Red Room Rhetoric

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Mike Flanagan's adaptation of Shirley Jackson's The Haunting of Hill House aired in October of 2018 and immediately caught the attention of viewers at home. Flanagan has noted several times within interviews that he wanted to draw on the major themes of Jackson's beloved novel and "remix it" for modern audiences (Mirjalili). Flanagan's main diversion from the original material in his remix is the choice to follow the Crain family as they make Hill House their temporary residence. Keeping true to Jackson's themes of psychological horror, Flanagan focuses on the Crain children's psyches by displaying the ghosts of their childhood home and how they continue to be haunted in adulthood.

With this in mind, Flanagan leaned into the rhetoric of gothic horror to highlight the effects of childhood trauma on adult life. He did this by following the classic template of gothic horror, which portrays common fears and anxieties in a fantastical way (Ethridge). The fear and anxiety that accompanies trauma often manifests later in life in the form of mental illness (NIH). In regards to this, Flanagan uses rhetorical devices such as repetition, identification, metaphor, and paradox to portray the reality of ghostly traumas and how they may alter behavior.

Consequently, this produces a sense of fear, which is then used as a vessel to explore social issues and expand on their narrative with audiences as they cathartically live through these experiences, ultimately making this work an important expansion on mental health within society.

To begin, arguably the most prominent rhetorical devices that Flanagan uses within the series are repetition and identification. Both are simultaneously used throughout the series to establish themes. In regards to repetition, in the book The Gothic Vision: Three Centuries of Horror, Terror and Fear, author Dani Cavallaro states that gothic horror's use of repetition often materializes as ghosts, stating "The recursive appearance of ghosts often articulates both the return of the repressed and the longing to let it rest in peace." Cavallaro then goes on to distinguish this as a way to draw parallels and establish important themes, similar to how repetition is used within speeches and writing. Cavallaro's take on the way that repetition materializes within the genre speaks to Flanagan's methodology throughout the series for establishing themes for the audience.

For example, Flanagan drives home the theme of trauma with the repetition of each Crain family member's use of the red room. The recurring

red room is a prominent and ominous visual displayed throughout the series. The door is seemingly harmless and always locked. The red room only opens as a unique haven for each potential victim. This room is eventually described by the ghost of Nell Crain as the "stomach" of the house, as it digests their hopes and dreams, feeding on the trauma that is left behind. Each family member unknowingly spends time in the red room as a means to "escape" the reality of living in Hill House (Flanagan). Every episode focuses on each of the family member's experiences and interactions with the red room individually, making it a crucial element of repetition.

Adding to this, Flanagan masterfully pairs this repetition of the red room with the rhetorical device of identification. Rhetorician Kenneth Burke describes identification as "an addition to the rhetoric lore," explaining that in order to be persuasive, you must first identify with your audience (1286). This is achieved when the audience is able to make connections with other convincing works. He describes the accumulation of these as the "body of identification," which utilizes the repetition of themes that audiences can identify (Burke 1286-1290). Flanagan deploys this method of rhetoric by referencing common tropes within the horror genre and utilizing these themes within his plot. This circles back to his repetition of the red room and how it "opens" uniquely for each character.

For example, the red room opens to the mom, Olivia, as a reading room, providing relief from her migraines. For Theo, it is a dance studio where she can escape her family's emotional turmoil. Shirley finds a family room for comfort when she isn't able to control her surroundings. Steven finds a game room where he can dissociate from the reality of his childhood. The youngest of the family, twins Nell and Luke, find rooms that reflect their childhood innocence. The dad, Hugh, is never able to enter the red room, as the house protects itself from the one character that might be able to end its feast (Flanagan). In regards to Hugh specifically, Flanagan is referencing an age-old horror trope, and he is banking on his audience's ability to identify it.

It is a common theme within the haunted house trope for the father to be crucial for the rescue of the family. Oftentimes, the father is able to step in and save his family from unspoken evils as he fulfills the role of protector. The article "Dangers Inside the Home: Rereading Haunted House Films from a Gothic Perspective" speaks on the portrayal of this trope, stating that "[t]he issues of the family, which surface through supernatural incidents, lie dormant before they move into the haunted house. In some films, a search for the truth drives the story forward, in which case one family member—more likely to be the father—is engaged in the search." This trope is present within other works of the horror genre such as James Wan's Insidious (2011), Tobe Hooper's The Poltergeist (1982), and the more light-hearted The

Haunted Mansion (2003), produced by Disney. Assuming that Flanagan's audience enjoys the horror genre, they would have been primed to this theme and be able to make connections through identification.

With this rhetoric in mind, the audience would have expected Hugh to be able to rescue the family from the red room; however, this is not the case. Although Hugh attempts to help his wife when he realizes that her mental state is slipping by, encouraging her to take time away from the house, it ultimately isn't enough to save her. He attempts to fix his family, but in the end is unable to dodge the inevitable when his wife attempts to murder his children and commits suicide. All of this, of course, was guided by the hand of the red room. The creative use of this failed horror trope was purposefully done to subvert the expectations of the audience. This is just one of many plot points tied to the red room where Flanagan utilizes repetition and identification to draw upon the audience's knowledge and establish an overall theme for the show.

In addition to the use of repetition and identification, Flanagan leans on the rhetorical use of metaphors as well. The use of monsters as metaphors is a classic staple within gothic rhetoric and is often used to portray the common societal evils that we fear in real life (Ethridge). Moriah Richard of Writer's Digest describes the genre's rhetorical use of metaphors through monsters as critical, explaining that they "focused heavily on topics of morality and were highly metaphorical…The supernatural and monsters were used as a lens through which to view these themes." In this same way, Flanagan uses the red room as a lens to view the generational trauma of the Crain family. By using a monster as a metaphor, Flanagan is able to persuade his audience with fear tactics and expand upon the horrors of unacknowledged mental illness. This draws an unconscious, or conscious, depending on the audience's context, parallel of childhood trauma and monstrosity.

The audience is further clued in to this metaphor by the character Steven Crain. As the oldest of the Crain children, he remembers his childhood more vividly than his siblings. In adulthood, his character is adamant that the house was never haunted and that their mother suffered from severe mental illness. He denies supernatural involvement even when standing face-to-face with ghosts (Flanagan). His denial of the hauntings discredits his family's experiences, which also discredits the causation of their mental health struggles. This is akin to the real-life failure of denying childhood trauma as a contributor to mental illness in adulthood. With that being said, Flanagan uses his character to further highlight this metaphor and draw parallels to the real monster behind the mask.

Pursuant to this, the red room fulfills the role of "monster" within this plot, as it is the metaphorical embodiment of generational trauma. The ghosts that haunt Hill House are its victims foreshadowing the inevitability of Hill House's evil grasp. The house sustains itself on their mental illness - their anxieties and fears and what plagues and troubles them. Year after year, the red room feeds on new souls, letting their ghosts haunt the next hosts and leading them back to the red room, perpetuating a vicious cycle resembling that of generational trauma (Flanagan). While not a physical monster made of flesh and bone that is typically found within gothic literature, the entity of the red room fits the requirements of monster and metaphor that is prominent within the rhetoric of the genre.

The revelation of this is realized by the audience in the final episode where the red room is shown in its true state. It is a decrepit room with black mold clawing at the walls. Oftentimes in gothic literature, the monster is deformed, signaling its inherent evil. In this case, the mask of a warm, safe place, revealed to be a toxic, mold-infested room points to the silent wickedness of the house, resembling the unspoken effects of generational trauma. An article published in Dawn, a Pakistani newspaper, explains that generational trauma is much like baggage being passed down from one family member to the next, causing mental turmoil, stating that "Ignorance of their traumas has caused them to suppress the pain they go through, and this is likely to continue until they decide to break the cycle of pain." Flanagan expands on this idea, as the viewer is hit with the realization that not breaking the cycle of generational trauma is succumbing to it, allowing the black mold to spread.

Flanagan's choice of mold was purposeful, as mold as a physical embodiment of evil is a common trope within the horror genre. Flanagan's audience is most likely familiar with other movies that leaned into this rhetoric such as The Haunting in Connecticut (2009) and The Amityville Horror (1979). Both of these movies utilize this trope and use mold as a way to symbolize the growing evil within the home as the hauntings progress. Author Joshua Myers expands on this trope, describing mold as a metaphor for corruption in his essay "The Madness of Mold: Ecogothic in Nathaniel Hawthorne's The House of the Seven Gables," stating that the "conditions for fungal growth enhance supernatural and existential horrors." Audiences identify with this already existing theme within the genre and are able to follow Flanagan's metaphor of rot symbolizing the effects of trauma on a family.

Finally, Flanagan also utilizes the rhetorical device of paradox within the series to provoke fear within his audience and further drive home themes. Paradox is outlined by Mark Moore in an article featured in Rhetoric Society Quarterly as something that forces the audience to contemplate new

knowledge and different realities, and "forces the reader to consider something other than, or contrary to commonly held beliefs, attitudes and values." This method is often used within gothic rhetoric, as the creators look to evoke shock and fear from their audience in subversive ways. In line with Moore's definition, Flanagan uses paradox alongside fear, hinging on the premise that commonly held values can lead us to frightening ends.

For example, the story of Olivia Crain, the matriarch of the Crain family, begins with Hill House feeding on her fears of not being able to protect her children from harm. She is plagued by visions of the future where she sees her twins suffering from depression and addiction. Through the haunting and manipulation of the red room, she comes to the conclusion that the only real way to save her children is to "tuck them away" forever in death (Flanagan). This scenario presents itself as a paradox, as the common belief that mothers should protect their children from harm is challenged by a gothic, deranged oxymoron that death would prevent a child's awful fate.

To build on this thought process, "Melmoth the Wanderer: Paradox and the Gothic Novel," states that the gothic genre expands on the rhetorical device of paradox by "examining the disparity within appearance and reality." Flanagan accomplishes this within the story of Nell Crain, who ultimately follows the tragic fate of her mother. Nell can't escape the trauma of her childhood. It literally haunts her in the form of her own personal ghost, the Bent-Neck Lady. The series opens with her suicide, as she follows the (bad) advice of her therapist to confront her childhood home and remove its power from her life. She ends up succumbing to Hill House and commits suicide in the end (Flanagan). This scene in particular stands out within the series, as its dramatic reveal is frightening and crucial to central themes and the overall plot.

The scene opens with Nell being led through Hill House by spirits of loved ones, who ultimately lead her to the same balcony where her mother flung herself towards death years ago. Beside Nell stands the ghost of her mother. She places a necklace around Nell's neck - the one that she had wanted to inherit since childhood. As she starts to wake, she realizes that the necklace is a rope. Her mother consolingly whispers for her to wake up. She loses balance and falls to her death. Her body sways at the end of the rope for a while, displaying her neck dramatically broken at a sharp angle. Nell is still conscious. Suddenly, the setting changes. Nell falls into darkness and through time, revisiting moments in her life where she saw the figure of the Bent-Neck Lady. At the final scene, she locks eyes with her childhood self during the first experience she ever had with the ghostly apparition. Nell lets out a guttural

scream as she realizes that she was the Bent-Neck Lady the whole time (Flanagan).

This scene provoked shock within the audience as it drew hazy lines between what they held to be true and what was happening. Nell appeared to be haunted by a ghostly apparition her whole life, but the haunting revealed itself to be entirely self-inflicted. She foreshadowed her own death as her own ghost in her own childhood. Unable to shake the grasp of generational trauma, she tragically fell to depression and suicide like her mother before her (Flanagan). This is a powerful moment, as the whole series circulates around her suicide. The audience is taken on a cathartic journey with Nell from start to finish and is made to sympathize with her pain as she grapples with grief and depression. However, the details of her suicide are left out until the very end, making it a shocking turning point for the audience and further subverting their expectations. This consequently leads to the paradoxical realization of the Bent-Neck Lady and all that she implies.

Overall, the sum of the use of these rhetorical tools within gothic horror produces fear within the audience. Fear is another rhetorical device that can be used to sway or motivate an audience, often associated with the rhetorical devices pathos or logos (Olson). An article by Molly Olson, published in Rhetoric in Everyday Life, states that research suggests that fear may be the best motivator for changing behavior in individuals, as we all ultimately fear our own demise. Gothic horror as a genre hinges on this premise and feeds on the audience's most primitive emotion. Flanagan follows suit and uses fear to manipulate his audience and tug at their emotions. In the case of the Bent-Neck Lady, Flanagan provokes the common fear of a self-fulfilling prophecy and the horror of our worst fears coming to fruition by our own hands.

In agreement with this, author Benjamin Ethridge states that the strategies to evoke these emotions are unique to the genre, stating that "The Gothic novel, through its rhetoric of fear, aims to engage with the reader in hope of stimulating his curiosity and making him revalue the ideas and the objectives of the dominant societal, religious, political, scientific and philosophical positions." In this same way, Flanagan's adaptation asks the audience to re-evaluate their thoughts on generational trauma and its reach into adulthood, and what part the individual has to play in this process as they reflect upon what happened to Nell.

Ultimately, Flanagan's examination of the reality of the effects of trauma on adulthood serves as an important rhetorical narrative on mental health. By portraying the horrors of trauma in a gothic setting using a house as a monster and ghosts as paradoxical players, he is able to allow the audience to identify with the characters and cathartically digest the weight of unresolved trauma. This element helped the show rise in popularity, as

Flanagan's take on The Haunting of Hill House connected with audiences, as mental health became a pressing issue within society. The same year it aired, the National Institutes of Health (NIH) released a compelling study on the results of past trauma on mental health, urging healthcare providers to shift from asking "What is wrong with you?" to "What happened to you?" (Sweeney et al.). This fundamental shift within healthcare highlights Flanagan's cathartic work as an important cog in the machine of mental health awareness; the audience is made to see the connections of what is wrong with the Crain family as being correlated to what happened to them.

With this in mind, the audience is able to cathartically live through the shared traumas of the Crain children, identify with their pain, and take part in their reconciliation with the past. This idea of catharsis is an important tool that rhetoricians use to move their audience. Aristotle coined the term that we use today in his work Poetics to explain the emotional rollercoaster that the audience is taken on when viewing a tragedy. The Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy states that Aristotle felt like tragedy is a paradox, stating that "In a tragedy, a happy ending doesn't make us happy. At the end of the play the stage is often littered with bodies, and we feel cleansed by it all." Flanagan fits Aristotle's definition closely, as the ending is littered with grief and death, but ultimately cleanses the audience with its overarching theme of reconciliation and ending generational trauma.

For example, the series climaxes with the Crain family returning to Hill House. All of the children are trapped within the red room after having battled their own individual psychological horrors. The ghost of Nell is present, and the siblings are finally able to reconcile with their late sister. Nell forgives and reassures them, explaining that life is made of moments, good and bad. She reminds them that she loved them completely, that they loved her the same, and that "the rest is confetti" (Flanagan). This scene serves as a perfect end cap to an emotional ride, allowing audiences to cathartically reconcile their own traumas alongside the Crain children. The horror genre as a whole allows audiences to remotely live through characters in this way, thus providing a safe space to digest their own horror stories.

In conclusion, Mike Flanagan's take on the classic horror novel, The Haunting of Hill House, masterfully uses a gothic horror backdrop to portray the horrors of generational trauma and its effect on adulthood, ultimately ending with a message of hope to break the cycle. He uses many tools from the gothic horror rhetoric toolbox, such as repetition, identification, metaphor, paradox, and fear, allowing the audience to have a climatic, cathartic experience. This catharsis lends to the modern conversations surrounding mental health, making the series an important talking point in regards to

generational trauma. The emotional rhetoric of the red room falls throughout the show in moments, making its way into the hearts of the audience and coloring the show as a whole; the rest is confetti.

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