

### **The Acceptance of Not Knowing: Danielewski's Nihilist Labyrinth**

In two separate worlds, two individuals stand before facades that may soon prove to be their ruin. They are both ready to take a new step forward in their lives, but they are also both unaware of the consequences of entering the domains in front of them. One of these individuals is a reader, perhaps just out of college, at a bookstore perusing the Staff Picks section, taking particular interest in the undersized front cover of Mark Z. Danielewski's 2000 novel *House of Leaves*, at first glance a usual horror narrative about a geometrically impossible house. The other individual is Will Navidson, a primary character within Danielewski's novel, staring down the House on Ash Tree Lane he's just moved into with his family to begin a new chapter in their lives. In both of these worlds, these facades only mark the beginnings of what is to come. Danielewski's *House of Leaves*, most known for its striking page layouts and unconventional layered metanarrative, quickly escalates into a densely packed bundle of multiple tragedies conveyed as footnotes to each other, all underscoring the House on Ash Tree Lane, built from a confusingly ageless foundation, as it warps and distorts in infeasible ways. But while these front gates appear dissimilar from the offset, they make way to deeply similar labyrinthine interiors, one composed of references to the likes of Borges and Derrida, and the other composed of nothingness in its most conveyable form. Both the House on Ash Tree Lane and *House of Leaves* itself are multi-level structures representing characterizations of the nihilism on which they were built.

The House on Ash Tree Lane, similarly to *House of Leaves*, becomes more and more abstract over time, but fundamentally maintains its outward structure. The house features a first and second story, an attic or loft, and, as the novel progresses, a larger and larger unstable

‘basement’ of sorts. These properties indicate a key similarity between the House and the novel it is contained in: *House of Leaves*, as well, has the structure of a house. As Will Slocombe notes in his influential 2005 article “‘This is Not For You’: Nihilism and the House that Jacques Built,” the four different levels of the narrative stemming from the Navidson family’s experience with the House “form different levels of the figure of a house (basement, first floor, second floor, loft), with each critical level adding another level of meaning” (89). As Slocombe describes, all contributing portions of the narrative go to form a complete structure, at least when viewed at a glance. The “figure” of a house comes into being here, but not more than that. The novel, then, is “both about a ‘House of Leaves’ (a house in which there are multiple absences)... and is a ‘house of leaves’ (a text),” in which each leaf is another step forward, another deeper exploration into the layers of the house (Slocombe 89). Beyond these outward facades, though, both structures contain unpredictably labyrinthine corridors and dimensions. The House on Ash Tree Lane’s basement is completely different each time it is explored, warping the space within it in stranger ways as the novel goes on. The novel, of course, also warps. Text from Zampanò, the critical analyst of the Navidsons’ story, intermingles with footnotes from Johnny Truant, the first editor of Zampanò’s manuscript, that tell his own story. Some footnotes are pages earlier than their indicators, leading to dense appendices dozens and dozens of pages long. Bringing all of this information together indicates that not only is the House on Ash Tree Lane a multi-leveled being containing complex and unpredictable motion, so too is *House of Leaves*, as both appear to be structures stories high with labyrinths contained at their innermost points.

However, in examining structures full of absence, it is important to equally examine their construction to find the reasons for the constant absence. But for the House on Ash Tree Lane, this is not a possibility. The House, according to the narrative itself, has been present and

historically documented since it was a set of stairs leading into the ground in 1610. As well as this, some materials used to build the House are “possibly... older than even our solar system” (Danielewski qtd. in Slocombe 93). As such, the house has the capacity to be older than humankind itself, or perhaps significantly longer. This house’s persistent absence, then, would stem in its ‘creation’ (a term used only loosely here) out of nihilism. Nihilism, as used here, refers to the philosophical concept of an inverse reaction with Being, supported by thinkers like Heidegger and Derrida, rather than a belief that nothing in existence matters. As Slocombe discusses the House on Ash Tree Lane’s connection to this form of nihilism, he writes:

The House, both as house and as text, seeks to unwrite its own creation, and this reflexive destruction of its own axioms demonstrates an important aspect of nihilism and the primary difference between deconstruction and nihilism. The word "seeks" is important here because the structure of the House functions in a manner akin to Heidegger's conceptualization of Being. In "The Word of Nietzsche," Heidegger argues that "Assuming that every 'is' lies in Being, the essence of nihilism consists of the fact that Nothing is befalling Being itself" (111). Nihilism and Being are fundamentally connected, existing in a continual deadlock that neither can break. (92)

Slocombe, here, identifies the reason for the House’s continual, uncanny existence. The House is not only a nihilistic agent, but it constantly wants to continue into nothingness. However, because nothingness cannot spontaneously come into being, the House was never created, and as such, has always been in our universe in a state of post-Being, somehow becoming a part of our world and becoming first a set of descending stairs, and then a House. It also cannot simply leave its state of Being. This means that even while the filmed evidence of the House on Ash Tree Lane cannot be recovered, and the House may have killed its sole record-keeper, Zampanò, accessories proving its existence can be recovered, and another record-keeper, Truant, takes Zampanò’s place. The House on Ash Tree Lane has to continue existing, even though its foundations stem completely from nihilism.

Just as its focal point is built from nihilism, so too is *House of Leaves*, but with its foundations here taking a more philosophical standpoint. Danielewski's ideas that formed the basis of the novel originated from a variety of major nihilist or existentialist thinkers, primarily Derrida, Heidegger, and Borges. In her 2008 article "The A-Mazing House: The Labyrinth as Theme and Form in Mark Z. Danielewski's *House of Leaves*", Natalie Hamilton posits that the works of Jorge Luis Borges most significantly impacted Danielewski's writing in *House of Leaves*. Hamilton refers to the layered nature of Danielewski's text as "a Chinese box structure with nothing at its center, [which] is a common feature of Borges's prose," claiming that both Borges and Danielewski worked with "this writing of potentialities" to achieve their literary effect (11). It is indeed this potential space in which the House on Ash Tree Lane thrives, desperate for a space outside of being. Thus, the nothingness present in Borges's work becomes a common theme in *House of Leaves*. Similarly, as Slocombe previously utilized, Martin Heidegger's philosophy stands as a cornerstone of Danielewski's inspiration. Luka Bekavac, in his 2020 essay "Matrix Pauoris: Material Dislocation in *House of Leaves*", highlights Danielewski's use of 'unheimlich,' a term referring to the uncanny nature of certain buildings or houses, famously expanded on by Heidegger, writing that its use "makes Heidegger the provisional basis of Danielewski's treatment of architecture, an 'establishing shot' of the constitutive role of habitation" (340). As Slocombe identified Heidegger as the reason for the House's consistent presence even prior to its becoming a house in itself, Bekavac cites Heidegger for Danielewski's entire approach to the use of structures in his novel. Bekavac's statements also determine Heidegger's nihilism-founded philosophy on habitation to play into the way the Navidsons live in the House on Ash Tree Lane to begin with. Similarly, both Bekavac and Slocombe agree on the presence of Jacques Derrida's ideas and concepts within *House of Leaves*.

Slocombe addresses Derrida's architectural thoughts, quoting Derrida that "the center [of the structure] is, paradoxically, *within* the structure and *outside* it" (Derrida qtd. in Slocombe 98). Slocombe uses this line of thinking to conclude that "this centerless center informs a major part of *House of Leaves* and the reason why it eventually becomes a nihilistic space. Within the house there exists... a nihilistic... center of the House – that which defines the totality of the House – and yet is absent from the House itself" (98). Bekavac agrees, referring to Derrida's work on *khōra*, another architectural concept used to refer to metanarratives or stories within stories, "easily [applying] to Danielewski's novel; a paranormal space, contained within a documentary film, which is contained within a blind man's recounting," and so on and so forth (353). These parallels between Derrida and Danielewski are hard to miss, as the center of a structure forming only outside of it and the idea of stories within stories are both conclusively present within *House of Leaves* – as discussed before, the novel is a layered series of narratives, each weaving into one another, and the basement of the house serves as its uncanny center, even though it is present only outside of the structure until the door appears that connects the two. Across the works of Borges, Heidegger, and Derrida, the philosophical and literary foundations for *House of Leaves* are made abundantly clear: Danielewski's novel stems from nihilism, just as his House on Ash Tree Lane does within the text.

Even though both structures are composed from nihilism at their roots, they are both shaped by human characterizations of the philosophy from which they originate. The basement of the House on Ash Tree Lane, for instance, warps and shifts in accordance with the mental states of the people inside of it. Hamilton, in her discussion of the changes of the House, refers to its "susceptibility to manipulation by the minds of those within it," which causes the labyrinth to change so quickly and, towards the end of the novel, allows Will Navidson and his wife, Karen

Green, to reunite outside of the House entirely after a life-threatening expedition back into the basement (7). As the characters within the House on Ash Tree Lane are capable of changing the labyrinth based on changes in their mental state, their interactions with the House's corridors also categorize their connections with and responses to the nihilism at its core. Each character experiences the house in a different way, and different expeditions with different individuals create variable results. These changes, then, when faced with the nihilistic space at the center of the House, reflect each character's attempt to formulate a physical space around this nihilism. Will Navidson, on his final expedition into the basement, ends up finding around him no physical markers at all; his characterization of the nihilistic space is so close to the actual Nihil, the void outside of Being, that nothing else is present save himself. But when he recognizes his love for Karen Green, he is released entirely, sent outside of the House. Like the Navidson pets, a cat and a dog who cannot access the hallway or basement and, according to chapter six's introductory quote, "lack a symbolic identity and the self-consciousness that goes with it" (Becker qtd. in Hamilton 7), Will is no longer able to identify with the nihilism present in the House at all, and as such, simply appears beyond it. Will and Karen, along with their pets, demonstrate that these changing characterizations of, and identifications with, the nihilism present within the House are a core part of its structure.

Of course, *House of Leaves* follows suit, comprising a set of characterizations of nihilism that go to shape the stories within the text. As Hamilton, Bekavac, and Slocombe have laid the foundation for, Danielewski's writing of *House of Leaves* was deeply inspired by the works of nihilist thinkers and writers. Not only are all three of these perspectives human attempts to cover, respond to, or characterize the abstract question of nihilism and architecture as it stands, the postmodern lens by which *House of Leaves* operates gives it an additional level of human

characterization. In Seán Travers's 2018 article "Empty Constructs: The Postmodern Haunted House in Mark Z. Danielewski's *House of Leaves*," he defines Danielewski's novel as characteristically postmodern in style and in substance, as the House on Ash Tree Lane "symbolizes... the postmodern distrust of master narratives and of concepts of reality and the feeling of nothingness" (68). Other themes and moments within the novel also point to a postmodern approach to the novel's writing, including the "postmodern crisis of identity" suffered by Holloway Roberts, an explorer hired by the Navidsons to examine the basement, in which Holloway "[attempts] to... prevent himself from disappearing" before killing himself, which is "representative of the anxiety produced by postmodern skepticism" (Travers 72). These calling cards of postmodernism, whether they be concepts represented by the house or fears expressed by the characters within it, show the lens by which the novel is approached – Danielewski's postmodernist characterization of nihilism commands the entirety of his text, marking yet another similarity between the labyrinths of *House of Leaves* and the House on Ash Tree Lane itself.

To conclude, the similarities between the initially disparate facades of *House of Leaves* and its House on Ash Tree Lane are great in number. Firstly, both structures are comprised of a series of several noticeable levels, all of which mesh and warp into each other as their two stories unfold. Secondly, both Houses exist out of a nihilistic background – for the House on Ash Tree Lane, a physical point unable to be physically constructed, and for *House of Leaves*, a philosophical background founded from the works of Derrida, Borges, and Heidegger. And thirdly, both of these layered nihilistic structures are shaped and organized through human characterizations of the philosophy that birthed them. The House on Ash Tree Lane stands for the ways people interact with nihilism, which shapes its labyrinthine hallways and corridors.

*House of Leaves* weaves its core philosophies with a postmodern literary style, which shapes its metanarrative as a whole. While both of these houses of leaves (one of absence and one of paper) only go to form a work of postmodern horror fiction, they also both represent different ways that individuals can interact with the nihilism that surrounds them. Danielewski, in his writing of *House of Leaves*, composed a series of characters who see the world differently and who, just like anyone who might read the novel, find their way to navigate the labyrinth of postmodern anxieties and nihilism for themselves.



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