the house as subjects. Rather than fearing the house and/or mother, Johnson asks us to see and sympathize with their changing forms. Johnson describes Sheela’s early years of motherhood: “She’d

never had so many hands on her, feeling like her skin could wear away like thin material” (92). She feels like the Settle House’s “white walls [...] streaked with mud handprints” (8). Sheela is sometimes convinced her daughters “wanted the very foundations of her, wanted to break the bricks of her body apart and climb back in” (92). Here, Johnson explicitly presents nonseparation as a mother’s fear; rather than centering the daughters’ desire for mother-protection through merger (or fear of mother-entrapment), Johnson centers the horror of being the object of that need.

Johnson introduces pregnancy and motherhood as core to understanding bodies as houses, describing how pregnant bodies and mothering bodies are inhabited. However, Sheela experiences her body as a house for more than literal children. Johnson writes,

She had housed those beautiful daughters, hadn’t she, and she had housed depression all through her life like a smaller, weightier child, and she housed excitement and love and despair and in the Settle House she houses an unsettling worry that she finds difficult to shake, an exhaustion that smothers the days out of her. (2020, 89)

Through Sheela, Johnson draws attention to the many things people carry inside—children, mental illness, emotion—and explores the difficulty of being “filled up with noise and pain” while also carrying the weight of motherhood (2020, 162). Sheela has often felt “her body did not belong to her” (162); like many women, she is treated as an object of use, first by her daughters’ father, then by her children. The truth and terror of motherhood (if not womanhood), for Sheela, is that she is transformed into a house, an everyday object. As July remarks, “she is just a mother to us and she is in rooms the way chairs and tables are” (32). Johnson aims to write mothers who “might be struggling to fit themselves into too rigid a categorization, or might be managing alone – or might even, like Sheela, find themselves frightened of their child” (Clark 2020). Uncanny, frightening children are features of the Domestic Gothic (Rosales 2020). Rather than exploring these struggles through a house in which Sheela is confined, Johnson highlights Sheela’s ambivalent experience of her own body as a house.

While *Hill House* and *Castle* feature characters struggling with their role as caretaker (Eleanor caring for her mother, Constance caring for Merricat and Uncle Julian), these works do not focus on motherhood. However, Jackson’s nonfiction domestic writings are invested in the complexities of motherhood that Johnson describes. Jackson infuses her nonfiction writings with a Gothic

sensibility to explore these ideas. The titles of *Life Among the Savages* (1953) and *Raising Demons* (1957), Jackson's collections of life writings, convey a sense of being overwhelmed and even frightened of one's children to which Sheela could relate. Within Jackson's witty remarks and humorous anecdotes, one detects Gothic elements—her daughter hears a faraway voice singing to her at night; her son writes a treatise on their house's poltergeist. Jackson writes, "Sometimes, in my capacity as a mother, I find myself sitting open-mouthed and terrified before my own children, little individual creatures moving solidly along in their own paths..." ([1953] 2019, 164). Here, Jackson engages with the "uncanny characters" of the Domestic Gothic "who grotesquely distort our expectations [...] frequently (and most perversely perhaps) in the figure of one's own child" (Rosales 2020, para. 1). Jackson reimagines the Female Gothic fear of separation—not as a child's fear of abandonment or a mother's fear of losing her child, but as a mother's fear of alienation from her child. In *Special Delivery* (1960), a guide for new mothers, Jackson reimagines Gothic entrapment. Jackson writes, "No caged bird, singing its sad sad song of captivity and beating its little wings against the bars, is more poignant than the mother of a new baby looking out at the vast, unattainable world beyond the nursery windows" (1960b, 91). Jackson reverses how fear of entrapment is traditionally depicted in the Female Gothic. Rather than the house representing the mother trapping her child, the mother is trapped by her child and motherhood: "Wherever the mother goes, the baby goes too" (91). By writing candidly about frustrating experiences of motherhood (fear, guilt, depression, anger), Jackson opens space for writers to explore the mundane horrors of motherhood—space into which Johnson steps.

Although Johnson highlights motherhood, the experience of one's body as a house is not limited to Sheela or to mothers. The dynamic between September and July, and July's ultimate fate as a house for September, denaturalizes the idea of "body as house" and reveals its uncanniness. In the epigraph, Johnson writes, "My sister is the end of the line my sister is the locked door [...] My sister is the last house on the street" (2020, 1). Both July and September could speak these words—September seeking to break into and inhabit July, and July facing her final destination: possessed by her sister, trapped within herself. Speaking together, July and September begin the novel with the words "[a] house" and tell us "[t]his is the year we are haunted," "this is the year we are houses, lights on in every window, doors that won't quite shut" (5, 6). Although the epigraph speaks of a "locked door," the "doors that won't quite shut" remind us that the boundaries between the sisters are—like the boundary between life and death, and the boundaries of bodies—permeable.

Johnson juxtaposes Sheela's self-conscious articulation of the hardships of motherhood with the horror of July's possession, an extreme experience of becoming a house. Sheela lucidly reflects on "what it was like to house things inside her, how it was possible to be both skin and flesh and also mortar and plaster" (Johnson 2020, 162). July experiences this description as body horror. The skin on her arm becomes "dry like baking paper and rough, bubbled like the odd wallpaper in the old house" (124). July picks at the flesh of her arm like she picks at the Settle House's walls. In a dream state, she makes a hole in a wall, revealing a swarm of ants: "the softened wall gives, the hole widening against their small, tough forms" (125). In trying to discover what lurks with the Settle House's walls, July tries to locate what lurks within herself. July likens herself to a house when describing how she sees September in the mirror: "She gazes out of my coating, like a thief caught breaking into a building" (122). Side by side in *Sisters*, we find July forcibly inhabited by her dead sister and Sheela reflecting on ordinary experiences like grief and motherhood—both through the metaphor of body as house. July's uncanny bodily experiences, culminating in possession, cast the relatability of Sheela's experiences in a more disturbing light and reveal their underlying horror. By writing July's interactions with the Settle House as reflections of her bodily possession, and describing possession through the central idea of "body as house," Johnson differentiates *Sisters* from a typical possession story: she writes possession as a haunted house tale, rooting it in the Domestic Gothic and everyday uncanny.

Johnson both extends Jackson's legacy and shifts the valences of the final merger between body and house. Both Jackson and Johnson draw upon Female and Domestic Gothic tropes to explore the terrors that live within the home, the family, the body—what should protect us but so often traps us, what should be familiar but often feels alien. As Angela Hague argues, the pervading fear in Jackson's fiction is "the terror of what is unseen and unacknowledged; the enemy cannot be confronted because it inhabits a world that lies hidden but dangerously close by—often within the individual herself" (2005, 90). Locating the "enemy" within the individual is precisely what Johnson builds and innovates upon. While Merricat and Constance make their house their world, and Eleanor abandons her body to truly enter Hill House, July becomes September's home. Johnson's shift in focus is evident when we compare these passages from *Hill House* and *Sisters*. Jackson writes, "Nothing in this house moves [...] until you look away, and then you can just catch something from the corner of your eye" ([1959] 2009, 110). Johnson describes July glimpsing September: "When I look from the corner of my eye I think I see something moving, *not out in the room but somehow inside me, crawling beneath the surface*"



(2020, 168, emphasis mine). Jackson writes alive and uncanny domestic spaces and characters who retreat into and merge with these homes. While Johnson also brings the Settle House to life, blurring the boundaries between it and its inhabitants, she does so to emphasize how the inhabitants *are also inhabited*. What is truly unsettling in *Sisters* is not that July and Sheela are confined by or undifferentiated from the house around them, but that they themselves are houses—that they can, and are even expected to, house difficult and terrifying things. Johnson extends the Gothic’s connection between women and houses by focusing on bodies not as inhabiting uncanny spaces but as uncannily inhabited.

## Conclusion

Alex Preston finishes his review of *Sisters* by calling it “a novel Shirley Jackson would have been proud to have written” (2020). While Johnson writes almost six decades after Jackson, Jackson’s influence on Johnson’s novel, conscious or not, is clear, and Johnson revisits and extends ideas found in Jackson’s work. Both writers reimagine key Female Gothic and Domestic Gothic elements to explore complex sisterly relationships, unhomey and alive domestic spaces, and ambivalences toward motherhood.

For both Jackson and Johnson, houses, families, and bodies can become unhomey—especially for women. For Jackson, writing in mid-twentieth-century America, women’s houses, families, and bodies are haunted by exacting domestic expectations: they must be kept clean, straight, and controlled. Jackson’s strange houses, in her fiction and nonfiction, help her represent the difficulties of navigating those expectations and reveal how homes can never truly abide by those rigid lines. Writing in the 2010s, Johnson ought to face domestic expectations that are less imprisoning; yet our houses, families, and bodies are still haunted. By depicting women’s bodies as houses, Johnson suggests that the threat may not always be imposed from the outside but, instead, may be something we carry inside us; that the demands upon us to deny and sacrifice ourselves are found burrowed within; that our bodies and minds can feel like funhouses and prisons; and that the capacity to carry so much, for better and for worse, is what it means to live—especially as a woman, but as anyone who carries emotions, experiences, relationships, and a body through this world.

Exploring *Sisters* as a house intertextually haunted by Jackson’s work, we acknowledge a lineage of writers employing the Gothic to explore women’s

experiences and to stage the domestic uncanny. Moreover, we recognize the rich and enduring nature of Jackson's literary contributions, which continue to influence the Gothic tradition today. Jackson's legacy and the Gothic genre, pushed forward by writers like Johnson, still have much to tell us about our families, our fears, our homes, and our bodies, and how they grow within each other.

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