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The Uncanny

In the novel *House of Leaves*, Mark Danielewski incorporates encounters with the uncanny throughout the book by focusing them around three areas of the uncanny valley. According to Sigmund Freud, “the uncanny is not new but something familiar and old-established in the mind that has been estranged only by the process of repression.”. This shows that the uncanny is subjective and what is repressed into the uncanny valley never truly leaves an individual. This leads to future encounters with the uncanny as the experiences we have haunt us throughout our lives, just as Danielewski demonstrates with his characters in *House of Leaves*. The three main areas that Danielewski explores are the absolute destiny of death, the structure of time and space, and the origin of our ontic and ontological existence. These topics are located within the uncanny valley as they are outside of our unconscious mind. Encounters with the uncanny can only be experienced through the conception of ontic and ontological being in the world. In *House of Leaves*, the encounters with the three areas of the uncanny valley create an immersed experience within the uncanny for the characters within the story and the readers.

In this novel, there is evidence of encounters with the uncanny in relation with the absolute destiny of one's own death. This concept represents itself in the text by allowing the characters to be open to their own death or being towards death. From chapter four, “Something inhuman, reeking with so much rot & years,....Something’s behind me. Of course, I deny it. It’s

impossible to deny. I wanna puke.” (Danielewski 26). In this chapter, we see Johnny Truant experiencing a panic attack while he is at the tattoo shop after he walks out into the hall alone. This is the creature associated with Zamponos death and it is tied not only to Johnny but to the house itself. This creature looming over his unconscious mind is representing death looming over him and being close to him. In chapter five we see Johnny have another encounter with the same creature, “There’s that awful taste again, sharp as rust, wrapping around my tongue....Extremely long fingers...Sucking on teeth, teeth already torn from the gums.” (Danielewski 70-71). In this scene we see Johnny experiencing the same closeness to death as he did previously. This creature has attached itself to Johnny's uncanny valley and will not leave until he is no longer living. Johnny continues to encounter the uncanny throughout the novel as the creature continues to draw him closer to his death. Later in the story, this will cause Johnny to spiral into insanity. These scenes help the readers experience the uncanny, after reading these scenes I couldn't help but feel that I was also no longer alone in my apartment. I was so immersed in the novel that I also felt paranoid that something unreal could be present, even though I knew there wasn't. PG 43 “When all of a sudden along the edged of the tongue, towards the back of my mouth, I started to taste something extremely bitter, almost metallic. I started to gag.”

In the novel, we also see Karen encounter the uncanny as she is being towards death or open to her own death. From chapter four, “Just as with Karen, its removal causes an immediate domino effect...the last few do not stop at the wall as they had previously done but fall instead to the floor...Which is exactly when Karen screams.” (Danielewski 40). In this scene Tom is taking a book from the shelf, in the past when the books have toppled over they have always been caught by the wall at the end. This time is different though and the books fall through a newly formed one-foot space between the shelf and the wall. This shows a change in the house and Karen.

Karen is towards death because she realizes that she is no longer living in a home but in a house. The difference here is a home is something that is familiar and well known to you but a house is just a place you can be. As the house is changing Karen is also changing, this shows that she will never truly know and understand herself the same way that she will never understand how the house changes. These examples show how characters in the novel and the reader experience being towards death which is an area of the uncanny valley.

Evidence exists in the novel of characters experiencing the uncanny within the structure of time and space. In the story we see the house defy the standards of space. The house is constantly changing and growing, adding new rooms and spaces within but getting no larger from an external point of view. From chapter four, “The result is anything but comforting. In fact impossible...The width of the house inside would appear to exceed the width of the house as measured from the outside..” (Danielewski 30). From this, we can see that the house is actually bigger on the inside than it is on the outside, not just by eye but by physical measurement. This concept of change within the house as it grows goes back to the previous paragraph and how it cannot be a home but rather just a house as it will continue to remain unfamiliar as it grows. In chapter five, “Except as Navidson swings around, he suddenly discovers a new doorway to the right. It was not there before.” (Danielewski 64). In this chapter we see that the house has changed, this time developing an entirely new room that was not there previously. This change really embraces the uncanny as our brains cannot process this as a fathomable event and the fear we experience within the unknown. In class, I thought about when families renovate their homes and what that changes about it. For a short period of time, the change causes their home to no longer be home until they become reacquainted and familiarized with the changes. Thus they experience the uncanny for a short period of time. During the exploration scenes, we see how

time and space are connected within the novel. In chapter seven, “Holloway, Jed, and Wax take forty-five minutes to reach the Spiral Staircase only to spend the next seven hours walking down it. When they at last stop, a stopped flare still does not illuminate or sound a bottom.”

(Danielewski 86). From this scene, we can see that the depths of time and space are connected in the house. The amount of time that it takes them to explore the new areas of the house is the longer that the characters are disconnected from the outside realm of time. For it to take the characters this long to explore this area within the house it must be of unfathomable size. For the flare to never reach the bottom symbolizes to me that they are walking down a staircase that indeed leads to nowhere. This symbolization to me reflects how the uncanny valley can be never-ending. These examples from the novel show how the author connects the area of the uncanny valley to the characters in the novel.

There is evidence in the novel where the uncanny is present in relation to the origin of our ontic and ontological existence. Ontological existence refers more to the life we live and the experiences we have whereas ontic existence refers to the physicality of an object or oneself. In a way, the house serves as a window into the ontic and ontological origin. The house is ontic as it is just a structure made from wood, nails, concrete, and many other objects. The house also embodies the ontological existence because it has the potential to become a home and provide experiences and emotions to the families who live in it. While the house itself changing relates to the structure, the experiences it creates for the characters are ontological. In chapter one, “she still cannot resist looking out the window every couple of minutes...Even if there is no sound, the weight of a hundred seconds always turns her head.” (Danielewski 12). In this scene, we see Karen and the kids making candles, during this time her head is constantly turning towards the window. She seems uneasy and slightly shaken. Right after she feels this unease, “Navidson’s car

pulls into the driveway. Karen hardly attempts to contain her relief.” (Danielewski 12). Since Karen is still unfamiliar with the house at this time she seems to be waiting for it to tell her something in this scene. In the beginning of the novel, we see how the house has affected Zampano and led to his death. The writings themselves that Zampano is creating are the ontic as it is just meaningless lines and shapes on the page. From the introduction, “As I discovered, there were reams and reams of it. Endless snarls of words, sometimes twisting into meaning, sometimes into nothing at all, frequently breaking apart, always branching off into other places I’d come across later” (Danielewski xvii). At the beginning of the novel, we learn that Zampano is dead and Johnny finds all of these writings. Zampano wrote constantly, we learn that he never finished a single work but would write on anything that was available such as napkins and envelopes. In a way when Zampano spiraled in the end due to the house much like Johnny does later in the story he did so by writing. I believe that the house caused him to do this and Zampanos' writing symbolizes the never-ending depths of the house as it grows as his writing is never-ending. Based on these examples from the novel we see how the house is a gateway into the ontic and ontological origin of our existence.

In conclusion, Danielewski uses encounters with the three areas of the uncanny valley to not only create immersed experiences for his characters but also for the reader. When examining the three areas that Danielewski chose to explore we see how he connected these experiences to the house. The house is the vessel in which an individual can experience the uncanny through the ontic and ontological experiences that an individual has.

Works Cited

Danielewski, Mark. *House of Leaves*. Pantheon Books New York, 2000.