

The Absence as Presence: A Navigation of Space and Darkness in Mark Z. Danielewski's Ergodic Novel *House of Leaves*

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Abstract

Mark Z. Danielewski's ergodic novel, 'House of Leaves', intricately employs various narrative techniques to represent the thematic presence of absence and space in the novel. The novel navigates through layers of darkness and space structures that challenge traditional notions of storytelling. Within the unconventional format of the novel, the exploration of space transcends physical boundaries, delving into psychological and existential dimensions, and altering spatiotemporal realities in both the plot and text. Conclusively, through extensive analysis of the interplay between absence and darkness in 'House of Leaves', this study exposes Danielewski's intended meaning that human knowledge shrinks time and space.

Keywords: Ergodic, Absence, Darkness, Presence, Space

Introduction - The Ergodic Novel:

"The floor begins to assume a new meaning. It can no longer be taken for granted"
(Danielewski 67)

Danielewski's, *House of Leaves* begins with a startling line "This is not for you"
(Danielewski v) as a warning to the readers in foreshadowing what the fabricated

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narrative of the novel might evoke during the reading experience. Being an experimental text that exploits postmodern features with its complicated narrative layers, *House of Leaves* stands out as an evident example of an ergodic novel that intricately deals with the effective employment of space, absence, and darkness in exploring the labyrinthine structure of the story.

The term "ergodic" comes from the Greek words "ergon," meaning "work," and "hodos," meaning "path" (Yonan). The concept was proposed by Espen J. Aarseth in *Cybertext: Perspectives on Ergodic Literature*, who defines ergodic literature as a type of literature where a "nontrivial effort is required to allow the reader to traverse the text." (Aarseth 1). According to him:

If ergodic literature is to make sense as a concept, there must also be nonergodic literature, where the effort to traverse the text is trivial, with no extranoematic responsibilities placed on the reader except (for example) eye movement and the periodic or arbitrary turning of pages. (Aarseth 2)

Ergodic literature forces the reader to do more than just read a piece of work. Literary pieces of this genre might usually involve the usage of puzzles, ephemera, footnotes, or marginalia (Yonan), and as writer Melissa Baron points out in an article, "Books Like *House of Leaves*: An Intro to Ergodic Fiction," that it is:

sometimes just a few scattered words tossed across the page like confetti. Your eyes are jumping all over the place as you piece together the story. This is what ergodic fiction is: books or digital text that use unusual methods to tell their stories. (Baron)

As an evident example of ergodic literature, *House of Leaves* primarily revolves around the Navidson Record, a documentary that exposes the life and the mysteries of space in the Navidson house. The complexity of the narrative increases as it is through Johnny Truant's exploration of Zampano's writing of the documentary that the reader is exposed to the house, which in reality does not seem to exist. The complicated nature of the plot is exploited through ergodic elements in the text, which add to the multiple perspectives and the fabricated reading of the story.

For instance, Danielewski places a blue text box on page one hundred and twenty of the novel, containing a series of sentences that require a mirror to read. Danielewski prints the words in a way that requires the use of an external source to make seemingly nonsensical sentences make sense. The use of various languages evokes another major ergodic element of the novel. One such example is the sentence "aber da, an diesem schwarzen Felle/ wird dein stärkstes Schauen aufgelöst" (87), meaning but there, on this black skin/ your strongest vision is dissolved (Google Translate). Unless a reader is multilingual, knowing French, Latin, and German, the text will not bring out its complete meaning without using tools like Google Translate (Joemon 6).

While the novel's ergodic nature creates a unique reading experience, it also appears to reflect the intricate thematic effects presented in the plot by the author. Upon the Navidson family's return from a week-long vacation, they find a surprising addition to their home: the upstairs master bedroom suddenly holds a walk-in closet. This closet stands out with its plain white door, a glass knob, and a distinct lack of typical features like outlets, switches, shelves, or decorative moulding—setting it apart from the other closets in the house. This peculiar discovery prompts Navidson to become increasingly unsettled. Restless, he engages in a relentless cycle of measuring and re-measuring the dimensions of the house as he grapples with the spatial anomaly that challenges conventional logic and reasoning.

This spatial oddity found in the Navidson house is readily resonated through the ergodic features of the text, where the perpetually dark hallway of the Navidson house finds itself reprinted in the form of words as the non-linear narration of three storylines running parallel together creates a maze-like interpretation of the plot. As the ergodic narrative compels the reader to explore beyond a standard reading experience, the uncertainty that the novel kindles is also seen in the house, where “that which is uncanny or *unheimlich* is neither homey nor protective, nor comforting nor familiar. It is alien, exposed, and unsettling, or in other words, the perfect description of the house on Ash Tree Lane” (Danielewski 28).

Such ergodic elements in the novel enhance the reading experience in delivering the thematic observations of the plot, such as the unconventional formatting in the pages of the novel, including the liberal use of white spaces, which mirrors the voids and unexplored spaces within the mysterious house, while the textual maze with its complicated page layouts and layered narratives mimics the labyrinthine nature of the physical space described in “The Navidson Record.” The sense of disorientation and uncertainty runs throughout the text, where ultimately the themes of darkness and absence pervade the narrative, consuming the reader's experience through the clever integration of ergodic elements.

This article explores Mark Z. Danielewski's use of darkness as a central motif that has permeated the ergodic structure and thematic content of the novel. In this novel, darkness is not merely a backdrop but a profound element that drives the story and shapes the reader's experience.

The novel centres on a house that inexplicably expands into a vast, labyrinthine space, defying the laws of physics and creating an ever-deepening darkness within its walls. This physical darkness serves as a metaphor for the deeper, more unsettling psychological and existential themes explored throughout the text. As characters navigate the house's shifting and shadowy corridors, their journey into the darkness becomes a reflection of their own inner turmoil, fears, and uncertainties.

Danielewski's use of ergodic techniques—such as unconventional page layouts, fragmented narratives, and intertextual elements—mirrors the disorienting nature of darkness itself. The novel demands active engagement from its readers, who must

decipher not only the physical darkness of the house but also the layered and often opaque storytelling. This approach enhances the thematic resonance of darkness, making it a key element in the novel's exploration of the unknown, the hidden, and the uncanny aspects of human existence. The thematic significance of darkness in relation to the ergodic nature of the novel creates a unique plot.

Darkness and Absence

Darkness is usually associated with something incomprehensible, the absence of light in a particular space, and there is a "need to shed light" on it, and it is this tendency to 'present' or make present that has given darkness a bad name" (Burik 2). Darkness is frequently linked to peril and ambiguity, particularly when viewed through the filters of mainstream culture and religious beliefs. This association is evident in concepts like dark matter and black holes, which carry an inherent sense of menace as they appear to swallow and obscure matter. Similarly, in religious imagery, the devil is often depicted as the Prince of Darkness, reinforcing the negative connotations associated with the absence of light.

The sense of sight, which is regarded as the most rational sense, struggles to operate effectively in an environment defined by emptiness and a scarcity of visual indicators. According to the text, hearing is the only sense capable of uncovering the hidden complexities of such a perplexing space. The explorers navigating the labyrinth, as depicted in the narrative, depend solely on echoes to gauge distances.

Upon examining Zampanò's perspective, it becomes much evident that in circumstances like these, blindness does not serve as a limitation but rather as a unique form of perception. This state may allow a person to see intangible things. For example, Zampanò could envision through the heightened lens of his imagination; the construction of the house of leaves may be interpreted in the novel as a manifestation of his internal vision. The pervasive darkness within the domestic environment is perceived as more than merely the absence of light; it embodies something ambiguous and boundless. This dark space challenges physics principles and symbolizes the unknown and uncharted. As Tom and Will Navidson delve deeper, the hallways appear to stretch endlessly, complicating their understanding of the newly discovered anomaly. Truant elucidates this phenomenon as follows:

What took place amounts to a strange spatial violation which has already been described in a number of ways - namely surprising, unsettling, disturbing but most of all uncanny. In German the word for 'uncanny' is 'unheimlich' which Heidegger in his book "Sein und Zeit" thought worthy of some consideration: [...] In anxiety one feels uncanny. Here the peculiar indefiniteness of that which Dasein finds itself alongside in anxiety, comes proximally to the expression: the 'nothing and nowhere'. But here 'uncanniness' also means 'not-being-at-home.' [das Nicht-zuhause-sein]. (Danielewski 24)

While exploring how darkness engulfs the physical space of the Navidson house, it is important to notice how the creation of such absence alters the psyche of the characters witnessing it. The darkness within the Navidson house also leaves emotional and psychological distress. The strained relationships between characters, especially the growing distance between Will and his partner Karen, reflect the emotional turmoil engulfing the domestic and mental space as reflected by darkness. The absence becomes a metaphor for the internal struggles and conflicts faced by the characters, mirroring the chaotic and unsettling nature of the house itself.

These psychological interventions are not only seen in the characters inhabiting the house, such as Will, Tom, and Karen, but also in the characters who engage in exploring the nuances of the documentary. Throughout the novel, Truant gradually unravels as he reads Zampano's work, where there is a slow blurring of his reality and imagination. The narrative darkness consumes him, as he becomes extensively obsessed with the manuscript and goes through a distorted reality that haunts his daily activities.

These complexities of absence and darkness are brought out through Danielewski's effective use of ergodic elements. Absence is not only signified in the Navidson house but also on the pages of the text, resonating through the void that the plot focusses on to bring out the effective blurring of the boundaries between reality and fiction.

For instance, the author adds emphasis on absence on page three hundred and nine of its novel, which has a single word "white," which reveals that Navidson's film screen had run out and the screen is blank and white. In the novel, absence and voids in the typography echo the Navidson house's lack of space, darkness, and light, challenging human understanding of absence.

The explorations within the novel indicate that the vast hallway's absence deeply influences the thoughts of its residents, thereby interrupting the narrative. This absence mirrors the uncertainty inherent in the space, projecting it onto the characters' minds. However, Danielewski's use of absence and darkness also effectively questions whether the newly found space is real or a product of the mind's imagination.

As it is ironically mentioned, Truant finds out that the documentary on the house seems to be nonexistent, and even the numerous people whom Zampano has cited throughout his manuscript seem to be unaware of the existence of such a house. Danielewski interestingly leaves the readers with the same lack of origin and absence that the novel incorporates to be unaware of whether the house is Navidson's imagination or of Zampano's or if the entire novel is just the unravelling of Johnny Traunt's disturbed mind. Danielewski also sheds light on how the Navidson house reproduces its voids in human minds, where:

Ruby Dahi, in her stupendous study of space, calls the house on Ash Tree Lane "a solipsistic heightener," arguing that "the house, the halls, and the

rooms all become the self—collapsing, expanding, tilting, closing, but always in perfect relation to the mental state of the individual. (Danielewski 167)

If Dahi's interpretation is observed, it suggests that the entity in Holloway's narrative originates from Holloway's psyche rather than the house itself. Similarly, the confined space where Wax finds himself stuck mirrors his own feelings of weariness and hopelessness. As pointed out in the novel, one's perception of the size of the house aligns with one's understanding of it. When encountering something new, there's a natural tendency to approach it cautiously, which can make it seem larger than it actually is. However, upon subsequent visits and gaining familiarity with the surroundings, the perceived size diminishes significantly.

This is particularly seen in the Navidson house, where the mysterious hallway initially represents itself as a convoluted maze reflecting the inhabitant's minds. However, as Holloway becomes familiar with the space and emerges from it, the hallway almost disappears. This not only questions the readers about the psychological traces left by the space on the psyche of the characters but also ultimately raises speculations regarding whether the space was just an illusion created by the characters' minds.

The presence of absences and voids engulfs narrative spaces and architectural structures, resulting in experiences that are far more unfathomable to human understanding. As the novel points out, "Unoccupied space will never cease to change simply because nothing forbids it to do so. The continuous internal alterations only prove that such a house is necessarily uninhabited" (Danielewski 120). According to Ryan Jones, the house can be treated as "nothing, which, based on human perception, makes it everything we can imagine... why is it titled House of Leaves when nothing related to leaves is ever mentioned?" (Jones 9). This notion of nothingness finds its visual representation in the aforementioned footnote number in the novel's hundred and forty-fourth page, which is deliberately left empty, effectively embodying the boundless nature and absence inherent in the labyrinth. The blue borders surrounding the footnote draw a parallel to the blue screens used in chroma keying, a video post-production technique that removes the background of an image or video to merge two frames. Thus, similar to a blue screen, the house operates as a "blank slate" onto which projections can be cast.

In such cases, the Navidson house becomes a symbol of intricately complex perceptions that are alien to the inhabitants. These realities that become incomprehensible to the human psyche manifest themselves as a form of absence, becoming a potential presence of something complex, fragmented, and unexplainable, as Navidson points out:

One thing's for sure, even without touching it, both of us slowly began to feel its heaviness, sensed something horrifying in its proportions, its silence, its stillness, even if it did seem to have been shoved almost carelessly to the side of the room. I think now if someone had said be

careful, we would have. I know a moment came when I felt certain its resolute blackness was capable of anything, maybe even of slashing out, tearing the floor, murdering Zampanó, murdering us, maybe even murdering you. (Danielewski xvii)

Danielewski brings in Rouholl W. Leffler's explanation of the absence in his novel, as he quotes:

It seems people should complain more about this empty space but to my knowledge no one ever has. I think there's a very simple reason too: people understand, consciously or unconsciously, that it really isn't empty at all. (Danielewski 413)

The Navidson house serves as a profound exploration of the interplay between absence and presence, creating experiences that defy human understanding. Through visual representations and metaphorical associations of absence and darkness, the house emerges as a symbol of the enigmatic and incomprehensible, challenging the inhabitants' perceptions and inviting contemplation on the complexities of space and time.

Conclusion

Danielewski creatively incorporates darkness as the motif in his ergodic novel, the *House of Leaves*. From interspersed typography, fragmented metanarratives, and numerous plot points to exploration of voids, absences, and darkness in labyrinths, the novel exemplifies the nuances involved in the discourse between reality and perception through its ergodic elements. Through extensive use of the above-mentioned techniques and themes, Danielewski achieves a universal notion of deferral, which becomes the novel's primary thematic concern.

Mark Z. Danielewski employs a complex narrative structure, incorporating multiple layers of storytelling, footnotes, and unconventional formatting. The intertwining tales of Zampanò, Johnny, and the Navidson family create a labyrinthine narrative that constantly defers a concrete understanding. The novel's exploration of the house, a spatial enigma with ever-changing dimensions, serves as a metaphor for the indefinable and enigmatic aspects of existence.

Additionally, the incorporation of various textual elements adds to the ambiguity, suggesting a deliberate deferral of meaning. The frequent references to a mysterious manuscript and paradoxical situations, such as Navidson reading *House of Leaves* within the house itself, contribute to a sense of perpetual uncertainty.

Through these narrative techniques, Danielewski grapples with the limits of human understanding. The deferral of meaning becomes a thematic device, echoing the idea that some concepts are inherently beyond our grasp. The novel's intricate web of stories and symbols serves as a testament to the vast, unfathomable complexities of existence, challenging readers to embrace the uncertainty and ambiguity that define the human experience. The novel ultimately portrays that one

cannot reach an ultimate point of origin or signified meaning.

Through its intricate and immersive use of darkness, *House of Leaves* invites readers to confront their own fears and uncertainties, pushing the boundaries of traditional narrative forms. In doing so, Danielewski creates a haunting and thought-provoking work that challenges conventional perceptions and engages with the profound implications of darkness in both a literal and metaphorical sense.

"You can look, I have, but no matter how long you search you will never find The Navidson Record in theaters or video stores" (Danielewski xix-xxi)

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