



## **Waking Up from the Dream of Motherhood in Netflix's *The Haunting of Hill House***

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### **Abstract**

*In the Netflix original series The Haunting of Hill House (2018), Olivia Crain (Carla Gugino) wrestles with her identity and value as a mother as the ghosts in Hill House affect her perception of the world around her. Hill House creates visions of Olivia's children dying and forces her to believe they are only safe within her realm of control. These visions lead Olivia to attempt to poison her children to save them from the darkness of the world. Hill House generates a vision of Poppy Hill (Catherine Parker), a mother who occupied the house, to encourage Olivia toward the idea of killing her children. Hill House embodies the fears women are forced to bear as a result of their commitment to their children, unwittingly placing thoughts into mothers' heads that they need to protect their children, no matter the cost. The house forces women to follow in the steps of previous mothers, and the result is a legacy of toxic maternity, a critical theme in the series. Hill House requires viewers to question how maternal anxiety is pressed upon each generation, creating an inheritance of noxious identity.*

It is a common assumption that all women, no matter their upbringing, desire to become mothers. From a young age, girls are taught to play with baby dolls instead of action figures, pick up strollers instead of toy trucks, and are questioned as to what they will name their future child. The systematic implantation of these thoughts into the grains of civilization force women to

take up the mantle of the established roles of femininity. These thoughts place them into an institution which historically limits the freedom of women and puts them into a societal system which foists unneeded and unachievable expectations upon them. These expectations and fears make it impossible for women to separate themselves from the identity of “mother.” In her book *Of Woman Born: Motherhood as Experience and Institution*, Adrienne Rich states, “I realize that I was effectively alienated from my real body and my real spirit by the institution—not the fact—of motherhood” (36). Due to society’s judgment of women based on their ability to raise children and maintain an orderly household, women shape their identities on factors that can be manipulated by outside elements and thereby force upon themselves the necessity to protect everything around them. A mother needs to protect her children from the outside world that she cannot control, no matter the costs, because protecting her children makes her a good mother and therefore a good person. She, in turn, must protect the house in which her children live because the house is a world she has the ability to control. Protecting and caring for the house means she is a good mother and deserving of the gift that is motherhood.

The Netflix original series *The Haunting of Hill House* illustrates this commitment to both house and child. Olivia Crane (Carla Gugino) juggles the roles of wife and mother of five as she and her husband attempt to renovate a traditional mansion to turn a profit. The house, called Hill House, has a dark history of affecting and distorting the minds of the people inhabiting it. The ghosts who inhabit the house have the ability to distort the perceptions and judgments of those within it. Olivia is extremely affected by the dark presence in the house, suffering from increasingly worsening headaches and visions of her children dying. She is plagued with the fear that the world will devour her children to the point where she tries to poison her two youngest in an attempt to save them from the darkness of the world. The opening lines of the first episode state: “no live organism can continue to exist sanely under conditions of absolute reality” (“Steven Sees a Ghost,” 0:20). Olivia, and the other mothers featured in the series, lose their sanity once they realize they cannot protect their children from the outside world forever. Hill House is the embodiment of the fears women are forced to bear due to their commitment to their children, unwittingly placing thoughts into mothers’ heads that they need to protect their children no matter the cost and that it is their job to keep them pure and safe. The house forces women to follow in the steps of previous mothers, committing acts of violence in the name of protection for their children.

While living in Hill House, Olivia takes on the role of the stereotypical Victorian “angel in the house.” In Coventry Patmore’s poem of the same name, the angel in the house is a woman who dedicates her life to the private sphere of society. The angel is perfectly meek and unseen, committing her life to pleasing her husband and running a successful home. Patmore describes the ideal angel:

While she, too gentle even to force  
 His penitence by kind replies,  
 Waits by, expecting his remorse,  
 With pardon in her pitying eyes;  
 And if he once, by shame oppress'd,  
 A comfortable word confers,  
 She leans and weeps against his breast,  
 And seems to think the sin was hers.

The angel in the house is perfectly docile. She keeps her innocence, refusing to be a bother to her husband or others around her. Although Olivia has moments of feistiness and works with her husband as they renovate the house, drawing the floor plans and organizing the furniture, she ultimately defaults to her role as a committed mother and wife, charged with protecting and caring for the children while her husband works. Her role within her family supports the Victorian belief that women need to “devote themselves to their prime duty—childbearing and childrearing” (Altink qtd. in Murray 34). Her role in the business partnership depends on her established femininity and delicacy. Wearing long, flowing gowns as her day wear, Olivia is physically showing those around her that she has no intention of doing any heavy lifting or manual labor. Being the facilitator of the renovation gives Olivia the opportunity to preserve her status as the angel residing within Hill House while also taking part in the public sphere.

Olivia finds her identity in her motherhood and fears the day she will cease to be able to mother her children. The twins, Luke (Julian Hilliard) and Nell (Violet McGraw), are five years old, a time during which they still desire their parents’ attention and affection, two things Olivia is overjoyed to give. When the twins fall asleep cuddling with her one evening, Olivia tells her husband Hugh (Henry Thomas), “I wish I could just freeze them. Keep ‘em just like this forever” (“Screaming Meemies,” 1:10). After saying this, she looks down at their heads to see Luke being carried away from her in Hugh’s arms. This literal taking of Luke from her arms, despite it being his father who is taking him to bed, symbolizes the fear many mothers have as their children grow up: the loss of their child to the male-dominated world. In her essay “‘Savage’ Mothers: Narratives of Maternity in the Eighteenth Century,” Felicity A. Nussbaum states, “mothers [may have] the dominion over their children in the sense of identifying their paternity but not in the sense of possessing them” (128). Though mothers bear the children and know the truth about their identity and parentage, they will never truly possess them as individuals, because once their children begin to form their own identities and personalities they are taken and exposed to the patriarchal world their mother can never enter. Entering this world leads to the corruption and eventual death of their children. A mother can never truly possess and love her child fully because they will always be destined to be killed by the world outside of her arms.

The second episode of the series, “Open Casket,” has reoccurring scenes focusing on young Shirley’s interactions with a litter of orphaned kittens. After finding them one evening in a shed, Shirley (Lulu Wilson) decides to become a

surrogate mother to them, giving them milk and box to sleep in inside of her room. Slowly, one by one, the kittens die. Distraught by the loss, Olivia comforts Shirley by saying, “this kind of thing happens. Kittens aren’t supposed to be without their mommies” (35:30). This belief, the thought that children should never be without their mothers lest they die, parallels something Olivia says in a later episode, “Screaming Meemies,” the episode documenting Olivia’s descent into madness. When responding to a question asked of her by Poppy Hill (Catherine Parker), an apparition of a previous mother who lived in the house, Olivia states, “I don’t think there’s anything worse than [losing your child]” (17:10). Firmly believing that child and mother should never be separated, Olivia’s fears that she will be separated from her children are manifested into reality through illusions and mind games the house forces into her head. Using truth that she “lack[s] the political and social power to alter the condition of life which [she] and [her] children are touched and shaped by” (Duplessis 9), Hill House distorts Olivia’s perception of reality, forcing her to see the ghosts of mothers who once lived in the house and other visions the House believes will influence Olivia.

As stated previously, Olivia is plagued with visions of the deaths of her children, particularly the twins, Luke and Nell. The migraines Olivia suffers from become increasingly worse throughout the duration of the series, and the viewer is given an inside look into what her headaches are like in episode nine. With an increasingly loud screeching noise, Olivia walks through the house squeezing her eyes shut and grimacing—unknowingly walking past several ghosts that inhabit the house. When the piercing noise is at its climax, Olivia enters a room, which the viewer will recognize as the room in which Shirley exhumes corpses as a part of her mortuary business in the present day—showing the viewer that she is having delusions. Once in the room, the House shows her the corpse of an adult Nell (Victoria Pedretti), lying on the exam table, ready for her funeral. Beginning to cry, Olivia backs up and bumps into the body of an adult Luke (Oliver Jackson-Cohen) lying on the floor due to a drug overdose, the needle still in his arm. Nell, sitting up and decaying rapidly, shouts, “Mommy!” (“Screaming Meemies,” 11:00), shocking Olivia out of her delusion. This delusion sets the course for the climax of Olivia’s story. It plants the seed of fear into her life and makes her afraid for the lives of the twins.

After her encounter with the twins’ corpses, Olivia is haunted by Poppy Hill, one of the previous mothers who both occupied and died in Hill House. Poppy presents herself as a classically beautiful woman from the 1920s, enticing Olivia’s trust with her soothing voice and trusting demeanor. Poppy’s deceptive presentation of the pleasantness of motherhood reflects the philosophy that “motherhood . . . [is] imbued with a sense of goodness, ‘something regarded as so unquestionably good as to be beyond criticism [and a state of being] representing irrefutable and unquestionable goodness and integrity’” (Ross 1)). The abuse of the maternal ideal gives Poppy the opportunity to manipulate Olivia’s thoughts and convince her to follow the established role and mindsets the mothers who

occupy Hill House adopt: they must kill their children. Poppy tells Olivia about the deaths of her two children, how they suffered and then stopped breathing, but then she describes how all of the sadness was just a bad dream, a “screaming meemie,” from which she needed to wake up. Poppy believes that the bad things, the horribleness in the world, are simply a dream they all must wake up from, because once they wake up, the bad is gone and is replaced with the good. And it is the mother’s job to wake up their children from their screaming meemie, because it is the only way for her to “fulfill her maternal responsibilities . . . and use the only power she has left” (Murray 35). With the limited power women have over their lives, they are forced to protect their children from the screaming meemie of life by killing them and thereby to prevent them from experiencing the nastiness of the realm lying outside of a mother’s range of protection.

With the seed of death already planted in Olivia’s mind, the house then transports her into another delusion where she is standing at the foot of the twins’ beds, watching them sleep. Reflecting on how perfect Olivia’s children are, Poppy says:

POPPY: I’d bet you do anything for them. Ain’t that so?

OLIVIA: Yes.

POPPY: So what if they was having a dream? I mean, bad ones. I mean posi-lutely screamin’ meemies. The worst of the worst. What would you do?

OLIVIA: I would wake them up.

POPPY: I mean a dream so mean, so scary. A dream about sick and sad and disease and rot and loss and darkness. If they was stuck in that dream, you’d wake ‘em.

OLIVIA: Of course.

POPPY: And keep them safe. No more bad dreams, no more screaming meemies. You’d wake ‘em up and you’d keep ‘em just perfect. Just like they is, wouldn’t you.

OLIVIA: I would.

POPPY: Well, mitt me, kid, ‘cause I got a secret. A way to wake ‘em up. A way to keep ‘em safe if they get stuck in them dreams.

OLIVIA: What is it? (“Screaming Meemies,” 19:46)

Then, whispering in Olivia’s ear, Poppy tells her the secret to saving her children. Though her exact words are unknown to the viewers, the scene implies that Poppy is giving Olivia instructions for waking her children by killing them. Using Olivia’s maternal instincts and love against her, the House in the form of Poppy entices Olivia to kill her children in the name of saving them. With the thought already in her mind, Olivia then has a conversation with apparitions reflecting

the twins. They beg her to wake them from their nightmares—nightmares that explicitly reflect Olivia’s previous vision of their dead bodies. This pulling of the mother’s sympathy reflects the institution’s control over women and the emotional vulnerability women have when it comes to their children. To manipulate Olivia into conformity, Hill House holds Olivia’s maternal identity hostage, making her choose between protecting them from evil and suffering from the internal shame of doing nothing.

Mothers are shamed by society when they are unable to protect their children properly. The inability to protect one’s children is a direct reflection of one’s femininity and ability to act within expected gender roles. She is shaming the very idea of motherhood “[which] is culture’s sacred cow.” She then, in turn, is “challenging all institutions that have axiomatic status, institutions which appear natural” (Duplessis 9). Losing this identity is to be exiled from all institutions within society, leaving the woman on the outskirts of society and subject to shame and humiliation. The act of failing to be the proper mother to her children revokes everything which makes her a woman, forcing her to a space of neither woman nor man, neither mother nor stranger to her children. Failing to perform the role given to her as a result of her biology adequately forces her to adopt a new label, something less desirable than the role of creator. In order to avoid this shame and loss of identity, Olivia decides to kill both herself and the twins, preventing them from being separated even in death.

Olivia, deciding to protect the twins from the horrible death that awaits them when they are away from her, decides to wake them in the middle of the night in order to have a tea party, but instead of serving tea, she fills the teapot with rat poison. The traditional feminine ritual, the serving of tea to guests as a part of hostess duties, is distorted into a tool for murder. A staple within the childhood of a young girl is mimicking this traditional behavior and hosting tea parties with imaginary friends or other girls. Aligning herself with this trope early in the series, Nell expresses her desire to have a tea party with her sisters. When neither one of them want to partake in this activity, she is extremely upset and goes to Olivia, her mother, to express her frustration. Not being able to take part in that activity then makes Nell overjoyed and eager to participate in the party her mother is hosting. Pouring cups of “tea” for everyone, Nell, Luke, Luke’s imaginary friend Abigail, and herself, Olivia appears to be content with her decision to kill both herself and her children. The group’s tea party slams to a halt once Abigail, who is revealed to be a real child and not imaginary, begins to die due to her drinking the rat poison, taking a sip from her cup before any of the others. As Abigail dies, Hugh enters the room and destroys the teacups, preventing the members of his family from dying.

The entrance of Hugh into this gathering symbolizes this disruption of maternal rituals by the patriarchy. The intervention by the patriarchy within the maternal is a common occurrence throughout the course of history. In “‘Savage’ Mothers: Narratives of Maternity in the Mid-Eighteenth Century,” Felicity A.

Nussbaum states, “in a profound historical contradiction, eighteenth-century Englishmen largely defined themselves, sexually and materially, as fully outside the scope of the maternal yet eager to intervene within it” (126). The male’s eagerness to place themselves within the lives of mothers and their children and control how they conduct themselves, both in the production of motherhood and in the maintenance of it, shows the overwhelming control men have throughout society. Even within the institution of motherhood, which is traditionally feminine and comprised of women, men and their patriarchal rule absorb and ingest rights of the maternal, leaving women with a rigid institution comprised of the skeletal leftovers.

The institution of femininity ultimately spans beyond Olivia Crain. Throughout the course of the series, the viewer sees all of the Crain women and other characters who interact with the house affected in different ways. They are all consumed in different ways past that of the maternal. The feminine ideal affects every woman who has ever lived within the walls of the manor house that is Hill House. Olivia’s submission to the house particularly impacts Nell and her relationships with her husband and siblings, but Olivia’s slow descent into conformity is at the core of the destruction of the primary characters.

Hill House outlives Olivia. Her narrative ends with her desire to “wake up” and the fall to her death (whether she jumped willingly or was given a push from Poppy is unknown) after Hugh takes her children away from her, forcing them into the car after discovering her plans to kill the twins. Hill House lives on, while Olivia’s memory is demonized by the outward perception of her final moments. Trapped in the institution that killed her, Olivia’s ghost spends eternity with the other mothers who succumbed to Hill House’s desire to consume. Poppy, Olivia, and eventually little Nell—who dies in Hill House as an adult—are consumed by the institution of femininity and maternity that seeks to overpower them and commit them to bend to its will and conform to the set precedent of motherhood and womanhood placed before them. Hill House’s red room, the room in which the evil seems to originate, consumes the Crain women. Nell states in the last episode, “mom says that a house is like a body. And every house has eyes and bones and skin. A face. This room is like the heart of the house. No, not a heart, a stomach” (“Silence Lay Steadily,” 39:18). The room, the house, craves the independence of women, needing to eat and digest until there is nothing left but the absence of life and freedom, nothing left but the institution of femininity, which will eternally continue to devour women who foolishly think they will be able to mother on their own terms.

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