

# Beware the House that Feels: The Impact of Sentient House Hauntings on Literary Families

Ashley Starling, *Ball State University*

This essay examines Edgar Allen Poe's "The Fall of the House of Usher," Shirley Jackson's *The Haunting of Hill House*, and Mark Z. Danielewski's *House of Leaves*, texts featuring sentient house hauntings. The author focuses on how the family unit in each text undergoes drastic destruction, arguing that the breakdown of the family is the true source of horror in such hauntings where a traditional ghost is not present.

The source of horror behind most literary hauntings can be traced back to a ghost's visual or physical manifestation. In Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, for example, the titular character only realizes the personal horror of his situation after seeing his father's ghostly figure lurking in the hallways of his home. The governess in Henry James's *The Turn of the Screw* experiences not only horror but madness as well when she visualizes the ghosts of Miss Jessel and Quint. In these instances, it is simple to pinpoint the cause of all negative emotion down to a human-like ghostly entity, and the characters can therefore work to eliminate that source of fear. Works that feature sentient houses in their hauntings, however, weave a complicated web of horror that makes it difficult to determine what actually generates fear in the absence of a familiar ghost form. By looking at several literary works that feature sentient house hauntings, it is evident that the real horror in sentient houses does not come from an actual ghost in this type of haunting; rather, it is the revelation that the family at the center of the haunting is fragile and can be easily damaged beyond repair, which sparks the fear as the haunting displays an underlying cultural anxiety about familial instability as a whole.

Even for enthusiasts that are well-read in ghostly literature, the term *sentient house* may be a concept that is confusing or unclear. Although this type of ghost story has become increasingly popular in fiction and film, there has not always been a single accepted classification for such stories; sentient house is perhaps the most concise designation that has been attributed to this style of haunting. Literally, sentience is defined by Merriam-Webster as "finely sensitive in perception or feeling" ("sentient"). In ghostly literature and film, a house typically displays this quality as it becomes animated in a manner such as rearranging household items, warping its physical walls, or even attempting to inflict physical pain upon its inhabitants. In essence, sentient houses exhibit the characteristics of a typical ghost manifestation but display those characteristics in a dominantly malevolent structural presence rather than a posthumous human-like apparition.

The sentient house figure has evolved over time, the behaviors of its malevolent structure being representative of the time period of its literary publication. One of the first instances of this haunting in literature is Edgar Allan Poe's "The Fall of the House of Usher." In

Poe's work, the sentient house displays qualities of the Gothic genre popular at the time. It is in itself a gloomy backdrop for supernatural events, a setting that reflects the dark nature of the emotional turbulence experienced by the Ushers. The house haunts its inhabitants in a way that is both internal and external in this way; the crumbling house possesses both ghostly behaviors and a catalyst for madness. Shirley Jackson's *The Haunting of Hill House* reflects in its house the anxieties of 1950s America, especially the worries of women in that time. The house specifically targets Eleanor in its haunting, calling out her abnormal social role as an older, unmarried woman in a time when marriage rates were at an all-time high. Likewise, Mark Z. Danielewski's *House of Leaves* features a sentient house that reflects modern concerns about technology. Navidson uses equipment such as video cameras in order to explain the haunting, yet the house manipulates that technology for its own agenda. This brief timeline shows that sentient houses have evolved throughout their history to reflect the common thoughts of their time, but there is always one element that remains constant in these hauntings: a family at the center of the ordeal that is drastically damaged by various tribulations.

One of the larger concepts that fuels the horror in a sentient house novel is a sense of the uncanny. The uncanny, or *unheimlich* in its original German, was a concept developed by Sigmund Freud in his 1919 essay "The Uncanny." Freud provides multiple definitions for the uncanny, the most prevalent being all that "arouses dread and horror" (930). The uncanny is more complex, however, being both contradictory and complementary in nature: what is familiar becomes unfamiliar, the hidden is revealed, and a lingering sense of unease settles inside one's mind. One definition in particular relates directly to sentient houses and the horror induced by the situation. Freud describes the *heimlich* as being "the enjoyment of quiet content, etc., arousing a sense of agreeable restfulness and security as in one within the four walls of his house" (932) and furthermore associates the opposite of such enjoyment, *unheimlich*, with the idea of a "haunted house" (945). This "homely" and "unhomely" concept directly describes the fear felt in a sentient house haunting. Haunted houses take the familiar security and comfort found in one's home, the familiar and the known, and turns that security into a sense of fear in the face of what is unfamiliar and unknown.

In a sentient house haunting, the uncanny works to destroy the physical representation of a family and throws the safety of the family into question. Metaphorically, a home is typically associated with feelings of comfort, security, and everyday functions. It is the base of family life, the safe haven from the evils of the outside world. Yet this place of domesticity supports an atmosphere that is ripe for malicious intrusion. Anthony Vidler, in *The Architectural Uncanny: Essays in the Modern Unhomely*, states that in haunted houses "the house provide[s] an especially favored site for uncanny disturbances: its apparent domesticity, its residue of family history and nostalgia, its role as the last and most intimate shelter of private comfort sharpen[s] by contrast the terror of invasion by alien spirits" (17). In most horror situations, the home is a shelter into which characters can retreat in their distress, offering at least a temporary sense of security. Haunted houses, particularly ones that feature traditional ghost figures, alter that security by placing the malevolent force within the structure of comfort, but this alteration only lasts until a cleanse or an exorcism dispels the ghost itself. Once the ghost has gone, the house can return to its normal state. Sentient house hauntings are therefore unique in that there is no safety at all to be taken from the haunted house; the only permanent solution to escaping the haunting would be to completely abandon the home, leaving behind the family history and memories associated with the structure. Houses in such sentient hauntings, therefore, are no longer secure in their domesticity.

In *House of Leaves*, the Navidsons' constantly-shifting house reflects the uncanny and

does not allow for any initial establishment of domesticity or familial comfort. The family's initial occupancy of the house on Ash Tree Lane is fueled by Will Navidson's desire to both document how a family settles down and to experience that settlement for himself. "I just thought it would be nice to see how people move into a place and start to inhabit it," Will states early on in the novel. "Personally, I just want to create a cozy little outpost for me and my family" (Danielewski 9). The house therefore begins as a place of familial dreams, but the sentence sets in too quickly for the family to actually achieve any inkling of domesticity. After only weeks in their new home, the Navidsons leave their inanimate dwelling for a few days but return to find something undoubtedly uncanny: a new door appears between the parents' and the children's rooms. Even Zampanó, one of the novel's many narrators, remarks on this change: "In their absence, 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" (28). The immediacy of this intrusion halts the family's domesticity through the will of the sentient house—the house will not allow the family to make the home familiar. Likewise, the fact that the family has to be away for this uncanny door to appear shows that the house is indeed its own entity: 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. The uncanny in *House of Leaves* therefore works to divide the family and the house from an early stage, destroying Will's hopes to settle his family securely into a new domestic life.

The uncanny plays a similar role in inhibiting familial security in *The Haunting of Hill House* even though Hill House itself gives the impression of comfortable family life. The family unit in this novel is not typical as it consists merely of weak bonds between strangers. These strangers often are depicted in scenes that exaggerate their role as a family of sorts. For instance, they once held a picnic in which "Theodora and Eleanor and Luke brought back a handkerchief full [of strawberries] and lay on the lawn near the doctor, eating them, staining their hands and their mouths; like children, the doctor told them" (Jackson 347). Scenes such as these place the doctor in a parental role and the others as his dependents. Yet the bonds between these strangers are very loose—they are brought together only to experience the haunted house, and this family dissipates once the experience is over. This means that there is always a false sense of security during this sentient house haunting; each individual thinks they are safe in their group but really they are vulnerable as individuals. Tricia Lootens, in "Whose Hand Was I Holding," states that "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" (178). As seen in the quotation from Lootens, the situation is a manifestation of the uncanny: the family unit that seems so familiar in the face of the haunting is yet very unfamiliar in its inner structure and reality. Because the familial bonds are temporary, no complete sense of security can be established in the onset of this haunting.

In "The Fall of the House of Usher," the uncanny plays a vital role in establishing the sentient presence within the house—a presence that will hurry along the destruction of the family. The Usher mansion is unlike the houses in *House of Leaves* and *The Haunting of Hill House* in that the family experiencing the haunting has actually resided in the structure for generations. The house itself has become a symbol of the larger Usher line. As such, it would be expected for this long-established house to give off a sense of security and warmth due to the length of familial inhabitance. However, as the narrator enters this house, what is felt instead is an uneasiness of great proportion. He describes the exterior as "an

atmosphere which had no affinity with the air of heaven, but which had reeked up from the decayed trees, and the gray wall, and the silent tarn—a pestilent and mystic vapour, dull, sluggish, faintly discernible, and leaden-hued” (Poe 233). This outside impression of the home makes the building that is familiar to the narrator from his youth quite unfamiliar in its sense of uneasiness, and the interior has a similar effect. The narrator even remarks that “while [he] hesitated not to acknowledge how familiar was all this—[he] still wondered to find how unfamiliar were the fancies which ordinary images were stirring up” (233). This uncanniness early on in Poe’s tale works to initially establish the sentient presence in the Usher mansion; the strange sounds that will occur at the climax of the story do not seem farfetched because the house has already been associated with an uneasy atmosphere.

By using the uncanny in such a manner, authors writing this genre of ghost story destroy the sense of comfort, domesticity, and security that is associated with a home. Taking away these qualities takes away the very physical and emotional foundations of a family unit, rendering the home nothing more than a malevolent house. This only allows for more permanent damage as the family, with no physical place for safety, must leave behind all memories and symbols of their past in order to fully escape a sentient house haunting.

Another common thread in sentient house novels is the onset of madness and lasting psychological change within its characters. The house itself often serves as a reflection of a character’s inner tribulations. For example, Ridvan Askin states that in *House of Leaves* “the house and labyrinth on Ash Tree Lane do not constitute two levels at all—they are located on one and the same level, matter and soul irreducibly folded into one another” (103). Since the house and the labyrinth are “folded” within each other, the labyrinth can be seen as a reflection of the family’s mental state. Furthermore, one of the critics quoted in *House of Leaves*, Ruby Dahl, calls the house a “solipsistic heightener” and states that “the house, the halls, and the rooms all become the self—collapsing, expanding, tilting, closing, but always in perfect relation to the mental state of the individual” (165). This is seen as the family becomes more divided mentally and the descents into the labyrinth become more puzzling, more complicated, and more terrifying. Additionally, as in any haunting experience, sentient houses are bound to leave long-term effects upon the characters. In many works of ghost literature, the text ends either at the end of the haunting or shortly afterward, making it difficult to certainly know any permanent damage for the characters. However, there is enough evidence in sentient house novels to show that the changes that take place psychologically revolve around traits such as personality and life goals. These hauntings work seemingly as a reality check for these characters, causing them to rethink previous priorities and obligations.

These two elements—madness and psychological change—work to destroy the family unit because they place a mental distance between the members within the unit during the haunting and raise the question of familial compatibility after the haunting is complete. In these hauntings, there are two different types of madness displayed: a true mental madness and a temporary obsessive madness. The true madness shows a more permanent effect of a ghost experience; a haunting is such an incomprehensible situation, many simply cannot deal with the thoughtful implications. The obsessive madness, on the other hand, is more of a temporary state that is experienced in the moment of hauntings. Regardless of which type a character exhibits during the course of the novel, madness places that character on a different thought plane than the rest of the family. It is therefore difficult for the family to stick together and resolve the haunting because their understandings of the situation contrast. Furthermore, the changes in psychology and sanity throughout the haunting hint at a later

incompatibility for the family overall. Dale Bailey, in *American Nightmares: The Haunted House Formula in American Popular Fiction*, creates a formula for haunted houses that names three different options for the eventual climax, one of which is “the house survives, but the skeptical family makes its escape—though not without paying a high price, usually a fatal one” (62). Although the resolutions of sentient house hauntings do often involve a family death, one of the other high prices paid is the mental changes seen in its characters. It is difficult to assume that a family will learn to function as easily as before the haunting if such issues as madness have crept their way into one of the family members. As seen in the sentient house texts, it may take much effort to establish the family back at the level it was before their haunting experience.

In Danielewski’s work, madness works to tear the Navidson family apart as Will becomes increasingly engrossed in exploring the sentient house. As mentioned earlier, the family (with Will in particular) is united in its plan to establish a new life together in the new house. However, when Will becomes obsessively interested in exploring more and more of the house’s curious labyrinth, he creates distance between himself and his partner, Karen. While Karen keeps herself grounded in the more logical, common situations by calling her parents or checking real estate, Will obsesses over the homely anomaly and attempts to connect with outside people who would also find the situation interesting (Danielewski 57). As the haunting progresses, it results in two drastically different goals between the husband and wife: while Will wants nothing more than to answer his curiosity about the haunting, Karen just wants to pack up her children and move. Karen, in this case, wants to keep her family intact and sees leaving the house as the only option for that; however, without Will being a willing participant in her plan, the rift between the couple grows.

Looking at the psychological changes in *House of Leaves* reveals that, during the haunting, Will and Karen 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. Will turns back into the overly goal-focused journalist and shifts away from any personal morality. This is the type of person Will exemplified when he photographed Delia and won his journalism award, a man that is more concerned with getting the perfect photograph and less concerned about the people involved. By putting his focus on the labyrinth and on the strange workings of his house, Will neglects the well-being of his family as a whole. At the climax of the novel, when Will has reached the focus of the labyrinth, he admits in his letter to Karen that this is the type of person he really is: “I should burn the place down, forget about it. But going after something like this is who I am. You know that” (Danielewski 389). Meanwhile, Karen strays from being the faithful wife that she had become into the adulterous woman she was in times prior. Karen struggled to overcome her past adulteries (348-350), yet it is the stress of the sentient house that causes her to turn back to her old, comfortable habits. This is seen in an important scene within the first quarter of the novel: as Will is deep inside the house’s labyrinth, Karen kisses Wax, an outsider brought in to help with the exploration. In this scene both characters present their former selves: Will in his obsessive exploration and Karen in her comfortable infidelity. This throws the overall compatibility of the two into question. Both had to give up their vices in favor of the family’s new start in the new house, but, because they quickly turn back to those vices, it shows a deeper disconnect within the family unit, a disconnect that will permeate long after the haunting is resolved.

“The Fall of the House of Usher” displays a more permanent type of madness destroying the family. The sentient house itself is generally viewed as a metaphor for the crumbling

mental state of Roderick Usher and for the dissolving family itself. Roderick seems to have become mad as part of his illness, yet the sentience within the house escalates this madness, breaking the bonds between Roderick and both his sister and the narrator. The actions within the sentient house prompt the most important question of the story: was Madeline really dead when she was buried, or did Roderick bury her alive in a fit of madness? The truth behind that question, before it has been made clear, has irreparable effects on the individual members of the family unit. Roderick Usher believes that she was indeed alive when buried, and exclaims that he and the narrator “*have put her living in the tomb!* Said I not that my senses were acute? I *now* tell you that I heard her first feeble movements in the hollow coffin” (Poe 245). This quote makes the reader question Roderick’s madness: was he truly mad all along and buried his sister alive, or has he just developed madness as a result of the sentient house and only mistakenly believes that she is still alive? Either way, his willing burial of his twin sister separates himself and Madeline, prompting the breaking of the family via life and death. Even if Madeline is truly dead, Roderick has also caused a rift between himself and Poe’s narrator, who can be considered as the other member of his family. The reader is forced to see the narrator as the sane and mentally capable character in this story; therefore, Roderick’s madness distances him from both reality and the narrator. In this short story, overall, the madness displayed causes the breakdown both of the sentient house and of the Usher family.

In *The Haunting of Hill House*, the psychological change separates the “family” by essentially pitting one family member against the others. Specifically, this character is Eleanor as she struggles psychologically throughout the haunting. Lisa Kröger states that “Eleanor’s psychological health is already compromised before she even leaves for Hill House....Some, like Melanie Anderson, may even go as far as to assert that Eleanor herself is haunting Hill House” (151). The latter assertion has quite the separating implication for the family in Hill House. By considering Eleanor’s psychological state as the cause of the haunting, Eleanor is therefore responsible for any harm done to the others in the family unit. She becomes no longer a part of the group of innocent victims but rather an individual instigator in the haunting. Furthermore, viewing Eleanor as having taken on the mentality of Hill House forces her to be classified with the sentient structure and not the living people. This means that she was never truly a part of the “family” established at Hill House but rather an interloper grouped in with the others. Additionally, Eleanor’s madness highlights the lack of dependence with the family unit. At the end of the novel, Eleanor is killed in a moment that causes confusion concerning her sanity (Jackson 417). This not only separates her from the others in terms of life and death but also eliminates her presence completely from the lives of others. They can therefore associate Eleanor with Hill House in their memory, an experience they will most likely want to forget. Eleanor’s thoughts during her final moments also reveal the lack of family dependence. She questions, “Why am I doing this? Why am I doing this? Why don’t they stop me?” (417). That final question reveals that Eleanor does see herself as connected to the others, enough so that they should step in if she were to attempt to harm herself. Yet it can be concluded from the text that no one has helped her: at this moment, with the haunting now being over, the inhabitants are likely to view their temporary associations with each other as being over. The madness and psychological change within Eleanor throughout *The Haunting of Hill House* works to establish the family unit as being simply a loose tie of temporary inhabitants.

Overall, madness is an important factor in the dissection of the family unit because those in a collective group must be of one mind within any haunting. It is important for each

member of a family in a sentient house haunting, or even a traditional ghost haunting, to have the same understanding of the situation and how to go about solving the problem. By introducing madness into this equation, a new obstacle is introduced as the haunting problem is now twofold: there is a house haunting the family, but also a mental ghost haunting the mad individual. The psychological effects of hauntings further the breakdown of the family unit as the permanent effects of hauntings are made evident. Each individual in a family does not come out of a haunting unscathed psychologically, making it immensely more difficult for the unit to function collectively as it once did.

The endings of sentient house works showcase a family that is fragile and shaken to its core. In *Beyond Words: Signifying Families in Postmodern American Fiction*, Mary Holland explains that in *House of Leaves*, “the last chapter presents the newly reunited Navidson family, with Will and Karen finally stably wedded, [in a] completely normal house in Vermont, depicted as a homey home” (330). Indeed, it may seem that *House of Leaves* ends with a family that has recovered from its traumatic experience, and in some aspects, it has indeed healed. However, the haunting has left a lasting devastation on the family that will require years to fully heal: Tom, Will’s brother, died in the sentient house; Will himself lost a hand and an eye; and, as Karen recovers from the haunting, she develops cancer. All of these physical and emotional trials mingle with the harsh truth that they must learn how to function as a family once again. The house on Ash Tree Lane still haunts the family, regardless: “The Navidsons may have left the house, they may have even left Virginia, but they will never be able to leave the memory of that place” (Danielewski 526) and even Will “has never stopped wrestling with the meaning of his experience” (527). *House of Leaves* displays a relatively hopeful ending for the family at its conclusion—although the house still mentally haunts them, the family is able to move forward.

Other sentient house works do not end on such a positive note, however. *The Haunting of Hill House* resolves with a broken family that will never become a family again. This temporary grouping of individuals was a product of their situation, and they became essentially a family by choice. With the conclusion of the haunting of the Crane house, the family has dissipated, the strangers not likely to ever encounter each other again. Furthermore, with Eleanor’s death at the very end, the family could never be complete if it were to try to reassemble. Without that one individual, the family could not resurrect its former state at the onset of the work. Finally, “The Fall of the House of Usher” shows a family that is shattered in multiple ways. The physical representation of the family, the large Usher mansion which has housed generations and reflects the living experiences of that family, has been destroyed as it cracked open. The living family has been destroyed as well, as both ultimately cause the death of the other. Only the narrator remains, a man who could be loosely grouped with the Usher family by way of association, but a man that could never replace nor represent the true being of the Usher line. There is no hope of the family ever reconstructing itself at the end of this work. The narrator even describes the outcome of the story as being left as “fragments” of the House of Usher (Poe 245), showing that irreparability. Overall, ghost literature that features a sentient house concludes with families that are broken, sometimes beyond repair, as a result of the haunting.

In conclusion, by looking at sentient house literature such as *House of Leaves*, “The Fall of the House of Usher,” and *The Haunting of Hill House*, it is clear that the terror experienced through the breakdown of the family unit in these hauntings reflects an overall cultural anxiety about such familial turbulence. Families are generally regarded as a collective source of security and comfort. The destruction of the family unit works to strip families of

these qualities, diminishing the value of the unit from an emotional resource to merely an asset for basic survival. This is frightening to an individual in such a family that must learn to take on the complex situations of life without any familial support. By reading sentient house hauntings in literature, therefore, one may gain insight into an anxiety about family instability that is present in overall culture: that an unstable family will ultimately render an individual helplessly alone. It is this thought that provides the real source of terror in sentient house hauntings in place of a ghostly manifestation.

WORKS CITED

- Askin, Ridvan. "Folding, Unfolding, Refolding': Mark Z. Danielewski's Differential Novel *House of Leaves*." *Revolutionary Leaves: The Fiction of Mark Z. Danielewski*. Ed. Sascha Pohlmann. Newcastle-upon-Tyne, UK: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2012. 99-121. Print.
- Bailey, Dale. *American Nightmares: The Haunted House Formula in American Popular Fiction*. Bowling Green, OH: Bowling Green State University Popular Press, 1999. Print.
- Danielewski, Mark Z. *House of Leaves*. London: Pantheon, 2000. Print.
- Freud, Sigmund. "The 'Uncanny.'" *The Norton Anthology of Theory and Criticism*. Ed. Vincent B. Leitch. New York: Norton, 2001. 929-952. Print.
- Holland, Mary Katherine. *Beyond Words: Signifying Families in Postmodern American Fiction*. Thesis. University of California, 2004. Print.
- Jackson, Shirley. *The Haunting of Hill House*. New York: Viking, 1959. Rpt in *Shirley Jackson: Novels and Stories*. New York: The Library of America, 2010. 243-420. Print.
- Kröger, Lisa. "House of Leaves: A Postmodern Retelling of Shirley Jackson's *The Haunting of Hill House*." *Journal of the Georgia Philological Association* Dec. 2009: 149-156. Print.
- Lootens, Tricia. "'Whose Hand Was I Holding?': Familial and Sexual Politics in Shirley Jackson's *The Haunting of Hill House*." *Haunting the House of Fiction: Feminist Perspectives on Ghost Stories by American Women*. Ed. Lynette Carpenter and Wendy K. Kolmar. Knoxville: The University of Tennessee Press, 1991. 166-192. Print.
- Poe, Edgar Allan. "The Fall of the House of Usher." *Burton's Gentleman's Magazine*. Sept 1839: 145-152. Rpt in *Complete Tales & Poems: Edgar Allan Poe*. New York: Vintage Books, 1975. 231-245. Print.
- "sentient." Def. 3. *Merriam Webster Online*. Merriam-Webster, 2014. Web. 4 Feb. 2014.
- Vidler, Anthony. "Unhomely Houses." *The Architectural Uncanny: Essays in the Modern Unhomely*. Cambridge, MA: MIT, 1992. 17-44. Print.