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**An Empty Labyrinth: Nihilism and the Creation of Fear in Mark Z.
Danielewski's *House of Leaves***

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Mark Z. Danielewski's debut novel, *House of Leaves* (2000), was incredibly well received, and not surprisingly so. Aside from the complexity inherent to the layered plot of the novel, this work is praised for its use of unique typography, footnotes, poetry, appendices, and colored words and images. Danielewski has truly created a unique work of art, incorporating aspects of film and literary criticism as well as visual art into an already irregular novel. The complex nature of the novel allows it to be categorized as a work of ergodic literature: one which requires non-trivial effort on the reader's behalf. By considering *House of Leaves* as such, it can be analyzed within this particular context, allowing for criticism in regard to the form and a unique perspective of the purpose of the novel. In his groundbreaking essay, "Cybertext: Perspectives on Ergodic Literature," Espen J. Aarseth defines the concept of ergodic literature, comparing the non-linear nature of any particular text to a labyrinth. He describes the historical models of labyrinths as either unicursal or multicursal; that is, one path leading to a particular point, or multiple paths in which the explorer must make choices in an attempt to find the ending point, respectively (5-6). *House of Leaves* would certainly be considered a multicursal labyrinth, as the reader must make choices of the order in which to read the material, sometimes even necessitating the manipulation of the book itself: some pages must be read sideways, upside down, or with a mirror. While its formal elements are certainly akin to the labyrinth structure, the complexity inherent in the narrative levels also supports this comparison.

The novel's abnormal form is reflected by an intricate narrative structure. At its center, *House of Leaves* is about the Navidson family's relocation to a house in the countryside of Virginia as an attempt to rekindle their relationships. Before long, Will Navidson and his partner, Karen, start to notice strange things about the house. Doorways appear which were not previously there, and beyond the doorways a seemingly infinite labyrinth of hallways, rooms and

staircases emerges. These changes are all documented by Will through cameras placed throughout the house, and the footage becomes a film entitled “The Navidson Record.” The main text of *House of Leaves* is comprised of an old blind man named Zampanó’s commentary on the film, as he produces a manuscript by the same name as the film. However, revealed in the footnotes of Zampanó’s work are two more narrative levels: that of Johnny Truant, a deviant young man who finds a chest containing the manuscript after the old man’s death; and the fictional “editors,” who make notes on both Truant and Zampanó’s writings. These many narrative levels contribute to the overall complexity of the novel in a way which serves to intrigue readers and keep them on a path through the labyrinth that is the text.

Navigating *House of Leaves* has a powerfully frightening effect on the reader. In the introduction to his book, *Supernatural Horror in Literature*, H.P. Lovecraft begins with a potent statement about the nature of fear: “The oldest and strongest emotion of mankind is fear, and the oldest and strongest kind of fear is fear of the unknown” (12). Fear and horror are correlated in that the latter produces the former, and the presence of fear is crucial to defining the genre of horror. Lovecraft’s point about the unknown is essential to the analysis of *House of Leaves* as a work of horror. After all, it is the unknown which plagues Will Navidson, his family, and his colleagues. The fear inherent in their discovery of a great void transfers to Johnny Truant as he reads the manuscript, and in turn creates a sense of horror in the reader. Therefore, this essay will consider *House of Leaves* as a work of horror, based on the convictions that it incites fear in the reader and that this fear is established mainly by unknown forces.

Danielewski creates this horrific sentiment through his use of nothingness and meaninglessness in the experiences of each character as well as in the overall form of the novel. This overwhelming sense of meaninglessness can be defined as *existential nihilism*, a form of

nihilism set in place by the famous philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche. Nietzsche's basic definition of nihilism is "weariness of man" (44). In Philip J. Kain's *Nietzsche and the Horror of Existence*, the author posits that according to Nietzsche, humans can live with suffering, but what they cannot live with is *meaningless* suffering: "In Nietzsche's view, we are 'surrounded by a fearful void...' We live in an empty, meaningless cosmos. We cannot look into reality without being overcome" [original emphasis] (2). In *House of Leaves*, this idea of meaningless suffering is seen on each narrative level, and creates the sense of horror inherent to the novel. Many critics agree that horror is derived from a conflict between the known and the unknown, and that there are two types of fear: that of a force which is understood and that of one which does not exist in reality. Nihilism is very much a real part of life, and therefore its impact on an audience is one which is known and understood. Most people experience some form of meaninglessness at one or more points in their lives, whether it is in the form of an existential crisis or simply an observation of insignificance. In keeping with this concept, most readers will be able to relate to the nihilism in the text, and therefore relate to the fear created by it. However, although readers can identify with the nihilistic tendencies of the novel, within the definition of nihilism is a sense of nothingness. Since we are unable to understand that which does not exist, there is inlaid in the relatability of nihilism a certain fear of the unknown. Therefore the fear instigated by the novel is based on a conflict between the known and the unknown. In *House of Leaves*, Danielewski uses nihilism on several levels to create a sense of horror in the reader.

The Effect of Horror

In order to understand the horror of the novel *House of Leaves*, one must first understand the genre of horror on a conceptual level and the effect it has on an audience. As it is generally understood, the effect of literary horror on the reader is fear; therefore, it could be posited that

the definition of horror must include the induction of fear. However, the fear created by a work of horror does not complete the definition; there are other forces at work. In his book, *Tentacles Longer Than Night*, Eugene Thacker points out that “the horror genre is as much driven by ideas as it is driven by emotions, as much by the unknown as by fear” (13). These are two important aspects of the horror genre, and the distinction between emotions and ideas is critical to note. Horror functions on several levels, creating both an emotional response as well as an intellectual one. Thacker goes on to explain the several levels of interpretation of a work of horror, noting the important distinction between the literal and the allegorical. While the literal story and its effects are easy to understand, the allegorical effect is not always as easily accessible. Thacker observes that “often we as readers...get the sense that an author...is out to explore ‘issues’ – say, pertaining to mortality, morality, religion, science, politics, conflicts between ‘us’ and ‘them,’ or what it means to be human” (16). This passage shows that there is often a deeper purpose to the production of horror aside from eliciting fear. *House of Leaves* certainly represents several depictions of “what it means to be human,” and, although the author’s intentions are unknown, this essay argues that Danielewski is attempting to make a point about nihilism or nothingness and the ways which humans deal with these powerful forces in their lives.

Other critics classify the horror genre based on its literal content. Noël Carroll, a philosopher known for his work in the field of the philosophy of art, defines horror based on its relationship with some sort of “monster,” a word which does not hold its regular connotation in this form. By “monster,” Carroll means “a being in violation of the natural order, where the perimeter of the natural order is determined by contemporary science” (40). Although it is not a being, the hallway at the center of *House of Leaves* is certainly an enigma which violates several natural laws. In fact, it is this violation which first distresses the Navidson family: “[t]he

impossible is one thing when considered as a purely intellectual conceit. After all, it is not so large a problem when one can puzzle over an Escher print and then close the book. It is quite another thing when one faces a physical reality the mind and body cannot accept” (Danielewski 30). This excerpt reveals the struggle presented by the appearance of an anomaly. Will Navidson spends days measuring and re-measuring his house, attempting to reconcile the quarter inch discrepancy he has discovered between the measurements of the inside and the outside of the house. The natural order has been violated, and the Navidsons are frightened because of it. Will and Karen spend the first night after the hallway appears restless, unable to blame the incident on a break-in, and concerned for their family’s safety (29). Lovecraft, too, writes about horror as a defilement of natural laws: “[a] certain atmosphere of breathless and unexplainable dread of outer, unknown forces must be present; and there must be a hint...of that most terrible conception of the human brain--a malign and particular suspension or defeat of those fixed laws of Nature which are our only safeguard against the assaults of chaos and the daemons of unplumbed space” (15). There are many facets to Lovecraft’s definition. Crucial to the explication is the concept of dread, but beyond that it must be a dread of “outer, unknown forces.” Secondary to the definition is the defeat of the laws of nature, reiterated here with the connotation of loss of security. Based on this definition, it is clear that a fear of unknown forces is crucial to classifying a work of horror. The fear produced by *House of Leaves* is certainly based on unknown and unimaginable forces, and therefore the novel fits easily into the genre of horror.

Moving beyond a definition of horror, it is important to this analysis to consider why and how audiences find pleasure in that which frightens them. After all, fear is normally considered an uncomfortable or unwanted emotion, and so the question arises: why would one choose to

experience fear, keeping in mind all of its negative connotations? One theory is that the observer identifies with the protagonist(s). This theory posits that the audience identifies directly with the characters, experiencing the same emotions, especially of fear or dread, as the fictional character. However, Carroll, in his book, *The Philosophy of Horror or Paradoxes of the Heart*, debunks this theory, explaining that when watching a horror movie, the observer does not react exactly as the character in the film does, but rather experiences a secondary sense of horror. He explains that "...a strong sense of character-identification would imply a symmetrical relation of identity between the emotions of spectators and characters. But generally, the relation is asymmetrical; the characters, in part through their emotions, cause different emotions in spectators" (96). The spectator experiences a different sort of dread than the characters in the film or, in this case, the text. Carroll's explication is crucial to understanding the effect of horror on an audience. The fear understood by the reader is not quite the same as that which is felt by the characters. This asymmetrical relationship is a result of the audience's removal from the text, and the several narrative levels in *House of Leaves* create even more distance between the events taking place at the center of the work and the reader.

In Danielewski's novel, the reader is presented with a unique opportunity: there are other readers within the text who exhibit the kind of fear that the reader can expect to experience. This novel is very much about observers and commentators: Zampanó comments on the Navidsons' experiences, Truant comments on Zampanó's writing, and then the fictional editors make observations about the text in its entirety. In this sense, the reader is the last in a list of readers interpreting the central events. Therefore, the audience can expect to experience similar (though not equal) sentiments as the characters they are following. Johnny Truant writes about his own experience of fear based on the text he has been compiling:

Things are definitely deteriorating. Even reaching for the latch made me feel sick to my stomach. I also experienced this awful tightening across my chest, my temples instantly registering a rise in pulse rate. And that's not the half of it. Unfortunately I don't think I can do justice to how truly strange this all is, a paradox of sorts, since on one hand I'm laughing at myself, mocking the irrational nature of my anxiety, what I continue in fact to perceive as a complete absurdity—"I mean Johnny what do you really have to be afraid of?"—while on the other hand, and at the same time mind you, finding myself absolutely terrified, if not of something in particular—there were no particulars as far as I could see—then of the reaction itself, as undeniable and unimpeachable as Zampanó's black trunk. (107)

In this critical passage, Johnny describes the nature of his fear- both the physical and the psychological experience. The reader is, then, is able to understand his or her own fear through the lens of the character's fear, despite their aforementioned removal from the text. The informal language that Truant uses allows the reader to relate more closely to his experience, and he serves as a model for the sort of fear that should be experienced by the reader. The trials that Johnny Truant and Zampanó undergo during their consumption of "The Navidson Record" serve as a parallel for the experience of reading the text as the author's intended audience. The reader knows what is in store for him/her because the novel includes fictional readers and their reactions to the text.

These many layers of the experience of fear are reminiscent of the labyrinth theme explored by this essay. Danielewski has created many levels of meta-narrative, with the reader observing other readers' reactions to the same events which are unfolding throughout the

duration of the novel. The multicursal labyrinth necessitates choice, and the reader must make a choice of whether to accept the character-reader's fear or create their own reaction. The labyrinth metaphor also alludes to a feeling of confusion, an emotion brought on by interaction with the unknown, which as we have seen is critical to defining horror. The complexity of the narrative levels is, in itself, nihilistic, because the reader's fear is rendered meaningless due to his or her extensive removal from the central plot. The experience of fear becomes an abstraction unable to be reconciled between the intricateness of the text and the reader's desired experience. This is but one of the ways which Danielewski uses nihilism to create fear in the reader.

Conceptualizing Nihilism

The root of the term *nihilism* is *nihil*, Latin for "nothing." Ashley Woodward, a professor of existential philosophy, writes: "[nihilism] carries with it the obvious connotations of nothingness and negation, and has been employed in a wide variety of ways to indicate philosophies or ways of thought, belief, or practice that primarily negate or reduce to the point of leaving nothing of value" (7). Nihilism has many forms and differing origins, with a common thread of negation. Woodward is concerned primarily with *existential nihilism*, which he defines as the "negation of the value of life" (9). In other words, existential nihilism is centered on the lack of meaning in human existence. In the same vein, this essay analyzes the ways existential nihilism functions to produce a sentiment of horror in Danielewski's text. Existential nihilism is the most commonly referenced form of nihilism, and by using it to analyze *House of Leaves*, we are able to understand the nihilism in the text through the lens of human experience; this is a novel about human relationships both with each other and with the unknown.

The concept of nihilism itself can be terrifying. Negating the value of life, finding no meaning in existence; these are ideas which frighten the average human. After all, many see their

purpose in life as finally discovering the meaning of it. Therefore, when faced with the potential that life is meaningless, one truly begins to understand the “horror of existence.” Returning to Kain’s interpretation of Nietzsche’s theory on meaningless suffering, once an individual is aware of the “fearful void,” they cannot return to the comfort of naivety. Similarly, once the Navidsons encounter the critically empty hallway, their lives are changed forever. Once Johnny Truant discovers the manuscript, he begins to be haunted by it, despite his removal from the experiences of both Will Navidson and Zampanó. These two characters experience nothingness in different ways: one in a very literal way, and the other vicariously, showing the reader that nihilism can exist in many forms and be found in many different life experiences. Meaninglessness pervades life, and its presence in art of all kinds reveals its far-reaching prevalence in our society.

Aside from solely a negation of value, nihilism implies a rejection of universal “truths.” If we as humans are suffering meaninglessly, then even the forces which cause our suffering are meaningless, and may as well not exist. It is a particular sense of rejecting everything one has ever known to be true that is the experience of a contemporary nihilist. Helmut Thielicke writes about this rejection in his book, *Nihilism: Its Origin and Nature—with a Christian Answer*: “in a world that is saturated and infested with pragmatism, the question inevitably arises whether everything is not ‘pseudo,’ whether everything is not—at best—a productive lie, and thus whether at the tail end of this parade of idols there is *Nothing*, a *Nothing* which is always dressed up in some new ideology, but still nothing but nothingness” [original emphasis] (25). Thus the aspects of life which once contained meaning are reduced to nothing. This is the reason that nihilists are often considered to be pessimists, as well. Nihilism is a dark force which can encapsulate the entirety of an individual’s experience and lead to feelings of isolation, desperation, and, as this essay aims to expose, fear.

However, nihilism is not the end point. The intention of nihilism is not to leave the individual in misery facing the horror of existence; it is to move beyond nihilism to a point where the individual is able to face and accept the void, but begin to ascribe their own meaning to that which had been rendered meaningless. Thielicke eloquently describes his view of the “real nihilist”:

He does not keep silent about his dreadful secret; he talks about it. And he talks about it with exclamation points and with a smile that one may well dread. He gazes into the abyss until the abyss gazes into him; he is intoxicated by its vertiginous fascination. He actually seeks out the lonely, echoing mountain walls from which he hears the echo of the agonizing mockery of his own laughter (26).

Thielicke’s point here is a compelling one: the “real nihilist” has come to terms with nihilism, and delves into it, seeking answers that will never be found. Once the individual is in this position of acceptance, he or she can move on to establish a new meaning. This requires the use of Nietzsche’s concept of “will to power.” As described by Kain, the will to power is a theory designed to control the inherent chaos of the universe and to construct structures to hide it in order to be able to deal with existence (39). He writes, “[w]ill to power is a process of constructing truths, that is, what we *take to be truth*, in other words, illusions that mask the *actual* truth. Will to power is the evolutionary development of the avoidance of truth, the masking of the horror of existence. Will to power seeks life, not truth” [original emphasis] (41). The *actual* truth he is speaking of is the unavoidable meaninglessness of the world, and according to Kain, and in turn Nietzsche, the solution to nihilism is to mask the nothingness with a new meaning. As a work of ergodic literature, *House of Leaves* certainly allows for the reader

to create their own meaning for this dark text, despite the unavoidably apparent presence of nothingness throughout the novel.

Exploring the Narrative Levels

Each narrative level of the novel expresses nihilism in varying but similar ways. The central plot of *House of Leaves* is concerned with Will Navidson, his partner Karen, and their two children, Chad and Daisy, as they move to the countryside in Virginia in an attempt to rekindle their troubled relationships. Things escalate quickly after the family returns from a wedding to find a new strange room in the house. A door has appeared in the master bedroom on a wall where nothing existed previous to their trip. Navidson (as Will is often referred to) and Karen expect the door to open into the adjacent bedroom, but instead find a small, closet-sized space: “[h]owever, unlike other closets in the house, this one lacks outlets, sockets, switches, shelves, a rod on which to hang things, or even some decorative molding. Instead the walls are perfectly smooth and almost pure black—‘almost’ because there is a slightly grey quality to the surface” (Danielewski 28). Already, the reader experiences a lack. Inside the space, where something(s) should exist, there is instead nothing. Alternatively, the room itself exists where nothing should, redefining space within the house. Will Slocombe, professor of literature and author of “‘This is not for you’: Nihilism and the House that Jacques Built,” writes about the new presence: “[t]he creation of the door stands in *House of Leaves* as the most significant opening into the text of nihilism; it is through this door, as both ‘movement through’ and as ‘mechanism by which,’ nihilism (or nothingness) comes into conflict with Being...” (Slocombe 95). The small void represents only the beginning of the family’s troubles. It is simple and has a definite beginning and end, unlike the many changes in store for the house. So, although it raises concern, it does not cause enough turmoil to force the family to leave: “[i]n their absence, the

Navidsons' home had become something else, and while not exactly sinister or even threatening, the change still destroyed any sense of security or well-being" (28). This passage is reminiscent of Lovecraft's definition of horror and the loss of security associated with it. The Navidsons' experience begins with a loss of comfort and safety, and the appearance of this space is the catalyst. The new presence is a physical oddity, but it has metaphysical effects. The relationships between the family members become even tenser than they already were, especially between Will and Karen, as Will begins to obsess over the changing house.

These changes continue to affect and astound the characters throughout the novel. Before long, another new space appears, this time on the wall of the living room. A dark and doorless hallway, described by Zampanó as "The Five and a Half Minute Hallway" (60), becomes the new source for anxiety in the lives of the Navidsons. It is discovered one day when the children, Chad and Daisy, are heard screaming from a distance that is clearly out of the bounds set by their parents. At this time, the hallway is described as being at least 60 feet long, but the following morning, as Will uses one of his cameras to peer into the darkness, the hallway seems to have shrunk to a length of only 10 feet. Will enlists the help of his brother, Tom, and an engineer, Billy Reston. As the three crowd around the new development, Zampanó notes that "the hallway offers no answers" (60). Unlike similar anomalies in contemporary science fiction, this hallway is simply a void, rather than fulfilling its potential of being a doorway to another dimension or world. This particular example of meaninglessness reveals to the reader how nothingness can have an impact on those who experience it. It is the lack of substance, and therefore meaning, which horrifies the Navidsons. Zampanó writes that "the hallway also remains meaningless, though it is most assuredly not without effect" (60). The point that Zampanó is trying to make here is that the hallway seems to serve no purpose other than to cause a rift in Will and Karen's

relationship. It is entirely empty and devoid of any defining characteristics. Will builds a door with four color-coded locks to hide the hallway. It doesn't help: "Sadly, even with the unnatural darkness now locked behind a steel door, Karen and Navidson still continue to say very little to each other, their own feelings seemingly as impossible for them to address as the meaning of the hallway itself" (61). The meaninglessness of the hallway and the urgent need to find a meaning for it drive Will to his first exploration of the space, without Karen's knowledge. Will's desire to explore the space represents his need to create meaning in a meaningless space, not only in reference to the hallway, but also in his relationship with Karen. The family came to the house on Ash Tree Lane to create more meaningful relationships and so far all they have managed to find is a great void which seems to have made their relationships more strained. The "horror of existence" has been made clear by the encounters with nothingness, and the reader can only hope that through exploration of the space, a new meaning will be created which will lead to a deeper connection between Will and Karen.

The first exploration, in the middle of the night, establishes several things about the "hallway." One is that it is not just a hallway, but a series of hallways and rooms, some massive in scope. The other important facet of the void is that it is constantly changing. Not only does this significant detail cause major setbacks in further investigations, but it also serves to represent the meaninglessness inherent in Will's experience. The space is not only completely empty, but its consistently changing form makes it impossible to determine any sort of direction or trajectory. Returning to the idea of the labyrinth, the multicursal nature of the hallway causes distress and deception, and creates an overwhelming sense of nihilism and hopelessness in the explorer. Will Navidson's experience of nothingness is literal and easily observed. The other

narrators in the novel come to feel similar sentiments as a result of their observations of his experience.

As his manuscript accounts for the majority of the text of *House of Leaves*, Zampanó's experience of nihilism is crucial to this analysis. The reader is not provided with very much information about Zampanó himself or his life, except that he wrote "The Navidson Record," which details the events experienced by Will Navidson and his family. However, the fact that he was blind is alluded to throughout the story: "...all this language of light, film and photography, and he hadn't seen a thing since the mid-fifties. He was blind as a bat" (xxi). Zampanó's blindness is a perfect representation of a lack. Like the explorers of the hallway, he can see nothing. This literal representation of nothingness does not necessarily connote meaninglessness, however, and it could actually be argued that Zampanó works harder to create meaning in his life than the other characters. All of the information which the reader receives about Zampanó is through Johnny Truant's perspective. Along with the manuscript, Truant has gained many of Zampanó's notes, including the phone numbers of many people who helped the old man compile his text. One of these contributors, named Amber, gives Johnny a haunting description of the man: "He said he didn't have any children any more. Then he added: 'Of course, you're all my children,' which was strange since I was the only one there. But the way he looked at me with those blank eyes...It was like that tiny place of his was suddenly full of faces and he could see them all, even speak to them. It made me really uneasy, like I was surrounded by ghosts" (35-36). Amber is not the only person who shares a strange experience of Zampanó with Johnny, but her recollection reveals the old man's eccentricity. Zampanó feels he is not alone, even when he is, and this speaks to his ability to create something out of nothing.

Aside from his blindness, Zampanó represents nothingness in another way: throughout the course of the story, he is dead. His death takes place at the beginning of the novel and Johnny's whole experience of compilation is done without his aid. So, although the text is full of his words, the man himself is absent. This is significant because non-existence could be considered the most apt form of meaninglessness. If something does not exist, it is not possible for it to hold meaning. Zampanó's words become his whole identity within the context of the novel, thanks to Johnny, who becomes his voice and his existence within the world. Zampanó's life work becomes Johnny's until their very different worlds seem imperceptible. Johnny writes, "Zampanó is trapped but where may surprise you. He's trapped inside me, and what's more he's fading, I can hear him, just drifting off, consumed within, digested I suppose, dying perhaps, though in a different way..." (338). Johnny is certainly haunted, as evident throughout the text, but that which haunts him seems to shift. In the above passage, he seems to be haunted by Zampanó, but at other times he is haunted by the very monster whom we can only assume killed Zampanó. This transfer of fear is a product of the complexity of the narrative levels. As the third-tier observer, Johnny is forced to interact with and thus reconcile the experiences of both the Navidsons and Zampanó, which proves to be no easy task.

Johnny Truant serves as an intermediary between the horror occurring in "The Navidson Record" and the reader's experience of reality. He is both immersed in Zampanó's text as well as attempting to function in a society much like our own. Truant works as an apprentice at a tattoo shop and celebrates vices such as drugs, sex and alcohol. Actually, he has this job and these vices at the beginning of the novel. By the end, he has been changed drastically. This change comes about based on the horrifying experiences that Truant encounters. His character serves as a representation of the disintegration that can occur when one is faced with nihilism and the horror

of existence. In order to properly analyze this character, one must observe both the Truant who finds the chest containing the manuscript and the Truant who is in the process of compiling the text.

In the beginning of the novel, Johnny Truant is a nightlife fanatic and skilled in the ways of escapism. He and his best friend Lude are always party or bar-hopping, trying to meet girls to tell fantastic stories to: “We both thrive in the late hours, appreciate its sad taste and never get in the way of each other’s dreams, even though Lude just wants more money, better parties and prettier girls and I want something else. I’m not even sure what to call it anymore except I know it feels roomy and it’s drenched in sunlight and it’s weightless and I know it’s not cheap. Probably not even real” (20). For all his pessimism and cynicism, here the reader finds a small source of optimism in Johnny. However, this description of what he wants could not be further from what he gets as a result of working on “The Navidson Record.” The resulting feeling is cramped, dark, and heavy as Johnny begins to slowly lose his mind.

Johnny uses marijuana and alcohol throughout the text to escape. In the beginning it seems to be just his lifestyle, but as Zampanó’s words start getting to him, the escape is from whatever haunted Navidson, and in turn the old man. He writes, “Glass of bourbon. A toke on the blunt. There we go. Bring on the haze” (43). This “haze” that Truant speaks of represents his own form of nothingness, brought on intentionally by drugs. However, much like the nothingness experienced by the Navidsons, it brings him no sense of the comfort he voraciously desires. Johnny begins to have episodes brought about by the assembly of the text he is working on. He begins to experience a sense of something following him, or lurking in the shadows around him. One such horrifying occasion occurs while Johnny is at work. He goes into the storage closet to get some ink for his boss, and realizes the light is burnt out. While gathering the

materials, he begins to sense a strange presence. He can feel the monster's breath on his neck and feel its eyes burning into his back. He rushes to leave the closet-sized dark room and trips on his way out, falling down the stairs and spilling tattoo ink everywhere. The rest of the employees rush to find him,

...called there by all that clatter and mess. What they can't see though is the omen seen in a fall, my fall, as I'm doused in black ink, my hands now completely covered, and see the floor is black, and—have you anticipated this or should I be more explicit?—jet on jet; for a blinding instant I have watched my hand vanish, in fact all of me has vanished, one hell of a disappearing act too, the already foreseen dissolution of the self, lost without contrast, slipping into oblivion, until mid-gasp I catch sight of my reflection in the back of the tray, the ghost in the way: seems I'm not gone, not quite. My face has been splattered with purple, as have my arms, granting contrast, and thus defining me, marking me and at least for the moment, preserving me. (72)

This passage is extremely important because it is the first time Truant experiences the presence of the monster, which is never defined in the context of the novel, but which one can only assume killed Zampanó as well as two of Navidson's companions. However, this monster is never seen, and "[i]t is almost as if there is no need for a physical beast, because each character has his or her own psychological demons with which to contend" (Hamilton 12). All of Zampanó's passages regarding the monster have been struck out in the text, and every reference to "the beast" only serves to express the psychological state of the characters. It seems that in the process of assembling the text, its haunting aspects have become all too real, and Truant is

tortured by them. The fact that he feels he has vanished is significant too, just as Navidson's hallway seems to aim to swallow people whole. The contrast described at the end of the passage which reinstates his identity is what keeps Johnny sane and forwardly mobile. If there was any contrast in the hallway, it would not be nearly as terrifying. Similarly, if Zampanó could see any type of contrast, he would be healed of his blindness.

Moving Beyond Meaninglessness

For most human beings, the concept of meaningless existence seems horrifying. Just as Johnny is frightened as he begins to see himself disappear, members of our society experience fear when they feel their life has no inherent value. This type of fear, a fear of the unknown- because it cannot be known- void of nothingness, is much more potent than that of a known object. Thus the fear is created by the lack of meaning, and we return to Nietzsche's negation of the value of life.

This negation of value can be found in the very nature of *House of Leaves*, and is well represented by the concept of deconstruction, set forth by Jacques Derrida. His theory was innovative in the field of literary criticism, and can be simply defined as the "decentering" of a text. The "center" which is being dismantled is problematic because it marginalizes or excludes others. Derrida believed that all of Western thought functions in binary oppositions, and all binary oppositions privilege one member while marginalizing the other. In this sense, deconstructive literature attempts to isolate the "center" and then subvert this central idea so that the more marginalized idea can be featured more prominently (Powell 21-26). This concept of deconstructing a text, in effect, devalues the text, revealing an inherent nihilism related to the general conception of the work. As Slocombe writes, "within *House of Leaves* is an attempt to bring forth nothingness into literature, not by writing about it, but by such literature destroying

its own literariness from within” (105). Slocombe argues that the nothingness in the text serves to demonstrate that every presence is built upon an absence. Therefore, the deconstructive nature of the novel is overridden by a certain reconstruction. As the text dis-assembles itself from within, a new kind of meaning is found within the void.

Will and Karen Navidson discover the meaning they were searching for in the beginning of the story by transgressing the nothingness they have encountered within their house. In the end of the novel, the house, according to an interview with Karen, entirely dissolves, despite its continued existence after the traumatic events. She conquered her fear of the void in order to rescue Will: “[w]hatever ultimately allows Karen to overcome her fears, there is little doubt her love for Navidson is the primary catalyst. Her desire to embrace him as she has never done before defeats the memories of that dark well, the molestations carried out by a stepfather or whatever shadows her childhood truly conceals” (Danielewski 522). So it is the love between the pair which ultimately saves Navidson’s life. Despite Karen’s fear of the nothingness presented by the hallway throughout the novel, she is able to cross the threshold in order to save the man she loves. Here the reader can see a flicker of hope: in spite of the meaninglessness offered by the bleak labyrinth, the characters are able to ascribe their own meaning, in effect saving them from the horror of their experiences.

The other characters too, extract a certain meaning out of the nothingness inherent in their plights. Zampanó is dead at the beginning of the text, and his life’s work is based on a film that may not even exist. However, he gains presence through Johnny Truant, as Truant works to compile Zampanó’s manuscript. Whether or not the film, “The Navidson Record” exists, it becomes all too real through Johnny’s experiences. This gives a certain life to the dead man, and a meaning is ascribed to his previously meaningless work.

Johnny Truant's trials throughout the text do not heed such positive results. As the novel progresses, he becomes more and more insane, haunted by that which he cannot explain. By the end of the novel, he has left Los Angeles on a journey of discovery. It is as if he is navigating his own version of the labyrinth, searching for a meaning and understanding of his pain. He claims the trip's purpose is to find the house on Ash Tree Lane, but has no success in this endeavor, and the pages that follow are a strange mixture of lies and reality. Truant is trying to trick himself into thinking he is fine and well. When he admits he has been lying, he writes, "I don't even know where the last month went. I had to make something up to fill the disconcerting void. Had to" (509). Truant is aware of the disturbing truth: that to move beyond the power of nothingness, he must find some meaning to fill the void.

Following in the footsteps of these characters, the reader must create his or her own meaning out of the novel. When faced with a nihilistic text such as *House of Leaves*, the reader's experience is a unique one: he or she must choose how to react to the fear of nothingness and meaninglessness that is presented. One such reaction would be to just become encapsulated by the horror and slip into an experience of meaningless suffering, unable to reconcile the feelings of hopelessness. On the other hand, the reader may choose to understand the nihilistic sentiments within the text and move on, utilizing Nietzsche's "will to power," and attaching a new purpose to the novel. I suggest that this new purpose is one reflective of the positive effects of meaninglessness. Just as Will and Karen Navidson discover their love for each other only as a result of their traumatic experience, the reader has the opportunity to realize positive forces in his or her own life. The sentiment of emptiness created by all of the layers of the text can be replaced by some substance or meaning of great value.

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