

**When Home Becomes a Labyrinth:  
Gothic Houses in Jackson's *The Hunting of Hill House* and Danielewski's *House of Leaves***

**by**

**Dr. Nessma Abdel Tawab Salim**

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**المستخلص:** الرواية المرعبة هي نوع من الخيال ظهر لأول مرة في أواخر القرن الثامن عشر وأصبح معروفاً في القرن التاسع عشر. تتميز بمزيج من الرومانسية والرعب والعناصر الخارقة للطبيعة، والتي تحدث كثيراً في أماكن غريبة وغامضة. تتناول الروايات المرعبة موضوعات مثل المفزع، والمظلم، والخارق للطبيعة، والذهان من أجل فحص الجوانب المظلمة للطبيعة البشرية. لقد أثر هذا الشكل الأدبي بشكل كبير على الأدب الإنجليزي، حيث ألهم كتاب الأجيال اللاحقة وساعد في تشكيل تطور العديد من الأنواع الأدبية. تقدم كلتا الروايتين *House of Leaves* و *The Haunting of Hill House* مبرراً منطقيًا لبقاء الرواية المرعبة حتى الوقت الحاضر. وللتوضيح، فإن روايات العناصر المرعبة، وخاصة المنازل وباحات الكنائس والقلاع والمباني، لا تزال حية وتستمر لأنها المكونات السائدة والأبدية للوجود الإنساني. المنازل والمباني هي شخصيات في حد ذاتها؛ فهي ليست مجرد مكان للأحداث. في الروايتين، يوصف المنزل بأنه له نفس هيكل وشكل قلعة من العصور الوسطى. يوصف دائماً بأنه ضخم ومظلم بنوافذ فارغة وإحساس باليقظة.

**الكلمات المفتاحية:** المتاهة - البيت - الرعب

## Abstract

A Gothic novel is a type of fiction that first appeared in the late 1700s and became well-known in the 1800s. It is distinguished by a fusion of romance, horror, and supernatural elements, frequently taking place in eerie and mysterious settings. The Gothic novels deal with themes like the macabre, the sublime, the supernatural, and psychosis in order to examine the darker sides of human nature. This literary form has greatly influenced English literature, inspiring writers of later generations and helping to shape the development of several literary genres. Both novels *House of Leaves* and *The Haunting of Hill House*, give a logical justification of the gothic's survival till the present. To clarify, novels of gothic elements, specially houses, churchyards, castles and buildings, are still alive and will continue since they are predominant and everlasting components of human existence. Houses and buildings are characters in themselves; they are not simply a setting for events. In *The Haunting of Hill House*, the house is described as having the same structure and impression of a medieval castle. It is always described as enormous and dark with blank windows and a sense of watchfulness.

**key words:** Gothic literature, houses, labyrinth

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When Home Becomes a Labyrinth: Gothic Houses in Jackson's  
*The Hunting of Hill House* and Danielewski's *House of Leaves*

A Gothic novel is a type of fiction that first appeared in the late 1700s and became well-known in the 1800s. It is distinguished by a fusion of romance, horror, and supernatural elements, frequently taking place in eerie and mysterious settings. The Gothic novels deal with themes like the macabre, the sublime, the supernatural, and psychosis in order to examine the darker sides of human nature. This literary form has greatly influenced English literature, inspiring writers of later generations and helping to shape the development of several literary genres.

The Gothic novel's inception dates to the middle of the eighteenth century, when Horace Walpole's *The Castle of Otranto* was published in 1764. Many people consider Walpole to be the father of the Gothic genre, and his writing established many of the tropes that would later come to characterize Gothic fiction. The popularity of *The Castle of Otranto* opened the door for a wave of Gothic novels written by writers like Ann Radcliffe, Mary Shelley, and Matthew Lewis in the late 18th and early 19th centuries. The Gothic novel's emphasis on place and atmosphere is one of its main features.

Gothic stories often take place in isolated, ancient, or decaying environments, such as castles, monasteries, and haunted mansions. These settings contribute to the eerie and mysterious atmosphere that is central to the genre. The use of the sublime, a concept that invokes a sense of awe and terror, is also a common feature of Gothic literature. The sublime is often associated with the natural world, as seen in the towering cliffs, stormy seas, and dense forests that frequently appear in Gothic novels. Another hallmark of the Gothic novel is the presence of supernatural elements. Ghosts, vampires, werewolves, and other supernatural entities play significant roles in these stories, adding an element of horror and the fantastical. The supernatural is often used to ex-

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plore psychological and moral themes, reflecting the anxieties and fears of the time in which the novels were written.

One noteworthy feature of the Gothic literary genre is the representation of women in the works. Female characters are frequently portrayed as innocent and strong, constantly in danger from evil forces. Gothic novels frequently feature the "damsel in distress" trope, with their heroines experiencing dangers such as incarceration and persecution.

A piece of writing known as the Gothic tradition, is primarily interested in the lines that separate the past from the present, the supernatural from reality, morality from immorality, victimization and guilt, and reason from superstition or religion. We read these Gothic tales of terror and horror partly because they speak to some inner curiosity or urge, and partly because we project our societal anxieties onto monsters and duplicates of our own making. Gothic literature mostly focuses on the past, portraying it as a time of simplicity and belief, as well as an abominable place full of foolish superstitions.

The gothic tradition of English literature has given an approach to taboos such as incest, illegal sexuality, human guile, betrayal, miscegenation, hypocrisy, prejudice and any other human evil that may threaten the human peace and harm the human psychology. From the early ages of English literature until the present, the best and most moving of literary works, are gothic, and many English authors have written using this tradition, such as Christopher Marlowe, Joseph Conrad, Charles Dickens, Charlotte Bronte, Emily Bronte, William Faulkner, Shirley Jackson and Mark Z. Danielewski. This paper aims to reveal how a haunted house can indicate the broader disorder and psychological degeneration of its inhabitants, as exemplified in Shirley Jackson's *The Haunting of Hill House* (1959) and Mark Z. Danielewski's *House of Leaves* (2000). The setting of both novels reflects the most prominent elements of a gothic story. Gothic fiction is connected deeply with the architectural spaces where the

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narrative takes place. Probing deeper, a reader of a spatial gothic novel soon discovers that the terrifying dark and haunted corridors, walls, hallways, and rooms of a haunted house, are in fact not but an indicator of the dark, twisted and restless corridors of human mind, where all the deliberately forgotten secrets lie hidden.

Both novels *House of Leaves* and *The Haunting of Hill House*, give a logical justification of the gothic's survival till the present. To clarify, novels of gothic elements, specially houses, churchyards, castles and buildings, are still alive and will continue since they are predominant and everlasting components of human existence. Houses and buildings are characters in themselves; they are not simply a setting for events. In *The Haunting of Hill House*, the house is described as having the same structure and impression of a medieval castle. It is always described as enormous and dark with blank windows and a sense of watchfulness. When Eleanor has first seen her room, the room was described as blue and crooked. This is a reflection of Eleanor's own mental and psychological disturbance and illness. The fact that the room is crooked can be a foreboding of Eleanor's future twisted and mixed mentality. Shirley Jackson employs the gothic house throughout the whole novel as an attempt to create the sense of tension and suspense, instead of simply portraying deaths, blood and murders. Like Jackson's *The Haunting of Hill House*, Mark Z Danielewski's *House of Leaves* is a modern novel about a gothic house. The house is a character in itself. It is the indicator of the characters' deep deliberately forgotten threatening secrets and experiences. The gothic elements of the novel: architecture, death, decay, family secrets and deviant sexuality, are all reflected, embodied and hinted about in the walls of the house. The mental instability, and sickness are reflected in the crooked corridors of the house. The actual heroes of these gothic novels are the houses themselves. William and Karen Navidson, who are the current owners of the house, have moved to this

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house in order to repair their marital relationship. Ironically, the house itself drives them to separation. The appearance of the dark, long, cold and barren hallway is the first sign of their coming predicted cold, barren and dead emotions. The house being larger on the inside than it is on the outside, urges the Navidson to investigate the house and discover its inner pain and suffering, as if it is a living breathing creature. This paper establishes a relationship between the walls, hallways, and rooms of a house and the tracks, paths and rooms of the human mind.

The term gothic is not easily defined and the suggested definitions have changed during the last years. The gothic tradition is no longer an exclusive narrow tradition combining only ruined buildings, abandoned castles, churchyards, supernatural elements, darkness and blood; it has, however, broadened and become more inclusive to include human mischiefs and evil such as incest, bigamy, miscegenation, betrayal, and any disturbing action that may threaten the human psychology. Gothic literature exposes the repressed, hidden, unspoken, fearful and deliberately forgotten human experiences of an individual and even of cultures. Another recently added aspect of the definition of the gothic literature is its insistence that human beings are evil and can cause harm to each other.

The human reaction to the gothic tale may be considered cathartic. The cathartic nature of a gothic literary work is actually the most significant value of the gothic since it helps in confronting fears, and healing the inner unspoken psychological injuries imposed on individuals and communities by traumatic pressure. In his book *Historical Dictionary of Gothic Literature*, William Hughes defines gothic literature as

a complex cultural term, and its meanings have varied greatly across the 400 years of its persistence in the English language...Gothic somehow captured—and then came to shape—the consciousness not merely of the 18<sup>th</sup> century but

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that of later eras also, and transcended, from its English origins, boundaries cultural linguistic, political and geographical (1).

According to Hughes, the word gothic is applied to any literary work of art that is characterized by its features, since it "transcended from its English origins". He also tackles the term gothic as its cultural legacy, saying that "the generic term Gothic is derived from the tribal name of a warlike Germanic people who, in the declining years of the Roman Empire, swept into southern Europe and reputedly initiated that period in history popularly known as the Dark Ages" (2). The "dark ages" indicates that this type of literature resorts to dark, mysterious atmospheres, and supernatural elements to be used as metaphors for human evil. For Hughes, gothic literary works aim at evoking emotional anguish in readers by depicting gloomy settings, such as graveyards, haunted houses and ruined buildings.

Confirming this fact of the evil nature of human beings, the gothic literature evokes the emotions of fear and terror, instability and insecurity. It is a type of literature that teaches readers what they really need to understand about life. It may be pleasurable for a human being to be frightened as the theory of terror is based on the excitation of imagination and intellect. In the introduction of his book *21<sup>st</sup> Century Gothic: Great Gothic Novels Since 2000*, Daniel Olson stresses the importance of the gothic novel in English literature:

for my part, I understand a reader's or student's desire to simply experience the terror, untamable superstition, occasional sadism, and constant suspense of these books...each of the novel's authors and critics may have a different answer to why the gothic is worth an academic literature, though separate entities, have so closely crept up to the mainstream that a basic interest



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in the world around us demands that they be examined (xxi,xxii).

Olson stresses the significance of the gothic in that it is a timeless phenomenon that human beings experience and need to understand. He elaborates that the study of the horror fiction, blood and death accompany it, intend to take the human imagination deep beyond the human sphere; since "we are ensorcelled by death, haunted by the day or night of our own death, wondering if death is the definite end of our existence" (Olson xxiv).

In the United States, gothic literature is known as Dark Romanticism or American gothic. Since "it is the imaginative expression of the fears and forbidden desires of Americans... from the beginning and to the present, some of the best and most revealing of our literary works have been gothic, and many of America's finest authors have worked within this tradition" (Crow, 1). Actually, the importance of the gothic literature lies in the fact that it draws a map for readers and writers to explore and express the hidden unspoken, deliberately concealed considerations of human life such as traumatic, painful experiences, repression, sexual abuse, betrayal, incest, political issues, racial discrimination and any other anxieties of social life that may threaten the peace and stability of human mind. As mentioned before, the assumed human pain and fear may be agreeable since it secures a safe return to the comfort zone of individuals' peace and security.

Gothic novels such as *The Haunting of Hill House* and *House of Leaves* incorporate the supernatural, dark and frightening settings with a threatening atmosphere that permeates the events. The gothic tradition of unravelling the hidden threatening violence that attacks the tranquil surface of human life is not simply examined by uncovering or shedding light on the gothic elements of novels. It requires, however, a deeper analytical exploration of the repressed buried secrets and any related gothic



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elements that contribute in the composition of a gothic literary work of art.

In the gothic genre, haunted houses and buildings are actually an apparent symptom of deeper more serious hidden malignant cells off human past sins. In other words, houses and buildings are only diagnostic of other gothic causes in the dwellers of the houses. In his novel *The Haunting of Hill House* (1959), Shirley Jackson tells the story of a parapsychologist, Dr. John Montague, who rents Hill House for its reputation as being haunted as he needs to accomplish his studies in the field of parapsychology. The experimentation of Dr. Montague required some people to be the sample of his study. He has chosen for the study Eleanor Vance, a thirty two-year old lady who was known as a poltergeist when a child, and Theodora, a young lady of psychic abilities. The third selected participant is Luke Sanderson who is the heir of Hill House. When the three characters settle in Hill House, they experience supernatural feelings and findings that are transformed to their readers, creating an uneasy, unstable, unpleasant, and unexplained atmosphere. The house plays the role of a true hero in this novel since it is personified as a ghost that haunts each character, unfolding the past secrets and taking vengeance on each character.

Inside the house, no one can hear outside noise of sounds; the house is secluded as "silence lay steadily against the wood and stone of Hill House and whatever walked there, walked alone" (*The Hunting of Hill House*, 5). The fact that the house is a frightening character in the story as a gothic element, showing how much gothic elements can change the traditional story into an unpleasant frightening literary work of art. The hill house is not in itself a setting of paranormal activities and dark history, it is on a broader scale a house of unexplained suicide scandals. The resonating stories of people who commit suicide for no clear reasons, are the proof of the house's responsibility of their deaths. "In the unending, crashing second before the car hurled into the

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tree, she thought clearly, why am I doing this? Why am I doing this? Why don't they stop me? (*The Haunting of Hill House*, 204). In this quotation Eleanor shows how desperate and helpless she was while killing herself; there is a supreme supernatural power that controls her, pushing her to death.

Her suicide is actually identical to those who died in the past at the same spot of the house. Eleanor is portrayed as a tragic heroine in the novel who is punished for her sins and mistakes. Throughout the novel, Jackson immerses her in mystery. Her sin or mistake is not clearly shown. She lies almost about everything in her life; she lies about her age, her background, where she lived and how she lived. She also doesn't have a socially developed character. She preferred to escape her past life with her older sister. She doesn't accept or surrender to her destiny. She falls entirely under the house's force, as an attempt to show the house's gothic power over her. Actually, readers get perplexed about their feelings towards Eleanor. They don't know whether to sympathize with her as a victim of the house or to consider her a sinner who is punished for her mistakes. Eleanor and the other participants of Dr. Montague's study are all like common readers. They are not sinners of deadly sins, their sins are vague, unknown or hidden so as to make them true tragic heroes who simply get the sympathy of readers. In his book *God-Fearing and Free: A Spiritual History of America's Cold War*, Jason W. Stevens describes Eleanor, saying that "Eleanor, however, is the heroine of the Hunting of Hill House rather than Theo, and the novel is ultimately about tragedy rather than her double's moxie. In contrast to the fantasists Hugh Crain and Theodora, Eleanor is too afraid to dare the evil because she equates evil with risk itself rather than the influences in the house, which has dreamt itself into a symbol of the dishonesty loving family she can no longer resist" (239). Stevens believes that the tragic heroine Eleanor sacrifices her life and accepts her fate in the hill house since she admits "whatever it wants of me,

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it can have” (*The Hunting of Hill House*, 166). She wishes to achieve her sense of belonging and freedom for any cost. As a tragic heroine, Eleanor who doesn't belong to anyone, the symbol of the dishonestly loving family, cannot distinguish true home from an institute of experimental parapsychology. She offers herself easily to the hill house's trick that has been practiced on dead guests for many years. The gothic house has stolen everything from Eleanor; she is deceived by the dream of achieving freedom, social development, familial relations, and independence, and at the same time she is punished for her telling lies, deception and betrayal for the group, and specially Theodora.

All the characters in the hill house are trapped in a gothic house, haunted by a past they cannot redeem. Eleanor, the main character, is haunted by her past, struggling to reconcile with her mother's history as well as her hatred to her family: her sister, and her brother-in-law, and her feeling of inferiority. Theodora, known as Theo, is invited to the hill house to help Dr. Montague investigate the hauntings of the house. Actually, Theo's past is vague and unexplained. She had a past relationship with her female roommate and is considered, by some readers, the novel's heroine. Stevens comments on Theodora being mistakenly perceived as the novel's heroine:

since Theo is one of Jackson's few female artists and drawn in sharp relief to Eleanor's repression, some readers have erroneously interpreted her, rather than Eleanor, as to novel's heroine. Along with the Montagues, Luke Sanderson, and Eleanor, however, Theodora also participates in the group's manipulative surrogate parent-child-sibling relations, and her behavior toward her “sister” Eleanor is occasionally jealous or cruel, as when she taunts Nell about blaming her-

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self for her mother's death. Like the other members of the household, living and dead, she appears to share in the house's bad will (Stevens, 238).

Stevens believes that Theo has also participated in the house's "bad will" since she appears to be a hypocrite, who pretends to be loving and caring for Eleanor, while in fact she is jealous of her. Stevens adds that Theo's "ignoble self-love" (*God-Fearing and Free: A Spiritual History of America's Cold War*, 239), is also one of the sins that deserves punishment. Jackson describes Theodora's inner cruelty and ingratitude saying that "Theodora had deliberately and heartlessly smashed the lovely little figurine her friend had carved of her, and her friend had cruelly ripped to shreds the volume of Alfred de Musset which had been a birthday present from Theodora... These acts were of course unforgettable, and before they could laugh over them together time would have to go by; Theodora had written that sit right accepting Dr. Montague's invitation, and departed in cold silence the next day" (*The Hunting of Hill House*, 8). This description of Theo's personality shows that she is a character who is willing to live inside a haunted house just because she needs a place to sleep. She can change her character to suit the situation since she quickly shows her fake love to Eleanor, while deep down she is jealous of her. Her hypocrisy is actually the evil side that, Stevens believes, has participated in the hill house's ill will.

Luke Sanderson is another minor character and invited guest to the hill house. He is well-educated, and well-dressed, though he has an evil side of his character since he is a selfish liar and thief. He insults other people pretending that he is the future heir of the hill house. He is sent to the hill house to oversee the study on behalf of his aunt. He is also the current owner of the house. Jackson describes Luke saying that

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Mrs. Sanderson told the family lawyer that at any rate there was really nothing in the house Luke could steal. The old silver there was of some value, she told the lawyer, but it represented an almost insuperable difficulty for Luke: it required energy to stand it and transform it into money. Mrs. Sanderson did Luke an injustice. Luke was not at all likely to make off with the family silver, or Dr. Montague's watch, or Theodora's bracelet; his dishonesty was largely confined to taking petty cash from his aunt's pocket book and cheating at cards (*The Hunting of Hill House*, 91)

Jackson hints about Luke's sins which make him deserve to experience the horrors of the hill house.

As for the role of the house in *The Hunting of Hill House*, gothic elements are perfectly used to describe the setting of the novel. The house is described from the very beginning of the narration as a place that stirs strange feelings of uneasiness. Jackson says, "Hill House, not the sane, stood by itself against its hills, holding darkness within, it had stood so for eighty years and might stand for eighty more. Within, walls continued upright, bricks met neatly, floors were firm, and doors were sensibly shut; silence lay steadily against the wood and stone of Hill House, and whatever walked there, walked alone" (*The Hunting of Hill House*, 5). Jackson starts the novel by employing the gothic elements and continues doing this until the end. She covers the events with dark and blue colors, corresponding to the mentality and psychology of Eleanor.

The small blue front door" (*The Hunting of Hill House*,19)... "Mrs. Dudley crossed the hail and opened a door, perhaps at random 'this is the blue room', she said... and they had brought her under Dr. Montague's unerring eye to the

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blue room at Hill house... “here I'm in the blue room of Hill House’ she said half aloud, although it was real enough, and beyond all question a blue room. There blue dimity curtains over the two windows...and a blue rug figured rug on the floor, and a blue spread on the bed and a blue quilt at the foot. The walls, dark woodwork to shoulder height, were blue figured paper above, with a design of tiny blue flowers... Perhaps someone had once hoped to lighten the air of the blue room in Hill House (*The Hunting of Hill House*, 30-32).

The blue color is almost mentioned in every descriptive scene of the house. Even the air of the house is described as blue, which directly corresponds to Eleanor’s dark blue psychology that is twisted and crooked.

Narrated from Eleanor's perspective, readers start to doubt whether this paranormal house is in itself evil and gothic or it is all in Eleanor's head. In his book, *Houses, Secrets, and the Closet*, Gero Bauer explains the relationship between architectural settings and the personality of the characters in literature, saying that “architectural criticism and theory since the end of the twentieth century has seen a theoretical shift towards a more interdisciplinary approach to houses, housing, and home making and has increasingly asked ‘how ideas and assumptions about social relations around gender, class, and race get translated into domestic space, embodied in the home represented in its spatiality” (18). Bauer believes that there is a strong relationship between the structure of the house and the characters of people living inside. There is a perspective on the way houses are designed and the lives of their dwellers. This is exactly the relationship between Jackson's portrayal of the hill house and

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Eleanor's personality. For Bauer "the gothic novel juxtaposes ideas of the feminine home as a safe haven, the place in which the majority of readers of gothic fiction-middle class women-would actually find themselves, with the fact that this home can be a stifling prison" (Bauer, 24-25). Bauer suggests that the gothic fiction presents an explanation of the living personalities. Applying Bauer's theory of the relationship between gothic houses and people's lives, especially women, on the hill house of Shirley Jackson's novel, it is evident that the hill house is actually the major character of the novel. The gothic blue uneasy and unpleasing feeling the house arouses in readers, is a preparation for readers to infer the dark history of the suicide scandals of the house and also to predict the future cruel deaths of its current dwellers.

Introduced as a house of paranormal activities, the hill house is described as a morbid setting. The turrets of the hill house are symbols of fear, restlessness and gloomy future. The turrets are small towers that are employed in gothic architecture for many reasons. They are used for decoration, specially of castles, or to strengthen the corners of the building, or they are used sometimes in churches to contain a staircase. In all cases, the turret, being narrow and secluded, gives a feeling of horror and frightening ill-omen future. Jackson describes the hill house as having a turret since, "They made houses so oddly back when Hill House was built, she thought; they put towers and turrets and buttresses and wooden lace on them, even sometimes gothic spires and gargoyles; nothing was ever left undecorated" (*The Hunting of Hill House*, 27). There is a frightening history of the turret of the house since the previous owner of the house killed himself in the turret as "the poor girl was hated to death, she hanged herself, by the way. Gossip says she hanged herself from the turret on the tower" (*The Hunting of Hill House*, 64). Turrets are central to gothic literature; they give the genre its frightening effect. Matthew M. Reeve in his book *Gothic Architecture and*



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*Sexuality in the Circle of Horace Walpole*, states that Horace Walpole, the founder of gothic literature, had built his own gothic castle in Strawberry Hill, full of gothic features like turrets, arched windows, dark walls, and vaulted ceilings. From that time, the gothic elements are the archetypal patterns for gothic stories.

As a typical gothic house, the hill house is a wide isolated house in a remote location since "Hill House stood by itself against its hills, holding darkness within; it had stood so for eighty years and might stand for eighty more. Within walls continued upright, bricks met neatly, floors were firm, and doors were sensibly shut; silence lay steadily against the wood and stone of Hill House, and whatever walked there, walked alone" (*The Hunting of Hill House*,5). Stevens comments on this description of the Hill House saying that

Hill House's designer, Hugh Crain, and its guest, Eleanor Vance, are paired by the novel's key metaphors of madness and dreaming. The novel opens and closes on a symmetrically repeated, anthropomorphic description of Hill House, alone, dreaming and insane, its personality foreshadowing Eleanor's fate and implying Hugh Crain's sensibility. The mirroring descriptions of the house punctuate the theme that reason is illusion, and readers encountering these lines the second time, after Eleanor's sojourn in the house is over, will appreciate the narrator's irony... In fact, this description is deceptive, as is the apparent orderliness of the house (*God-Fearing and Free: A Spiritual History of America's Cold War*, 234)

Actually, Crain designed the hill house as a series of cloistered maze-styled circles which are never to provide a feeling of comfort or domesticity. The house is in fact not designed for a

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family to settle in; the wife of Crain never lived there, as she died before reaching the house. “Crain designed Hill House to emancipate his imagination—take what hideous shape it might rather than to prepare a domicile for his wife and children” (Stevens, 235). The characters of the hill house are described with tragic flaws in their personality. All of them betray each other. Dr. Montague is portrayed as a selfish liar who deceives his guests, promising them of a stable better life in the hill house, while in fact he seeks his own interest of making his fortune and reputation as an expert scholar in supernatural phenomena. He is willing to rent a haunted house and stay there with strangers who are supposed to experience real psychic troubles.

As for Luke the future owner of the house, he is a thief who stays in the house only to observe the guests and protect his future fortune. Theodora is a shallow girl who escapes from her life even if she is going to live in a haunted house. It is implied many times in the novel that she may be lesbian, who betrays Eleanor pretending that she loves her very much. Eleanor, the tragic heroine of the novel lies to others and to herself. She pretends to have had a great house where she lived happily, while in fact she escapes her tragic life with her older sister after the death of her mother. She betrays herself and others in the novel.

The hill house is the main character of the novel. It is the gothic house with the typical description of a gothic setting. The house has narrow passages, bumps, crooks, shadows, cold spots, turrets, closed doors, dark walls, blue air, and whispering voices. These elements of the gothic setting have their impact on its victims; the guests. Actually, Shirely asks the questions of why are gothic novels significant? What is the relationship between the gothic setting and the characters? And are the characters of the hill house victims or sinners? These questions are left unanswered so as to open a wider horizon in her readers’ imagination and expectations. She stresses the relationships between houses and dwellers in a broader psychological analysis.



Published in 2000, Mark Danielewski's novel *House of Leaves*, is a modern novel that represents the gothic elements such as death and loss, architecture, family secrets, sexuality, and mental illness. Like *The Haunting of Hill House*, in *House of Leaves*, the house itself plays the major role as the hero. It is a house that is larger on the inside than it is on the outside. All the traumatized dwellers of the house explore the internal labyrinth within this house, which drives its inhabitants into fear, despair and even physical distortion. *House of Leaves* is a heartbreaking narration since the novel doesn't depict a common house, it is rather a metaphorical house of darkness and unknown secret depths of the human psychology.

The novel unfolds a double tale. It tells the story of Johnny Truant who works at a tattoo shop in Los Angeles. He is described as a man of the world who is involved with many women. He was searching for a place to live when his friend tells him about Zampano's apartment. Zampano, the dead owner of the apartment has left a manuscript written by himself about the Navidson family. This manuscript is entitled The Navidson Record, which records their contact with a house of supernatural backgrounds. Danielewski portrays the house as a representation of human life since it is always changing, growing and unexplained. The narrator of the story Johnny Truant describes the house of leaves saying that

Then no matter where you are, in a crowded restaurant or on some desolate street or even in the comforts of your own home, you'll watch yourself dismantle every assurance you ever lived by. You'll stand aside as a great complexity intrudes, tearing apart, piece by piece, all of your carefully conceived denials, whether deliberate, or unconscious. And then for better or worse you'll turn, unable to resist, though

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try to resist you still will, fighting with everything you've got not to face the thing you most dread, what is now, what will be, what has always come before, the creature you truly are, the creatin we all are, buried in the nameless black of a name. And then the nightmares will begin (*House of Leaves*, 22).

This description contributes to preparing the readers for what is coming in the narration. Through Truant, Danielewski frightens readers who are supposed to encounter horror, supernatural experiences represented in the irrational events of human life. In other words, Danielewski describes the irrational events of human life as something you are "unable to resist"; they are actions that defy expectations and never conform to social norms. This introductory description of the novel actually sets the basis of Gothic literature. Irrationality and supernatural elements in the postmodern literature, represent the uncanny. In his book *The Encyclopedia of the Gothic*, William Hughes describes *House of Leaves*, saying:

The single most ambitious work of twenty-first century Gothic, however, was indisputably Mark Z. Danielewski's 700-page novel presented multiple embedded narratives, fake scholarly commentary, footnotes, and appendices, telling the story of an uncanny suburban house that is bigger on the outside than the inside (302).

By "uncanny" Hughes believes that the uncanny may refer to something that is familiar to human beings, yet at the same time it has a feeling of unease and discomfort. The uncanny in Gothic literature often refers to familiar settings or heroes who become eventually frightening and toxic. According to Hughes, the house of the Navidsons, is the riddle of the novel. It is a character that

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plays a vital role in creating an atmosphere of suspense and horror.

Danielewski uses the house to symbolize mental illness of everyone who ventures into the house of leaves. The Navidson Record and the house itself are metaphors of schizophrenia and madness. The maze of the house is the metaphor of the maze of the human mind: the deeper one gets; the more lost one becomes. The novel itself has three layers of narration. The first layer of narration is of the Navidson Record which tells the supernatural incidents and events inside the house. After Zampano's death, his record about the Navidsons is found by Johnny Truant, the young tattoo artist who comments on Zampano's narration, forming the second layer of narration in the novel. As for the last third layer of narration, it is the footnote of the unknown editors to both Zampano's and Johnny Truant's texts. Danielewski uses different fonts and typing styles to discriminate each layer of narration or voice. The multiple narrators and typing styles correspond to the human mind's layers of reacting and responding to life and incidents. They create a maze in which all readers get lost. So, the labyrinth is not only embodied in the setting of the novel, it is however, represented in the text and its structure. The house of the novel is exactly like its structure; that is continuously changing, growing and resisting interpretations.

Like the house and the narration, the story is in itself not similar to a normal story. It refuses analysis or commentary. It requires the readers' full acceptance of its chaotic structure, without any explanation. In her article, *Hauntingly Sweet: home as Labyrinth and Hospitality in House of Leaves*, in Sascha Pohlman's book *Revolutionary Leaves: The Fiction of Mark Z. Danielewski*, Aleksandra Bida comments on *House of Leaves*, saying that "the perhaps obvious yet often overlooked point that House of leaves continually makes, is that home is never simply good or bad, safe and comfortable or dangerous and traumatic, but that it is always, potentially, all of these things. (45) Actually,

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Bida's comment on the concept of "home" as not "simply good or bad, safe and comfortable or dangerous and traumatic", is exemplified in the house of leaves as Truant describes the house, asking the question: "how could anyone be lost in a house for days anyway?" (*House of Leaves*, 28). These lines unfold the fundamental theme of the novel, asserting the disconnection between the concept of a house as a place of safety and domesticity and the house on Ash Tree Lane, which is a place of endless unease, fear and mystery. Aleksandra Bida confirms that "House of Leaves depicts the experiences of home as continually labyrinthine in order to reveal the labyrinthine nature of a postmodern home" (*Revolutionary Leaves: The Fiction of Mark Z. Danielewski*, 44). The labyrinth of the novel is a maze from which the characters and also readers cannot escape, literally and metaphorically. Danielewski uses the labyrinth on a symbolic level to determine the relationship between what is real and what is imaginary or symbolic. Eventually, the novel itself becomes a labyrinth. In *House of Leaves*, the Navidson Record describes the house as a place where they "are involved in a labyrinth, meandering from one celluloid sell to the next, trying to discover another sequence, leading in a completely different direction, a continually devolving discourse, promising the possibility of discovery while all along dissolving into chaotic ambiguities too blurry to ever completely comprehend" (*House of Leaves*, 168). This quotation uncovers the novel's essential theme; the psychological depths of its characters and the perplexing narrative that blurs the lines of reality and imagination. Each mention of the word labyrinth in the novel suggests each reader's labyrinthine journey, like those journeys of the characters. The labyrinth is the reflection of the uncanny, gothic nature of the house on Ash Tree Lee, which destroys the conventional expected concept of a safe dwelling. Danielewski also employs the labyrinth so as to investigate the complex social question of at home or belonging. Through the story within the story of

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*House of Leaves*, he portrays the hostile and aggressive relation between a human being and home. He radically changes the conventional relation between a character and his\her home. The architecture represented in the labyrinth, plays the greatest role of the gothic elements in the novel. The labyrinth-like hallways are the symbol of the human brain and its psyche: “when Holloway's team traveled down the stairway, they had no idea if they would find a bottom. Navidson, however, knows the stairs are finite and therefore has far less anxiety about the descent” (*House of Leaves*, 228). When Holloway and his fellows whom Navidson hires to examine the house descend the stairs, they expect it to be long and it takes them many days to descend. However, Navidson descends the stairs so quickly as he expects them to be short. The house accommodates the expectations of its dwellers. The obscurity of the house and also of the missing sentences and pieces of words such as in the following quotations are in fact another element of the gothic tradition since missing is somehow related to death, decay, disappearance and fragmentation:

Unlike the real world, Navidson’s journey into the house is not just figuratively, but literally shortened.

[204—Missing.—Ed.] (*House of Leaves*, 229),

But it also means...[Rest missing] (*House of Leaves*, 315),

...[2 pages missing...] (*House of Leaves*, 445)

...[17 pages missing...] (*House of Leaves*, 449)

...[2 pages missing...] (*House of Leaves*, 474)

Include all data in zero folder [428—missing—Ed.]

(*House of Leaves*, 604)

In his book *Placing America: American Culture and its Spaces*, Michael Fuchs states that



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After all, Sigmund Freud described the uncanny, one of the characteristic features of gothic literature, as a curious blend of the familiar and the unfamiliar: the uncanny is that class of the frightening which leads back to what is known of old and long familiar. In *House of Leaves*, gothic and frontier traditions merge, as not only the new Navidson home suddenly turns from secure and homely to threatening and unhomely, but a dark hallway emerges in the house that relocates the frontier experience into the middle of an American family home (111).

Fuchs explains Freud's definition of the "uncanny", which is the major component of gothic literature, saying that the uncanny is the change from homely, friendly and securely into unhomely, unfriendly, and insecurely. In *House of Leaves*, according to Fuchs, the house turns from being secure and domestic into dangerous and threatening. Ironically, Navidson's intention in buying the house was to secure a better understanding and a comfortable life for his family. He states in one of his records that:

I just want to create a record of how Karen and I bought a small house in the country and moved into it with our children... I just thought it would be nice to see how people move into a place and start to inhabit it. Settle in, may be put down roots, interact, hopefully understand each other a little better. Personally, I just want to create a cozy little outpost for me and my family (*House of Leaves*, 30-31).

Here, Navidson mentions the purpose of buying the new house, believing that it would be a better new start for his relation with



his wife and also children. He compares between the insecurity and danger outside home and the comfort and safety inside. Ironically, the new home is the start of their deterioration and destroyed relationships. They wished happiness and security inside a hostile and dangerous home. The mystery and hostility of the house started to appear and attack the Navidsons soon after they return from Seattle: “In early June of 1990, the Navidsons flew to Seattle for a wedding. When they returned, something in the house had changed. Though they had only been away for four days, the change was enormous. It was not, however, obvious—like for instance a fire, a robbery, or an act of vandalism. Quite the contrary, the horror was atypical” (*House of Leaves*, 51). While at the beginning it was mysterious what exactly happened to the house, a hidden horror starts to invade the family as “the change still destroyed any sense of security to well-being” (*House of Leaves*, 57).

Frightening enough to both the Navidsons and the readers that the Navidsons were never surprised to discover a new room in the house while they were investigating the signs of intrusion in the house; “though the designs, as they appear on screen, do not show a room or closet, they do confirm the existence of a strange crawl space, roughly four feet wide, running between both bedrooms” (*House of Leaves*, 58). With the passage of time, readers get to realize that the house of the Navidsons is not but a reflection of their own true nature. To clarify, reading the novel, readers discover that the Navidson family is not as perfect as it seemed at the beginning of events. There is a discrepancy between how they look from the outside and the inside. They are reflected in their home which seems larger from inside than it looks outside. From the outside, Will Navidson, the great Pulitzer prize-winning photojournalist, his loving partner Karen Green and their decent children Chad and Daisy, look like a perfect loving family. However, deep inside, the relationship between Navidson and Karen is characterized by psychological and

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emotional alienation, since “while both have been perfectly content not to marry, Navidson’s constant assignments abroad have led to increased alienation and untold personal difficulties” (*House of Leaves*, 32).

The uncanny phenomenon of the house, as mentioned, is the sudden unexpected appearance of a new room between the room of the parents and that of the children. The house shows the actual separation between the parents and their children; “the alienation of their children finally becomes apparent to both of them one evening in the middle of July” (*House of Leaves*, 92)... “Navidson also uses the dissonance implicit in his home-bound wait—the impatience, frustration, and increasing familial alienation—to figuratively and now literally send out his own cry for help” (*House of Leaves*, 152). At the beginning the rooms of the parents and children were next to each other, separated by a wall. However, suddenly, there is a whole room separating both rooms; that of the parents and their children. The door of the newly installed room of the house may be perceived as a symbol of connecting both rooms. However, readers should remember that the door of the children’s room doesn’t directly lead to the parents’ room since there is a new installed room in-between both rooms, symbolizing the physical and psychological separation between parents and their children. This is a direct implication of the house’s intention of tearing this family apart: “Navidson pushes ahead, moving deeper and deeper into the house, eventually passing a number of doorways leading off into alternate pass-ways or chambers. ‘Here’s a door. No lock. Hmmm...a room, not very big. Empty. No windows. No switches. No outlets. Heading back to the corridor. Leaving the room. It seems colder now. Maybe I’m just getting colder” (*House of Leaves*, 101). The words “empty and colder” signify the empty and cold relationship between the family members.

In fact, the physical architectural changes of the house do correspond to the psychological and emotional changes of the

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Navidsons since they can no longer feel safe and secure in that house. Ironically, the family members who resort to the house to get closer to each other, start to lose their passion for each other as “the invasions begin to strip the Navidsons of any existing cohesion” (*House of Leaves*, 127). The house is no longer the symbol of security or domesticity. In his book *Oscillations of Literary Theory: The Paranoid Imperative and Queer Reparative*, Facundo comments on the Navidson’s house in *House of Leaves*, saying that:

Like Freud’s relationship to his theory of sexuality, like infant to the elusive breast, the reader is confronted, again and again, with an absence around which words repeatedly revolve. Although the novel’s central object, the house, is an absence, it nonetheless haunts and structures the narrative. The house becomes the engine to which the characters and the reader seek the answer. The reader and characters enter into a paranoid-schizoid position when the house’s absence, like the breast, becomes disavowed through an overdetermined, excessive process of narrative symbolization (105).

Facundo believes that the gothic tradition in literature has always been a medium for conveying the state of absence and withdrawal since the state of absence stirs the feeling of barrenness and fear. The “house’s absence” Facundo means in the above-mentioned quotation can be symbolized in Zampano’s list of things that were absent and not found in the house itself, making this absence even more physical; “as we already mentioned in chapter III, some critics believe the house’s mutations reflect the psychology of any one who enters it. Dr Haugeland asserts that the extraordinary absence of sensory

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information forces the individual to manufacture his or her own date (*House of Leaves*, 225). This confession of the house's negative effect on its dwellers' psychology, is an indication of a deeper physical absence that leads to an endless consuming darkness of the souls. The "absence" in the novel is not only an absence of physical objects, it is, however, an absence of identity, unity and passion in the labyrinth of that house.

*House of Leaves* is a novel with a different nature since it attacks its readers with its terrifying facts of human life. The novel creates a new horizon of perception for its readers. To clarify, the readers realize that the novel, the house, and their lives are all alike: they are bigger on the outside than inside. Both the novel and the house are labyrinths that defy readers' basic notions of reality such as the feeling of safety, security and domesticity. Similar to Danielewski's *House of Leaves*, is Shirely Jackson's *The Hunting of Hill House*. Both novels deconstruct readers' perception of how their lives should look. They are typical examples of gothic literature since their foreboding settings, psychological ambiguity, and supernatural features are symbols and indicators of ambiguous hidden evil that immerses readers in a world of terror and doubt. The gothic traditions in both novels do provoke emotional responses in them such as horror, anxiety, insecurity, homelessness, dread, suspense and uncertainty. In other words, gothic novels give voice to inner unexplained fears that remain silent in the human mind and heart. The fact that the house, which is supposed to be the most secure place for a human being, can in itself be a source of terror, demise, and destruction for its dwellers who may be sinners or deviants, is a predominant theme in both novels.

*House of Leaves* and *Hunting of Hill House* can be seen as representations of Freud's uncanny as their textual complexity with their supernatural elements help in creating the labyrinth within them. Mark Danielewski and Shirely Jackson succeed in involving their readers emotionally in the novels making them



feel suspense, shock and even sympathy with the heroes. They employed such gothic devices as haunted houses, spirits, labyrinths and voices talking from another world beyond this common one. Danielewski and Jackson were talented in creating a microcosm of a weird life inserting the uncanny with it. The isolated gothic houses of the novels play the greatest role since the walls of both houses were reacting to the dwellers' intentions and desires.

Eleanor's unexplained suicide in *Haunting of Hill House* and the Navidson's separation from their children and their failure to rescue their familial life in *House of Leaves*, are signs of characters' lack of communication with themselves and with the outer world. The isolated haunted houses are significant settings that suit the stories. Another gothic element in both novels is the unhealthy psychological status of Eleanor, Theodora and Dr. John Montague in the *Haunting of Hill House*, and the Navidsons, Johnny Truant and Zampano in *House of Leaves*. Their unhealthy status is an indication of their inner evil which is originally found in all readers as human beings. They have their characters developed throughout the events of the novels, but unfortunately their development led to their demise and decay. They have paid for their development, finding suicide a resolution for their unhappy existence. The houses in both novels seem to consume and distort the lives of its dwellers. The uncanny feelings provoked in the readers of both novels stand for the psychological disturbances in the protagonists. Through these gothic features of the houses of both novels, the conflict between subjective impressions and the actual real facts, lead readers into a labyrinth of fear and uncertainty about what is real and what is fictional. The novels investigate the nature of human perception and its relation to the hesitation regarding the truth of perception, which attacks the characters of the novels. This paper actually brings the deeper forgotten experiences of human minds into the surface. The novels solve the buzzle of the hidden psychological

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problems, and their representation in actual life. The Freudian concept of the uncanny refers to a specific kind of fear and a feeling of unease that all human beings experience in certain situations. This kind of fear or uneasiness is felt by readers as exactly by characters of both novels.

Shirely Jackson's *The Hunting of Hill House* and Mark Danielewski's *House of Leaves*, are notably gothic. Both novelists originated their unique style of writing. They weave their spell since they convey serious messages to all readers. They created an atmosphere of evil, stripping off their characters' outward hypocrisies and inner evil, showing the innate spiritual corruption. Actually, all readers react with horror stories as there are deep roots in human psychology and culture for the dark and macabre atmosphere. Being scared can trigger the adrenaline in human bodies, which is considered an exciting experience for many people. Reading *The Hunting of Hill House* and *House of Leaves* can serve as a form of emotional release in which readers confront their own fears in a controlled secured context. Readers of both novels can experience danger and horror from a safe distance. Both houses of the novels have labyrinths which correspond to the labyrinths of the human mind of each reader. These houses can be the house of any reader. In other words, readers can identify themselves with the characters of the novels; they learn more about their inner unexplained fears. They learn even how to react to fear and respond to unexplained emotions. Human beings are naturally curious, so confronting the unknown through literature is exciting.



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