

**EXPLORING THE DOMAIN OF ERGODIC LITERATURE:
A STUDY OF MARK Z. DANIELEWSKI'S *HOUSE OF LEAVES***



*Project submitted to St. Teresa's College (Autonomous) in partial fulfilment of the
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DECLARATION

I hereby declare that this project entitled “Exploring the Domain of Ergodic Literature: A study of Mark Z. Danielewski’s *House of Leaves*” is the record of bona fide work done by me under the guidance and supervision of Dr. Jeena Ann Joseph, Assistant Professor, Department of English.

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CERTIFICATE

I hereby declare that this project entitled “Exploring the Domain of Ergodic Literature: A study of Mark Z. Danielewski’s *House of Leaves*” by Kripa Joemon is a record of bona fide work carried out by her under my supervision and guidance.

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Introduction

Jean-Francois Lyotard defines postmodernism as incredulity towards metanarratives, Jean Baudrillard defines it using his theory of simulacra and simulation focusing on the blurring of reality and fiction, and for Fredrick Jameson, it is the cultural logic of late capitalism characterized by the fragmentation and the commodification of culture. Postmodernism can hence be defined as a multifarious intellectual movement characterized by skepticism towards grand narratives, an emphasis on the contingency and relativity of knowledge and truth, a rejection of essentialism, a preference for fragmentation and diversity, and a celebration of the hybrid, the ironic, and the playful. It challenges the concept of stable and coherent reality and emphasizes the role of language, power, and discourse in shaping our understanding of the world, art, and everyday life. Postmodernism questions the assumptions and foundations of modernity, including the ideas of progress, rationality, and the autonomous individual, and challenges traditional notions of art, literature, and representation, emphasizing the ways in which they are intertwined with social and political power structures.

Postmodernism can be identified using an array of literary techniques that are common to all the works that fall under the category. Intertextuality and metafiction are common features of postmodernism. Intertextuality is when one text draws on another text either by directly referencing it, subverting it, or using subtle references to it, to bring out a fresh perspective or new meaning.

Metafiction is when a text calls attention to its own fictional status through its

structure, writing, or other literary devices. Another prominent feature of postmodernism is hybridity. It throws away traditional rules of writing that force a work into rigid genres and in turn embraces hybridity that blends together various genres, writing styles, themes, narrative techniques, etc. Many of the postmodern works challenge the present societal norms and class hierarchy. It calls out the world for its shortcomings and selfishness and uses art and literature as a way of speaking against this. This is why most works under this category are filled with irony and satire, a rather playful way of pointing out the hypocrisies of contemporary society. All postmodern works see the world for what it is. It accepts the fact that the world is fragmented and broken but unlike modernism which chose to lament the fragmentation and hopelessness, postmodernism chooses to accept and celebrate it.

Postmodernism arguably revolutionized the literary scene, discarding many traditional concepts and giving birth to new experimental ideologies, narration, and even basic novel structure. It also helped in the formulation of many other literary theories that shared similarities with itself and one such type of theory is ergodic literature. The concept of ergodic literature was first used by Espen J. Aarseth in his work *Cybertext: Perspectives on Ergodic Literature*. His argument in this work is that the interactive and engaging aspects or experiences found in video games can be found in other texts as well. The term 'ergodic' comes from the Greek terms 'Ergon' meaning 'Work' and 'Hodos' meaning 'Path' (Aarseth 1). This gives us an idea that this type of literature has something to do with creating your path by putting in some work. Ergodic literature is any

work where “nontrivial effort is required to allow the reader to traverse the text” (Aarseth 1). This means that the reader has to put in substantial effort and deal with the text in unconventional ways to understand or read it. A nontrivial effort is anything that the reader has to do that is not conventionally required of them while reading a novel. As Marie-Laure Rayan quotes in *Cyberspace Textuality: Computer Technology and Literary Theory* “ergodic work is individualized or quasi-individualized on the audience level, in that different audiences at different times may have experienced very few (if any) of the same sign vehicles” (33).

In a normal text, the choice a person has is to read the text from left to right and front to back if they want it to make sense. Say a more daring reader skips ahead a few chapters or reads in a non-sequential chapter order, the text stops making sense, the plot or theme breaks, and the story is lost, forcing the reader to go back to the beginning and read it conventionally. However, in ergodic literature, the conventional rules for reading a text are broken and the reader is granted the power of decision-making that is not constricted to deciding whether to close the book or turn to the next chapter. It does not mean that ergodic texts are devoid of any order or goal. Aarseth points out that the successful ergodic work of art maintains tension and excitement while providing a path for discovery, a coming into focus of a didactic of the design, and hidden principles at work in a text. The readers still have to make decisions and find a ‘path’ to navigate the work under the terms of the text. It has a concrete plot or idea that is conveyed just like a normal text, the only difference is the fact that here the way to reach the goal of the text is in the hands of the reader. They have

to concentrate on the work and explore its possibilities through coordinated thinking and reasoning to understand the text. Ironically, something that seems like a tedious task to achieve is exactly what gives the reader a special satisfaction that a conventionally written novel could never provide. Reaching the end of a piece of ergodic literature will give the reader a sense of satisfaction similar to reaching the peak of a mountain.

There are many other works of ergodic literature written and they are usually described as “experimental”. One good example of this genre is Vladimir Nabokov's *Pale Fire*. This work is written as a 999-lined poem written by a fictional poet John Shade with the same name “Pale Fire”, which has a forward, lengthy commentary and index written by Charles Kinbote, another fictional character in the novel who is Shade’s neighbor and colleague. The book is presented in a way that makes both these people the central figures in the novel. This is almost identical to the narrative of the *House of Leaves* where the book is a review/critique of a documentary called “The Navidson Record” by a blind old man called Zampanò with added footnotes by John Truant who happens to find Zampanò’s manuscript. This gives the novel many central characters including Zampanò, Truant, and the people within ‘The Navidson Record’ documentary.

Give Yourself Goosebumps by R.L. Stine, a spin-off or a branching series in the regular *Goosebumps* series is a good example of a simple ergodic literature text. As it is meant for a younger audience the work itself is easy to understand with normal speech and Stine’s signature horror style. But the book is written in a way that the ending of the book depends on the choices made by the speaker. The

reader is faced with choices on some pages and each choice will have a corresponding page number next to it. The reader is the protagonist and makes a choice and has to flip to the page number linked to that choice. This makes the reader move back and forth from one page to a random page. The reader is in control and can experience multiple endings in the same book by simply starting over.

This project analyzes the intricacies of one of the most famous works in ergodic literature *House of Leaves*. Written by Mark Z. Danielewski, *House of Leaves* is an innovative, complex, and ambitious work that explores the events that take place in a house in Ash Tree Lane in Virginia and the unfathomable effect on the lives of people who both live in it and don't. This multinarrative work is Danielewski's debut novel that seems pretentious and nonsensical to some while being an absolute genius to others. It upholds a postmodern outlook by blatantly discarding the traditional structure of a novel. It explores serious themes like extreme obsessions, mental illness, trauma, and the influence of one's psyche on reality. An analysis of the *House of Leaves* is not possible without exploring the realm of ergodic literature as the book is one of the best examples of the same.

When thinking about ergodic literature, it is obvious that *House of Leaves* is a true testimonial of this genre due to its style of writing, the way it deals with the subject matter, its narrators, etc. It throws various challenges at the reader which requires them to work their brains rather than passively read through pages and pages. One main part of the book is the various quotes and phrases from other

languages like German, Latin, French, etc, some of them with translations and some without. When faced with a similar quote with no proper translation the reader is forced to use google translate or some similar measures to read it and fully experience that part of the book. One example is the line “aber da, an diesem schwarzen Felle/ wird dein stärkstes Schauen aufgelöst” which is in German on page 87 of the book. There are many pages where words contort to mimic the action happening. The words expand to show space expanding, the word “dragging” is written horizontally, and spaced which gives an effect of the action itself. There are pages with just one word that increases the overall effect of what is being said on that page. The footnotes of Jonny Truant coming in between Zampanò’s text makes the reader go back and forth between two separate narratives (as Truant’s footnotes are mostly confessional and personal that has nothing to do with Zampanò’s work) with a bit extra effort to fully understand the scope of the words of both parties. Zampanò also brings in many elements of psychology and literary criticism that might require some additional research by readers to understand. The book requires the reader to read it sideways, upside down diagonally, and even mirrored at certain parts. The ergodic aspects of the book are so vast that when one thinks of an example of a work under the genre, *House of Leaves* is definitely at the top of the list.

This project aims to look at the novel from two perspectives, the various features of postmodernism found in the novel and the impact of the same on its readers. The main intention of the project is to identify the postmodern aspects of the novel and analyze it further. The first chapter will involve a brief retelling of

the narrative after converting the non-linear narrative to a linear one. This reiteration of the novel's plot will follow an analysis of the major postmodern elements, both ideological and structural in it. The project will also investigate the effect the novel has on its readers, which will be covered in the second chapter. It explores how the structure of the novel helps it transcend a traditional novel structure and reach a more interactive game-like format. The second chapter will also look at how efficiently the author delivers the horror aspect of the story. Through both chapters, the project will provide a detailed inspection of the structure and its impact on the reader. By a close postmodern inspection of the book and its unique features, the project attempts to justify how works like this will change the literary landscape and make printed media more compatible for the present technologically advanced generation.

Chapter 1

Decoding *House of Leaves*

Ergodic literature, when looked at from a broad perspective, is a part of postmodernism. Postmodernism was formed as a reaction to modernism and is characterized by the idea of experimentation and a rejection of conventional forms of literature. “It refers to the state of culture where media is produced in such staggering quantities that it has crossed the boundaries into reality itself and hyperreality prevails” (The Media Insider). To make the book more challenging, Mark Z. Danielewski alters the structure of his creation, completely discarding traditional notions of a novel structure; a feature often used by postmodern writers. *House of Leaves* borrows from various disciplines and genres of literature to add to the overall reader experience and even add to their confusion by bringing in a feeling of being all over the place. Postmodernism too doesn’t believe in strict distinctions between different genres and frequently blends them in works that come under this field. Establishing that ergodic literature is a part of postmodernism, this book will be analyzed from a postmodern perspective for a fuller and deeper understanding of all its ideas and content.

House of Leaves has three parallel stories told through various narrative tools. There are mainly five elements to this novel. First, we have the Navidsons, a family who has moved into a new house. Then we have the blind Zampanò who writes about “The Navidson Record”, a movie made about them and their experiences at the house. This manuscript is picked up by Johnny Truant, our third element, who adds his footnotes to it and organizes everything Zampanò

wrote into a readable book. Then we have an unnamed editor who fills out the missing pieces, clarifies some parts, and publishes it as “House of Leaves”. The final element is us, the readers who are acknowledged by Johnny now and then. The plot is non-linear and fragmented with a lot of missing parts but still comes together as a beautiful whole. For an easier understanding of the plot, the story is made as linear as possible and has been added below. To have a basic understanding of the layout and idea behind the book, it is important to understand this.

A blind man named Zamapno writes a criticism or a thesis on a documentary named “The Navidson Record” which follows the incidents that took place after Will Navidson moved into a house in Ash Tree Lane with his family. The work is very detailed and filled with fancy phrases, ideas of psychology, and various theories of literary criticism including Derrida’s theory of sign and center and Freud’s theory of psychoanalysis. The manuscript of this unpublished work is picked up by Johnny Truant after Zampanò’s death. Truant is an alcoholic with a drug abuse problem who has no hold on his life. Truant becomes obsessed with Zampanò’s work and writes his footnotes for the manuscript. There is however something very strange about the work. There is no documentary called “The Navidson Record” to be found anywhere. Zampanò quotes a lot of famous people who have talked about the documentary but upon Truant’s investigation, it is revealed that none of them have even heard about the work. Be that as it may, Truant still works on the manuscript, savaging whatever he can, writing his notes for it, etc. This work, the original manuscript along with

Truant's footnotes is discovered by an unnamed editor who adds his notes to further clarify some missing details and publish the work as "House of Leaves".

The actual story portrayed in "The Navidson Record" is as follows. A Pulitzer Prize-winning photographer, Will Navidson, buys a house in Ash Tree Lane to be closer to his family, only to realize that they might have gotten themselves trapped in a house that has a terrible secret of its own. He moves in with his family, his partner Karen, and children Chad and Daisy. Being a photographer, he intends to record the moments his family spends inside the house using various cameras set up in different spots and a personal Hi8 to everyone. As the story progresses, Navidson finds an anomaly in his house. The width of the inside of the house is greater than the outside of the house by $\frac{1}{4}$ ". It's not just about the measurements though, the house grows new rooms, closets, and doors overnights leaving the family bewildered.

The first mention of this is on Page 28, right after the Navidson family returns to the house after a week of vacation. They discover that the upstairs master bedroom now has a walk-in closet, a closet with a plain white door and a glass knob, unlike any of the other closets in the house devoid of outlets, sockets, switches, shelves, a rod to hang things or even decorative molding. This is what makes Navidson measure his house to find the anomaly mentioned earlier. This discovery leaves him restless, measuring and remeasuring the house trying to solve the issue of space that questioned logic and reasoning. He ultimately calls in his estranged twin brother Tom Navidson to measure the house with professional tools, but to his dismay, the inside of the house remains larger than the outside.

Though the problem remains, it does bring the brothers closer. Throughout the story, the house remains an ominous enigma, its “alien, exposed and unsettling”. The Navidsons’ story begins its journey downhill with a hallway that suddenly emerges in the living room which leads to a long, dark, and cold corridor. Navidson wishes to explore it whereas Karen who is already scared of the house vehemently opposes it. Regardless, he does sneak into the hallway only to find that it leads deep into the house and had many rooms that just kept going on and on. He finds a huge room, so vast that his flashlights fail to illuminate even a decent amount of distance. When he finally decides to return to the living room, he finds that the space has shifted and he cannot find his way back. Though he panics and runs he finally ends up coming out of the hallway thanks to his daughter Daisy’s sound.

This perpetually dark and cold hallway that defies the laws of space and walls is something Navidson cannot keep from exploring further. He doesn’t do so however for the sake of his wife and instead brings in a team comprising Holloway, Jed, and Wax to come to explore the hallway and document it. The team makes many explorations down the hall, documenting everything, though nowhere as skillfully as Navidson did. They mark their way using neon markers and fishing lines. Back in the house, they are supported by Billy Reston who is constantly manning the radios while in his wheelchair. It is during “Exploration #4” made by the team that tragedy strikes. The team made its way down the spiral staircase (one of the main focal points of the house- the spiral stairway that expands and shrinks and goes miles down) but loses radio contact within a few

days as expected. Jed, Wax, and Holloway soon start feeling the mental pressure exerted by pitch-black surroundings, lack of heat, and the constant growl heard from an unknown creature. Holloway goes rogue and is abandoned by the other two as he runs around as a madman trying to slay or capture the apparent creature. He goes crazy and shoots Wax thinking he was the creature. Afraid of going to jail, he attempts to kill Jed and Wax but they escape. Jed takes care of Wax staying unbelievably composed in a dire situation.

As this is happening below the spiral staircase, the situation in the living room is not anything to brag about. Everyone is feeling the pressure of not hearing back from the team after seven days. Karen and Navidson keep growing further and further apart as they have been since the anomalies in the house started, especially after the appearance of the hallway in the living room. Finally, on the morning of the eighth day, they hear knocks coming from inside the walls. “Three quick knocks followed by three slow knocks, followed by three more quick knocks. Over and over again” (101). There is an old superstition that if you heard three knocks on the door and nobody was there when you answered it, then someone is about to die. The knocking is said to be death knocking at the door coming to take a soul. Therefore, one could look at these as a way of foreshadowing the unfortunate deaths that are soon to come.

The SOS signals give Navidson all the reasons he wants to finally go down there and explore it himself. Though Karen is infuriated, she cannot argue with the obligation to rescue the team that has gone down. Navidson swiftly collects all the equipment he needs and forms a rescue team with Tom and Billy

Reston. The plan was that the three-member rescue team would go to the spiral staircase, have Billy set up camp there, and stay to man the radios (so that the chances of losing radio contact are minimized) while the twin brother duo goes down to rescue the former team. The team goes into the hallway leaving the emotionally wrecked Karen to take care of the radios in the living room. However, once they reach the staircase Tom is too scared to go down and Navidson and Reston end up going and Tom sets up camp. The shifting walls and environment of the area have serious effects on all of them with Reston throwing up. The team soon finds that many of the neon markers and fishing lines left by the previous team are either slashed or partially consumed by the house and its darkness. Some seem to have disappeared. It turns out that the house has a powerful ability to exorcise any and all things from its midst. Reston and Navidson soon end up finding a dying Wax and Jed in a locked room and are relieved. The tearful and happy reunion of the team is cut short as a bullet hits Jed killing him. The team finds a dark silhouette of a man shooting at them which is Holloway. They are only saved by a hairline as the doors leading to the dark shadow close on their own. Reston and Navidson drag both Wax and Jed trying to escape.

All this while, Tom was losing more and more of himself in the camp above the stairs. He's scared to death and keeps calling out to "Mr. Monster" who he believes is out to get him. He keeps Karen company and shares reassuring words with her to keep her calm though he himself is freaking out. Finally, Navidson and Reston reach the stairway and are pulled upstairs by a pulley that

Tom made. Unfortunately, just as Reston was going up, the stairway expands leaving Navidson trapped downstairs and Reston barely escaping to the safety of the living room. The family then waits for Navidson in the living room for days. Tom drinks into oblivion and Karen keeps thinking about leaving the house. Finally, Navidson makes it back exhausted with Holloway's cameras and gear. By now Jed is dead, and Holloway is assumed dead (which is proved true in the end as we find footage of Holloway killing himself) Wax is rushed to a hospital and later makes a full recovery. The family is soon packing to leave the house for good. It's exactly when they believe everything is over that another tragedy strikes. The house starts to collapse on its own. Navidson, Karen, Reston, Daisy, and Chad manage to escape but Tom dies after being dragged into the pitch-black nothingness of the collapsing house.

The misfortunes of the family don't end here. Though Navidson agrees to meet Karen and his children after getting his affairs in order, he never follows through. His obsession with the house continues and consumes him 24/7. He makes basic edits to the clips captured inside the house and sends them to Karen who later works further on it. After the analysis of some samples taken from the house hit a dead end, Navidson promises Reston that he would go back to Karen and the kids. Much to everyone's surprise he goes back to the house in Ash Tree Lane alone after writing a letter to Karen. Reston reluctantly goes back to get Navidson only to find that the hallway along with the spiral staircase, the newly formed corridors, and the closets had all disappeared and there was no trace of Navidson. Meanwhile, Navidson is trapped inside the hallway exploring the

darkness with better pieces of equipment. But as he would shortly realize, no amount of preparation can hold up against the house. No matter which direction he goes, it always seems to be slanting down. Finally, he finds himself falling or floating in a void of cold darkness. During this time, Karen visits the house looking for Navidson. After days of hopelessness, she finds that one of the walls in what used to be the children's room has disappeared leaving a black void. Karen goes into it as the wall appears behind her closing her inside. She ends up finding Navidson, naked and shivering, and as she cradles him, the house seems to melt away and she finds herself with him in their yard. Navidson is badly hurt from this final trip to the house, losing his right arm and left eye, and damage to his skin. Though "The Navidson Record" gives us a glimpse of stability for the family afterward, the movie doesn't end with this feeling of comfort, instead, it ends with a shot of an empty road that has a pale curve vanishing into the woods where nothing moves.

A feature that sets *House of Leaves* apart from other novels found in the market, is its use of different styles of narration, a feature that is commonly used in postmodernism. The whole novel follows a non-linear narration pattern. Within "The Navidson Record", there is a constant shift between past, present, and future incidents. For example, other than the non-linear narration, there are three storylines running parallel throughout the novel woven together perfectly. We have the Navidson family's experiences along with Zampanò's commentary on the documentary and Truant's footnotes on the same page. Though all these can be distinguished from one another thanks to different fonts, it is still engaging for

the reader to move between various stories. It is almost like navigating a maze trying to piece together parts of one story, mixing them but keeping them separate at the same time. Johnny Truant's footnotes are a mix of confessional writing and stream-of-consciousness style writing. Though they are supposed to be footnotes sharing his opinion on Zampanò's work, he often digresses in talking about his thoughts and life. At times the footnotes seem more like dairy entries, talking about his day, working at the tattoo studio, his obsession over Thumper, his fears, complaining about his boos, his friend Lude, him having sex with multiple girls, etc. During other times, the footnotes talk nothing about his day but are a disorganized collection of his thoughts. His irrational fears and panic attacks are described realistically, uncensored and raw. Even without opening the book, the readers get to experience an element of how the structure resonates with the concepts in the story. The focal point of Navidson's house, the absurd element of the story, is how the interior of the house is bigger than the outside. This geographical anomaly is the agent of the tragedies that happen to the Navidsons. Representing this anomaly, the outer cover of the book is slightly smaller in comparison to the inside pages of the book (refer to fig 1), something unthinkable to many of the readers and publishing companies out there.

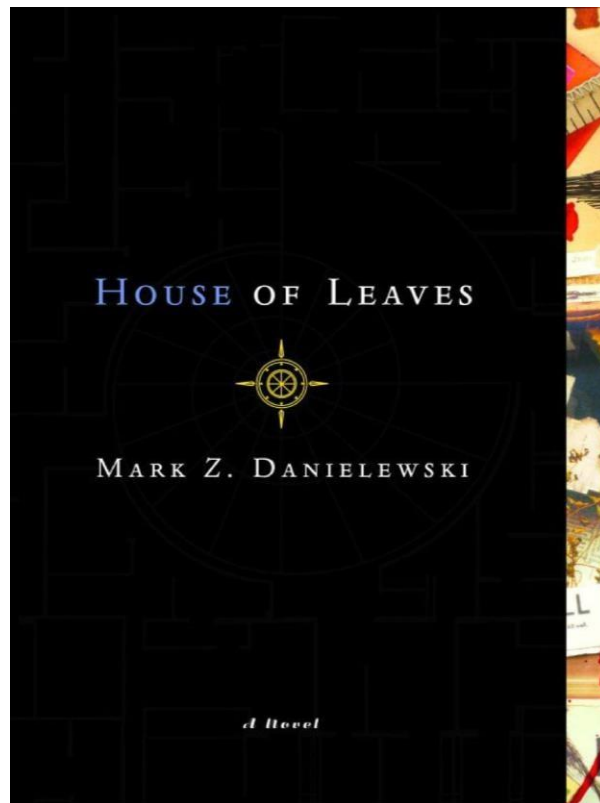


Fig 1

Self-reflexivity is one of the most common distinguishing features of post-modern work. A self-reflexive work is something that constantly acknowledges that it is a fictional work, it's 'aware' of what it is. It acknowledges its fictitious status by drawing the reader's attention to the process of how it was created, its language, formatting, etc. Dr. Dixit Sanjay Ganpat in his paper "*Self-Reflexivity In Robert Nye's The Voyage Of The Destiny*", gives a detailed explanation as to the role of self-reflexivity in postmodern literature,

In the postmodern context, the main purpose of self-reflexive fiction is to challenge the conventional approach to literature as the representation of reality and reveal its true nature

as fiction. It deliberately breaks the linear frame of narration and directly comments on its structure. (Think India Journal)

House of Leaves in concept, is two books in one; the first is Zampanò's extensive academic review of "The Navidson Record" with footnotes by Johnny Truant and the second one is "House of Leaves" itself- that is Zampanò's manuscript with Truant's footnotes, added notes from an anonymous editor and published as a whole book.

The novel takes considerable effort to call attention to the fact that both these novels are a work of fiction. Truant is supposed to salvage what is left of Zampanò's scribbles in an attempt to turn it into a proper book. Danielewski uses many techniques for the same. The manuscript has a lot of illegible pages apparently from ink stains while Zampanò wrote it. While transcribing, Truant marks these areas with bold 'X's, dashes, simple spaces, or just a note that says a certain number of pages are missing. Whenever the reader goes through these markings, they are reminded of how they are reading something written by Zampanò. Truant also constantly calls attention to the words used by Zampanò often to criticize his fancy phrases and sentence construction. After seeing a few instances like this, the reader automatically looks at the writing style of Zampanò's work to find common threads. There are many references to the book called "House of Leaves" within the text. In Truant's diary entries, he mentions an instance where he goes to a club only to hear a reference to the five-minute hallway mentioned in the work he salvaged. He realizes that his work can be found on the internet and that many people have already read it. He was handed a copy

of the book and he describes what he saw on the first page of the document in his diary (refer to fig 2)

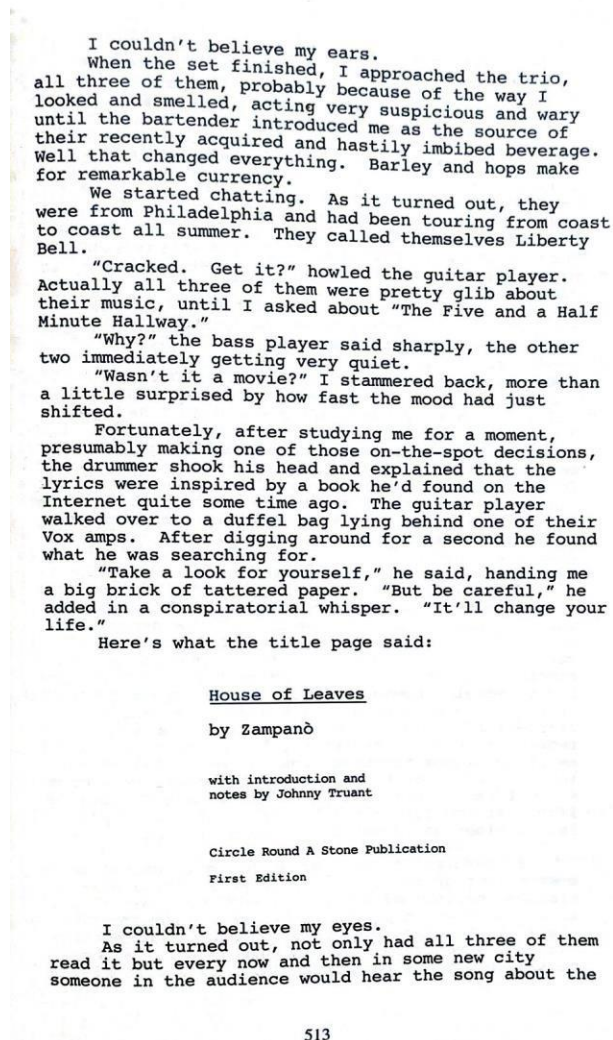


Fig 2

The novel makes one more direct reference to itself, this time with one of its main characters reading it. Towards the end of Navidson's second lone venture into the hallway, he ends up freefalling in the darkness with just a few matches left. He is shown struggling to finish the book that he has been reading with the matches he has left and that book is titled "House of Leaves" (465), once again creating a metafictional element to the novel.

Postmodernist writers recognize the world and humans for who they are and they celebrate the world's meaninglessness, lack of empathy, and purposelessness. To bring this idea of a fragmented world into their books, Mark Z. Danielewski uses fragmented texts, and the structure of the novel itself will replicate the condition of the world. Most pages are divided into two by a line dividing Zampanò's writing and Truant's footnotes. There are many paragraphs with words missing and words with letters missing, which are either marked by blank spaces, dashes, or bold capital 'X' (refer to Fig 3) to remind the author that they are looking at a rough manuscript that is being savaged by Truant.

father figure. His lack of good parental figures or proper love and care lead to a troubled adulthood of loneliness, insecurities, and inability to get into a healthy relationship with anyone. All Truant had as an adult was one friend, Lude, an unhealthy obsession with a stripper who he calls 'Thumper' and one-night stands with numerous women. Will Navidson's career as a famous photographer kept him away from his family for a long time. His partner Karen was sexually abused by her stepfather which scarred her for life and gave her a lot of mental health issues. She was highly dependent on Will and his being away affected their relationship a lot. Throughout the novel, we also see instances of Karen's infidelity like her kissing Wax and her affair with Fowler. She used to keep love letters she received from others in a jewelry box with her, which Will knew about though he never confronted her about it. This fragmentation of families is reflected in the fragmented structure of the novel.

Temporal distortion, a postmodern tool where the story does not follow a chronological order and keeps jumping between events from various timelines, is widely used in *House of Leaves*. This method is also used in famous novels like *Catch-22* by Joseph Heller and Kurt Vonnegut's *Slaughterhouse-Five*. To begin with the fragmented nature of the text in itself provides an effect of temporal distortion. Other than that there are other instances like when we jump to Holloway's time stranded in the hallway after the whole event is assumed over, with everyone other than him reaching the living room, and the family is set to move out having escaped a calamity. The same can be seen when we learn about Lude's death from Truant's diary and then later get to see the events that

happened before his death on the next page. Using temporal distortion, the novelist succeeds in bringing a cinematic effect as well as making it a little harder for the reader to absent-mindedly flip through the book.

To bring additional depth and different dimensions to their books, postmodern writers add different genres within the same book. A poem will no longer follow the usual style and form of a traditional work, rather it would look more like a piece of prose. Similarly, prose may look like poetry or they have novels written in the format of letters. Postmodernism hates classifying works into specific rigid categories. It lets the authors experiment with various forms and genres, blending them and creating new forms to invoke new emotions in a reader. *House of Leaves* is a culmination of different genres including poetry, prose, academic writing, interview transcripts, personal statements, diary entries, letters, etc. It also adds many pictures, collages, and sketches (Refer to Fig 4 and 5) to make it more interesting for the readers and to help them gain a better understanding of the events happening.



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Fig 4



"Rescue: The Navidson Record" designed by Tyler Martin.
 Magoo-Zine. Santa Fe, New Mexico. October 1993.

659

Fig 5

The use of different genres increases the effect these parts have on the reader. It is through Truant's mother's letters that we discover that his mother was mentally ill and had to be institutionalized due to which he moved from one foster home to another. Her love and obsession with her son scream through those letters. The letters are arranged chronologically and show the gradual worsening of her mental state leading to her ultimate suicide. (The transition between Fig 6 and Fig 7 shows Truant's mom's descend into insanity). The video transcripts

from the time Tom made camp above the spiral staircase reveal so much about his character. It tells us how he is scared to death but his love for his brother and sense of duty doesn't let him abandon his post. We also learn that humor is a huge part of Tom's defense mechanism. He keeps cracking slightly vulgar jokes to escape his fear and take his mind off the ugly situation he is in.

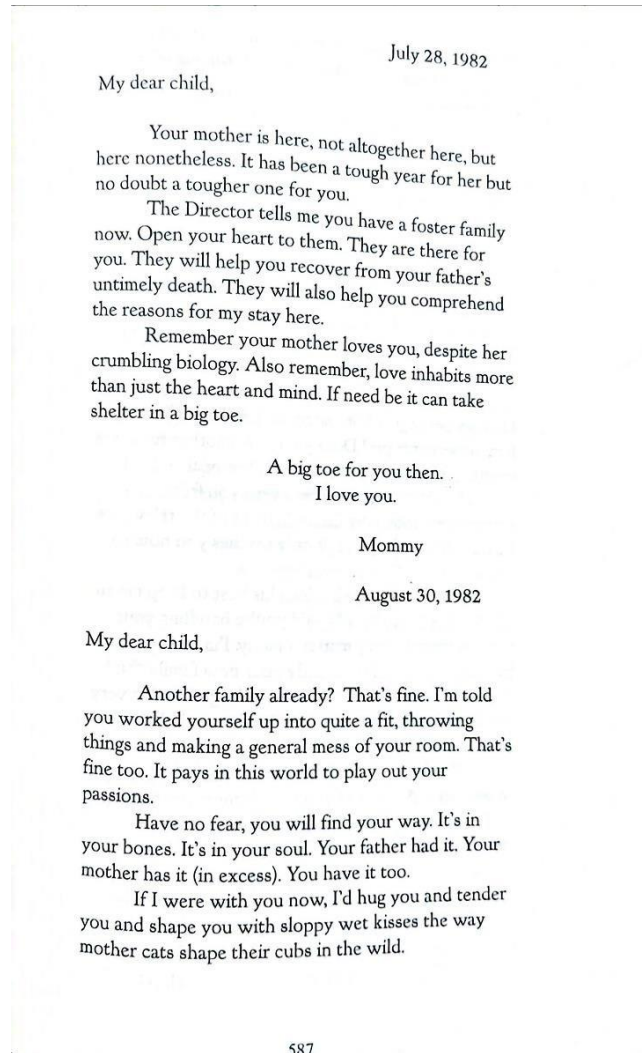


Fig 6

about whether something they hear or see is real or not. The unholy growl that is constantly heard throughout the house is never proven to be real or fake. Everyone hears it at some point but there seems to be no source for the growl. Along with this, it is important to consider how the house and its walls change according to the mental state and personality of the person in it. The staircase is only 100ft for Navidson whereas it's miles for Holloway and the team. Much like the staircase, the monster can also be looked at as the projection of one own mind. This means that the reality perceived and experienced by each person is different from the other. It is both real and not at the same time.

Other than the structural elements that shape the book, many of the concepts used in the novel stand true to various thoughts and ideals that were given momentum by the postmodern movement. A philosophical idea, born from post-modernism that could shake the foundations of truth is 'Post Truth'. Post-truth is more than a simple lie. Post-truth is a situation where one isn't a single factual truth anymore. Different varieties of the same "truth" are circulated and one cannot trace it back to the actual truth. In post-truth, the existence of a finite truth is impossible. Modern media has vastly contributed to this phenomenon with photos and videos edited extremely well and fake news that cannot be differentiated from real news. People can no longer guarantee the legitimacy of something fully.

As *House of Leaves* is a work that involves the criticism of a documentary, that too of a supernatural, psychics-bending nature as "The Navidson Record", it is only natural that Zampanò discusses this idea of post-truth. In his thesis h

makes a fictional citation and quotes Andy Grundberg's statement from the 1990 New York Times:

In the future readers of newspapers and magazines will probably view news pictures more as illustrations than as reportage, since they will be well aware that they can no longer distinguish between a genuine image and one that has been manipulated. Even if news photographers and editors resist the temptations of electronic manipulation, as they are likely to do, the credibility of all reproduced images will be diminished by a climate of reduced expectations in short, photographs will not seem as real as they once did. (141)

Digital media opened up new possibilities that aid fabrication and hence set the stage for a post truth world. As Zampanò quotes from a non-existent work "Document Detectives" by Murphy Gruner "Digital manipulation allows for the creation of almost anything the imagination can come up with, all in the safe confines of an editing suite, equipped with 24 hour catering and an on-site masseuse" (144).

In his book, Danielewski makes both his narrators, Truant and Zampanò, unreliable. Their words or characteristics have been created in a way that keeps a reader from trusting them blindly. Juliet Jackson in her exegesis titled *Tell the truth and then run* makes the following remark about using an unreliable narrator as a literary tool: "The unreliable narrator correlates with postmodern theories on the negotiable nature of truth. It emphasizes and explores the relationship between

the reader, author, and narrator. The reader has to have an active role, to be disconcerting” (3). Zampanò is blind which makes him one of the most unreliable people to write a proper detailed review of a documentary. He constantly talks about ‘seeing’ things, focusing greatly on the light, shape, color, contrast, movement, etc. of the shot which wouldn’t have been accurate, given his physical limitations. On top of this, the documentary that he is basing his paper on never existed. His entire thesis is filled with citations that are entirely made up. He also makes contradictions to what is supposedly being shown in “The Five and a Half Minute Hallway”, which is a five and a half minute long video of the Navidson’s house that surfaced before *The Navidson Record*. On page 4, Zampanò writes about a doorway on the north wall of Navidson’s living room as seen in the “Five and a Half Minute Hallway”. But later on page 57, Zampanò talks about the same doorway but this time he says that it's in the west wall. We also understand that Zampanò couldn’t keep his personal issues from seeping into his work something that makes us question how objective his writing is. Denise Neiman, a character from the book who worked with Zampanò on his metaphor of Esau and Jacob makes the following statement about him: “Too bad much of his life had to slip between the lines of even his own words” (249).

Johnny Truant is possibly worse off when it comes to reliability in comparison to Zampanò. He is an alcoholic who also abused drugs. Furthermore, his mental stability was affected and made worse by reading Zampanò’s work causing him to have hallucinations and disorientation which leads to contradictions in his words. He is in the habit of cooking up stories to impress

girls when he hangs out with his friend Lude. He makes stories in an attempt to protect himself constantly, to hide his past scars and memories that haunt him. He writes “We all create stories to protect ourselves” (20). There are many instances when he describes in detail something horrible happening to him or him feeling terrible, only for him to reveal that what he mentioned a few lines before was not true. He is unsure of his sanity as he himself tells the readers “Though to tell you the truth I’m no longer convinced anything happened. I keep concerning myself with these questions: did I really experience some sort of decapitating seizure, I mean in-? Or did I invent it?” (35). Since Truant is the one that is compiling and salvaging Zampanò’s work and setting it up for the audience, the readers can’t help but question the authenticity of the whole work. One cannot be certain if it’s real or a figment of Truant’s imagination. Using unreliable narrators means that the readers can no longer absent-mindedly race through the tale spun by the almighty narrator. Here, readers have to concentrate better and put in substantially more effort. They have to understand the narrator to spot incongruencies in their words or to find areas where the narrative doesn’t fully make sense. This helps the reader be more critical about the words being used as well as helps them read between the lines. This is also one of the many features that make *House of Leaves* an ergodic work.

Another popular byproduct of postmodernism heavily employed in *House of Leaves* is absurdism. In “*The Theatre of the Absurd*” Martin Esslin describes the word absurd as follows “‘Absurd’ originally means ‘out of harmony’. Out of harmony with reason or propriety; incongruous, unreasonable, illogical” (xix). In

the same work, Esslin also notes that “Absurd is that which is devoid of purpose... Cut off from his religious, metaphysical and transcendental roots, man is lost: all his actions become senseless, absurd, useless” (Ionesco as qtd. in Esslin xix). All humans are born with an inherent thirst to find the meaning of life and understand it. Absurdism sentences this search for meaning along with any attempt to create the same futile and useless. It acknowledges that human life is meaningless and people are helpless victims of everything that happens to them. The crux of “The Navidson Record” is a house that keeps adding new rooms and corridors to itself, expanding in every direction with no definite center utterly defying the laws of physics. The idea of the inside of a house being larger than the outside of the house is absurd. Any attempt to understand the house is meaningless.

Considering the house to be a metaphor for the world, the meaninglessness of trying to understand how the house works are similar to the futility of trying to make sense of this broken world. Many of the citations given by Zampanò about his works are made up, neither do those works exist nor do the authors. “The Navidson Record”, the documentary on which Zampanò writes his criticism is a fictional work in itself. Going even further, Zampanò, the guy who writes an extensive detailed criticism after “seeing” this documentary is blind. A blind man writing a thesis on a non-existent work using made-up citations and an alcoholic later picking up this work and devoting his whole life to it is as absurd as possible. Navidson’s efforts to explore, make sense of, and later escape the house are meaningless and fruitless. Towards the final part of “The Navidson Record”,

we come across Will who has accepted his fate and decides to roll with whatever the house throws at him. This acceptance of helplessness and one's doom and the realization that any attempt to escape or understand it is meaningless forms a core part of absurdism.

House of Leaves brings a whole new reading experience to its readers. It challenges the reader's understanding and tests their concentration. It keeps its audience on their toes and makes them look forward to what is to come. Though Zampanò's work is supposed to be academic, his narration of "The Navidson Record" is full of plot twists and unexpected events that it doesn't feel like a dry thesis. The mixture of various complex ideas, different genres, experimental structures, ambiguity, and supernatural elements, opens up a whole new experience for every reader.

Chapter 2

Deconstructing *House of Leaves*

House of Leaves is a daring experiment by Mark Z. Danielewski. He fully disregards traditional modes of narration and novel structure to create a different experience for his readers in a true postmodern fashion. The ergodic nature of the book allows the readers to feel like they are a part of the work due to the efforts on their part to understand the novel. In normal novels, the reader is kept at a distance from the work. They are merely the audience who are supposed to consume the work as it has been presented to them. This alienation of the reader from the work is minimized by Danielewski's genius method of playing with the structure of the novel. The success of the novel is distancing itself from its as much as possible and having more to do with its readers. This 'death of the author' (as Ronald Barthes put it in his essay "The Death of the Author") grants the book multiplicity of meaning without which the true objective of the work wouldn't have been achieved. According to Barthes "to give a text an Author is to impose a limit on that text, to furnish it with a final signified, to close the writing" (147). Danielewski's vision is only fulfilled because the text could be interpreted in multiple ways by multiple readers.

House of Leaves uses different techniques to remind the reader that Truant is rearranging, transcribing, and salvaging Zampanò's work to rebuild the manuscript into a comprehensive whole. This includes parts of paragraphs missing which are either denoted by bold capital 'X's or dashes. This will be accompanied by a footnote saying that they represent missing or illegible parts of

Zampanò's work. The entire transcription of Holloway's Tapes is filled with incomplete words with missing letters. An attempt to understand said part of the book will necessitate a great deal of guesswork on the part of readers which almost feels like putting together pieces of a jigsaw puzzle. When the words on the pages one reads turn into a game, it sparks their interest and makes the book a unique and interesting read.

Even without using missing letters, Danielewski can make his text into a puzzle with the way things are printed in the book. Some pages have paragraphs printed diagonally starting from various corners of the page. Some have a single line or word printed on them whereas others have paragraphs that take up two pages. To cite a specific example, page 438 has its text toward the center of the page. The paragraph is printed vertically and is supposed to be read from down to up. But halfway the direction mirrors itself and the text is supposed to be read from top to bottom and left to right (refer to Fig 8). With such a complicated structure, the book demands the entire attention of the readers at all times. This is not something people can read passively. It requires the reader to sometimes read the book holding it upside down or sideways. It is definitely not something one can read sitting on the bus or train to pass time.

The first thing Navidson notices when he wakes up is that the only door out of there has vanished. Furthermore the stairs which were horizontal before he had gone to sleep are now directly above him, rising through the ceiling, suggesting that this tiny house within a house has rotated onto its side. After changing the bandages on his leg and devouring a small snack, Navidson transfers the sleeping bag, tent, Bolex, the Nikon, the Hi-8, the film, all the video tapes, the microcassette recorder, two containers of water, three flares, chemical heaters, and the remaining PowerBars into his pack, which he then tosses up through the hole

. in the ceiling where it lodges on
 on a step. Other items, like
 flashlights, batteries
 and this journey's
 only book, Navid-
 son stuffs into his
 pockets. Cautiously
 he then climbs onto
 the handlebars of the
 bike, grabs hold of
 the first stair and
 pulls himself up
 through the only
 cramped
 room
 exit out of that

438

Fig 8

Though the multiple narrators are necessary components to add complexity to the work, sometimes they both clash with one another essentially destroying the mood set by either of them. The continuity of the story narrated by Zampanò is interrupted by Truant with his footnotes which are basically his diary entries. Similarly, Truant's struggles or confessions are often interrupted by Zampanò's dry academic writing. Even though it helps in making the work

ergodic by having the readers pay more attention to follow drastically different stories at the same time, the lack of harmony between both of them can be irritating and distracting.

The multidisciplinary nature of the text might make it a bit of a hard read for some of the readers in the market. Zampanò's work uses challenging concepts like Derrida's theory of sign or Freud's psychoanalysis. Without knowing complicated theories such as this, some parts of the book may seem like irrelevant blabbering. Even if one isn't familiar with such theories, once one put a bit of effort into researching the topic and develops an understanding of the same it helps one appreciate the work much better. Even if the reader is not in a position to spend that much time on a piece of fiction, it wouldn't hinder the understanding of the story. The beauty of *House of Leaves* is that even if you read it just for the story, the formatting and paranormal story provides enough entertainment to make the book enjoyable. However, going that extra mile definitely elevates the overall reading experience.

When speaking about the reading experience of *House of Leaves* it is important to speak about how Danielewski successfully manages to create a feeling of dread and discomfort while reading the book. The story isn't like most horror films or novels in the market today. He doesn't define any of his monsters clearly. His genius is in realizing the effect of the unknown on the minds of people. Once a person gets a description of the monster a huge part of the terror is resolved. Danielewski's monster is never absolutely defined in the book. It's just an unholy growl that resonates throughout the house but has never been seen. The

monster isn't restricted by time or space either adding its supernatural appeal. The Navidsons were continuously haunted by the monster when they ventured into the dark hallway. Zampanò, someone who is from an entirely different location, is found dead with claw marks on the floor signifying the presence of the same monster. Similarly, Truant is constantly terrorized by a monster that he feels is coming for him. He buys guns to protect himself from it and goes paranoid waiting for it to attack.

It is also hinted that the monster may not be a monster but the human psyche itself. It could be an embodiment of human obsession since we see that Truant only starts sensing the presence of the monster once he becomes entirely obsessed with Zampanò's work and the monster along with it. The monster can also be the one inside all humans. During #Exploration 4 we find Holloway's increasing obsession with the monster and his eventual transformation into it. Though not literally, Holloway's obsession with capturing and slaying the monster makes him act like it. His angry shouts start resembling that of the monster and he accidentally ends up shooting Wax thinking he was the monster. Drawing a parallel between the monster and the human mind instills a certain kind of fear in the minds of people, the feeling that the monster isn't far away anymore.

The formatting of the text increases a feeling of suspense and terror when necessary. The way he structures the text helps in achieving what punctuations could never do. If he wishes the audience to pause and take in something the page will only have that sentence or perhaps just that word. With his formatting of the

book, Danielewski has managed to make reading into a game. The unique structure of the book is enough to make people pick it up. The overall game-like feel makes *House of Leaves* a pioneer of new-generation novels that is more suited to today's audience.

Conclusion

In today's golden age of burgeoning technology and gadgets, traditional novels are quickly becoming relics of the past. The novels we are used to, with many pages divided into chapters of neatly arranged paragraphs, are becoming something solely associated with bookworms or literature students. It is slowly turning into nothing more than an accessory to one's personality. Today's development of interactive games makes the players involved in them to such an extent that the border between reality and fantasy is often blurred. Traditional books simply cannot keep up with this level of entertainment, at least as far as a major part of the population is concerned. According to an article about the book and reading statistics of 2022, "Book sales over time statistics show that reading is losing ground to other forms of entertainment year after year — unit sales are increasing but overall revenue is dropping" (Toner Buzz). Though this might seem like a huge crisis, postmodernism offers a solution with the introduction of features of a game into literature.

A game is interactive at its core. No game can exist without the player, so the players feel deeply connected to the games and are hence more invested and interested in them. The moving images and tricky situations engage the minds of the players. This is what is missing from traditional novels. They are rigid and are a narration of events or concepts that can exist free from the reader. This distances the reader and the work. In many postmodern works, especially works that fall under the category of ergodic literature, the conventional structure is done away with and a more creative and experimental formatting is adopted. The way they

are structured makes them useless without the unconventional effort put forward by the readers. *House of Leaves* is living proof of this concept. The way the book is formatted makes it impossible for it to make sense without the interpretations of the readers. Also, the moment this book was published the reader is born. Many aspects of the book will have different interpretations for different readers, making the book feel like an organic, ever-changing, living entity. As Ronald Barthes rightly said in his essay “The Death of the Author”, “we know that to give writing its future, it is necessary to overthrow the myth: the birth of the reader must be at the cost of the death of the Author” (148).

House of Leaves, with its dynamic formatting, gives off an effect of moving text similar to the moving images in games. The text wraps into different shapes in accordance with the situation mentioned in the book. On page 427 of the book, the only text on the page is “sometimes the ceiling drops on him”(427) and the text is printed at the bottom of the page which helps in mimicking the falling action. The next page describes the ceiling getting progressively lower until it grazes Navidson’s head which is depicted by arranging the words one under the other in a straight line. But the ceiling suddenly rises higher and higher which is shown by arranging the words one after the other from the bottom left of the page to the top right making it look like a bunch of stairs going up. Any reader flipping from page 427 to page 429 will be able to ‘see’ the movement of the ceiling solely through the formatting of the words in the text. This kind of visual representation simply by an experimental way of arranging the words on a page is

the secret behind the success of *House of Leaves*. It makes the book engaging and attractive to the reader.

With its extremely ergodic nature and postmodern features, this book manages to successfully blend the lines between reality and fiction. Just like the characters in the book who are never able to find the monster that they sense or cannot make sense of what is happening to them, the readers also feel confused about the true potential and capacity of meaning in the book. When read slowly, understanding all the elements in the text by putting in substantial effort, the book tends to incite certain feelings within the readers. It is said to make many readers uncomfortable, feel an overall dread, or even claustrophobic in some extreme cases. This proves that the work is able to mask reality and take the readers to a fictional realm that appears very real to them. Thus, *House of Leaves* is able to successfully create a field of extreme hyperreality and make the readers question reality using complex techniques, turning a simple book into a living masterpiece.

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