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SCHIZOID MASCULINITY AND MONSTROUS INTERIORS IN AMERICAN HAUNTED HOUSE NARRATIVES

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ABSTRACT

In this article, I propose that the haunted house narrative, so central to American Gothic, has itself mutated in response to a backdrop of post-millennial social, political and financial collapse in a manner quite different to developments in the rest of the Gothic literary world. The narrative strand which has emerged presents the reader with a new form of the Gothic male protagonist, whom the British psychologist R.D. Laing would describe as a ‘schizoid’ subject (Laing 17). Fragile, failing and fragmenting, he escapes a failing career, marriage and parenthood by removing his family to a quasi-domestic space which promises repair. Often combining work and home, the house rises up to meet the male schizoid, not merely as the traditional Gothic setting, but as a sentient being; a monster in its own right. His entrapment in this new Gothic labyrinth that is constantly shifting, expanding and shrinking, provides a performative stage on which the schizoid male is forced into an existential crisis beyond the trauma of spousal and parental failure, ultimately forcing him to confront what it is to exist in space and time. A reaction to the rise of neo-liberalism and toxic masculinity, this type of narrative embraces the multiplicity of the Gothic’s new forms and is evident in texts such as Steve Rasnic Tem’s *Deadfall Hotel* (2012), Mark Z. Danielewski’s *House of Leaves* (2000), Thomas Ligotti’s *The Town Manager* (2008), Jac Jemc’s *The Grip of It* (2017) and Shaun Hamill’s *A Cosmology of Monsters* (2020). Developing from their deeper roots in the Calvinist Gothic tradition of Hawthorne, Brockden Brown and Poe via the mid-century works of Stephen King and Robert Marasco, these new post-millennial narratives provide a space in which notions of masculine subjectivity are fundamentally challenged.

Keywords: schizoid, Bachelard, quasi-domestic space, masculinity, cosmic terror.

I. THE EMERGENCE OF A NEW STRAND OF THE AMERICAN HAUNTED HOUSE NARRATIVE

The haunted house has always existed at the heart of the Gothic mode, first as castles and country houses and latterly as suburban homes, prisons, asylums and hotels, providing a liminal space in which the protagonist is confronted by the supernatural. As Catherine Spooner points out in *The Contemporary Gothic*, the Gothic operates like a “malevolent virus” (8),

constantly mutating in response to contemporary anxieties such as gender, class and socio-political concerns. In this article I will be presenting a new iteration of the haunted house narrative in which the male protagonist is presented, not merely as unstable or insane, but as a subject in a more complex state of insanity. Most importantly, this subject finds himself in a hybridized setting, part domestic (in that it serves some or all of the functions of a home) and part workplace (either as a hotel, prison, asylum or where the character works from home). This setting does not simply provide a passive architectural space in which a haunting can occur, but responds to the presence of the masculine subject becoming a sentient being, a monster in his own right. This hybridized, quasi-domestic space then proceeds to mutate in ways that develop the traditional notion of the labyrinth into an architectural space that is intended to drive the fragile, schizoid protagonist into a confrontation with his deepest fears, memories and traumas. In identifying this key development in the haunted house trope, I aim to explain how the Gothic affect created is not in the more conventional sense of the sublime, the numinous or simply terror in the reader, but a more unsettling sense of Heideggerian angst at a cosmological level, generating a sense of nihilistic hopelessness. I will be identifying the historical origins and development of this new haunted house iteration that focuses specifically on the white middle class male, from its origins in the 1940s, as well as exploring the psychological construction of the male protagonist, the nature of the architectural space and the key contextual factors which have influenced its flourishing in the eco-gothic and new sub-genres of the Gothic from 2000 to the present day.

When early Gothic literature relocated its settings from an othered Catholic Europe at the end of the eighteenth century to the various home grounds of England, Scotland and America in works such as William Godwin's *Caleb Williams* (1794), Charles Brockden Brown's *Wieland* (1798) and James Hogg's *Confessions of a Justified Sinner* (1824), the protagonist of the haunted house tale changed gender from female to male, acquired a family and downsized from the ancient castle to a more domestic setting. Rebecca Janicker sees the early haunted castles of European eighteenth century narratives as "crude symbols of menace rather than the meaningful encounters with complex supernatural entities that appear in later haunted house fiction" (Janicker 82). Kate Ferguson Ellis tracks the development of the nineteenth century idea of the middle-class abode as the "safe sphere of home" against the literary trope of the castle acting as the "dark opposite." It is a result of the development of "separate spheres for men and women," she claims, in which the home (the private sphere) became the specific domain of women while the new, industrialised world of work (the public sphere) became that of men (Ellis x). While many critics have commented on the setting of the haunted house, the focus has typically been on locating the home as a feminised, maternal or queer space. However, some of the recent work on the queer male protagonist and domestic space has been very pertinent, such as the work of Gero Bauer and Andrew Hock Soon Ng. Bauer explains the changes in the way that homes were occupied during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, recognising the shift to the "emergence of modern civil society" and observing the

resulting emergence of “new spatial arrangements” in the home to reflect the development of these public and private spheres (Bauer 17). He identifies in this development the emergence of the closet as a “specifically masculine space for men” —in which was housed the “resources needed to master the world” (Bauer 21). However, Bauer defines this space as one in which men conceal their homosexuality and so does not account for the role of the heterosexual male in Gothic domestic spaces. Hock Soon Ng does begin to identify the emergence of a symbiotic relationship between setting and protagonist, identifying “architecture” as “capable of implicitly influencing its occupant’s subjectivity” (Ng 17). Overall, however, there is little written that explores the relationship between the heteronormative, white male protagonist and the broadly domestic setting that now features so prominently in contemporary American Gothic narratives.

The switch in gender of the protagonist might simply be more directly tracked alongside the transference of this particular strand of the Gothic to its New World setting, shifting as it does from the labyrinthine castles of the mode’s European origin in Horace Walpole’s *The Castle of Otranto* (1764), to the middle-class houses to be seen in the works of writers like Charles Brockden Brown, Nathaniel Hawthorne and Edgar Allan Poe, reflecting the more egalitarian, post-revolutionary political foundations of a newly established American nation. The innocent young orphan girl is replaced by the independent young man, more representative of the themes of universal suffrage and the pioneer spirit key to America’s search for its political ideals. In the aftermath of two World Wars, the Great Depression and the twin threats of the atomic bomb and the Cold War America, the twentieth century produces the beginnings of a more divergent instantiation of the motif. In particular, the horror films of the 1970s saw a return to the original and more visually tempting female protagonist, and this is reflected even earlier in the post-war works of a burgeoning number of female writers such as Shirley Jackson—and perhaps most famously, in the character of Eleanor in *The Haunting of Hill House*—such representations engaging with the changing attitudes to women that arise in the post-war era. Yet more importantly for my argument, the 1970s also sees the emergence of a new kind of male protagonist and a novel strain of the haunted house motif referred to by the Gothic writer Stephen Graham Jones as the “hungry house” in his introduction to Robert Marasco’s novel, *Burnt Offerings* (200).

This new expression of the “haunted house” narrative reflects ongoing changes in the way that domestic architectural space is conceived and inhabited. The spaces described in texts that are part of this trope should now be described more accurately as hybridized, quasi-domestic spaces which are both home and workplace, reflecting the conflicted nature of employment and family life for the excessively troubled male protagonist, who reflects the dramatic political and social upheaval of post-millennium America. This expresses a fundamental collapse of American masculinity so extreme, that these entrapped, troubled men are left with few options except to consider their very existence. The most recent examples of this divergent haunted house form occur in texts published post-2000, such as *House of Leaves* by

Mark Z. Danielewski (2000), Thomas Ligotti's *The Town Manager* (2008), Bret Easton Ellis's *Lunar Park* (2005), Steve Rasnic Tem's *Deadfall Hotel* (2012), Grady Hendrix's *Horrorstör* (2014), Jon Padgett's *The Secret of Ventriloquism*, (2016) and Shaun Hamill's *A Cosmology of Monsters* (2020); novels that generate a powerful Gothic affect—an unspecified, nihilistic, cosmic terror—that deeply unsettles the reader. It was not, however, the first outing for this new iteration, which could be seen to originate in L. Ron Hubbard's novella *Fear* published in 1941, though it really begins to develop in the 1970s with classic novels like Stephen King's *The Shining* (1977), Anne Rivers Siddons *The House Next Door* (1978) and the short stories of Steve Rasnic Tem of the 1980s.

The more recent short stories and novels published in the 2000s occur within the context of what the journalist Hannah Rosin sees as the loss of “the old architecture of manliness” (Rosin 8). In her account of the latest American crisis of masculinity, Rosin describes a “mancession,” as occurring thanks to the “post manufacturing age” dating from the recessions of the 1990s. She posits that the American male is left with only the “mancessories” of masculinity: “jeans and pickup trucks and designer switchblades, superheroes and thugs who rant and rave on TV and, at the end of the season, fade back into obscurity” (Rosin 9). She goes on to quote from Susan Faludi's *Stiffed*, who describes masculinity as “ornamental” (qtd. in Rosin 9). It is precisely this loss of the traditional concrete markers of masculine identity that seems to lie at the heart of this trope of haunted masculinity. In the premises of this kind of Gothic text, the male characters are in peril of losing everything that would identify them as a heteronormative, white man: the expected role as patriarch, a wife and children, their career and pride in their abilities as breadwinners. The “hungry house” to which they decide to escape, in the belief that it will allow them to re-establish their traditional masculine identity, is revealed to be a dangerous space where they are confronted by a truth which will exacerbate their existential crisis and force them into a schizoid state. I argue that these texts reflect contemporary fears of an end of patriarchy and the notion that American men will soon have no option but to re-engineer the traditional, patriarchal image of themselves, perhaps best represented by images of men in the 1950s, as the paterfamilias living the American Dream of home, family and stable career into a new, as yet unformulated model of masculinity, whose construction is fraught by “conflicting or unmanageable social expectations” (Connell 23). The traditional models of American masculinity have been drained of any meaning and those that are suggested as replacements elicit the recurring fear of feminisation and powerlessness. Faludi observes that men in the 1990s became like a 1950s housewife, “stripped of his connections to a wider world and invited to fill the void with consumption and a gym-bred display of his ultra-masculinity” (Faludi 823).

Faludi's suggestion here is that men have lost their connections to the traditional homosocial dimension of work and such loss sets them adrift, unable to fulfil the traditional heteronormative performative roles of father, husband, and most importantly, the subject who has symbolic control over the home and its physical spaces through its purchase and maintenance.

In Stephen King's novel *The Shining*, for example, Jack Torrance has lost his job as a teacher and his career as a writer is stalled. The opportunity to move to the Overlook Hotel provides him with a traditionally practical and masculine role as caretaker. In Mark Z. Danielewski's *House of Leaves*, Will Navidson is forced into his "cozy little outpost" (Danielewski 8) to perform the role of husband and father but finds that this home refuses to be obedient to his wishes. Both Jack's and Will's careers belong to sectors outside those traditionally associated with American masculine ideals—which revolve around steel and oil industries, as well as manufacturing processes such as car assemblage. Such occupations demand participation in the homosocial public sphere, allowing men to publicly demonstrate their economic power and to dominate in the private domestic sphere. Will's career as a photojournalist and Jack's unsuccessful career as a writer require solitary work, outside both private and public spheres, demonstrating purely intellectual and aesthetic qualities which result in the production of the symbolic representation of actions, rather than the tangible products of traditional manufacturing industries. Jack's ostensible career teaching in a private school is one that he rejects as representing his sense of economic powerlessness and lack of status in the homosocial sphere.

Like Faludi and Rosin, Michael S. Kimmel points out that the American blue collar male worker has been hard hit by economic recession. He notes that, "80 percent of all the jobs lost since November 2008—a number in excess of 5 million—were jobs held by men." (Kimmel 14), while Rosin argues that the increasing predominance of a "service and information economy" rewards skills traditionally associated with women rather than men, such as, "social intelligence, open communication, the ability to sit still and focus" (Rosin 5). The focus of this Gothic form on protagonists who are writers, teachers or employed in "service industries" directly parallels the economic decline of those American industries most associated with men and the concomitant fears of feminization.

Historian Howard Zinn provides a crucial historical underpinning to the arguments of critics like Faludi, Rosin and Kimmel by delineating the origins of America's economic structures during the nineteenth century rise of industrialist elites, embodied by figures such as J.P. Morgan and John D. Rockefeller. These magnates controlled the most economically powerful industries—railways, steel and oil—and quickly learned to join hands financially and politically in order to create "an interlocking network of powerful corporation directors" (Zinn 258). The government (often consisting of members of the wealthy industrialist elite) always sought to promote economic and social stability. Nonetheless, the pattern of economic boom and bust that was established and persistent levels of unrest and workers' strikes of the period seem to support Zinn's socialist critique, based on the idea that "the capitalist system was by its nature unsound: a system driven by one overriding motive of corporate profit and therefore unstable, unpredictable and blind to human needs" (Zinn 387). He points out that the middle classes in America exist as a kind of aspirational steppingstone to the world of the super-rich upper classes. To maintain the illusion of the American Dream as a political tool for control of the masses, according to Zinn, the government has always ensured that the

economy was “doing just well enough for just enough people to prevent mass rebellion” (Zinn 382). It can be no accident then that the male protagonists in the post-millennial texts I explore such as Mark Z. Danielewski’s *House of Leaves* (2000), Steve Rasnic Tem’s *Deadfall Hotel* (2012) and Shaun Hamill’s *A Cosmology of Monsters* (2020) are middle class. These texts suggest that American men perceive middle class status to be a kind of Gothic liminal space that simply exists to be traversed on the way to membership of the upper classes. A sense of Gothic tension for the middle-class American male is derived from his being subjected to the constant double threat of failure to move into the upper class and the risk of falling back into the working class.

This kind of protagonist is described as psychologically unstable, just as his position in American society throughout history has always been a precarious one. He is engaged in a struggle to inhabit the liminal space of the middle class, a space whose ill-defined borders move, shift, disappear and reappear at the mercy of the vagaries of an inherently unstable economy. The mutating nature of the settings I explore reflects this economic uncertainty, especially as this aspect has become especially marked as the home begins to merge with the workplace thanks to the development of technology and the necessities of the COVID-19 pandemic. In all the texts examined, a hybridization between the home and the workplace becomes increasingly marked: in *The Shining* the protagonist is a resident caretaker; in *House of Leaves*, while Navidson claims at first that he just wants, “to create a record of how Karen and I bought a small house in the country and moved into it with our children” (Danielewski 8), he also uses that record to gain funding so he can turn the experience into a documentary. (Danielewski 10). In more recent novels, the hybridisation of the domestic setting becomes more complex. Grady Hendrix’s 2014 novel *Horrorstör* is set in an IKEA-style store laid out as a labyrinth of fake domestic rooms in which the protagonists seek to escape the malevolent presence of the Victorian prison which lies beneath its foundations. Shaun Hamill’s *A Cosmology of Monsters* (2020) is set in the protagonist’s home, which is also where he and his family plan and build their family business, a haunted house attraction.

II. LAING’S SCHIZOID PROTAGONIST

To analyse the development of this fragile male protagonist and to explore the reasons for the changes observed, it is key to focus on the connections existing between the psychology of the gendered male subject and the social conditions of his production. In this article, I draw on the ideas put forward in R.D. Laing’s *The Divided Self* (1964), His account of the schizoid subject allows a more nuanced and revealing exploration of this aspect of American Gothic narrative than is possible with other more modern accounts of masculine subjectivity.

Laing, a member of the anti-psychiatry movement of the 1960s, reacted against mainstream Freudian psychoanalysis, proposing his view that the Freudian approach resulted in a series of binary oppositions that split the patient’s behaviour into normal/abnormal too reductively:

The most serious objection to the technical vocabulary currently used to describe psychiatric patients is that it consists of words which split man up verbally in a way which is analogous to the existential splits unless we can begin from the concept of a unitary whole, and no such concept exists, nor can any such concept be expressed within the current language system of psychiatry or psychoanalysis (Laing 19).

For Laing then, it seemed to make no sense to begin from a point where the subject was treated as a mere set of symptoms outside the context of the subject's relationship to others and the world: "This difficulty faces not only classical Freudian metapsychology but equally any theory that begins with man or part of man abstracted from his relation with the other in his world [...] we can be ourselves only in and through our world" (Laing 19). Laing wanted to move away from the Freudian focus on the past as the key motivating factor for psychological disturbance. What he believed was that the production of the self was to be found in the subject's interaction with others and the world and indeed, Laing clearly references Heidegger's notion of "dasein" – or "being in the world" in his introduction: "I shall try to show that there is a comprehensible transition from the sane, schizoid way of 'being-in-the-world' to a psychotic way of being-in-the-world" (Laing 19). This framework allows us to carry out a more detailed analysis of how this now masculine subjectivity is constructed; to focus not just on their family/childhood history, but on their immediate and wider social context.

III. JACK TORRANCE'S ONTOLOGICAL INSECURITY

The schizoid male protagonist is not just "insane" in the sense that characterises the nineteenth century narrators of Edgar Allan Poe's *Black Cat* (1843) or *William Wilson* (1839), for example. Rather, he is described in the "modern" manner identified by Laing as "schizoid." Laing details the schizoid subject as having "a rent in his relations with his world" and "a disruption of his relation with himself," so he is "not able to experience himself together with others" or be "at home in the world," and is therefore forced to live in "despairing aloneness and isolation," unable to "experience himself as a complete person but rather as "split" in various ways, perhaps as a mind more or less tenuously linked to a body, as two or more selves" (Laing 17). According to Laing, the schizoid subject longs to be seen and understood by those around them but this is coupled with a crippling fear that this recognition will result in their "engulfment" – that is to say, the fear that their identity will be consumed and absorbed by the other. Their response to this conflict is to split into a "true self," which preserves their authentic self, and a "false self," which presents a mask or persona to the outside world that allows them to avoid engulfment. The pressure of this conflict often forces the schizoid subject to avoid the threat of engulfment by isolating themselves from others or by objectifying them in order to depersonalise them and so make them less of a threat. As a result, the schizoid subject will often prefer to be hated by others as a way of avoiding relationships that could result in engulfment. In this new iteration of the haunted house narrative, therefore, we see male protagonists like Jack Torrance whose ontological insecurity was propelled by an unpredictably

cruel and violently abusive father: “‘Runt of the litter,’ he would say, and then cuff Jack lovingly and laugh” (King 244). His father’s cruelty to his wife and sons leaves Jack with a deep-rooted inability to maintain relationships which are always already compromised and whose psychic construction is correspondingly fragile. Jack himself recognises that his experiences have left him broken psychologically, in effect diagnosing his own schizoid nature: “there was a broken switch somewhere inside, or a circuit breaker that didn’t work” (King 177). Jack’s schizoid tendencies are first revealed by his horrified and guilty reactions when he breaks his son Danny’s arm, enraged after the boy spilled beer on the manuscript of his play. Coupled with the conflicts intrinsic to his failing marriage, this event exacerbates his fear of engulfment by his family. Jack reacts by indulging in lengthy drinking binges with his friend Al Shockley and groups of students through which he seeks to avoid his inability to be, as Laing would put it, “alone with himself in the world,” yet fulfil his need to be “seen and recognized, in order to maintain his sense of realness and identity” (Laing 114).

Jack’s presence in the Overlook hotel prompts it to change its shape; the Colorado Lounge, its bar stripped of alcohol for the winter, is returned to its 1920s heyday, populated with partygoers and its bar restocked and staffed by the barman, Lloyd, who forces Jack to confront the alcoholism that threatens his marriage. The ghosts of staff members, bartender Lloyd and murderous caretaker Delbert Grady, appear in order to goad Jack with his fear of engulfment suggesting that “[a] man who cannot guide the course of his own wife and son can hardly be expected to guide himself” (King 390). Jack’s intention to rewrite himself literally and metaphorically in order to repair the threatened psychotic split is derailed, just as is his early writing success as his writer’s block returns. The constant work inherent to the maintenance of the hotel piles the pressure on his mental condition as Jack needs to make daily repairs and monitor the furnace. Indeed, many of the texts that form part of this trend reference the space’s tendency to decay and parasitic infestation such as those of insects and cats experienced in Tem’s *Deadfall Hotel*. Ultimately, the combination of career-related pressure, family conflict, taunting of the ghostly staff and exacting nature of the constant maintenance lead to an exaggeration of Jack’s failings, resulting in what Laing calls petrification. Jack begins to disengage emotionally from his wife and son, “‘I love you too,’ he said, but he was only mouthing the words” (King 294). Jack’s petrification is accompanied by the process of depersonalisation—in order to survive, Jack must reduce others to the role of objects who pose no threat of engulfment but can provide “constant confirmation of his own existence as a person” (Laing 46). At first, he begins to refer to his wife Wendy and son Danny, not by name as previously, but only as “bitch,” or “the boy” (King 443). Tormented by his own sense of failure, Jack’s behaviour becomes typical of the patterns described by Laing as he oscillates between extremes: “complete isolation or complete merging” (Laing 53), until he feels the urge to “throttle” Wendy and physically abuse Danny: “The sound of Jack’s open palm striking Danny” (King 295, 323). Eventually, the split in Jack’s personality is so complete that he is left with “no sense of existence as a ‘unitary whole’” (Laing 19), as recognised by Danny at the

end of the novel: “It wore many masks, but it was all one. Now, somewhere, it was coming for him. It was hiding behind Daddy’s face, it was imitating Daddy’s voice, it was wearing Daddy’s clothes. But it was not his daddy” (King 466). Jack realises that the hotel is sentient and it is explicitly working to do him harm and that, “the Overlook was having one hell of a good time” (King 308) in doing so.

IV. WILL NAVIDSON’S ONTOLOGICAL INSECURITY

In *House of Leaves*, Will Navidson’s ontological insecurity begins with the protagonist’s dysfunctional childhood which bears a resemblance to that of Jack Torrance’s in *The Shining*. His family experience is marked by a highly dysfunctional father, “an alcoholic prone to violent outbursts or disappearing for long periods of time” and a mother who “left them all to pursue a career as an actress” (Danielewski 22). However, the key event that drives his schizoid split is the choice to photograph Delial, the “Sudanese child dying of starvation, too weak to move even though a vulture stalks her from behind...” rather than save her from her condition (Danielewski 368).

Will is initially very close to his fraternal twin Tom but the relationship serves to represent the splitting of Will’s true and false self, highlighted by Danielewski’s comparison to the biblical twins Jacob and Esau. While their ontological insecurity has the same cause, Tom and Will exhibit contrasting schizoid responses that result in the splitting of all positive and negative qualities between the two of them. Compared to Navidson’s success, “Tom won no awards, achieved no fame, held no job for more than a year or two...” (Danielewski 246). Their estrangement occurs when Will marries and has children which leads to Tom describing himself as “orphaned at the age of forty” (Danielewski 250), and reflecting that “he felt like a part of him had been ripped away” (Danielewski 319), these experiences allowing the true and false selves to exist independently.

The ontological insecurity caused by his childhood and the guilt over abandoning Delial, simply exaggerates Will’s fear of engulfment, causing him to seek isolation by being constantly away from home. Just as Wendy threatens to leave Jack Torrance if he does not give up drinking, Will’s wife Karen threatens divorce if he does not settle down to create a proper family home. Consequently, the family moves into the house at Ash Tree Lane which his son Chad immediately perceives as sentient; he says: “It’s like something is waiting” and the house then proceeds to catalyse Navidson’s schizoid split (Danielewski 9). As Laing says, the schizoid subject is “torn between his desire to reveal himself and his desire to conceal himself” (Laing 37) and when forced into the family home, he resorts to recreating it as a workplace, distancing himself from the family by turning the process into a documentary. Will has no direct voice within the novel, his character is constructed through third person accounts and a series of films that, at first, seem to be like an artful and persuasive construction of his position on the side-lines of reality, observing others. He does so always with the intention of

somehow manipulating his audience to believe in his constructed false-self, by not hesitating to “constantly include in his film evidence of his own failings” (Danielewski 17).

Like the Outlook Hotel for Jack Torrance, the house at Ash Tree Lane awakens to Will’s presence. While the family are away for a weekend a mysterious closet appears in the master bedroom. Will’s measurements of the space tell him it cannot exist in reality: “The width of the house inside would appear to exceed the width of the house as measured from the outside by $\frac{1}{4}$ ” (Danielewski 30). During the course of the novel, the closet proceeds to expand into grey-black and featureless rooms, corridors and staircases that constantly change shape and defy the laws of physics. Unable to control this space, that should be at his command, Will invites Tom, who possesses all the traditional, practical skills usually associated with American masculinity, to help him investigate the strange happenings in his home; it is clear to the reader that the arrival of Tom is, to an extent, an attempt to heal Will’s psychic split.

Initially forbidden by Karen to enter the space, Will has to send in substitutes for himself in the form of Tom and a team of experienced explorers but it becomes clear that the person the house really wants is Will. Driving the team to madness and murder in its ever-expanding and mutating rooms and corridors, the house finally swallows Tom alive: the house is literally the “hungry house” and willing to force the protagonist into its depths. Once inside, Will is finally trapped on a balcony overlooking a bottomless abyss and he is left, quite impossibly, with only a printed copy of *House of Leaves* and enough matches to read it by. The documentary film he has been working on records his descent into madness as the balcony disappears and he falls into the void: “So there is no bottom. It does not exist for me. Only my end exists” (Danielewski 472). While Jack Torrance dies at the end of *The Shining*—unable to reconstitute his schizoid split—Will Navidson survives. Rescued from the house by his wife Karen, he emerges alive but emotionally and physically damaged in an unexpectedly positive resolution. As with many of the texts that belong to this strand of the haunted house narrative, the male protagonist emerges from his experience in the hungry house made whole, but always with a caveat. Reunited with his family, the final images of Navidson carry a dark existential warning—that existence is always under threat from unknowable cosmological forces. As Will films his children trick or treating, he captures “the empty road beyond, a pale curve vanishing into the words where nothing moves and a streetlamp flickers on and off until at last it flickers out and darkness sweeps in like a hand” (Danielewski 528).

V. IDENTIFYING THE MONSTROUS INTERIOR

To analyse the symbiotic inter-relationship between the male protagonist and the sentient quasi-domestic setting in these narratives, it becomes necessary to go beyond the concept of the haunted house as simply a liminal space which hosts a supernatural manifestation and focus more closely on the psychological function of specific architectural spaces within the home. Gaston Bachelard’s *The Poetics of Space*, published in 1958, remains a highly influential work on the philosophy of architecture and provides a way of considering how the quasi-

domestic space can set about influencing its occupants. It is referenced in the extensive footnotes of Mark Z. Danielewski's *House of Leaves*, and the 2014 Penguin edition of *The Poetics of Space* opens with a foreword written by Danielewski himself, in which he says Bachelard's work "has everything to do with how our comprehension of space, however confined or expansive, still affords us an opportunity to encounter the boundaries of the self just as they are about to give way" (Bachelard vii). This statement supports my view that Bachelard's theory has great potential in the criticism of Gothic literature, providing a framework to understand the domestic space in its widest sense. In her consideration of the relationship between Bachelard and Gothic space, Rebecca Janicker helpfully points out that "any space which is regularly used by, and thus bears the mark of, human occupants can fundamentally be seen as a kind of 'home away from home'," meaning that a space such as the Overlook Hotel in *The Shining*, becomes a domestic space in the same manner as the traditional home in *House of Leaves* (Janicker 397). For Janicker, these Gothic domestic spaces serve to provide "encounters with ghostly presences that work to estrange protagonists from their daily lives, forcing them to see previously-accepted versions of their "reality in a very different light" (Janicker 430).

The application of Bachelard's theories on narrative and space is a relatively unexplored line of investigation in the Gothic field, having only emerged in the last twenty years. It has been adopted by a range of critics including Fred Botting in his article: "Horrorspace: Reading *House of Leaves*" (2015), Dylan Trigg in *Topophobia: A Phenomenology of Anxiety* (2017) and Katherine Hayles in "Saving the Subject: Remediation in *House of Leaves*." However, currently only Townshend has moved beyond the interpretation of the symbolic nature of space to articulate the relationship between character and space in terms of topophilic or topophobic environments, and at the moment there is no research exploring the relationship between setting and protagonist using both Laing and Bachelard. My approach might be viewed as philosophic rather than literary, but I argue that it redresses the gaps in current literary theory that prevents it investigating the existential nature of the relationship that I believe arises in this emerging, sentient space that shapes male subjectivity in a way that goes beyond that extends beyond psychoanalytic means.

We can draw from Bachelard's critical frame when approaching these haunted house texts in order to identify the role that the individual spaces of the settings play in the ontological crisis undergone by the protagonists. Bachelard appears to capture the quintessence of what it is about the relationship between inhabitant and space serving to illuminate why the spaces in *The Shining* and *House of Leaves* appear to become the living monsters of the text. Bachelard argues for the "trans-subjectivity of the image" – the fluidity of meaning that occurs between subject and object within an architectural landscape – that he considers to be like a "phenomenological experiment" which is exactly what occurs inside the Overlook and the House at Ash Tree Lane (Bachelard xix). In *The Poetics of Space*, Bachelard sets out to create a literary taxonomy of rooms, making many references to Gothic literature such as the works of Poe. Within such a taxonomy, the closet of *House of Leaves* would be associated with order and

identity for Bachelard and so the fact that it is the closet whose impossible proportions irrupt within the home at the centre of *House of Leaves*, implies disorder from the outset. It is no surprise that, associated as they are with greater clarity of thinking, higher floors (as in above ground level) rarely appear in the novel; however, the novel describes a wealth of staircases which, for Bachelard are always heading downwards to cellars which generate an “anthropo-cosmic fear” (Bachelard 23). These are coupled in *House of Leaves* with functionless empty rooms, endless corridors and corners which all imply uncertainly and transition.

VI. CONCLUSION

This iteration of the haunted house narrative can therefore be seen to emerge set against the decade of recession that would lead up to the rise of neo-liberalism under Ronald Reagan’s presidency. *The Shining* delivers one of the earliest representations of the crisis of masculinity as Jack Torrance struggles to reconcile the traditional values of the 1950s he has inherited from his father with the more modern ideas of fatherhood emerging in the 1970s. The Overlook Hotel is represented not just as the setting of the novel, but as a character in its own right. The hotel manager Ullman’s detailed account of the hotel’s history recounts its passage through the hands of its successive owners: the capitalist adventurers, the politicians, the prohibition gangsters and culminating in the faceless corporations of the 1970s, much as any character in a narrative might be introduced. Such framing presents the hotel as a place which not only provides a setting for the action of the narrative, but also exists to situate Jack within a micro-cosm embodying the society that results in the contemporary crisis of American masculinity.

In narratives written post-2000, the representation of domestic space becomes more complex and explicitly threatening for a protagonist whose fears and anxieties have become more terrifying in a world of vanishing solutions. Accounts of specific rooms become more highly charged and their changes become more pronounced and claustrophobic. Will Navidson’s eighteenth century, colonial home, embodies all the traditional ideals of the American Dream, but instead of providing the “cozy little outpost for me and my family. A place to drink lemonade on the porch and watch the sun set” (Danielewski 8), it revolts against him to reveal the futility of his existence on a cosmological scale, generating a sprawling black, featureless underworld of staircases, corridors and empty rooms whose existence defies the laws of physics.

Spaces in these narratives mutate with the specific intent to provoke a Heideggerian sense of angst in the protagonist. For Bachelard, the home is an oneiric space of memory and this is a key function of the sentient, simulacral and hybridised spaces found in this haunted house trope: the unmappable, decaying labyrinth of the hotel in Tem’s *Deadfall Hotel*, the constantly reformulated haunted house attractions of Hamill’s *A Cosmology of Monsters* and the home in Ellis’s *Lunar Park* which slowly mutates into the protagonist’s childhood home, all serve to return him to his key memories of trauma, forcing him into an existential crisis. Descriptions consist predominantly of corridors and corners which, for Bachelard, always imply

change and transition, perhaps explaining how post-millennial protagonists survive the hungry house when pre-millennials do not. The message is that he exists in an incomplete and transitional state, doomed to failure, and worse, subject to the whims of the cosmos. The price of survival for the schizoid male protagonist seems to be the realisation that traditional models of American masculinity, and indeed of humanity itself, have failed him and the solution is to retreat to a vanished past, accept a “diminished” masculine model or become obsolete. The Gothic affect of the narratives in this strand of the haunted house narrative therefore induces a terror in the reader that goes beyond simply failure as a husband, father and worker to embrace the terror of existence itself. In the end, it is Laing’s sense of existential crisis which aligns Bachelard’s taxonomy so well with this new Gothic trope. Laing perfectly describes the existential crisis forced upon the protagonist by the sentient, hungry house comparing it to the world created on stage by Samuel Beckett: “With Samuel Beckett, for instance, one enters a world in which there is no contradictory sense of the self in its ‘health and validity’ to mitigate the despair, terror, and boredom of existence” (Laing 40).

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