

Hollow Houses, Haunting Homes:
Emptying Out the Houses of Daphne du Maurier, Shirley Jackson, and Mark Danielewski

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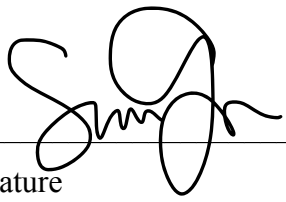
Thesis

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*To the house on the top of the ridge,
and to the people (and the dog) who make a house a home.*

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Strange house we must keep and fill.
House that eats and pleads and kills.
House on legs. House on fire. House infested
With desire. Haunted house. Lonely house.
House of trick and suck and shrug.
Give-it-to-me house. *I-need-you-baby* house.
House whose rooms are pooled with blood.
House with hands. House of guilt. House
That other houses built. House of lies
And pride and bone. House afraid to be alone.
House like an engine that churns and stalls.
House with skin and hair for walls.
House the seasons singe and douse.
House that believes it is not a house.

— “Ash,” Tracy K. Smith

You are in the belly of the beast. It is a hollowed-out, gaping maw. It can feel you
writhing on its floors, scratching at its doors, invading spaces that do not want to
be filled. It resists your presence. You cannot call it home.

If you let yourself be devoured, *turn to the next page*.
If you take the chance to get out while you still can, this is *The End*.

I.

WELCOME HOME, SWEET HOME

Traipse down the long, winding driveway to the house without a name, the house that resists its very categorization as such. What do you see? What is missing? What is this “strange house,” the vicious tangle of thinking and feeling that Tracy K. Smith outlines in “Ash”? In aiming to introduce the house as an object of study – and to eventually clarify the destabilizing potential of its *material, physical* existence rather than focus exclusively on its metaphorical productivity (Ng 7) – “Ash” may seem like a strange place to start. After all, perhaps the first thing that came to mind when you finished reading (or chanting) Smith’s wonderful poem was *I get the feeling that this is not talking about a strictly literal, physical house*. “Ash” might even be thought to distance a house’s metaphorical resonances from the physical dwelling, posing a challenge to representations of the material. And yet, as a certain illegibility of the subject in Smith’s poem unspools the many different things a “house” can be and hold, “Ash” also activates the productive potential of the house as a structure, as space. By featuring a house that is twisted, vicious, and miserable as a theoretical framework, the poem thinks through and thinks with the space of the house to consider how the house may become materially infused with malice and may even possess a certain subjectivity. The question that Smith seems implicitly to be posing (“how is a person like a house?”) also invites an interrogation of its inverse (“how is a house like a living being?”). What emerges out of a reading of this “strange house” *as a house*, as a place where material and metaphor collide?

I begin with “Ash” not only because of the playful and fluid freedom with which Smith treats her subject matter, but also because I find that the poem provides an entry point into

conceptualizing the hostile house as *space that haunts*, rather than as a building that is haunted by other (often supernatural) forces. This understanding of space is particularly relevant to the exploration of a malevolent house's capacity to "emote" through a haunting that emerges out of domestic spaces and impresses on the lives of its human inhabitants (Geller 0:11:50-57). Such a house does not need to be literally "alive" or sentient in order to give off a sense of pervasive antagonism and uncanniness. Although one could certainly argue that Smith is simply using the house as a stand-in for a person, and nothing more, "Ash" begs the question: why a house? Why are the spaces of the house, in particular, primed to express a more subversive understanding of space, where the house's material presence can both spatialize and dislocate a subject and can offer its own kind of thinking?

"Ash" grants space a powerful physicality that is then intertwined with the house's symbolic potential. This house is embodied: its rooms are awash in blood, skin and hair envelop its walls. The pain that the house experiences is manifested in physical terms – of burning, breaking, hungering. Such grotesque and visceral imagery in the poem invites consideration of how, "like the human body, houses wither and eventually decay" (Mirabal). Houses, too, suffer physically and existentially under the burden of neglect. They can be pried open, hollowed out. The 2016 video game *Anatomy*, in which a series of cassette tapes guides the player through an investigation of an empty house, directly invokes this analogy of the house as a body. The voice on the tapes tells the player that it intends to "dissect a house as we might a human cadaver" and compare "those organs of the house and those of a human body" (*Anatomy*). As the player progresses through the game, the house deteriorates further and further – space warps and distorts as pieces of furniture and strange lines clip through the walls, and as tapes now appear

floating, glitching in mid-air. At the end of *Anatomy*, when the player locates the final tape, the chilling voice on the recording (possibly that of the house) tells them,

“What happens to a house when it is left alone? When it becomes worn and aged, when its paint peels, its foundations begin to sink? When it goes for too long un-lived in? What does it think of? What does it dream? How does it regard for those creatures that built it, brought it into existence only to abandon it when its usefulness no longer satisfies them? It may grow lonesome. It may stare for long hours into the darkness of its own empty halls and see shadows. And its heart may jump as it thinks, ‘Here, here is someone again, I’m not alone.’ And each time it is wrong, and the hurt starts over.... It may grow bitter. It may grow hungry. So hungry and so bitter that its scruples dissolve and its doors unlock themselves. While a house may hunger, it cannot starve. And so, in fever and anger and loneliness, it may simply lie in wait. Doors open, shades drawn, hallways empty. Hungry” (*Anatomy*).

In this game, the house is sentient and feels the pain of its vacant spaces immensely. Having been abandoned and left alone to stew in its spitefulness, the house hates humanity and specifically the player (Geller 0:08:27-38). As the structural legibility of the house’s domestic space gradually degrades, the game gestures towards the ways in which a house may articulate its hostility through a disturbed and displacing spatiality. The house opens itself up and turns its vacant halls and long shadows against the player, aiming to frighten them with the gnawing emptiness at its core. Given that “houses don’t die easily, they just wait” (Geller 0:07:34), both *Anatomy* and “Ash” suggest this embodied experience of neglect – of an emptiness both physical and metaphorical – as a source of a house’s potential antagonism and violence. Emotional decomposition occurs alongside the physical rending.

Thus, the house comes into being as a fragmented self. In “Ash,” Smith presents a house that possesses a certain sentience, as a “House afraid to be alone” and a “House that believes it is not a house.” The house in “Ash” seems almost to be challenged and disturbed by its own subjectivity, seeing itself as an Other. If the house is afraid to be alone, it is afraid to be alone *with itself*, with its own existential emptiness. Playing with and igniting the complex overlaps between subject and space, Smith imbues the house of “Ash” with an unconscious and emotions, presenting the structure (if we continue to read it as such) as a kind of “psychoanalytic subject” (Eggner 8). This unconscious is externalized and mapped onto the space of the house, with anguish invested into the architecture. As the house feels the blood sloshing through its rooms, Smith considers how the house might engage with its own subjectivity. In an “ideal” home, one might see this spatial subjectivity generate a great feeling of “intimacy” (Bachelard 12) as the house “houses” and organizes the memories of its inhabitants (Bachelard 8). Such a relationship can be both reinforced and complicated, when “both space and subject are potentially collapsed into each other to thoroughly problematize notions of self and other” (Ng 12). In a perverse reflection of this enmeshing of subjectivities, the house in “Ash” takes on those housed memories as its own and embodies them. In turn, the lived experience of its spaces, which are infested with desire and lies and the past, haunt the house as it haunts itself.

Perhaps it is because of that great intimacy between people and their homes and the idealized association of domestic space with comfort that there is an impetus to comprehend the house in human terms. After all, many people treat the figure of the house with a certain reverence, care, and importance, as spaces are impressed with lived experiences and conjure up memories. As Pugliese summarizes, “the tendency to anthropomorphize houses is ancient” (Pugliese 301). In one instance, this close identification of the “humanness” of a house is made

apparent in the common trope of viewing the windows of the house as eyes. In Edgar Allan Poe's "The Fall of the House of Usher," the short story's narrator repeatedly makes note of the house's "vacant, eye-like windows" (Poe 90, 91). Bachelard too writes, "Through its light alone, the house becomes human. It sees like a man. It is an eye open to the night" (Bachelard 35). When considering the house as an emotive subject, there is an inclination to understand and identify with it, as particularly seen in "Ash." At first glance, the discussion of the house's embodiment in Smith's poem might seem to elide the difference between human subject and the spaces they inhabit; yet I also want to point out the dangers in pursuing the anthropomorphizing of a house too closely, in thinking we understand houses too much or in having certain expectations of them. The spaces of the house "provide comfort by being exactly *what we expect them to be*. Only when they change... do we realize just how much trust we put in our houses" (Geller 0:16:08-22, emphasis mine). When we enter the front door of our homes, we trust that the hallway ends where it has always ended, that the stairs lead to another landing, that chairs rest on top of the floor instead of sinking into it. In some ways, that trust is the very essence of "home, sweet home." But what happens when that space is evacuated of conventional understandings of home, consumed by a void where the familiar comforts of home *should* be?

Part of what is so striking about "Ash" is the way it mobilizes the concept of the *unheimlich*, the uncanny. Smith twists the familiar and deeply significant figure of the house to unbalance the reader and their expectations of what that dwelling should do and be. At the end of the poem, Smith likens the house to "an engine that churns and stalls," undermining conventional ideas about domestic comfort, security, and stability. This house is devoid of homeliness, even if the references to memories and history (or even personhood) spark recognition, making us think that something familiar can be found amid the chaos. As Anthony Vidler points out, this

destabilization of what was thought to be familiar is essential to understanding the uncanny: “For Freud, unhomeliness was more than a simple sense of not belonging; it was the fundamental propensity of the familiar to turn on its owners, suddenly to become defamiliarized, derealized, as if in a dream” (Vidler 7). What happens when the architecture of the home does not shelter its inhabitants, as Bachelard suggests (Bachelard 6), but rather betrays them through its unhomeliness? According to Marisa Mirabal, “when the home is compromised, an invasion of mental, physical, and emotional anguish follows” (Mirabal). Smith gestures towards why the house, in particular, can become such a dangerous figure and why the defamiliarization of its spaces can pose a psychological threat. In the process of dwelling, house and inhabitant inevitably co-constitute each other in a variety of ways; and yet, it is precisely because of the notion that a person should, in theory, have a deep and meaningful connection to domestic space that the house “has the power to unnerve, fragment, and even destroy its inhabitant” (Ng 1). Although a house is meant to be a place that supports a dweller’s identity, haunting space is invaded by all that should be excluded from a house’s protective boundaries, things repressed, repulsive, and illicit. As Susan Bernstein writes, “The uncanny destabilizes the structure of identity as presence precisely by insinuating what is absent, invisible, or other” (Bernstein 61). Narratives about haunting space articulate a sort of gap, between our understandings and expectations of home and the incomprehensibility of hostile space.

Unlike *Anatomy*, which walks the player through an unhomely house, explicitly names each room, and accounts for its analogical resonance, in “Ash,” Smith seems to talk around the architectural specificity of the house, excluding features that might compose our view of the typical “home.” There are no mentions of bedrooms or kitchens or basements – just blood-filled rooms that are devoid of an assigned purpose. The interior dimensions are left unwritten, as

hidden things are instead brought to light through the house's spatial subjectivity. The gaps in our understanding of this house convey the absence of a solid foundation, a sense of precarity and threat of slipping into nothingness. The protective potential of the house is disrupted as it loses the structural stability of its borders – the house becomes permeable, open to infestation (Weinstock 150). As “Ash” turns inwards, in a way it also “reverses” itself and “opens up” outwards, onto “an endless and undefined field ... where no identity is stable” (Bernstein 13). Here, these voids in meaning abound and become productive for thinking about everything we can never understand about home and about our relationships to that space. Smith's poem perverts Bachelard's concept of the house as a protective shelter for the dreamer (Bachelard 6); instead, the house is terrifying and sinister in its unknowability, a twisted being.

Because the house of “Ash” is not possessed by some entity but is materially and structurally invested with some form of sentience, there is no exorcism that can refortify its domestic space as homely and protective – thus, “the house cannot be redeemed” (Bailey 22). How does one deal with buildings that are “themselves the source of evil... which, through some flaw of design – some peculiar arrangement of space and mass, some technology gone awry – manifest a malign awareness that targets occupants” (Eggner 2)? Houses that are not haunted by something, but rather are themselves doing the haunting, carry a definitive sense of illegibility in their empty spaces, an inability for the place to be “recognized, organized into a pattern and recalled” (McAndrew 49). This spatial uncanny resists human attempts to understand the house and to assimilate it into an identity-constituting domestic space. If the house provides the subject with a means to “come into being” by “negotiat[ing] and identify[ing] space and its contents with her gaze” (Ng 14), then space that haunts by becoming uncanny resists that gaze, and thus has the potential to throw human subjectivity into disarray. This opposition to human perception, as

an emptying-out of the gaze and the subject, is an essential consideration of stories about haunting houses. Gaps in our understanding of the house force both the character and the reader to remain on the margins, and to fester in their anxieties surrounding “unused, unknown, or uncontrollable spaces” (Campbell et al. 5).

In *Anatomy*, the voice on the tapes reminds the player that, when they drift off to sleep each night, they place themselves “at the house’s mercy,” hoping that it loves them enough to not devour them while they are at their most vulnerable. The figuration of the house as a space of belonging, as a “home, sweet home,” plays upon expectations of homemaking and romanticized relations to space. Yet haunting houses expose some of the contradictions, complications, and even violence wrapped up in socially constructed definitions of home. Although some of us might, at times, believe that we have a deep, personal connection to our homes, we can never really know a house: “What does the house think of? What does it dream?” (*Anatomy*). And if the house cannot be understood, it cannot ever truly be defeated (Pugliese 318). Light a match, and maybe – just maybe – you can escape by burning it to the ground.

The house is meant to offer the comfort of knowing that certain bodies, “our” bodies, are at home and protected in spaces that reflect our lived experiences. The feeling that a homely house facilitates “comfort, security, and respite [is] palpably related to the atmosphere and condition of the building’s *interiority*” (Ng 7, emphasis mine). In theory, interiority is a key feature of the house’s ability to serve as a shelter, to feel like “home, sweet home.” When the building’s interior welcomes its inhabitants and allows them to cross its threshold, while leaving

other dangers outside, it spatializes them as belonging *here*: “The world, in its vulnerability and instability, ends, and the house begins” (Saxton 598). Already, we might trouble the supposed “sweetness” of this interiority for its corresponding exclusionary logic, its hierarchical positioning of a welcomed “us” against a rejected “them.” By establishing the separation between inside and outside, here and there, the selective workings of interiority involve “an explicit manipulation of an environment to achieve and construct a desired space” (McCarthy 113). If the interiority of the house is a “responsive phenomenon” (Ng 9), a controlled environment that reflects the power of its inhabitants (or the house’s) desires, what happens when those desires change or are overwhelmed by other interests? The negotiation of what and who belongs inside the house can quickly turn against a dwelling’s inhabitants. When the space of the house haunts, turning the longed-for comfort of domestic space into something threatening and often psychologically damaging, its inhabitants are often forced to confront their displacement from the desired space of the interior.

The haunting house becomes a site of tension between what *should* be solidified structural boundaries and nebulous interior space marked by darkness, by what is unknown or unseen, by what lives on the threshold between Being and Non-Being. The house-as-subject articulates itself by breaking through that threshold, as its “dark, submerged dream world” overwhelms human characters and “wreak[s] havoc all around” (Eggeneer 8). Because of this potentially threatening unknowability of interior space, perhaps it is fitting that labyrinths are commonly referenced in haunted and haunting house texts – as a motif that emphasizes the confusion of disturbed spatiality and disruption of boundaries and thresholds. In these narratives, the spatial uncanny often unfolds through labyrinthine geographies in which houses are “impossible to view in their entirety from any one point. They contain numerous rooms and

passages, including some that are hidden or forgotten or closed off altogether” (Eggener 5). Manuel Aguirre points out that, particularly in Gothic narratives, such a chaotic experience of space produces an essential “asymmetry” between the realm of human reality and that of the Other: “it is easy to enter the Gothic castle, hard to come out – the reason being that its structure makes the castle’s space, literally or metaphorically, *larger inside than outside*, this asymmetry being the extreme expression of that ‘colonization’ whereby the Other swallows up its own frontiers” (Aguirre 6). In an unknowable house, a house that is difficult to navigate and understand, it is also difficult to visualize an escape. Though the exterior of a house might look bounded, finite, and sometimes unassuming, space that haunts spirals out of human control and comprehension. The figure of the “homeless home”– that “absence of the house within the house” which forces us to feel the void of the cozy, sweet home (Slocombe 90) – exposes the house to considerations of emptiness, uncanny and hostile space, and the evacuation of meaning.

In the haunting house and homeless home, “emptiness” or “nothing” becomes a productive *something*, rather than merely a blankness, that we can engage with and use to reframe our understandings of spatiality. The oppressive malevolence of hollow, haunting spaces helps dismantle the idea of emptiness as a kind of before-space, as a temporary state of being that precedes a more complete representation of the house (Campbell et al. 4). As Henri Lefebvre acknowledges, “so great is the sway still held by the idea that empty space is *prior* to whatever ends up filling it” (Lefebvre 15, emphasis mine) – some might form a picture of empty space as a house before someone has moved their furniture in and left their impressions on the architecture. In the texts in thesis, human characters struggle deeply to fill the emptiness in their unhomey homes with meaning; when they fail to do so, they are forced to live with an experience of uncertainty, unbelonging, and a lack of sheltering space within their homes.

This thesis tracks a progression between three texts – *Rebecca*, *The Haunting of Hill House*, and *House of Leaves* – that explores different stages and figurations of the “emptying-out” of a house, whether through a gradual slippage into decay, a hostile exclusion of humanity, or an unmaking of the very meaning of “home.” Where there seems, physically, to be a house, there may instead be a gaping hole of absence. These considerations of emptiness are messily tangled up with the idealized and romanticized construct of the perfect house, of “home, sweet home,” an illusion that is then betrayed and weaponized against human dwellers.

When describing a hateful house, one might turn to the more perceptibly sentient houses of film and literature; instead, I begin with an exploration of a house that is far less actively antagonistic, to showcase how domestic space itself can become infested with emotion and spew that emotion back out. In the first chapter, I consider how Daphne du Maurier’s *Rebecca* foregrounds the interplay between a beautiful dream house, an abandoned ruin, and a house that still belongs, through material impressions and emotive capacity, to another. Even as Manderley’s rooms are closed up, kept secret, and gathering dust, the spaces of the house are simultaneously thrown open by the loneliness that the house experiences in Rebecca’s absence. The novel’s narrator, the nameless second wife of Maxim de Winter, finds her hopes of belonging and homemaking complicated by the felt absence of Rebecca. The dream house gives way to a more complicated understanding of home, that troubles the narrator’s ability to structure identity or make meaning within empty space that does not want her. The glory days of Manderley, once a jewel of an estate home, have since passed; with Rebecca gone, who upheld a

façade of upper-class society and held off the impacts of collapsing social foundations, the house sinks first into a more personal emptiness, before ending the novel as a tomb, a burned-out ruin.

Though Manderley slips into decay and emptiness after losing a sense of purpose, at some point the house *wanted* to be a home, to be lived in and loved. Shirley Jackson's Hill House, on the other hand, is a house that was "never meant to be lived in" (Jackson 24). Hill House wants to be empty and to exclude humanity. In my second chapter, I examine how *The Haunting of Hill House* presents a figure of a house that seeks to reassert an unwavering continuity of absence within. While Eleanor Vance, Jackson's main character, dreams endlessly of perfect houses where she could make a home, Hill House sets itself in opposition to such an idea – Jackson suggests that the house inhabits a realm of insanity-inducing "absolute reality" (Jackson 1) that comes about in the very absence of dreams. Yet Eleanor's fantasies of the perfect home are precisely what Hill House will manipulate in order to seduce her into staying forever; the lonely Eleanor sees possibilities for family, understanding, and connection within Hill House, though the house eventually snatches the promise of belonging away from her. The collapse of identity at the hands of hostile space is far more palpable and complete than in *Rebecca*, as Jackson's novel concludes with the main character destroyed, unmade, and unwanted. Hill House must remain empty, unnamable – it is ruinous to try to know it.

Almost as a postmodern descendant of Hill House, the house on Ash Tree Lane – the house-subject of Mark Danielewski's *House of Leaves* – takes the idea of unnameability and the exclusion of human understanding to a spatial and conceptual extreme. Danielewski's central characters, the new inhabitants of the house on Ash Tree Lane, also subscribe to the idealistic belief that the house will shelter them from the dangers of the outside world. When the danger is revealed to be within, however, their very idea of home unravels. Their seemingly mundane

home houses an endless and disturbingly empty labyrinth, which resists attempts at map-making or knowledge production. Although one might say that houses are *always* “bigger on the inside – spaces of memory and experience that exert place-power as they structure our experience of them” (Weinstock 142), the house on Ash Tree Lane expands inward into all-encompassing nothingness. In the final chapter, I explore how *House of Leaves* reaches an endpoint of near *houselessness*, where the house is absent from itself. In the face of this immense, practically cosmic void, human conceptions of reality collapse into a meaninglessness that expresses the uncertainties of the modern age. To return to the destabilizing “reversal” of the house outlined by Susan Bernstein, it is as though the house is turned inside out, opened onto an endless field that confronts the reader with their own displacement (Bernstein 13). We arrive at a kind of no-place within the house, but also without it, as the house on Ash Tree Lane works to unmake its own existence.

The house of “Ash” is a haunted house. And it is also every house. It invokes all of the agonies of dwelling in a house – filled with bad memories, loneliness, love, and loss – and the torment of being displaced, emotionally or physically, from an interior once thought to be safe and stable. In his work on haunted houses in film, Barry Curtis writes,

“All houses are haunted – by memories, by the history of their sites, by their owners’ fantasies and projections or by the significance they acquire for agents or strangers.

Houses inscribe themselves within their dwellers, they socialize and structure the

relations within families, and provide spaces for expression and self-realization in a complex interactive relationship” (Curtis 66).

Twisting the figure of a perfect “home, sweet home,” haunting houses take the general concerns of “all houses” – questions of belonging, personhood, and identity – and both amplify and distort them to an outsized scale, in the absence of apparent ghosts. In dialogue with “Ash,” the unknowability of the three houses studied in this thesis (though certainly disturbing) also opens the house to endless possibility and new ways of thinking – the house is many things, all things, no things, never fixed. It is a fraught and twisting labyrinth.

Get comfortable, as much as you can. But keep an eye out for the writing on the wall.

II.

HOUSE INFESTED WITH DESIRE: THE VOID OF LONELINESS IN DAPHNE DU MAURIER'S *REBECCA*

"Like fairy things, I said, and looking back, after living here two years, it is just that. A fairy tale. Even now I have to pinch myself to know that it is true. I belong to the house. The house belongs to me."

– Daphne du Maurier,
in *The Rebecca Notebook & Other Memories*, 100¹

Daphne du Maurier's *Rebecca* highlights as a subject a house that remembers what it once felt like to love another. Contaminated with the memories of the deceased Rebecca, Manderley is (to borrow phrasing from "Ash") a "house infested with desire" (Smith). The house belongs to Rebecca, and Rebecca belongs to the house. Through its haunting, the house and the space inside it operate as a mechanism to keep Rebecca's memory alive, and as a result, to embark on the project of psychologically unmaking the novel's unnamed narrator and reducing *her* to the level of ghost (Petersen 63). As the house gradually reveals its emotive capacity and continuing loyalty to Rebecca, the lovely, homely house of which the narrator once dreamed shuts her out, refuses to welcome her – Manderley denies the narrator's attempt to occupy the position and identity of Mrs. de Winter. Andrew Hock Soon Ng describes the danger in housing identity, in allowing identity to be tied to a place: "Structuring one's self-image by symbolically aligning it to the house is always precarious, for the ambiguity underscoring the architecture's

¹ *The Rebecca Notebook & Other Memories*, Daphne du Maurier's final book, includes both du Maurier's original plans for *Rebecca* as well as other collected "memories" recorded throughout her life. One section of this work, titled "The House of Secrets," focuses particularly on du Maurier's encounters with Menabilly, a deserted mansion in Cornwall that the writer would return to many times over the course of her life. These memories of Menabilly – the place which would inspire Manderley – are fruitful for understanding how du Maurier's personal relationship to houses and their emptiness shaped *Rebecca*.

property potentially threatens to sabotage such an exertion and in the process rupture subjectivity” (Ng 19-20). When one pronounces, as Daphne du Maurier herself does, “I belong to the house. The house belongs to me,” the very idea of “belonging” within a certain space – a constant concern for *Rebecca*’s narrator – gives the house incredible power as something that both structurally supports and helps compose identity. This level of control over the human subject can quickly turn sinister and destructive. Du Maurier’s unnamed narrator will find that she cannot enter Rebecca’s Manderley without being deformed and othered. Subverting the narrator’s hopes for a perfect “home, sweet home,” Du Maurier demonstrates the potential for the house to have multiple faces, beautiful and terrible, that it shows to the world and to its inhabitants – to be as “duplicitous” (Ng 4) as Rebecca was. The estate home of Maxim de Winter and his wives (new and old) goes through a number of stages of cherished, disturbed, and destroyed space, all of which contribute to its haunting and destabilizing force. While doors do not slam shut of their own accord, blood does not drip down the walls, and staircases do not spiral down into eternal darkness, this Gothic space haunts all the same (Erdem 102).

Although it is perhaps possible to read Manderley as haunted *by* the ghost of Rebecca (though no specter appears), I want to focus instead on how the space of the house haunts *with* Rebecca – or rather, with the void where Rebecca once was. That is, rather than Rebecca’s ghostly figure terrorizing the narrator, the house employs the memory of Rebecca to unbalance the second wife and disturb her ability to spatialize herself within her own home. The persistent idea of Rebecca and her palpable absence feeds into the house’s potential for subjectivity (and malice), as her figure underpins the novel’s interrogation of the class systems that sustain the estate house and the cultural anxieties that threaten it. The loneliness that the house experiences in Rebecca’s absence is Manderley’s open wound (though we may discover that this is not all the

house suffers from). In contrast to Hill House, in which emptiness persists as a continuous state of being, absence within Manderley is something interruptive, a discontinuity that foregrounds a loss of purpose and that undermines romanticized notions of home. The narrator believes that this vacancy produces and is produced by her inability to embody the role of an upper-class “lady of the house,” as Rebecca did. What does Manderley demand of its inhabitants in the pact of habitation and ownership? How will it respond when it is not satisfied?

Daphne du Maurier’s *Rebecca* famously begins with the recounting of a dream, in which the unnamed narrator traverses a winding, overgrown driveway to return to Manderley, once her husband’s estate house. In reality, the house is now a burned-down, abandoned ruin. In this dream, however, the narrator remarks that the house is “inviolable, untouched” (du Maurier 2). As she drifts toward the house, a supposed “trick” of the moonlight breathes life into the empty building: “I could swear that the house was not an empty shell but lived and breathed as it had lived before” (du Maurier 3). Multiple iterations of the house seem to overlap, as past and present blur. Although the narrator does seem to reminisce about a more vital Manderley with some degree of nostalgia, such a remembrance is complicated; as the “perfect symmetry” (du Maurier 2) of the house’s exterior is suggested to conceal something more organic and mutable, du Maurier provides the first hint of how the house might pose a danger by not being what its inhabitants expect. If the narrator inhabited Manderley while it still “lived and breathed,” then she had to confront the instability of a dwelling with its own subjectivity every day that she remained housed within its walls. The architecture of even this remembered house fights against

the narrator's attempts to understand and categorize it. The "empty shell" of a house – which, despite its ruination, is a structure with a concrete sense of where the house is, and where it is not – shifts into something more permeable, as the revived house hovers on the threshold between the real and unreal, between dreams and reality. Du Maurier demonstrates the ease of slipping into the uncanny "Otherness" of that realm beyond the threshold of "human reason" (Aguirre 3). Such a space, in which houses live and breathe, destabilizes the figure of the sheltering home. Though this is the narrator's own dreamscape, Manderley's overwhelming presence alludes to the ways in which space haunts by opening the door for the house's own "dream world" to bleed into the narrator's "reality" (Eggner 8).

The narrator's acknowledgement that she was unable to live at Manderley "without fear" (du Maurier 4) highlights the house's hostility towards her. In describing a revived Manderley, then, the narrator attempts to reconstruct a degree of intimacy between herself and the spaces of the house that she never truly experienced while residing there. She imagines that, if she and her husband were to re-enter the library of this living house, "the room would bear witness to our presence" (du Maurier 3). The act of attempting to write herself back into space through her dream only further emphasizes how the real house displaced her (Erdem 121). The narrator fantasizes about a homely house that would acknowledge and constitute her identity as Mrs. de Winter. Despite the suffering she describes experiencing within and because of Manderley throughout the rest of the novel, the narrator presents the dream house as something cherished, worthy of reverence, "a jewel in the hollow of a hand" (du Maurier 2). In the process of thinking through space, this retrospective reconstruction of a dream house captures the narrator's attempt to open up the spaces of the house and fit herself into the gaps, though this engagement with space holds a more dangerous weight than mere wishful thinking. Manderley's influence over

the narrator is made more potent through her longing for the beauty the house might have possessed, but which was forcefully withheld from her. This tension between dream and reality resonates with the fact that the narrator imagined Manderley and owned a painted postcard of it before she ever saw it as a real, physical structure (du Maurier 24); having had no place of her own, the narrator dreamed of belonging here, inside of this picture-perfect image of home. When she comes to live at Maxim's estate, then, she is forced to reconcile the dreamed-up image of a famous estate home with the real house, full of twisted feelings and secrets (Horner & Zlosnik 101) – by buying into the dream, the narrator had opened herself up to betrayal by haunting space, allowing the house to take hold in her unconscious. Manderley invades the narrator's psyche by preying on expectations of what a house *should* be and of how one should ideally exist in relation to its spaces.

The narrator's fantasy of Manderley, as a house that is "the stuff of dreams" (Horner & Zlosnik 101), is swiftly betrayed as her dream presents a dichotomy between a living house and a dead one. When a cloud obscures the glimmer of moonlight that briefly illuminated and restored the life of the house, the narrator "look[s] upon a desolate shell, soulless at last, unhaunted, with no whisper of the past about its staring walls. The house was a sepulchre, our fear and suffering lay buried in the ruins. There would be no resurrection" (du Maurier 4). Anthony Vidler similarly discusses the dismal fate of a house that is "killed by its very emptiness" (Vidler 19), by the evacuation of meaning from its rooms. With the absence of the past from its "staring walls," the house almost ceases to exist as such, turning instead into a shell, a sepulcher, a ruin. The empty house is its own being, haunting through the absence of itself. In her journals, Daphne du Maurier describes feeling deeply for the agony that the house might experience as it waits to

die. Upon returning to the ruined Menabilly, a house with which she fell in love when visiting it with her family years previously, du Maurier lamented,

“I could scarcely see the soul of her for the despair. The mould was in her bones. Odd, yet fearful, what a few years of total neglect can do to a house, as to a man, a woman... Have you seen a man who has once been handsome and strong go unshaven and unkempt? Have you seen a woman lovely in her youth raddled beneath the eyes, her hair tousled and grey? Sadder than either, more bitter and more poignant, is a lonely house”
(*The Rebecca Notebook* 98-99).

As much as a house can be the subject of one’s desires and fantasies, the reality of the house slipping into decay can shatter those dreams. A lonely house no longer offers the structural stability and personal comfort that one might want from domestic space. Du Maurier describes despair as something that seeps into the very “bones” of the house, a sickness that corrupts the structure at its core.

The abrupt dissolution of the narrator’s fantasy coincides with her attempt to isolate her “fear and suffering” to the past; and yet, although the narrator seeks to detach Manderley from her life and reassert the house’s temporal boundaries, marking it as a “soulless” and “unhaunted” relic of a time passed instead of an agent that still intrudes into her present, she undermines her own logic. Despite the narrator’s disavowal of any “resurrection,” the very presence of her narration – in which she excavates Rebecca’s story – means that she continues to bring the past back to life over and over again (Korkut-Nayki 34). Thus, the sepulchre and the dream of Manderley pervades every page of *Rebecca*, haunting the narrative even before it burns down. Throughout her dream, the narrator engages the haunting space of the house on multiple layers of being, though she attempts (and arguably fails) to hold it at a forced distance from her present

life. As the narrator is unable to reconcile her desire to return to the past with the present ruin of the house and her own displaced existence, the text splits Manderley into a fragmented signifier, both an image of abandonment and a vessel for nostalgia. The narrator continues to reinscribe the house with meaning – she will not let it rest, even as an emptied-out husk. For the house, that must make for a special kind of agony.

In one of his first conversations with the narrator, before their marriage, Maxim de Winter reflects, “An empty house can be as lonely as a full hotel. The trouble is that it is less impersonal” (du Maurier 27). Because Maxim knows the house – and Manderley knows him – that emptiness takes on a different weight, reflecting judgement back onto the estate owner. The empty, abandoned house emerges as a source of “trouble” and conflict when it serves as a reminder both for Rebecca’s murder and for Maxim’s failure to strengthen the estate as a patriarch should (Pons 78). As Manderley’s spaces are warped by this conflict, the house’s resentful subjectivity emerges. Although Maxim seems to be lamenting the ways in which his experience of Manderley has changed in the time since Rebecca’s death, it is not difficult to transfer his sentiment onto the house’s own experience. Indeed, having lost Rebecca, who took on great responsibility for its upkeep and improvement, Manderley must be experiencing a very personal sense of loneliness. Evacuated of meaning and purpose, the house is unable to be at home, as a home. Manderley articulates its mourning through an emptiness that throws open the house to instability and threatens the construct of “home, sweet home.” Du Maurier draws attention to the way sound echoes through the hollow great hall and the empty, dormant state of

many of the rooms: “There were ... so many rooms that were never used by Maxim and myself that were empty now; dust-sheeted, silent, rooms that had been occupied in the old days when his father and his grandfather had been alive, when there had been much entertaining, many servants” (du Maurier 197).² The quiet, unpopulated state of the house suggests that its glory days have passed. Now, it begins a slow decline into its eventual characterization as a “sepulchre.” Manderley is a shadow of what it used to be under the care of Rebecca, who was well-known as a great host and planner of balls (Wisker 94), and it is even further emptied-out from the days of Maxim’s ancestors. The house is haunted by the “old days” of life, activity, and purpose. This history is written in the architecture of once-occupied rooms, now evacuated of meaning. The current inhabitants of Manderley are forced to confront the dwelling’s overlapping past, present, and future, and how it speaks to the lonely house’s weakening foundation.

As Maxim’s aside about the “empty house” (and the narrator’s eventual troubled engagement with it) suggests, the effect of this haunting space is to unnerve and destabilize human inhabitants, making them feel like they are not able to fully operate within the comforts of the home. It is important to note that this present emptiness within Manderley is of a different quality, a different state of being, from that of the burned-out husk in the narrator’s opening dream. While the narrator lives there, the house’s abandonment does not arise from external physical destruction; instead, du Maurier highlights the emptiness of the interior and the decomposition of the house’s ability to shelter and comfort. In exploring how empty space can speak so strongly, Elizabeth Wilson points out the complex interplay between the eerie and the uncanny in a haunted house:

² Similarly, when du Maurier looks through the windows into an abandoned Menabilly, a moment recorded in *The Rebecca Notebook*, she despairs, “Where was the laughter gone? Where were the voices that had called along the passages?” (*The Rebecca Notebook* 97).

“The emptiness of the house is eerie, and yet at the same time it produces the uncanny sensation that something actually is there; and that must be the house itself.... It is this contradictory mixture that produces the belief that the house itself is a presence, a being, that it is in some sense if not alive, then at least sentient” (E. Wilson 114).

The voids in the house are not neutral vacancies, but productive sites for the house to come into being and reconstruct itself *through absence*, in all its hostile complexity. In the quiet and the stillness, in the longing for Rebecca, the house is there, waiting and wretched. Manderley haunts its own hollows, undermining any “romance of place” and deconstructing attempts to use the interior to constitute one’s identity (Wisker 87). Like the houses of “Ash” and *Anatomy*, Manderley suffers under the burden of neglect and experiences the discomfort of becoming something else in its emptiness. If “haunted houses are almost universally abandoned,” perhaps abandonment itself creates the conditions for space to haunt (Geller 0:09:34-41). Manderley’s pain spills over in Rebecca’s absence, turning space hostile and corrupting the trust that the narrator seeks to place in her ideal home.

The anguish of loneliness translates to an almost overwhelming silence in the house. Du Maurier repeatedly references the hush that hangs over the forgotten rooms and the jarring feeling when the stillness is disturbed. When the narrator first arrives at Manderley, she is particularly struck by the empty vastness of the great hall: “My feet rang on the flagged stones, echoing to the ceiling, and I felt guilty at the sound, as one does in church, self-conscious, aware of the same constraint” (du Maurier 78). The audible echoes through the house, emphasizing its hollowness, draw further attention to how the narrator does not fit in with this space – as though she is an intruder that the house’s body wants to reject. Gaston Bachelard writes, “The old house, for those who know how to listen, is a geometry of echoes. The voices of the past do not sound

the same in the big room as in the little bed chamber, and calls on the stairs have yet another sound” (Bachelard 60). For the narrator, such echoes are disorienting, as they resonate with the “falseness of current pretenses and silences” concealed within Maxim’s refusal to discuss Rebecca during their early conversations (Wisker 90). Thus, the echoes in Manderley’s great hall, amplified by the high ceiling and unused space, signify a palpable absence in the house – a past that still lingers – and perhaps suggest that the narrator is not attuned enough to be able to understand or listen to the house.

Later in her stay at Manderley, when the narrator loses her way trying to find her bedroom, the silence in the house makes her feel entirely alone: “I thought, as I stood there, wondering which way to turn, that the silence was unusual, holding something of the same oppression as an empty house does, when the owners have gone away” (du Maurier 100). The horror of this architectural haunting pulls on the second Mrs. de Winter’s nerves and “turns the domestic sphere into an unfamiliar and threatening place” (Brazzelli 145). For the narrator, silence is not merely the state of the house being quiet – it is something that weighs upon her and makes her aware of her own disconnect from the domestic space. Even though the “new” Mrs. de Winter walks Manderley’s halls, the house seems, in its stillness, to be without ownership. Manderley reflects the narrator’s presence back to her as transient, almost seeming to ask, *You’re not planning on staying long, are you?* The house as home, as comfortable shelter, hides itself away from her and refuses to speak. Though she once dreamed, “I would be Mrs. de Winter” (du Maurier 60), the house does not welcome her or even answer her. The second wife is unable to fit into the negative space produced by Rebecca’s loss, as she continues feeling like “a guest, biding her time, waiting for the return of the hostess” (du Maurier 154). The empty house feeds into the second wife’s insecurities about her inability to successfully keep an upper-class

household, given her previous social status as a paid companion (Light 1984, 10). Rather than an interior that shelters her from the instability of the world, the narrator encounters a space that seems to forcefully exclude her. The house reverses itself against her, turning inside out, and confronts her with her lack of placefulness.

As a further expression of the house's hostility, du Maurier spotlights the instability of the house's geography, the speed at which a person can become displaced. The unknowability of the narrator's environment begins to unravel her as the space around her defies understanding. Throughout the novel, the link between illegible geography and mounting insanity is anticipated by the twisting driveway that leads up to Manderley, one that "nags at [the narrator's] nerves" (du Maurier 72). Although the narrator attempts to put a fantastical spin on the experience, saying that the drive reminds her "of the path in the forest in a Grimm's fairy tale" (du Maurier 147), there is something sinister about the fact that "it's always longer than one expects, and the trees are so dark, and close" (du Maurier 147). The driveway captures the sense that space is shifting and unmappable, catching the human subject off guard. Look away, and the maze changes while you're not paying attention. This illegibility makes it difficult for the narrator to conclusively resolve her emotional response to hostile space – because of this "ambiguity," she must devote much of her attention "to determin[ing] if there is indeed a real danger awaiting [her]" (McAndrew 52). It becomes all the more difficult for her to assert herself or to flee, as she is paralyzed by questions of *Is this real?* and *Am I in danger?* Yet there is no revelatory center to

the maze, no true answer, and the house will come to exploit these gaps in the narrator's understanding.

Almost as though the twisting driveway primes her interaction with Manderley's interior, the narrator describes a similar experience of the house's geography deceiving her expectations. The twisting corridors of the house resist the second Mrs. de Winter and her attempts to inhabit Manderley more fully, not just as a guest. The path to the narrator's room is labyrinthine, taking her up and down multiple flights of stairs and passing through several doors (du Maurier 79). In addition, whenever she leaves the section of the house in which she has been tucked away, she quickly becomes lost. When the second Mrs. de Winter accidentally makes her way to what used to be Rebecca's side of the house, she remarks, "I must have lost my bearings, for passing through a door at the head of the stairs I came to a long corridor that I had not seen before" (du Maurier 100). While the geography that the narrator describes is ill-defined, her difficulty adapting to her surroundings develops out of her engagement with the physical features of the house – doors, stairs, corridors, and rooms arise as sites of disorientation and distress. Manderley stages a specific attack on the idea of the cozy home; spaces that should ground the narrator through recognition, understanding, and comfort turn uncanny and unknowable. As the material contents of the space elude her full understanding and expand out of her reach, the house enforces a mental distance between space and subject. The intensification of the physic force of the house is further represented in how the second Mrs. de Winter frequently sneaks around Manderley and ducks out of sight from other inhabitants (du Maurier 99, 177, 212), in almost childish displays of insecurity and nervousness. Afraid to make a sound or make her presence known, she uses the house's complex geography to hide herself. Yet, this exacerbates her feeling that she is a foolish intruder without a place, a disruption in the house's orderly routine (du

Maurier 90). The house makes the second Mrs. de Winter painfully aware of the reality of her own displacement. As the narrator finds herself unable to take up space and make a home, her recession into herself only further allows absence to take root in Manderley. The homely house is nowhere to be found.

For the narrator, Manderley's interior illegibility and vagueness causes it to become almost like an inverted dream house; this time, however, it is Manderley's dream world (not the narrator's) that takes over, spilling over the threshold and fragmenting the domestic space. The morning room and Rebecca's old bedroom, in particular, are suspended between states of being – between life and death, presence and absence. When entering Rebecca's bedroom for the first time, which Mrs. Danvers maintains as though it is still in use, the second Mrs. de Winter remarks, "For one desperate moment I thought that something had happened to my brain, that I was seeing back into Time, and looking upon the room as it used to be, before she died" (du Maurier 185). The lonely Manderley longs for the way things "used to be." Through this temporal unbalancing, du Maurier captures the emergence of the emotional tensions and repressed energies housed within Manderley, in a Gothic display where "something, ... which has been submerged or held at bay because it threatens the established order of things, develops a cumulative energy that demands release and forces it to the realm of visibility where it must be acknowledged" (Clemens 4). Rupturing the narrator's constructed reality, haunting space forces the house's liminal dream world, where two temporalities of Manderley overlap, to the surface. When the narrator sees Rebecca's room, a place where the house was (and still tries to be) a *home*, she is dislocated, almost thrown out of herself. Rebecca's absence is momentarily elided, and the house reveals to the second wife the discontinuity of its current hollow state.

Returning to McCarthy's suggestion that interiority is abstract and responsive, a process in which "desire, space, and control coincide" (McCarthy 113), the spatial rejection of the narrator signals that Manderley has constructed its desired space to align with the residual energy of Rebecca, as the one who cared for and nurtured it. The house holds onto Rebecca and the upper-class standards of "keeping house" that she represents; in turn, the narrator feels like she is intruding upon and "violating strict rules in a space of some higher order" (Erdem 110), forever unable to claim her place. This "higher order" denies her, tells her she is not enough. Any idealized vision of herself as homemaker is unraveled along with narrator's unspooling sense of self. Despite her hopes that the house would belong to her, it is as though the house, as well as her husband, are keeping secrets from her (Wisker 90). Du Maurier similarly discussed how Menabilly guarded its secrets as a matter of a loving engagement between subject and space: "[The house] held a secret – not one, not two, but many – that she withheld from many people but would give to one who loved her well" (*The Rebecca Notebook* 96). The act of secret-keeping parallels the complicated webs of responsive interiority within the house – holding in, keeping out, and opening up. As the second Mrs. de Winter, the narrator should control the nooks and crannies of domestic space; instead, Manderley's ability to deceive and displace her suggests that some repressed vestige of the past is still in control, animating the house's being and making the building dangerously unstable for certain subjects who are kept in the dark.

A house is property, and yet to own a house is to allow it to own you, to submit to its demands for upkeep and maintenance – Manderley wants something from you, it wants you to

play by its rules, to keep the house. If you know how to meet the house's demands, perhaps it will open up to you, reveal its secrets to you. Yet a lovely house can become a lonely house when it has no one with whom to share those secrets. If the house functions as a secret-keeping mechanism, du Maurier demonstrates how its privatization of knowledge, power, and desire is itself a destructive force, a burden that preys on its inhabitants and keeps them under the house's control. This taxing relationship is at the root of the characters' anxieties about the house as a source of "trouble," particularly in a time when the social systems that once bolstered the estate home are crumbling (Pons 81). While Rebecca was still alive, Manderley was nearly a battleground for a volatile relationship between interior space and human inhabitants. Maxim's attempts to maintain the house's grand reputation within the upper-class, English social order conflicted with the threat that Rebecca would "feminize the estate" by diminishing the patriarch's power (Pons 74). Rebecca simultaneously bolstered and tested Manderley's "society symbol" status, and the tension between those two different spatial relations still occupies the house even after her death.

Revealing that Rebecca struck a cynical deal with him to run Manderley perfectly and to bring it renown, Maxim despairs, "The beauty of Manderley that you see today, the Manderley that people talk about and photograph and paint, it's all due to her, to Rebecca" (du Maurier 307). Because Rebecca has chosen "every particle of furniture with great care," the morning room, for example, has an elegant cohesiveness even after her death: "the result was perfection in a strange and startling way, not coldly formal like the drawing-room shown to the public, but vividly alive..." (du Maurier 93). Unlike the eerie vacancy seen in other parts of the house, a certain energy animates the house in spaces where Rebecca's touch still lingers, which suggests that perhaps Rebecca had a more "ideal" relationship to the domestic space – more symbiotic and

emotive than confining. In return for making Manderley beautiful and beloved, the house serves to reinforce Rebecca's image as a proper, upper-class woman (Pons 80). Part of Rebecca's pitch for marriage (according to Maxim) is that "people will visit us, and envy us, and talk about us; they'll say we are the luckiest, happiest, handsomest couple in all England" (du Maurier 307); after her death, it is clear that this image has been secured, when townspeople recount that Rebecca was clever, beautiful, and lively, and that she hosted parties where "everything [was] always so beautifully done" (du Maurier 138). When she shared Manderley with society and put on grand balls, the house provided Rebecca with a stage on which to perform and to centralize a masquerade of upper-class identity – a screen of renown behind which she could hide her more transgressive behavior, from her affairs in London to her attempts at seducing Frank and Maxim's brother-in-law, among others. With Mrs. Danvers running the house as though Rebecca were still alive, Manderley holds desperately onto Rebecca's seemingly perfect knowledge of how to be a lady of the house – she met the house's demands for its own stately preservation while operating within the social order, which allowed her to "live among [its] luxuries" and enjoy its protection (Pons 80).

Since Rebecca "made" Manderley what it is, both materially and socially, she continues to structure the house as a social space. At one point, the narrator despairs, "The servants obeyed her orders still, the food we ate was the food she liked. Her favourite flowers filled the rooms.... Rebecca was still mistress of Manderley. Rebecca was still Mrs. de Winter. I had no business here at all" (du Maurier 261). Thus, when the second Mrs. de Winter feels Rebecca's presence invested into the architecture, through the material impressions she left behind, she feels her own disconnect from the hierarchical system that Manderley figures. The house hides certain knowledge of sociality away from her, in both its shared spaces and its dark corners. Özge

Erdem writes, “[The second wife’s] lack of knowledge of or familiarity with the conventions of aristocracy causes her to perceive the house as intimidating and forbidding, as if she were a child in the presence of adults” (Erdem 110). As the house amplifies the class differences between the narrator, Maxim, and Rebecca, it preys on the narrator’s insecurity about her middle-class social position and her inability to embody the role of “mistress” of the house.

Initially, Rebecca becomes in the narrator’s eyes a feminine ideal, a superior alternative to herself (Light 1984, 10). The more the second Mrs. de Winter comes to revere Rebecca for her many talents, the more she herself disappears: “for in that brief moment, sixty seconds in time perhaps, I had so identified myself with Rebecca that my own dull self did not exist, had never come to Manderley” (du Maurier 225). The absence of Rebecca within the house is reversed against the narrator, producing a void in *her* instead. Alison Light emphasizes the tension surrounding the relationship between identity and place: “If identity is attached to places and places are vulnerable locations in time, identity itself is potentially unstable, always in danger of being uprooted and needing to be rehoused” (Light 1991, 188). If the narrator’s identity is unhoused, if Manderley houses absence within, does she even truly live here? Furthermore, the second wife imagines that Rebecca’s upper-class status gave her access to a different model of femininity, “a passionate and equal sexuality,” while the narrator still feels as though she cannot escape her middle-class position as a paid companion (Light 1984, 10). When the narrator does try to inhabit a more aristocratic role by dressing up for the ball as Caroline de Winter, a costume that Rebecca herself once donned, her attempt to “fit into the shoes of Maxim’s lineage and of Rebecca ... causes intense confusion and destruction” (Wisker 91); Maxim, in particular, is shocked and horrified by her appearance and her resemblance to Rebecca (du Maurier 239). Despite her frequent dreams of calling herself Mrs. de Winter and belonging within Manderley,

she fails to claim her place in Maxim's household and in his social sphere. This nearly unmakes her when Mrs. Danvers capitalizes on the fear instilled by the house, telling her "She's the real Mrs. de Winter, not you," and encouraging the narrator to "leave Manderley to [Rebecca]" by committing suicide (du Maurier 275) – or else, leave Manderley to its loneliness. Du Maurier subverts the comfort of domesticity and the romance of place, making it so that the narrator cannot locate herself within that space, cannot claim herself as lady of the house. The gap between the narrator and the house results in an emptying out of the subject, and nearly leads to her destruction. She does not belong to the house, and she does not belong to herself.

Interestingly, however, the self-unravelling caused by the house (and by Rebecca's material traces) has a certain power that is as seductive for the narrator as it is frightening. As Manderley privatizes knowledge, desire, and knowledge of desire, it entices the second Mrs. de Winter with the contradictory power of the Gothic "to manipulate illusion and disillusion, to promise and to threaten" (Wisker 88). What dangerous secrets hide behind those closed-off doors? Aren't you curious? Erdem writes, "In the narrator's reluctant but at the same time fascinated search for forbidden knowledge, the house becomes her text" (Erdem 115). The haunting space of Manderley tracks a "slippage" from the *heimlich*, meaning the intimate and the private, to the emergence of the *unheimlich*, in that which should have remained hidden (Vidler 24). By throwing itself open and reversing itself against her, the house haunts the narrator with the uncanny return of repressed knowledge, promising and threatening concealed secrets particularly within spaces that remember Rebecca well. Though Maxim attempts to house her as far apart from the west wing and Rebecca's bedroom as he can, the second wife visits this part of the house three times, reading that haunting space for herself as a "site of fear and attraction" (Erdem 115). Thus, the house shares information with the narrator, about Rebecca, about herself,

and about sexuality, that her husband wishes to keep “under lock and key” (du Maurier 227). When the narrator is struck by “a sudden rather terrifying impulse” to venture up to the west wing for a second time, it makes her “heart [beat] in a queer excited way” (du Maurier 183-4). The house amplifies and sexualizes the stimulating charge of discovery, as space is haunted and infested by Rebecca’s subversion of “proper” feminine, domestic roles.

The narrator’s acquisition of knowledge also involves her entering and reading into the eroticized space of Rebecca’s bedroom. In a pivotal moment during the narrator’s first true encounter with Rebecca’s bedchamber, the second Mrs. de Winter “puts [Rebecca’s nightdress] against [her] face” and breathes in Rebecca’s scent (du Maurier 187). When Mrs. Danvers enters the bedroom, the housekeeper draws attention to how the narrator has felt Rebecca’s things and encourages her to repeat the action, while touching the second wife “in a way that servants do not” (Hallett 44). This act of touch between the narrator, Mrs. Danvers, and by extension Rebecca restructures the space of the bedroom, “[a site] designed to be heterosexual,” around the sexualized exchange of objects and knowledge between women, both past and present (Hallett 37). The tension between this homoerotic subversion of domestic space and the house’s patriarchal social order animates *Manderley* through contradiction. The narrator feels the palpable contrast between the stillness of the rest of the house and the vital potential of Rebecca’s bedroom. Mrs. Danvers frames this seductive act, where the housekeeper acts as a proxy for Rebecca’s luring of the second wife, as a revelation of some hidden knowledge, saying, “Let me show you everything” (du Maurier 189). In the exposure of secrets, we might add the house into this arrangement of figures, also participating in the act of touch. It is as though the house is trying to feel Rebecca again through this encounter with the narrator, reaching out for the *first* Mrs. de Winter through the second wife’s discovery of sexuality in this

space. The narrator's fascinated and terrified encounters with Rebecca's bedroom cause her to experience a fracturing of the self and a loss of control that displaces her almost to the point of self-annihilation.

According to the second Mrs. de Winter, Maxim's confession of murdering Rebecca is what allows her to throw off the other wife's influence over her (du Maurier 319). Yet before this, it is the narrator's final interaction with Mrs. Danvers in Rebecca's bedroom – in which Mrs. Danvers reveals to her Rebecca's vicious, uncaring nature (du Maurier 273) – that precedes the narrator feeling “as though I had entered into a new phase of my life and nothing would be quite the same again” (du Maurier 292). Perhaps, the narrator wants to believe that reading the house and seeking out its hidden knowledge will allow her to understand Maxim. Truly, though, she has come to know Rebecca. As the house works to revive some aspect of Rebecca and disrupt the secrecy surrounding her, the narrator's understanding of Rebecca (gained first from Mrs. Danvers and *then* from Maxim) becomes a necessary part of her ability to make meaning within the house, to understand Manderley's absences and echoes. Ultimately, the narrator learns more about Rebecca from the house and its “privatiz[ing] sexuality” (Erdem 114) than Maxim could ever tell her.

Still, her collusion with Maxim in covering up Rebecca's murder helps her “reinterpret” the first wife's “difference,” so that the second wife can claim the name of Mrs. de Winter (Light 1984, 10). Moving from the outside to the inside, the narrator now spatializes herself as belonging in the interior and “rooted in the patriarchal order” (Pons 78), even feeling comfortable sitting in the morning room and commanding the servants (du Maurier 324). Finally, the narrator can become the mistress of Manderley – though the house's malevolence is not quite dispelled. This is only a brief triumph for the second Mrs. de Winter, as being placed in the

interior means being enmeshed in the all-consuming effort to protect the house's reputation. Previously, the house shut her out. Now, she is inescapably tied to it. Mrs. de Winter is named by the house and its social structures; when Manderley is destroyed, she will again find herself displaced and cut off from that identity.

In his confession, Maxim admits to the sinister influence that Manderley has over him; his murder of Rebecca was motivated by her challenge to patriarchal structures, and her death was justified for the sake of Manderley's continuity (Pons 73). To some degree, it does seem as though Manderley resists this justification (even as it continues to signify patriarchal power), as its love for Rebecca generates internal tension between contradictory threads of emptiness, artifice, and hierarchy. Maxim's insecurity emphasizes a crisis of masculinity, his inability to feel "at home" even in his own seat of power (Pons 77), and the crisis at the center of the estate home in general. Maxim is shackled to Manderley and its preservation – he killed Rebecca because the alternative, a divorce, would hurt his reputation and put Manderley in the papers, as a result: "She knew I would never stand in a divorce court and give her away, have fingers pointing at us, ... all the trippers from Kerrith trooping to the lodge gates, peering into the grounds and saying, 'That's where he lives, in there. That's Manderley'" (du Maurier 306). Manderley must not be the subject of humiliation, for Manderley's continuity means the endurance of an upper-class social system and a way of life that structures the characters' realities. The empty spaces that persist in spite of efforts to fortify Manderley at any cost expose some of the inherently violent structures at play in this idea of "home." As Auba Llompart Pons writes, "The key to this ultimate source of fear and anxiety in du Maurier's novel lies in Maxim's statement: 'I accepted everything – because of Manderley'" (Pons 75). Lay yourself at the house's feet – without it, what is left?

Though, perhaps the emptiness has been there for years. Perhaps the bones of the house have been cracking since before Rebecca's time.

If, as Light remarks, "the texts of the 1930s were full of dying houses" (Light 1984, 21), the troubled, liminal status of English estate houses, both socially and culturally, becomes part of the reason that Manderley operates as a malevolent structure. In its inhabited hollowness, the house seems almost to possess an awareness of its eventual fate (both as a burned-down ruin and as just another example of changing societal relationships to the estate home). At one point in the novel, an anonymous character remarks, "all these big estates will be chopped up in time and bungalows built" (du Maurier 287), suggesting that the exclusivity of these aristocratic homes will be dismantled soon enough. There was never any saving Manderley or protecting it from the intrusion of modernization, despite the house's attempts to maintain its hierarchical distinction and magnify class divides. Perhaps, then, the "Gothic villain" in the text is not Rebecca, or even Maxim, but instead the "haunting presence" of a dying social system embodied in Manderley itself (Pons 71).

Once Rebecca's capacity for performance and artifice is revealed, this too invites a reinterpretation of Manderley's emptiness, proposing that the house was dying and sickly even before Rebecca's death. Though the house's emptiness does in part reflect the loneliness of being without Rebecca, Manderley also articulates the hollowness of past artifice. Gina Wisker argues that Manderley is "a grand house but austere, a tableaux of another's *artificial* life, now empty of meaning" (Wisker 88, emphasis mine). Rebecca was a wonderful host, but that woman was also a fiction. In longing for Rebecca, Manderley reflects back upon a past time that is merely a

fictionalized, empty ideal that “symbolize[s] and disguise[s] present concerns” (Hogle 16). Thus, the house destabilizes the narrator by making her long for an artificial construction of stately, upper-class life in society that never truly existed as such.

The scenes of partying and balls in the novel capture the centrality of this artifice – of “symbols that are quite obviously signs only of older signs” (Hogle 15). In one scene, the second Mrs. de Winter talks about how the house has reanimated in preparation for the costume ball: “The old austerity had gone. Manderley had come alive in a fashion I would not have believed possible. It was not the still quiet Manderley I knew. There was a certain significance about it now that had not been before.... It was as if the house remembered other days, long, long ago” (du Maurier 235). Yet, these remembrances are merely “ghosts of counterfeits” (Hogle 15), a nostalgic attempt at recreating the past without any true referent, for even Rebecca’s glorious balls did not truly bring back the heyday of the house. Though Manderley can attempt to conceal its emptiness, to come briefly “alive,” there is nothing substantial onto which the house or the narrator can hold. Wisker writes, “Fairytale lifestyles are exposed through the contradictions of the text as artifice, a dangerously decadent, culpably blinkered sham. Their exposure, as the narrative conventions fissure and collapse, are an indication of the end of the deceptions of a generation” (Wisker 84). Once the narrator’s Caroline de Winter costume is revealed to be nothing more than an imitation of Rebecca’s embodiment of Maxim’s ancestor, the narrator sees the whole party as a performance, with herself and everyone around her as marionettes (du Maurier 252). English social stability, grace, and legacy (what Caroline de Winter might symbolize) is exposed as a thin veneer from under which something sinister and rotten emerges. Later, Maxim reveals that Rebecca would throw grand parties and laugh behind the partygoers’ backs, before returning to London to continue her affairs (du Maurier 307). Even the wonderful

Rebecca was just engaging in a façade of a high-class scene of partying. Manderley could cling onto the vestiges of its symbolic status within the English social order, but it was already losing itself amid these performances and hollow representations. Eventually, this state of limbo and conflict within Manderley renders its inhabitants permanently displaced.

If Manderley is a source of trouble, representative of cultural anxieties surrounding the end of an era, then Rebecca alone could not have kept the house alive. The role of the English estate house “as a romantic setting and locus for English values” (Wisker 88) crumbles along with the collapse of social order. In the end, when Manderley goes up in flames, its destruction – one of the only endings for a malevolent house, according to Dale Bailey (Bailey 22) – does not free Mrs. de Winter and her husband, but displaces them into a life of wandering (Pons 81).³ Now, the state of the de Winter couple reflects that of their ruined home, which “becom[es] the most prominent haunting presence in [their] minds” (Pons 80) in its very absence. Manderley is a shadow of itself, not only destroyed but detached from its previous social significance. Moving away from the supposed beauty and perfected artifice of the exclusive estate house, the approaching modern age demands a reorientation of socially structured ideas of home. The ghost-like status of characters and house alike comments on the collapse of English upper-class identity – their ideals of housekeeping and belonging at home are no longer shielded from the encroaching outside world. A profound emptiness splits open the cracks in Manderley’s once stately foundation, offering nothing to hold onto, no chance for rebuilding.

³ The sense of placelessness with which Daphne du Maurier leaves us at the end of *Rebecca* has an interesting resonance with the “walking alone” seen at the beginning and the end of *The Haunting of Hill House*, where a lost soul is dismissed by an uncaring house.

III.

HOUSE AFRAID TO BE ALONE: BECOMING HILL HOUSE, BECOMING NOTHING

“Hill House, you’re as hard to get into as heaven.”

– Eleanor Vance,
in *The Haunting of Hill House*, 21

*“Look through the air-thin walls / Tear up the floorboards, strip the paint / Go over every inch
of space with the patience of a saint / Grab your hat, get your coat / The cellar door is an open
throat.”*

– The Mountain Goats,
“The House that Dripped Blood”

The house is empty – it has been empty for years. It belongs to no one. It hungers. It waits. In Shirley Jackson’s *The Haunting of Hill House*, the titular house overwhelms the narrative and the characters as it breathes life into its empty spaces, almost seeming to revel in its lack of habitation. Though the house waits, patiently and quietly, for new victims to entrap and new minds to warp, it never makes its interiors productively available for the novel’s four main characters to be anything other than visitors. Haunting space, space of loneliness where “whatever walk[s] there, walk[s] alone” (Jackson 1), reigns supreme. Well, the four investigators were indeed only ever supposed to be *temporary* residents, so there should have been no need to worry about the status of a “home, sweet home” – the experience should have been, as Theodora remarks flippantly to Eleanor, “just a summer, just a few weeks’ visit to a lovely old summer resort in the country.... Hill House is not forever, you know” (Jackson 154).

The persistent absence of humanity in Hill House means, almost paradoxically, that the house is “full” of negative space that possesses its own unknowable subjectivity. An uncanny absence makes up Hill House’s being, constitutes its presence as a dwelling that feels as though it is, at times, both more and less than a house. In this way, Jackson invites consideration of the house’s vacant spaces on their own merits, rather than framing that emptiness as space waiting to be inscribed with some truer meaning (Campbell et al. 3). Notably, Jackson deliberately keeps vague the identity of any possible ghost in Hill House, formulating “a tension between a haunted house and the house that does the haunting” – a tension which she never resolves (Weinstock 158). Jackson’s musing that “[e]xorcism cannot alter the countenance of a house; Hill House would stay as it was until it was destroyed” (Jackson 24) suggests that the malevolent architecture of the house is more powerful than any particular ghost. Hill House itself commands the narrative’s attention – after all, the novel begins and ends with Hill House, as its true central character. As well, Dr. Montague’s description of the house as being “born bad” (Jackson 50) and “deranged” (51) alludes to the house’s strange and inconceivable animism.⁴ The supposed insanity of the house is a continued object of concern for the investigators, as the characters and the space they inhabit exist on different levels of understanding that imposes a distance between them. For Eleanor, this void simultaneously repels her and makes her long to construct a bridge.

Because of the characters’ (intended) position as paranormal investigators as opposed to prospective homeowners, the idea of “unbelonging” comes with different meanings and consequences than it does in *Rebecca*. In du Maurier’s novel, the second Mrs. de Winter seeks the comfort of domestic space, of being a body at home, and is unexpectedly denied because of

⁴ Given these descriptions of a life-like house, perhaps it is not surprising to learn that the creator of the video game *Anatomy*, that unsettling investigation of the visceral similarities between the human body and a sickly, resentful house, dedicated the game to Shirley Jackson (*Anatomy*).

the residual attachment to Rebecca that continues to structure the domestic space. Silence and architectural illegibility, the terror of haunting space, produce a personal exclusion in *Rebecca*, overwhelming the narrator with her perceived inability to meet the house's demands for social structure and order. Certainly, the second Mrs. de Winter's feelings of displacement and her deep desire to belong overlap with the concerns of Eleanor Vance, the lonely and insecure protagonist of Jackson's novel. Indeed, Eleanor will eventually invoke the same fraught claim as did du Maurier's narrator (and du Maurier herself), of "[the] house belongs to me" (Jackson 181). But Hill House is a different beast. Where Manderley rejects the second Mrs. de Winter, Hill House very much wants to hold onto Eleanor (or perhaps devour her) – though it never intends on letting her belong. Hill House weaponizes the ideal of the perfect home against Eleanor, while remaining forever unhomely and empty, even if it may briefly seduce Eleanor into believing otherwise. It is the very fantasy of belonging somewhere that draws Eleanor into a place where she could never live or construct an identity.

Eleanor Vance is a dreamer – this is one of the first things we learn about the main narrative voice of Shirley Jackson's novel, as the story follows her along her journey to Hill House. Finally freed from many years of caring for her ailing mother, an obligation that made her deeply unhappy, lonely, and full of suppressed hatred, Eleanor feels as though she is breaking out of a state of personal and social purgatory. She dreams of making a life that is all her own, of belonging somewhere. Probing at the hollow space inside of her that has festered through years of social isolation and hostile relations with her now-deceased mother and her

sister (who she also hates), Eleanor attempts to fill herself up with hopes and dreams of possible futures. Now, she has acted for herself. Now, *something* will happen to her that will animate her life: “During the whole underside of her life, ever since her first memory, Eleanor had been waiting for something like Hill House” (Jackson 10). Little does she know that Hill House is waiting for her, too.

As Eleanor drives toward Hill House, unaware of what her future will hold, she imagines a series of dream houses for herself. In doing so, she demonstrates a quick and somewhat troubling slippage into constructed fantasy lives (Bailey 35). Glimpsing a “vast house” along one road, Eleanor envisions herself beginning her story there, as if in a newly discovered world: “Time is beginning this morning in June, she assured herself, but it is a time that is strangely new and of itself, in these few seconds I have lived a lifetime in a house with two lions in front” (Jackson 12). Much as the dream at the beginning of *Rebecca* serves partly as the second Mrs. de Winter’s attempt to reimagine a sense of home that she never truly experienced, Eleanor now attempts to author her own belonging within domestic space. Eleanor longs for the intimacy of a house-as-shelter for her elaborate dreams and as a foundation upon which to build memories. When she later comes upon a tiny, hidden cottage, Eleanor similarly imagines the possibility of stopping there forever: “I could live there all alone, she thought, slowing the car to look down the winding garden path to the small blue front door with, perfectly, a white cat on the step. No one would ever find me there, either, behind all those roses, and just to make sure I would plant oleanders by the road” (Jackson 15). Eleanor’s daydreams formulate what she imagines to be an ideal relationship to the space of the house. The fantasy displaces her from the rest of the world, leaving her and the house alone together in perfect, peaceful harmony.

Yet, as Bailey notes, Eleanor cannot quite escape her preconceived notion that, in order to belong, she must fit herself into the 1950s ideological framework of woman-as-homemaker, of the *angel in the house* (Bailey 33). Although her escape to Hill House is the first “positive action” (Jackson 11) of her life, a grasp at independence, Eleanor’s dream houses are populated with images of her dusting, washing, sewing – the same acts of keeping house that she performed in quiet resentment when caring for her bedridden mother: “Eleanor envisions emotional fulfillment through the performance of the same traditional female duties which a second aspect of her personality despises” (Bailey 36). Eleanor gives the idealized construct of home considerable power to structurally support her identity and create a foundation for self-fulfillment, though her fantasies of solitary housekeeping undermine her own goals to enter the wider world and better her life through independence. This sprawl of dream houses is incredibly dangerous for the lonely Eleanor, because it can be nothing other than an illusion; for her, the promise of harmonious homemaking “invents a perfect house that does not – cannot – exist. The attempt to make it real is fatal” (Bailey 45). If there is no such thing as a perfect house for a perfect homemaker, then Eleanor is imagining building a life around an idealized relation to space that is without foundation and will soon fall through. Her frequent descents into fantasy only accentuate this emptiness at her core: “Eleanor has no life she can call her own. She has only the life of her imagination” (Bailey 45). Eleanor’s loneliness makes her like an open wound, her dreams of keeping house susceptible to infection and infiltration. She wants to belong, but will find that a *real* house, with its own desires and appetites, does not make for such a pretty picture.

When Eleanor is confronted by the brutal reality of Hill House, then, its appearance textually disrupts a thread of fantasy in her mind. As she drives up the road to the house, inside

its gates but still unable to see the structure behind the trees, she posits a number of fantastical adventure stories that the house could facilitate: “Perhaps Hill House has a tower, or a secret chamber, or even a passageway going off into the hills and probably used by smugglers – although what could smugglers find to smuggle around these lonely hills? Perhaps I will encounter a devilishly handsome smuggler and...” (Jackson 23). *And* nothing – her mind grinds to a halt. She finally sees the house and is pulled abruptly out of her fantasies, shocked awake by the instinctive feeling of revulsion that she experiences: “The house was vile. She shivered and thought, the words coming freely into her mind, Hill House is vile, it is diseased; get away from here at once” (Jackson 23). Although Eleanor has not described Hill House with any concrete, physical characteristics, Jackson communicates the affective force of hostile space, by demonstrating a violent break from Eleanor’s fantasies. Eleanor’s daydreams will not altogether cease during her stay at Hill House, but her reaction signals that the house poses a considerable danger to visitors, particularly to dreamers. Even as Eleanor wants to distance herself from the place, Hill House already challenges her ability to produce knowledge surrounding it and threatens to violate the boundaries between dreams and reality. Hill House’s vileness threatens to contaminate Eleanor’s fantasies and expose “home, sweet home” for the illusion it is.

Hill House itself inhabits (and is inhabited by) a numinous Other space beyond the threshold of human comprehension, a space that stands in contrast to the world of dreams. The horrifying reality that Eleanor glimpses when she is pulled out of her dream is accentuated in the famous opening (and parallel closing) of Jackson’s novel:

“No live organism can continue for long to exist sanely under conditions of absolute reality; even larks and katydids are supposed, by some, to dream. Hill House, not 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” (Jackson 1).

Jackson articulates some basic level of structural stability in Hill House through a series of discrete building blocks (walls, bricks, floors) that ostensibly should combine to form a “house;” however, even just this opening paragraph plays with the idea that these individual components, for all of their “firm” and “sensible” organization, can be recruited into the house’s uncanniness when architectural boundaries shift into something more permeable. Inside, the house “hold[s] darkness within,” silence abounds, and emptiness festers, as that maddening reality invades every brick. Hill House, ever watchful, drives itself insane. Perhaps, the negative space of vacancy might illuminate how Hill House relates to itself, how it emotes and articulates an experience of spatial insanity. Though some ambiguously ghost-like “whatever” walks the corridors of Hill House, that entity is almost brushed aside, unable to fill the empty space with meaning or to impress upon the house’s interiors. For Hill House itself, the darkness within is productive, a condition of its unwavering continuity in this absolute reality.

After a long conversation outlining the house’s architectural distortions, Eleanor asks her companions, “What happens when you go back to a real house? [...] I mean – a – well – a *real* house?” (Jackson 78). The other investigators consider that exiting back into reality after leaving Hill House must feel like returning to dry land after a long voyage at sea. In the novel’s own framework, however, they have it the wrong way around, and the “real house” already has them in its clutches. The conflicting ideas of home interrogated in the novel – the perfect and the all-too-real – will soon close in around Eleanor. As Eleanor is slowly subsumed by Hill House and disabused of her illusions of personal freedom, the absolute reality of the house reveals to her the

truth of her own situation, that “wherever she goes she will only find the same hell she was running from” (Miller xvii). And when her hope for a Bachelardian shelter for dreamers is shattered, it will certainly be brutal. As Michael T. Wilson writes, “to step through the doorway of Hill House, and to look through the lens of stone and wood that it offers to see the world as it truly is ... would drive us mad” (M. Wilson 115). We the reader, in our attempts to read the house and in our identification with Eleanor (Miller x), are equally destabilized and dislocated by this hateful space.

A more pressing question for Eleanor should likely be, *what happens when you can no longer go back to dreaming?* If the only way to defend oneself against the horrors of Hill House is to remain figuratively asleep, ignorant to its unsheltered reality, then the true danger of the house “lies in *seeing* it, or through it, too *clearly*, of translating its ineffable horrors into the everyday world too accurately, without the diffusion of dreaming” (M. Wilson 116). Perhaps, the established unknowability of Gothic space might serve as a protective measure for the human brain, as long as one is not drawn into fascinated dialogue with those opened up spaces. The question of “seeing” the house dominates Jackson’s interrogation of materiality and geography. Don’t look now, even if you think you see something moving out of the corner of your eye.

As Eleanor approaches the house for the first time, Jackson highlights an unbalancing sense of illegibility and architectural dread that primes the reader for the experience of Hill House’s interiors. Eleanor seems unable to look at the house’s face, to read it properly. She “fruitlessly” seeks a concrete source for the revulsion she feels (Jackson 24), but there is a void

in her perception: “she could not even have told its color, or its style, or its size, except that it was enormous and dark, looking down over her” (Jackson 25). From the beginning, this unknowability establishes a power dynamic between subject and space, one where the human subject is subordinated to the gaze of the house, and is left in the dark:

“No human eye can isolate the unhappy coincidence of line and place which suggests evil in the face of a house, and yet somehow a maniac juxtaposition, a badly turned angle, some chance meeting of roof and sky, turned Hill House into a place of despair, more frightening because the face of Hill House seemed awake, with a watchfulness from the blank windows and a touch of glee in the eyebrow of a cornice” (Jackson 24).

The house resists human attempts at sense-making, becoming hostile when its illegibility leaves potential inhabitants unsure of how to defend themselves or of what they are even defending themselves against. Jackson presents an interesting relationship between the failings of the “human eye” and the “watchfulness” of Hill House’s blank (and implicitly eye-like) windows. It is as though the house can see humans clearly, but we (both reader and character) cannot see it. When space is characterized by what is not captured by the human eye, the viewer is haunted/taunted by what they cannot see. The only way for the reader to examine the house is to look through it, into the gaps in the narrative, for Eleanor will not and cannot provide us with answers. Come close, come inside, come see – so the house seduces, though there is nothing there, prompting considerable discomfort and unease.

Hill House seems to possess an extraordinary resistance to human control and comprehension, suggesting that the hostile space in the structure is in some ways self-producing. The characters theorize that Hill House has been outside of humanity’s control from its very inception. Eleanor has the impression that the builders of the house “had given up any attempt at

style – probably after realizing what the house was going to be, whether they chose it or not” (Jackson 26). Hill House lacks the kind of material impressions that space and human subject leave on each other – like those that Rebecca left on Manderley. The considerable disconnect of the house from “the rest of the world” (Jackson 35) signals an existential emptiness that manifests itself through negative space. This is a house that excludes and expels attempts to fill it, to take up space:

“This house, which seemed somehow to have formed itself ... fitting itself into its own construction of lines and angles, reared its great head back against the sky without concession to humanity. It was a house without kindness, never meant to be lived in, not a fit place for people or for love or for hope” (Jackson 24).

Hill House is more than just a house devoid of the comforts of domesticity, more than a house that denies entry to those who cannot meet its demands. The house is imbued with a violent and malevolent subjectivity that longs to be occupied only by itself. What is a house that was “never meant to be lived in?” It is a house that is always in the process of attempting to unmake its own status *as a house*, as a structure conceptually tied to human habitation.

In Wilson’s terms, Hill House embodies the “ineffable” as an “experience which should not or indeed *cannot* be named or rendered from phenomenological experience into language” (M. Wilson 114). When Theo asks, “What really frightens people so?” in search of some comprehensible way to grasp at the idea of the house, Dr. Montague replies, “I will not put a name to what has no name” (Jackson 53). This unnamable house elevates the experience of unbelonging – it suggests a linguistic void that is only productive for the house itself, allowing Hill House to formulate its own discourses to the exclusion of human systems of knowledge, such as language. If the human construct of a perfect house could *ever* be found, it certainly

would not be in Hill House, in a space that rejects the imposition of human meaning. Perhaps Dr. Montague is right in not attempting to grasp at the ungraspable – madness lies that way.

Early in their stay, Dr. Montague compares Hill House to the infamous Winchester Mystery House (Jackson 77), a house-turned-tourist-attraction in which stairs ascend directly into ceilings, doors open out into thin air, and secret passageways abound (“Winchester Mystery House”). Within Hill House’s twisting interiors, too, the investigators have considerable difficulty finding their way around. They face a constant state of confusion and dislocation – there are doors everywhere, which never seem to stay open long enough for the characters to orient themselves (Jackson 73). In the absence of anything like Ariadne’s thread, they always “choose the wrong doors” (Jackson 77), unable to keep track of where they have already been. Theo likens this destabilizing experience of space to the “crazy house at the carnival” (Jackson 73) – a particularly apt comparison given that the fun house is a house in name only, completely divorced from any true sense of human occupation. If, as Aleksandra Bida suggests, “mapping” space can be used as a metaphor for home-making (Bida 2018, 1), Hill House shows itself to be hostile to attempts to make home. With the characters barely able to find their way down to breakfast without becoming lost forever, the labyrinthine house is the opposite of a shelter.

As space eludes their comprehension and attempts at map-making, the investigators must all watch their step; they must navigate their geographical displacement within a house where all of the angles and measurements are not quite right:

“It had an unbelievably faulty design which left it chillingly wrong in all its dimensions, so that the walls seemed always in one direction a fraction longer than the eye could endure, and in another direction a fraction less than the barest possible tolerable length; this is where they want me to sleep, Eleanor thought incredulously; what nightmares are waiting, shadowed, in those high corners – what breath of mindless fear will drift across my mouth” (Jackson 28-29).

The spatiality of Hill House is intolerable for Eleanor. It pulls on her nerves, hides itself out of sight in dark corners that seem to stretch into nothingness. In a true Gothic display of *anisotropic space*, Hill House “exhibits different properties in different directions” (Aguirre 6), as the walls trick the eye. The house projects a misanthropic tendency to make a mockery of human perception and human discourses – like measurement or architectural principles – conventionally used to make sense of the world (Travers 70). Rather than a mundane house with finite dimensions, Jackson constructs a space that violates any sense of architectural boundedness. The “wrongness” of haunting space means that it is constantly being opened up and turned inside out; there is always something more- or less-there than one expects. In effect, Hill House’s constant elusion of full understanding makes the interior of the house seem endless, dominated by spaces unseen. Thus, the characters are ensnared by the realization of their own “diminished scale” and insignificance (Weinstock 152). The space of this house, always “bigger on the inside” (Weinstock 142), spirals out of human control and betrays the trust that people place in their homes, becoming something Other. As the boundaries of the house dissolve, it suggests a lack of safety and an increasingly difficult path to escape. The house’s hostile spatiality can be summed up in a simple despairing scream, a cinematic staple: *It’s a trap!*

Once Hill House houses someone within its walls, it weighs down on them. It wants to keep them close in order to devour them, and thus complete the annihilation of human control and reason suggested by the house's repulsive exterior. The novel's four main characters voice their concern that, now that they are inside, the house will not let them go. Dr. Montague refers to this feeling of containment as the house's "reputation for insistent hospitality: it seemingly dislikes letting its guests get away. The last person who tried to leave Hill House in darkness [...] was killed at the turn in the driveway" (Jackson 48). The twisting interior geographies are paired with the house's watchfulness and smothering embrace, the feeling that the house is "press[ing] down from all around them" (Jackson 42) – all of which accentuates the limitations to the characters' mobility and to their possibilities for escape. Hill House's stillness takes on a sinister and deliberating dimension, with the characters repeatedly commenting that they feel like the house is waiting patiently for them, like a predator (Jackson 25, 60, 112). Eleanor in particular feels as though Hill House wants to consume her: "I am like a small creature swallowed whole by a monster, she thought, and the monster feels my tiny little movements inside" (Jackson 29). The house is a gaping maw, and it is hungry (Pascal 469). Rather than the house providing a solid foundation, a stage for subjectivity where house and human impress upon and give meaning to each other, Hill House wants to smother and obliterate.

And yet, this pressing embrace does not merely generate feelings of icy fear; Tricia Lootens points out that "one of the most terrifying aspects of Hill House's haunting is its intimacy," its discovery of the characters' "illusions and ... deadly needs" (Lootens 167). The closer one gets to Hill House, the more haunting space is poised to possess and destroy. Cradled by Hill House, Eleanor is made vulnerable by glimpses of possible love and comfort in the domestic space: "Odd, she thought sleepily, that the house should be so dreadful and yet in many

respects so physically comfortable” (Jackson 66). The illusion of the perfect house hovers just below the surface of her mind, a recognition that Hill House probes in her unconscious. The house toys with ideas of hospitality and homeliness, as a predator might toy with its food, while remaining essentially empty. Turning this intimacy into a familial matter, Luke suggests that Hill House is a “mother house” (Jackson 156), holding its children: “‘It’s all so motherly,’ Luke said. ‘Everything so soft. Everything so padded. Great embracing chairs and sofas which turn out to be hard and unwelcome when you sit down, and reject you at once’” (Jackson 154). This is a cruel reflection of mothering indeed, though one that Eleanor likely recognizes from the “small reproaches” of her own mother (Jackson 3). Moreover, Luke’s comment foreshadows Eleanor’s final experience of the house, as a seemingly welcoming embrace that turns into a brutal rejection of her being. Lootens suggests that the mothering Hill House “takes care” of its inhabitants in both sense of the phrase – as womb and as tomb (Lootens 176). The house seeks to psychologically unmake vulnerable inhabitants, drawing them in with the illusory potential of homeliness but persisting in its deadly desire to return to that quiet emptiness.

Rather than a symbol of upper-class society, like *Manderley*, Hill House was intended to be a family house, originating as the domain of a disturbed and domineering patriarch, Hugh Crain. Perhaps, though, it became more of an anti-family house, for it tore the Crain family apart – Hugh Crain’s first wife died in a carriage accident upon entering Hill House’s gates (Jackson 54) and Crain’s two daughters later argued viciously over the house’s possession after his death (Jackson 55). Hugh Crain conceived of the house as an “enclave of family communality

dominated by Victorian notions of domesticity and femininity” (Pascal 469), where his daughters could remain “pure” and learn to avoid the “sins” of the world (Jackson 124). In consideration of this repressive and damaging framework, Bailey points out that Hill House “does not treat its women kindly” (Bailey 41). While the house keeps up the façade of a home that is “kept always in readiness for family” (Jackson 56), the violence implicit in the patriarchal power structures of this family “enclave” and its exclusion from the outside world seems to be threaded through the house’s hostile space. At the end of the novel, Eleanor believes that she knows what the house wants – to keep her forever, to add her to the family – and this will only further destroy her when she discovers that “houses and humans do not want the same things” (Pugliese 319). Only by drawing someone in and trapping them inside can the house destroy them entirely, stripping them bare and leaving them without a shelter against their own unravelling. What does it mean to try to start a family here, to make memories and structure experience around the space of a haunting, hateful house?

In this supposed family home, the four investigators do try to establish a temporary community of sorts, outside of the social conventions of the nuclear family (Shotwell 133). Having left behind biological relatives whom she despises, Eleanor in particular longs to reconstruct a family unit in this new space. For all of its horrors, Hill House is Eleanor’s first true foray into sociality, an expansion of her world and a “radical enrichment of her life” (Shotwell 134). For Eleanor, Hill House *is* a family house. When the investigators gather together for the first time in Hill House’s entrance hall, these “four separated people ... [look] trustingly at each other” (Jackson 41). And, after sleeping through one night in Hill House, the characters feel as though the experience has bonded them into a unit, with “their own places at the [dining room] table” (Jackson 71). Yet even these moments of trust and connection betray an underlying

tension, with the reminder that these four are indeed “separate” individuals who hardly know each other. No matter how much Eleanor wants to imagine that she, Theo, and Luke are like the doctor’s children, waiting for a bedtime story (Jackson 50), any sort of family (even a found family) needs collective memories and experiences. But their sole connection is constructed through an unhomely home, a place without foundation or opportunity for understanding. The characters merely carry out a masquerade of family life, and “only Eleanor, not surprisingly, can’t tell that it’s not real” (Miller xx). Once again, Eleanor’s fantasies blind her to the reality of her own isolation. There is an inherent distance between these strangers, one that Hill House will expose and unravel, opening its empty spaces onto “a field of rubble where no identity is stable” (Bernstein 13).

Dr. Montague points out the risk they are all taking by staying in Hill House, and how there is no real strength in numbers: “I think that an atmosphere like this one can find out the flaws and faults and weaknesses in all of us, and break us apart in a matter of days. We have only one defense, and that is running away” (Jackson 91). As the characters become increasingly enmeshed in the hostile architecture, the house “place[s] a mental distance between the members of the unit and raise[s] the question of familial compatibility” (Starling 71). Thus, the empty spaces in the house become the empty spaces between the characters. In her draft notes for the novel, Jackson wrote that the characters are “ALL DISTORTED LIKE HOUSE” (qtd. in Lootens 179), suggesting that the deranged house will speak to and exploit the distortions within the characters themselves, seeking to separate them further. Eleanor’s feeling that she does not belong in the human family constructed within Hill House leads to increasing madness. When the walls of the house ooze the words “HELP ELEANOR COME HOME ELEANOR” in bloody letters over Theo’s bed (Jackson 114), Eleanor feels herself detached from her companions, for it

is *the house*, not the people, being intimate with her and offering her a place to belong. She pleads for understanding with the others, saying, “Those letters spelled out my name, and *none of you know what that feels like* – it’s so familiar.... It’s my own dear name, and it belongs to me, and something is using it and writing it and calling me with it and my own name...” (Jackson 118, emphasis mine). Eleanor feels as though she is “dissolv[ing] and slip[ping] and separat[ing]” as the house takes hold of her, and she thinks perhaps she should just “surrender” (Jackson 118). Although Hill House positions itself, in theory, as a family house, it upends ideas of homeliness, raising questions of what must be done in order to belong and what “family” the house is really permitting to inhabit its interiors.

The intercession of Hill House between the members of the family is especially evident in the growing fragmentation between Eleanor and Theo. Despite their early affection for each other, the two women are set apart by their differing personalities, as Eleanor is both envious and resentful of Theo’s lack of regard for what Eleanor sees as “proper womanliness” (Lootens 185).⁵ In many ways, Theo is an alter-ego, a mirror, a double of Eleanor, representing (and perhaps *being*) everything that Eleanor denies herself from wanting (Bailey 39). The tension between the two calcifies when, in a moment of panic, Theo blames Eleanor for the bloody words above her bed (Jackson 113). Eleanor is consumed with “uncontrollable loathing” for Theo, calling her “wicked” and “beastly” in her head (Jackson 116). Theo pushes Eleanor out of her sphere, into a potential association with the house and identification with the more conventional, “appropriate” side of her being. Still, despite Eleanor’s occasional fantasies of watching Theo dying or attacking her with rocks, there is a genuine intimacy between the two

⁵ Eleanor seems to frame deviance from a constructed feminine ideal through her mother’s eyes. Seeing the two new pairs of slacks she bought for her stay at Hill House, Eleanor thinks “Mother would be *furious*” and tucks the pants into the bottom of her suitcase (Jackson 29).

women; Theo is the first chance at personal connection that Eleanor has known, and Hill House knows this: “when the entity haunting Hill House offers Eleanor a cold, false, phantom hand to hold, it is disguised as Theo’s hand” (Miller xxi). In the end, however, Theo refuses Eleanor the love and belonging she so desires, and ultimately rejects Eleanor’s plea for some future companionship. When Eleanor tells Theo that she has decided to come live with her after they all leave Hill House, Theo opposes her, saying, “Hill House is not forever, you know” (Jackson 154). Eleanor Vance, dreamer, tries to extend the illusion of family found in Hill House to the outside world, for this house is the only world that she has ever known. Theo’s cold rejection is a last and possibly unknowing attempt at saving grace, for in order to escape, one also has to leave behind the memories of that place, in order to not let Hill House infect the rest of their lives. Miller argues that perhaps Eleanor herself knows this proposition to be pure fantasy: “the whole plan smacks of a last jaunt through the dream world that has comforted Eleanor all her life” (Miller xxii). Now, Hill House slowly unravels that dream, just as it disrupted Eleanor’s fantasies when she first arrived. When Eleanor responds to Theo’s rejection by telling her calmly, “I’ve never been wanted *anywhere*” (Jackson 154), the implicit addition is “anywhere – *but here.*” Jackson demonstrates that her protagonist has begun sinking into the “absolute reality of her own isolation” (Miller xxii), dispelling a dream world of living with Theo in favor of belonging in the house. Having offered Eleanor a hand once already in Theo’s absence, the house reaches out again, having convinced her that “it alone wants and needs her” (Lootens 167). This hand to hold is an invitation to sink into absence, to surrender – an embodiment of Eleanor’s profound loneliness.

Finally, Eleanor surrenders to the house and to the hopes of belonging in its embrace, giving up thoughts of independence and personal identity. During a last, violent haunting, when the house is shaking all around them, Eleanor proclaims internally, “I will relinquish my possession of this self of mine, abdicate, give over willingly what I never wanted at all; whatever it wants of me it can have.” Then she voices her surrender: “I’ll come” (Jackson 150). With that promise secured, the house rights itself: “Composed and quiet, the house lifted itself primly around her, and nothing had been moved” (Jackson 151). As Eleanor finally stops fighting, there is some relief in her surrender of this self that she claims to have “never wanted at all.” Pascal writes, “the allure of the house, and also its horror, is bound up with the sense that it wishes to envelop [Eleanor] in a maternal embrace so comprehensive that her newly won independence and all vestiges of her individuality will be subsumed utterly” (Pascal 469). That *other* Eleanor, the one who was relinquished, was a person who never belonged anywhere, who had no perfect house or perfect life. Eleanor sinks into the embrace of the “mother house” as the womb and the tomb. Hill House plays on Eleanor’s weaknesses – it knows her name, it embraces her, it welcomes her home, even as it unravels her: “Gathered comfortably into the hills, she thought, protected and warm; Hill House is lucky” (Jackson 170). Hill House positions itself as the shelter Eleanor has always been searching for. Like the cottage hidden among oleanders, here is place where she can “stop forever.” Yet, the perfect house nestled in the hills is also a snare, and staying forever is a choice that is made not by Eleanor, but for her.

As Eleanor leaves her pseudo-family behind, she begins to merge with Hill House, where the empty space is more than happy to envelop her. Eleanor is attuned to the house, her sensorium expanding as she starts to see and hear the house more clearly: “Eleanor sat, looking down at her hands, and listened to the sounds of the house. Somewhere upstairs a door swung

quietly shut; a bird touched the tower briefly and flew off. In the kitchen the stove was settling and cooling, with little soft creakings” (Jackson 165). Some of the house’s unknowability and illegibility appears to slip away, as Eleanor’s mind moves through the house more freely – though this mobility only further entraps her. Eleanor is filled “with joy” to find that she alone can understand the house in this symbiotic manner (Jackson 167). In the fulfillment of her deep desires for belonging, Eleanor believes herself to be welcomed into the interiors of Hill House and be accepted as house-keeper. The house comes to take the place of the dream houses she saw during her journey there: “No stone lions for me, she thought, no oleanders; I have broken the spell of Hill House and somehow come inside. I am home, she thought, and stopped in wonder at the thought” (Jackson 171). For a moment, Hill House presents Eleanor with a fairytale version of home, a story featuring Eleanor as the perfect homemaker able to break the house’s “spell.” But, as Hill House appears to open itself up to Eleanor, she herself is thrown open to the house’s invasion. Ng writes that space might respond to a human subject by “affecting her unconscious to subtly recalibrate the coordinates of her subjectivity” (Ng 12). In some cases, this could be a harmonious connection, in which a house allows a subject to come into being through a sense of placefulness – yet this reorientation ultimately serves to displace Eleanor. Even her seeming invitation into the interior, protected by the house’s exclusive boundaries, reveals itself as just another betrayal in the end.

When Eleanor starts participating in the house’s haunting, she allies herself with the malevolent space of the house to the exclusion of the other people in her (former) family unit (Starling 73). Where Eleanor previously cowered inside a bedroom and clung to Theo for comfort as some force banged on the outside of the door, now she is the one knocking, the one whose laughter trails down the halls (Jackson 169) – now, Eleanor “*is* the haunting for the other

guests” (Lootens 188). This exposes the physical and emotional foundations of the “family” in the haunting house for the illusion and dream that they were, becoming a matter of *us* (Eleanor and Hill House) versus *them*: “Eleanor clung to the door and laughed until tears came into her eyes; what fools they are, she thought; we trick them so easily” (Jackson 170). For the reader, who has been experiencing the hostile space of the house through Eleanor’s point-of-view (Kahane 53), this change is both unbalancing and saddening. As Eleanor sinks into the deadly womb of the house, “incorporated – and infantilized – by the malign powers of Hill House,” she gradually regresses into a childlike state (Rubenstein 318). She dances about and plays hide-and-seek with the other investigators (Jackson 170), and she searches for her mother (168) inside of the mother house. Eleanor is effectively “being unborn” as she becomes one with the house (Lootens 177), separated from herself even in her own mind: “Poor house, Eleanor thought, I had forgotten Eleanor” (Jackson 169). Leave Eleanor behind, empty yourself out, and lean into the beautiful, dangerous, and empty ideal of the perfect house. Make yourself at home.

Unlike both *Rebecca* and *House of Leaves*, *The Haunting of Hill House* concludes with its main (human) character dead – and not only dead, but completely destroyed, even erased from the narrative’s reality (M. Wilson 120). Before her death, Eleanor has already started to become nothing, divorced from her identity as Eleanor, as the novel’s primary narrative voice. As Eleanor searches for the voice that she hears calling to her, she knocks on Mrs. Montague’s door, participating in the haunting. Mrs. Montague entreats, “Come in, *whatever* you are” (Jackson 169, emphasis mine). Now, Eleanor is being subsumed into the unknowable “whatever” that walks alone in Hill House, not as Eleanor but as a further entrenchment of nothingness. Eleanor herself walks nowhere. When the other investigators finally try to send her away, out of concern for her sanity, Eleanor knows she cannot leave – she will not be *allowed*, and she does

not want to go. She has no place but here, no identity but as angel of the house. So, rather than giving up her position of belonging, Eleanor “chooses self-immolation” (Bailey 43). In the moments leading up to her demise, Eleanor’s final dream of personal autonomy – “I am really really really doing it by myself” – is shattered, stripped away from her, as she wonders, “*Why* am I doing this?” (Jackson 182). As Eleanor dies, she is unmade completely as she comes into contact with the oblitative absolute reality of the house and the futility of her final act (M. Wilson 121). Hill House reveals its own maddening emptiness to her, an emptiness into which she could never and would never fit.

In his piece on vacant space in horror cinema, Karl Schoonover borrows Didi-Huberman’s framework regarding blankness in art to describe the potential of horror’s emptiness: “[it] offers nothing for the grasping: it offers . . . [the] ungraspable, which is to say productive of an inextricable loop of knowledge and not-knowledge” (qtd. in Schoonover 351). This sense of the ungraspable and the unnamable echoes Hill House’s devotion to its own emptiness (and will be essential for understanding the absence within the house considered in my final chapter, concerning Mark Danielewski’s *House of Leaves*). Eleanor Vance herself experiences this nothingness firsthand, unable to come to any conclusion but her own dissolution. The promise of intimacy and belonging is simply another trick, another fantasy that the house rips away from her. After all, Hill House was never meant to be lived in. Lootens writes, “Hill House will be glad to give you a hand to hold in the night, someone to be there, a sense of belonging. When it is too late, you will realize that all along you were really alone, clinging to your enemy – or to nothing at all” (Lootens 178). Though the house has seduced Eleanor into destroying herself in order to belong, it refuses to be a home for her. In the end, Eleanor is erased from her own story and from Hill House’s reality: “Eleanor has given her life

to become ‘everything’ and has become nothing. The house does not want her any more than anyone else does; it wants her dead” (Lootens 189). Hill House emerges victorious at the end because it reasserts its emptiness, obliterating Eleanor and returning to housing only an elusive and dismissed “whatever” in its halls. Eleanor has died, and nothing has changed.

IV.

HOUSE THAT BELIEVES IT IS NOT A HOUSE: *HOUSE OF LEAVES* AND THE PERFECT PANTHEON OF ABSENCE

The walls are endlessly bare. Nothing hangs on them, nothing defines them. Even to the keenest eye or most sentient fingertip, they remain unreadable. You will never find a mark there. No trace survives. The walls obliterate everything. They are permanently absolved of all record. Oblique, forever obscure and unwritten. Behold the perfect pantheon of absence.

– *House of Leaves*, 423⁶

“If we desire to live, we can only do so in the margins of that place”

– *House of Leaves*, 388

[] [house](#)⁷? []⁸ Nobody’s home.

What does the new, modern version of the haunted (or haunting) house look like, one that takes into consideration all of the uncertainty and rootlessness of the modern age? Mark Danielewski’s *House of Leaves* showcases a “postmodern” haunted house (Travers 68), one that is unfathomably large and labyrinthine, disturbingly dark and empty, and haunted by nothingness – through this architectural nightmare, Danielewski demonstrates the instability of fundamental constructs of spatiality previously used to make sense of the world (Travers 66). The house on Ash Tree Lane is a “morphing house” (Pugliese 306), always in the process of constructing, reconstructing, and unmaking itself (Hagood 88). As individuals look for meaning within, they

⁶ This description, which appears as the epigraph of Chapter XX of Zampanò’s manuscript, is originally recorded in Braille, though it is itself “unreadable;” rather than using the system of raised dots, the epigraph is “simply printed on the page with the use of ink. The text is, thus, ‘present on the page, and yet absent’ which makes it as illegible as the walls of the house” (Solarz 92).

⁷ In *House of Leaves*, each occurrence of the word “house” (in any language) is singled out by its blue text. Though this formal quirk goes unremarked upon within the novel itself, it nonetheless generates an unsettling thrill in the reader – every time you turn a page, your eyes likely search out the [house](#), against your will.

⁸ There is nothing here for you. Beware.

confront “the absence *of* the house *within* the house” (Slocombe 90), and the very concept of home is unsettled. Forcing both characters and readers to experience their own existential insignificance and unimportance in the face of a “perfect pantheon of absence,” the house ultimately serves as a “chilling reminder of life’s apparent meaninglessness” (Travers 68). When we as readers look into that absence, we too are displaced, thrown open.

Danielewski’s novel stages a maze of meanings, a fruitless search for one true answer; the text’s many narrative layers of mediation intensify both the house’s and the book’s abilities to “resist interpretation” (Danielewski 356) and elude comprehension. *House of Leaves*’ central object of study is *The Navidson Record*, a documentary film made by photographer Will Navidson, which was intended to be about his family settling down in a peaceful home on Ash Tree Lane. Yet, while their house appears to be entirely ordinary and even idyllic on the outside, the family soon discovers that an infinitely larger “inner house” (Bida 2018, 29) expands out of the mundane house’s living room, opening up into a dark, directionless labyrinth. In a further layer of complication and mediation, we learn about Navidson’s documentary exclusively from an academic manuscript crafted by a blind man named Zampanò (who may have himself entirely invented the film). This academic piece offers up its own criticism of and dialogue with *The Navidson Record*, using both real (to us) and imagined sources. Anthony Vidler’s work unsurprisingly makes an appearance, as does an entirely fabricated interview with Stanley Kubrick, for one. After Zampanò’s death, his manuscript is discovered by Johnny Truant, reassembled from fragments, and presented to the reader (complete with interjections from Johnny’s frequent and lengthy footnotes). As many scholars have noted, the novel itself is a

labyrinth, a maze of various authors, critical lenses, typographical styles, and so on.⁹ So, the book is also the house – of leaves, of pages (Slocombe 89).

Tracy K. Smith's house that "believes it is not a house" (Smith) aligns with the complexities of space in Danielewski's novel, which features both a house of nothingness and a text that is itself an impossible maze. By focusing on a house that is truly not a house, that has always been empty and that excludes human discourses of space, *House of Leaves* tracks an utter descent into the figure of a "homeless home" (Slocombe 90). There is no stability, security, or domesticity to be found in this place, no productive relation between subject and space. There is no way to leave a trace on the inner house as a dweller, because "the walls obliterate everything" (Danielewski 423). Notably, the house of Ash Tree Lane is curious and strange because, for all of its malevolence and the harm it enacts on the characters in the novel, it seems to have less of a "personality" than Hill House – perhaps, in completing the evacuation of meaning and connection to humanity, Danielewski also strips the house of more anthropomorphic qualities, making the house entirely Other and limiting any possibilities for identification. There are no quirked eyebrow cornices here. In fact, it is repeatedly insinuated that any suggestion of personality within the house is merely the characters' projection, a desire for the house to be "everything and anything but empty" (Danielewski xvii).

All of the various authors within *House of Leaves* turn a failing gaze onto the void of the house on Ash Tree Lane – as human discourses that seem to uphold reality decay, they look for any way to write upon those obliterating walls, to organize and map the home into something than can verify human existence. Yet, as the house reveals its relationship to nothingness, it turns

⁹ See Brianne Bilsky's "(Im)Possible Spaces: Technology and Narrative in *House of Leaves*" and Gülşen Aslan Uslu's "A Parable about Space: Mark Danielewski's *House of Leaves*" for in-depth discussions of how *House of Leaves*' strategies of narrative, formal, and spatial experimentation complement and complicate each other.

itself inside out and forces authors, characters, and readers alike to confront their positionings within and understandings of home. Aleksandra Bida writes, “together, these authors’ hopes of the Navidson house as an ideal as well as the realistic failure of the ideal home work to critique a limited notion of home as fully knowable and controllable” (Bida 2018, 30). This reversal of the “ideal home” foregrounds our discomfort with empty spaces and interrogates our overwhelming desire for presence over absence. The opening-up of the house to this endless void has the potential to open us up, as well, to broader considerations of identity and habitation.

What does it look like for a family to settle in, to move into a new house? Isn’t this place cozy? Don’t we love it here? These are the questions that inspired the creation of *The Navidson Record*, at least at the beginning – questions that will be twisted and made a mockery of when the house on Ash Tree Lane reveals its true nature. In a statement of purpose, Will Navidson tells the camera and the viewer,

“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.... Just lots of toothpaste, gardening and people stuff.... I just thought it would be nice to see how people move into a place and start to inhabit it. Settle in, maybe put down roots, interact, hopefully understand each other a little better.” (Danielewski 9).

One of the most striking things about Navidson’s statement is his attempts to make his own project minute, contained, mundane. His repeated use of “just” seems to imply, on his part, a certain emphasis on triviality. Just people stuff, he claims – how quaint! Yet, within this

mundanity there is a quiet idealism, a hope for personal connections with the home and among the family. As the Navidson family “settles down,” they believe that they will make the domestic space their own and will foster a sense of belonging and self-concept within. Unlike Hill House (and like Manderley), the house on Ash Tree Lane is *supposed* to be a permanent residence for these characters; they anticipate that they will become home-owners, home-makers. When moving in, the Navidsons’ mundane and practical concerns nonetheless form a vision of a perfect relationship to space. The film captures the family “arranging and rearranging furniture, unpacking crates, replacing light bulbs and hanging pictures.... Navidson not only reveals how each room is occupied, but how everyone has helped apply his or her own personal texture” (Danielewski 9). The family imagines that any empty space within the house is simply a space waiting to be filled, with personal touches, memories, and experiences of family. Navidson seems to believe they “possess all the agency” to transform the house, and that the house is merely a “silent backdrop for their earnest efforts” (Holland 318). They cannot wait to make their home into a sweet home. If we could peek into the Navidson family’s minds, we might want to warn them to beware, upon finding them sighing in delight the same phrase that marked the doom of their haunting house predecessors – one final time, *the house belongs to me!*

The house appears to them as its own universe, sheltered and safe from the outside world. Navidson adds to his vision of his project, “Personally, I just want to create a cozy little outpost for me and my family. A place to drink lemonade on the porch and watch the sun set” (Danielewski 9). Viewers of the film would have seen Will Navidson doing just that – the opening scene of the documentary finds him “relaxing on the porch of his small, old style heritage house... watching the sun turn the first few minutes of daytime into gold” (Danielewski 9). The house is like an oasis, a picture of quietude and peace. In his analysis of the scene,

Zampanò offers a reading of the house as a “cozy little outpost” (note again the diminutive “little”), suggesting that in addition to the associations between “cozy” and *heimlich*, or homely, an “outpost” means a base, military or other, which while safe inside functions principally to provide protection from hostile forces found on the outside” (Danielewski 23). The house’s coziness therefore is deeply related to the conception of interiority as security; the unstable world ends at the borders of the sheltering house, or so they think. Of course, Will’s attempt to “externalize the family’s problems by blaming former circumstances and surroundings” (Bida 2018, 37) only momentarily papers over underlying tensions in the family – no home is a panacea. Already danger lurks, for this externalization of family problems and total investment in the home as safe haven gives the house immense power to constitute the family, even while they still view the space as passive. In a later interview, Karen perhaps unintentionally invokes this slippage into the house’s power: “this house, this home, was supposed to help us get closer.... *It was supposed to make us a family*” (Danielewski 321, emphasis mine). Here, Karen grants agency to the house, positioning the family not as homemakers, but the house as a maker of *them*. For now, though, the film provides “bucolic, near idyllic impressions of a new world,” imbued with a powerful and “radiant optimism” (Danielewski 18). This is a picture-perfect house of dreams, gilded by the skillful photographer.¹⁰

Unlike Jackson’s and du Maurier’s texts, *House of Leaves* actually goes through the motions of homemaking, visualizing the possibilities of the dream house and tracking the family’s attempts to impress upon the space. Yet, the Navidsons are in for an incredibly cruel letdown *because* their dream is all the more material – the perfect house seems to be right there in front of them, rendered in comprehensible and manageable architectural detail. In other words,

¹⁰ Polaroid photos of a lovely “standalone house with a spacious yard” (Bida 2018, 43) in *House of Leaves*’ appendix material contribute to this filmic pursuit of capturing the perfect moment (Danielewski 572).

they “just” see a sweet, little house. They have no idea that this seeming shelter will soon be supplanted by an uncanny reality of malevolent, ever-expanding, and foundationless space. Though the “prototypical” home offers a contrast to the empty void of the inner house, the two homes are also manifested in the same place, layered on top of each other, which hints that a certain uncertainty and existential aimlessness occupies the mundane home, as well (Bida 2018, 43).

Of course, the Navidson family do not have very long to enjoy this peaceful home, and they will discover that chaos is within the house, not without. Soon enough, the stretches of film devoted to settling down will be “all Navidson ha[s] left” of a quiet home inhabited by a united family (Danielewski 17-18). After a four-day absence to attend a wedding, the family returns to find that the house is not the same as they left it. Now, a small hallway has opened up between the bedrooms of the parents and their children, capped off by closet doors where there previously were none. Inside this hallway, “the walls are perfectly smooth and almost pure black” (Danielewski 28). The family’s expectations of a perfect home are weaponized against them, as the house begins by threatening the intimate places where they sleep and dream, and thus are at their most vulnerable.¹¹ Particularly, the space of the house seizes upon Will’s concerns about his family, creating an uncanny architectural gap that separates Chad and Daisy, the children, from Will and Karen, their parents (Holland 323). And this physical familial separation is just the beginning: “with each spatial mutation of the house, each assertion of its impossibility, ... the family will be further torn apart” (Holland 323). Will and Karen are confused and concerned;

¹¹ See the discussion of the bedroom in *Anatomy*: “It is here, in the bedroom, that we are at our most vulnerable. Each night we shut our senses to the world for hours at a time, trusting in the house to keep us safe until next we wake.... Anything might stand beside us, watch us, keep us company until dawn, and we would never perceive it. We can only pray that the house will not let such things carry on as we sleep. In this way, during these hours, the bedroom seems less like a mind, and more like a mouth. For it is here that the house is most likely to betray us, it is here that we place ourselves most at the house’s mercy, and spend each night hoping that it will not bite down” (*Anatomy*).

though they try to rationalize this change as the act of some intruder, it appears that, “according to the motion-sensitive cameras, nothing has altered since their departure, in fact, *it is almost as if it had been there all along*” (Danielewski 28, emphasis mine). The perfect cozy house is revealed as always nothing more than a dream. The correlation between the family’s absence and the appearance of this unhomely hallway suggests that the house resists the romanticization of an impossible “home, sweet home”: “while houses typically need an occupying family to bring life inside its walls, the house on Ash Tree Lane establishes itself as an independent living structure” (Starling 70). The Navidsons hoped that the house would become a foundation for family identity and experience, but it denies them and reaffirms itself as separate.

This introduction to the “morphing house” on Ash Tree Lane (Pugliese 306) shifts away from the traditional view of making oneself at home and stepping over the threshold into the comforting interior, becoming something much more sinister and disorienting. *House of Leaves* stages a movement from outside to inside, from a front porch in the glittering sun to dark hallways:

“[T]he outside of the house is presented as an anchor for the family only to lure them into the chaos of the inside as efficiently ‘finding’ home through their purchase leads them to further losing their very sense of home and belonging to this new place, to each other, and even in the sense of locating their identities” (Bida 2018, 45).

The house draws the family in only to rupture their understandings of domestic space and upend their ability to make meaning there. In discussing this transformation, Zampanò writes, “the Navidsons’ home had become something else, and while not exactly sinister or even threatening, the change still destroyed any sense of security or well-being” (Danielewski 28) – perhaps, then, that which “‘becomes something else’ could be understood as the Navidsons’ very idea of home”

(Bida 2018, 44). Though the family cannot yet understand how dangerous the house has truly become, Danielewski demonstrates the beginnings of an emptying-out of meaning, a collapse of the house as a figure for home, particularly given that Navidson intended the house to be an outpost, a place of security. Once the dream house is destroyed, it becomes itself a haunting figure, the ghost of an ideal world. In presenting the contrast between the film Navidson intended to make about settling down and the film he ends up making about haunting space (Danielewski 8), the novel foregrounds the tension between the construct of the dream house and the house that is not a house.

If the discovery that your house has somehow seemed to have “grown” a hallway would not be enough to make you flee, perhaps the realization that the inside of the house is bigger than the outside by an unexplainable $\frac{1}{4}$ of an inch would do it (Danielewski 30) – after all, what do you do when the common-sense idea of the interior of the house being contained within the exterior has been completely upended? This disorganized occurrence of space complicates the idea of an interior that shelters and brings together the family. It is as though the house has been turned inside out, opened up to distortion and the uncanny. Recall how, in the depths of Hill House, Eleanor Vance was tortured by the appearance of the walls being unbearably too long in some directions, and too short in others. The feeling that the house is “bigger on the inside” (Weinstock 142) causes the human characters in *House of Leaves* to feel displaced; in a postmodern turn, their understandings of the world collapse into an unknowable void. The house on Ash Tree Lane is horrifying and unnerving precisely because of this destruction of meaning:

“[the house] draws attention to the artificiality and arbitrary nature of discourses such as systems of measurement and time. It suggests that an inch is a specific length and a minute consists of sixty seconds because humanity has decided so” (Travers 70). When the malevolent, distorted house becomes more real than the construct of the dream house, the Navidson family must unmake their understandings of and relation to spatiality, and that loss haunts them.

Soon enough, we will come to realize, though never truly to comprehend, “how big Navidson’s house really is” (Danielewski 64). This already unhomely interior progresses into the discovery of “a dark doorless hallway which has appeared out of nowhere” in the living room wall – a hallway which *should* intrude into the space of the backyard but is somehow only perceptible from the inside (Danielewski 57). Attempts to conceal the hallway behind a steel door with four locks are unsuccessful in reconstituting the domestic space and putting it out of the family’s minds. It is not long before, out of curiosity, Will Navidson is drawn into the gaping void. In “Exploration A,” he discovers that what seems to be a single, short, dark hallway opens up into passages leading to doorways leading to more passages. This inner house appears (and perhaps is) endless: “No matter how far Navidson proceeds down this particular passageway, his light never comes close to touching the punctuation point promised by the converging perspective lines, ... a constant stream of corners and walls, all of them unreadable and perfectly smooth” (Danielewski 64). The human eye struggles in vain to impose limits on the space, as the lines of the inner house extend forever into the void. This labyrinth magnifies the Gothic motif of the “stretching hallway,” the warping of space which causes humans to experience viscerally their own diminished scale and their aimless immobility (Weinstock 152). The house’s inner space is characterized by an incomprehensible bigness, which Zampanò links to the understanding of the uncanny: “*unheimlich* when used as an adverb means ‘dreadfully,’

‘awfully,’ ‘heaps of,’ and ‘an awful lot of.’ Largeness has always been a condition of the weird and unsafe; it is overwhelming, too much or too big” (Danielewski 28). This “largeness” is the site of a different kind of thinking through space, one that overwhelms and reorients the viewer to face their own displacement. The inner house is a labyrinth in the truest sense, where “terrifying shifts” can distort a path that seemed seconds ago to be straightforward (Danielewski 69). Pause for even a moment, let down your guard, and the house will obliterate your way.¹²

Returning to the metaphorical connections between mapping space and making home (Bida 2018, 1), the unmappable inner house reveals itself to be hostile to human notions of inhabitation or taking up space. Magdalena Solarz compares the labyrinthine house in Danielewski’s novel to Yuri Lotman’s concept of an *anti-home*, as an “uninhabitable space which stands in opposition to the idea of a secure and cozy home that is supposed to be the centre and focus of the world order” (qtd. in Solarz 90). The inner house is completely othered from the human “world order” – within its ever-shifting pathways, “compasses do not work” (Danielewski 90), and the material samples taken by the explorers suggest that the house is perhaps “older than even our solar system” (Danielewski 378). In the face of this undefined, cosmic void, any human conception of reality is revealed to be arbitrary, a foolish attempt to understand what is outside of our comprehension. Even as the characters engage materially with the hostile space of the labyrinth and attempt scientific analyses, the house is always in the process of erasing their efforts at mapping. As the house once thought to be homely is invaded by chaos, the anti-home unmakes the sense of a secure boundary between a protected “here” and

¹² Zampanò suggests that, in order to fully understand how the pathways of the inner house (and *The Navidson Record* itself) “unwind, twist only to rewind, then open up again,” we should consider the etymology of *labyrinth*: “The Latin *labor* is akin to the root *labi* meaning to slip or slide backwards though the commonly perceived meaning suggests difficulty and work. Implicit in ‘labyrinth’ is a required effort to keep from slipping or falling; in other words stopping” (Danielewski 114).

the space of some numinous Other. After all, compasses are not rendered useless just inside of the labyrinth, but within the seemingly mundane house as well (Danielewski 90). There is no anchor, no center, no order here. As Johnny's dedication introducing Zampanò's manuscript reads, "This is not for you" (Danielewski ix).

In "Exploration #4," Holloway Roberts, one of the explorers recruited to try to map the house, makes a hole in one of the walls of the labyrinth. He finds no exterior space, only yet another room, leading to "a hallway spawning yet another endless series of empty rooms and passageways, all with walls potentially hiding and thus hinting at a possible exterior, though invariably winding up as just another border to another interior" (Danielewski 119). If the ideal homely house is a space that delineates the boundaries between sheltered interior and chaotic exterior (Ng 9), the morphing inner house makes the interior uncanny and meaningless through its sheer magnitude. There is no exterior to compare it against or protect against. The network of relationships within the house is reversed through an endless expansion into emptiness. Zampanò links this understanding of the interior to the destabilizing impact of absence within the labyrinthine house: "This desire for exteriority is no doubt further amplified by the utter blankness found within. Nothing there provides reason to linger. In part because not one object, let alone fixture or other manner of finish work has ever been discovered there" (Danielewski 119). The complete blankness within the house provokes a "sensory craving" for anything onto which one could cling, any sort of connection with the space (Slocombe 103). Unlike Hill House, the inner house on Ash Tree Lane offers not even a phantom, trickster's hand to hold. Instead, "the walls obliterate everything" (Danielewski 423), and the negative space within the house "works to obliterate reality itself" (Slocombe 103). The house haunts with this complete absence,

a void that intensifies the longing for the manageable mundane house – though that house, too, has been destroyed.

As space expands out of his reach, Will Navidson looks fruitlessly for “home, sweet home,” in an effort to regain some sense of security and stability. In his first venture into the dark hallway, before he has realized its true expansive nature, Navidson’s tendency towards minimization reappears: “That’s it. Nothing else. No big deal” (Danielewski 64). This desire to contain the otherness of the space persists as Navidson recruits others for his explorations and records the inner home with the “aesthetic sensibility” of a photojournalist (Danielewski 64). Navidson endeavors to make meaning out of and thus “conquer” the labyrinthine space through his documentary, even expecting to gain “a great deal of fame and fortune” (Danielewski 91) by showing this architectural impossibility to the world. By attempting to capture and document the space in his film project, which charts a series of “explorations,” Navidson seeks to make the house into a concrete *something*. Yet, the very impossibility of reconstructing the labyrinth of the inner house and bringing that space into being plays out, in part, through the very film technologies that were supposed to help Navidson make sense of it all. Zampanò argues,

“From the outset of *The Navidson Record*, we are involved in a labyrinth, meandering from one celluloid cell to the next, trying to peek around the next edit in hopes of finding a solution, a centre, a sense of whole, only 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” (Danielewski 114).

The film fails to materialize the house or to fill it up with meaning, and instead seems to even participate in the spiral into emptiness – as discovery and understanding is repeatedly “promised,” then pulled away. *The Navidson Records* tracks a kind of aimlessness that articulates the decay of discourses used to make sense of reality. As we have seen in both *Rebecca* and *The Haunting of Hill House*, this theme of “incomplete knowledge” complements the “haunted house motif” by demonstrating a theoretically treacherous aspect of home (Bida 2018, 41). Concurrently, Navidson’s obsession with resolving and making use out of this gap in knowledge has the effect of ruining the mundane house and destroying the dream that brought the family here in the first place. The haunting of space is not confined to the twists and turns of the labyrinth. As Will is pulled into his work and Karen longs to flee, the house draws the couple apart as they “revert back to prior versions of themselves, versions that they had to initially abandon in order to maximize their overall compatibility and coherence as a family” (Starling 72). *The Navidson Record* does nothing to bridge the distances between the family, as originally intended. Instead, both the house and the film open up empty spaces between Will and Karen that make belonging comfortably within the home impossible.

As readers, our desire to “enter the house” – in other words, to read the book – aligns with Navidson’s constant need to return to and pass over that dark threshold; both reader and character pursue “a process of interpretation by which we seek to bring this House into Being” (Slocombe 97). Yet, for all of our longings for presence in the place of absence, the book itself insists upon and reproduces an experience of incomplete knowledge. As we travel from page to page, possibly flipping to the appendix or turning the book upside down, we are repeatedly

confronted with a textual labyrinth that “does not always reach anywhere” (Uslu 102). For as much as reading *House of Leaves* is an exploratory endeavor, the book is also full of blank spaces, struck-through text, constant interruptive footnotes (often extremely lengthy, without being at all illuminating), and challenges to its own validity – all of which leave the reader deeply aware of their own distance from the text and of the futility of seeking answers. We live in a world of “language and Being,” and thus will never be able to fully inhabit the nothingness that the book tries to express and render inexpressible through the very confusion of language (Slocombe 106). As Will Slocombe writes, “We cannot dwell within this text, but only dwell upon it, building up our own interpretation of what it means, living only in its margins” (Slocombe 92).

The absence of interpretive possibilities means that the labyrinthine inner house becomes a blank screen upon which its explorers can project, sometimes to the point of insanity. In some ways, the constant shifting and immense size of the inner house creates a very personal experience of space: “[A]ny way out remains singular and applicable only to those on that path at that particular time. All solutions then are necessarily personal” (Danielewski 115). In the empty spaces left by the collapse of human discourses, maze-treaders must develop their own systems of navigation (Travers 69). Zampanò suggests that such an isolating absence leads to the labyrinth that reflects the mental state of the explorer:

“Deprived of light, change in temperature and any sense of time, the individual begins to create his own sensory [], []d depen[]ng on the duration of his stay begins to project more and more of [] personality on those bare walls and vacant [] allways” (Danielewski 330).

In comparison to Hill House possessing its own sort of “personality,” any personality to be found inside the house on Ash Tree Lane is just a desperate attempt to seek out some sort of meaning, some presence in the face of overwhelming absence (Travers 71). In a similar fashion, the Minotaur-like figure that some of the characters claim to hear “growling” in the labyrinth seems little more than a concerted attempt to force *something* to occupy the blankness, though unsurprisingly the novel offers no conclusive answer on this front (Travers 71). Better this be a monster’s home, than No One’s home.

Recalling Bernstein’s formulation of the identity-destabilizing “endless and undefined field” onto which the house opens (Bernstein 13), *House of Leaves* demonstrates how the existential emptiness of the house within the house produces an unravelling of personhood, a revelation of the human subject’s own vacancy. Holloway Roberts, who eventually ends up killing one of the other explorers within the maze before committing suicide himself, loses his mind when confronted with the house’s absence. In an attempt to “preserve his identity from ‘the endless contours of darkness’ and prevent himself from disappearing with everything else in the labyrinth” (Travers 72), Holloway repeats his name, place of birth, and profession, to his camera in a “reiteration of his identity” (Danielewski 335). By speaking himself into the void, Holloway tries to fight against the existential emptiness of the inner house. But, following postmodern discourse, Holloway’s identity is just as much a construct, “shaped by ideologies and conventions” (Travers 72), as the human systems of measurement that have failed him in the labyrinth. Holloway is confronted by this personal insignificance and meaninglessness – tortured by the fact that no “monster” has come to disrupt his utter solitude, he eventually turns his rifle on himself: “In that place, the absence of an end finally became his own end” (Danielewski 337). Holloway’s attempted assertions of personhood do nothing to salvage himself, as his death

completes a process of erasure: “Fingers of blackness slash across the lighted wall and consume Holloway.... the last thing heard [is] the sound [of] Holloway ripped out of existence”

(Danielewski 338). Tom, Navidson’s twin brother, experiences a similar death when the floor of the more “mundane” house sinks into darkness and swallows him whole (Danielewski 346). In incredibly malevolent occurrences of this empty space, the house becomes “a black hole, seeking to absorb all traces of Being with which it is presented” (Slocombe 104). Nothing lurks around the corner. Nothing waits for you in the dark.

In an interview fabricated by Zampanò, literary critic Harold Bloom describes *The Navidson Record*’s labyrinthine house as “a lifeless, objectless, soulless place. Godless too” (Danielewski 359). Behold the perfect pantheon of absence. In a striking moment, Zampanò provides a nearly twenty-five-page list of everything that is *not* found in the labyrinth, peeking out of a small, blue-bordered box on each page, a room of its own in the novel:

“Not only are there no hot-air registers, return air vents, or radiators, cast iron or other, or cooling systems ... there are no windows – no water supplies, drains, bathtubs, urinals, sinks ... or even lights, whether electrical discharge, incandescent, or combustion, no flame arc or gas-filled, tipless, inside frosted, decorative ... to say nothing of the sheer absence of anything that might suggest a roof, whether pitched, gable, hip, lean-to, flat, sawtooth, monitor, ogee, bell, dome, helm, sloped ... ~~Picture that. In your dreams~~”

(Danielewski 119-141).

Zampanò presents a list of the many things that could make up a mundane home, in so many different variations, yet this list taunts us with just how hopeless it is to try to fill the inner house up, to make something out of it. The house presents “[the] ungraspable, which is to say productive of an inextricable loop of knowledge and not-knowledge” (qtd. in Schoonover 351). The house “of leaves” (both as the structural nightmare and as the book we are failing to understand) is filled with things that are not there, left unwritten. This catalogue of the condition of being objectless stands in opposition to more conventional “haunted house tales” (*Rebecca* and *The Haunting of Hill House* perhaps even among their number), which usually contain some combination of Gothic motifs (Travers 70). Rather, the true horror emerges from the fact that what “lurk[s] in the shadows” and stalks the characters *is nothing* (Travers 70). In the opening chapter of Zampanò’s manuscript, Will Navidson warns, “And if one day you find yourself passing by that house, don’t stop, don’t slow down, just keep going. There’s nothing there. Beware” (Danielewski 4). The “nothing” in the house becomes its own haunting force; it is a palpable threat that is nevertheless “negation itself, working to obliterate our everyday assumptions about reality” (Hayles 788). The house is full of nothing, imbuing “empty” space with a unique and powerful functionality.

The culmination of *The Navidson Record* emphasizes this haunting by emptiness. Consumed by the desire to enter the house one last time, even after it caused his brother’s death and his family to flee, Will Navidson returns to Ash Tree Lane; inside, he bikes thousands of miles through its interior until he reaches a sort of “center” in the house, where everything “suddenly changes” (Danielewski 459-460). As Navidson meets this space, the reader is confronted with a rectangular block of typed Xs in the middle of the page (Danielewski 461). Though Navidson is convinced that there is some sort of opening ahead, he encounters instead

the center of the house as a “grotesque vision of absence” – he finds himself standing upon an “ashblack slab... now apparently supported by nothing: darkness below, darkness above, and of course darkness beyond” (Danielewski 464). For the reader, the center of the spread of pages in which Navidson comes upon this nothingness is similarly blank. Thus, the reader must also deal with an absence of meaning that opens up the unbridgeable gap “between experience and representation” (Bilsky 159). The text will not represent this vision of absence to us as anything other than non-representation. If the homely house is supposed to be the center of an orderly world, *House of Leaves* invokes a kind of “centerless center” (Slocombe 98), to return to the concept of the anti-home. Zampanò’s discussion of labyrinths offers a quote by Jacques Derrida that employs such a (non)figuration, applicable even though Derrida is certainly not writing about a monstrous labyrinth:

“This is why the classical thought concerning structure could say that the center is, paradoxically, *within* the structure and *outside* it. The center is at the center of the totality, and yet, since the center does not belong to the totality (is not part of the totality) the totality *has its center elsewhere*. The center is not the center” (qtd. in Danielewski 112).

Slocombe offers an analysis of where Derrida’s “center” occurs within the house on Ash Tree Lane: “Within the house there exists (does not exist?) a nihilistic space that is paradoxically the center of the house – that which defines the totality of the house – and yet is absent from the House itself” (Slocombe 98). The void at the heart of the house is all-consuming, but it also refuses to “enter” the house and thus come into being. This centerless center is both “in place and out of place” (Campbell et al. 6), a labyrinth with no beginning, end, or middle that escapes any efforts to seek full meaning. As Derrida also points out, “the notion of a structure lacking a

center represents the unthinkable itself” (qtd. in Danielewski 112). To remain a nihilistic, postmodern void, the house must assert itself as “unthinkable” and unmake its own existence.

It is at this moment that *House of Leaves* hits us with one more blow to our understanding. In the dark, Will Navidson – creator of *The Navidson Record*, which is the subject of the manuscript at the center of the text that *we* are reading – takes out the “only book in his possession: *House of Leaves*” (Danielewski 465). This paradoxical violation of the hierarchy of narrative layers and order produces a “final figure of impossibility in the possibility that the text as we read it is in the process of absorbing itself” (Slocombe 101). Navidson begins to read. He only has a single matchbook, so he burns *House of Leaves* page by page, leaf by leaf, using the light of the paper torch to read the next two pages. Finally, he reaches the last page:

“Here then is one end: a final act of reading, a final act of consumption. And as the fire rapidly devours the paper, Navidson’s eyes frantically sweep down over the text, keeping just ahead of the necessary immolation, until as he reaches the last few words, ... ash peels off into the surrounding emptiness, and ... the book is gone leaving nothing behind but invisible traces already dismantled in the dark” (Danielewski 467).

Then, Will Navidson starts falling, into that “surrounding emptiness.” Thus, the text “bring[s] forth nothingness into literature ... by such literature destroying its own literariness from within” (Slocombe 105). The attempt at documenting the inner house consumes itself and empties itself out, even as we hold the book in our hands. The inner house succeeds in “unwrit[ing] its own creation” and destroying the potential for that house to be a house, to be anything but empty (Slocombe 92). Whereas Hill House asserted its status of emptiness by unwriting Eleanor, the house on Ash Tree Lane does so by unwriting itself. This postmodern figure suggests that

everything is built on top of a foundation of nothingness; any overarching narrative, any *House of Leaves*, that seeks to write nothingness must undergo a “necessary immolation.”

Unlike Eleanor Vance, Will Navidson does eventually make it out of the house with Karen’s help and survives, despite considerable psychological and physical damage. While the house appears to “[become] a house again” after Navidson enters it for the final time (Danielewski 406), the figure of the mundane home and the idea of homeliness has been so thoroughly disrupted throughout the novel that it is hard to imagine finding anything there. The self-consumption of the house and text sticks with us, refuses to leave. If the house symbolizes, is filled with, is composed of absence, then living inside of it is impossible (Slocombe 92). As we flit around the “margins” of *House of Leaves*, we are “haunting a text that is itself haunted by absence” (Slocombe 106) – and if we are haunting the text, we are haunting the house. The failure of human habitation and constructs of meaning in the text means that we haunt those absences by longing to fill them up, to assert our “hierarchy of proposing Being over nothingness” (Slocombe 106), and to find some semblance of belonging there. Yet we can only leave Danielewski’s text with the barest shadow of understanding. Instead, the endless, ever-changing labyrinth of the postmodern haunted house encourages consideration of the endless possibilities and traces of home in today’s age: “home is never simply good or bad, safe and comfortable or dangerous and traumatic, but all of these things” (Bida 2012, 45). Such a loss of foundation precedes the need to rethink and rebuild home. Taking these concerns materially into our world, Rachel Whiteread’s 1993 sculpture *House* (as explored in the coda) will further suggest how the process of turning the house inside out and rendering it unlivable might become productive when it reconciles a multiplicity of understandings of “home” with the absence within a haunting house.

UNLIVABLE

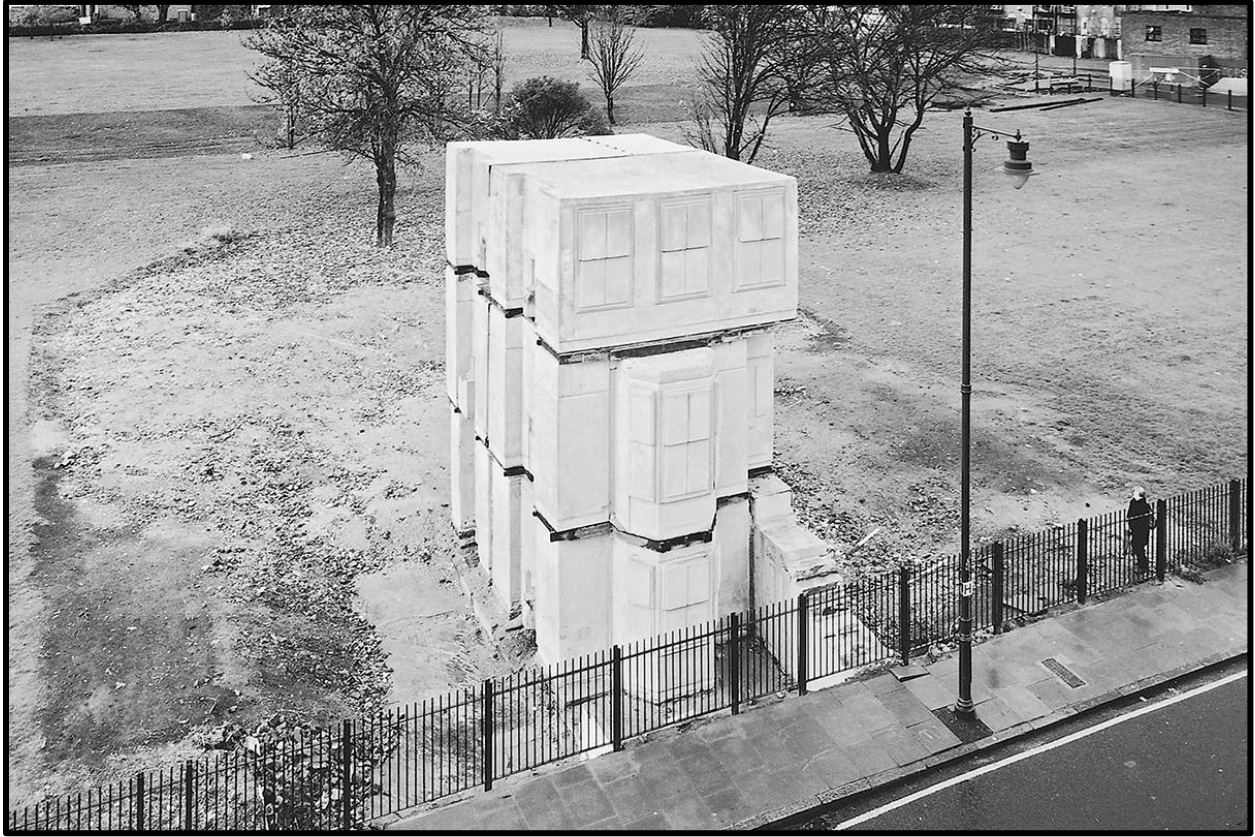


Figure 1: Rachel Whiteread, *House*, 1993, East London. Photo via *Widewalls*.

In 1993, sculptor Rachel Whiteread cast in concrete the interior of an East London home that was set for demolition – with approval from both the local council and Sidney Gale, the house’s recently-evicted inhabitant. Then, she removed the house’s exterior, brick by brick, leaving only concrete behind. Whiteread’s *House*, only intended to be a temporary sculpture, became a well-visited local attraction. The work was a source of considerable debate and controversy – while some local people “struggled to pay for their own flats, an unlivable structure had received significant attention – and funding” (Cohen). Thousands of others, however, signed a petition for *House* to be made a permanent installation (Takac). The petition

was ultimately declined, and this “lightning rod for all kinds of public housing debates” was eventually demolished ten days ahead of schedule (Cohen).

In opening up a dialogue between absence and presence and turning the interior of the domestic space outwards, *House* complicates ideas of “home, sweet home” by both “trapp[ing] space and destroy[ing] spatiality” (Cvoro 57). Though the inside of the house is physically preserved, any traces of relationality between domestic space and human subject are obliterated. The concrete cast left over when Whiteread pulls down rest of the building is a mark of negative space, an interiority “without a body” (Cvoro 56). In an inversion of the belief that “empty space is prior to whatever ends up filling it” (Lefebvre 15), which Lefebvre seeks to trouble, for *House* negative space *is* the end. By filling up the inside of the house with concrete in order to materialize its absence, Whiteread presents a sculpture that represents emptiness not as before-space, but almost as after-space. Thus, *House* gives form to the unfillable void that will inhabit that place in East London when the temporary sculpture is destroyed, and the last remnants of Sidney Gale’s house are removed. Whiteread’s sculpture attempts to represent the unrepresentable, to approach a confrontation with nonexistence (even if one can never truly bring nothingness into being). *House* does not aim to fill empty space with some other kind of meaning, but rather allows the empty, unlivable house to speak for itself. Once again, we return to a structure that challenges and collapses the very meaning of home, to a house emptied-out and haunted by itself. *House* is a space where no one belongs, only absence resides. This imposed gap between viewer and structure – and the gap between house and home – commands attention and consideration, as the monument to absence appears both grounded “in place” and entirely “out of place” (Campbell et al. 6). *House* invites its perceivers (both then and now) to sit in their discomfort with such unknowable space. We cannot overcome this emptiness, cannot

bring the house back to life, but we engage with and reach out to it, nonetheless. Certainly, it could be said that Whiteread's sculpture is a haunting house, fitting in with spaces that haunt as they "assert themselves, 'stick' to us, elicit affective responses, and shape interpretations" (Weinstock 153). But we might consider that this structure is also haunted *by us* – by our continued attention and efforts to understand the unknowable, hovering outside and looking for a way in.

Describing Whiteread's sculpture, Anthony Vidler writes, "*House* was less about the nightmare of containment than about the anxiety of expulsion, in turning the house inside out" (qtd. in Saxton 610). Uros Cvorovic points out that many reactions to the sculpture suggest that "the most disturbing aspect of *House* was its blank, blocked windows" (Cvorovic 62), which appear almost to push out of its concrete "walls." These windows intensify the feeling that the audience has been "refused the right of entry" (Cvorovic 62); even the "eyes" of the house have been closed to us, denying attempts at making meaning through the human gaze. *This is not for you*. Rather than being concerned about being trapped in a labyrinth that would rather erase you than let you leave (the Hill Houses and Ash Tree Lanes of the world), *House* expresses a different kind of fear of standing outside and being unable to enter – a kind of spatial orientation that those who always feel at home and those who have always had a home might not understand (Saxton 610). Especially given that *House* was only ever intended to be a temporary structure and was eventually dismantled just like the other homes in the area, Whiteread's sculpture "tackles the very notion of home and the privilege to have one" (Takac). Whiteread's sculpture opens up the once private, domestic world to "the scrutiny and questioning of the public other" (Cvorovic 62) – yet, when confronted with the house that rejects all habitation, that excluded, unwelcomed "other" becomes universal, becomes all of us. Reversing itself outward, *House* works to confront

the viewer with their own dislocation and to disrupt their sense of individual subjectivity. *We can live only on the margins of that place*. Thus, the emptying-out of the house also exposes the viewer to more complicated frameworks for understanding spatiality and home – home is many things, sometimes horrible, sometimes wonderful, and sometimes nothing at all. Though *House* remains “ungraspable” (qtd. in Schoonover 351) and inaccessible, it emphasizes that disturbed and haunting space can provide a stage for thinking on our socially constructed ideas of homes and homemaking. As *House* excludes the viewer and any potential inhabitants, it also turns outward to the world.

What does it mean for a house to be “unlivable”? The unlivable house rejects a dynamic that privileges human access to and comfort within space. Houses that are burned out, that walk alone, that obliterate everything – *houses that offer nothing for the grasping* – suggest that perhaps there is value in coming to realize that we cannot always fill space with meaning or shape it to our desires. Rachel Whiteread’s *House* conveys the considerations raised by the fictional houses of Daphne du Maurier, Shirley Jackson, and Mark Danielewski – all unlivable in their own ways – into our material reality; the sculpture suggests further possibilities for engaging with space that haunts, space that probes questions of belonging and identity through its emptiness. The three haunting house texts studied in this thesis demonstrate a progression of the collapsing foundations of “home, sweet home” and of the “emptying out” of the house, in order to account for the ever-shifting uncertainty within our relationships to the idea of home. The haunting house is always being unmade, hovering in the liminal space between the beginning and end of its own dissolution. Rachel Whiteread’s “unlivable” *House* is necessarily no one’s home, the (un)representation of a dwelling’s absence – yet any house could become *House*, as a space which constantly negotiates inclusion and exclusion and which could turn

hostile and throw us out without warning. By not welcoming us home, by becoming nothing, perhaps the unlivable house has so much more to say about its emptiness, if we are inclined to listen. Maybe we can haunt each other, this time.

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Further Reading

For those who won't heed the warning to beware, to turn away from the front door and drive far, far away... below are some texts, films, videos, and art works that were not directly addressed in writing but were still valuable sources of inspiration or exciting discoveries – helping to shape my thinking about haunted and haunting houses, disturbed spatiality, and emptiness.

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