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English IV

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Characterization of Characters through Characters

Much like the walls of Ash Tree Lane's eerie home, perspectives shift frequently, but with definite reason. Mark Z. Danielewski's dark masterpiece *House of Leaves* wastes no space in conveying as much information to the reader as possible, though Danielewski chooses to maximize this through unorthodox means. Unlike most books, Danielewski chisels the psyches of the various characters the reader hears from directly--Zampanó, Johnny, Pelafina, and the Editors (Ed.)--not only through the words they write, but how they write them--literally. The stylization of each character is present in nearly every aspect of the voice: font, format, grammar, tone, and more.

There's an old saying in writing: "show, don't tell." As a student and a writer, I think the best way to convey Mark Z. Danielewski's writing style is to emulate it. This, in my opinion, provides more evidence to the reader than if I had just written an essay. They might understand what I write, but they will not comprehend what I mean to write.

Also, it's more fun to break the rules of conventional writing.

Nonetheless, I've written an essay in the style of each character the essay is about. If you've ever seen Austin Powers, think of my essay as Mini-Me to *House of Leaves*'s Doctor Evil.

FOREWORD

The Editors of *House of Leaves* leave comments interspersed within the book, often to justify or correct a certain presumption that Johnny Truant had written in his notes. Interestingly, the Editors always use the 'Bookman' font, which is the same font used here. The Editors write concisely, and with professional manner. Like Johnny, the Editors use footnotes to communicate with the reader.[1] However, where Johnny occasionally uses the footnotes as a journal, the Editors strictly use it as a space to justify certain additions and edits to the book.

--The Editors

[1] I will also be using footnotes to communicate with the reader, though I will be using the Cambria font (as seen here). Largely, however, I will be emulating each character in their respective writing styles while I address the reader about said writing styles.

Introduction

I remember the first time I read one of Johnny's interruptions. Johnny writes infamously long paragraphs though they aren't really academic. They are more like tangents but they are personal tangents which have little to do with The Navidson Record, the main focus of Zampanó's book. They are however just as important to the story as Zampanó's perspective. Yes, Zampanó the blind man. Johnny talks alot about this old man who lived alone. Sometimes Zampanó leaves his house and then Johnny would see him outside, alone with his cats. It was only after Zampanó's death did Johnny attempt to know his neighbor and it was through searching his belongings no less. During the introductory phase of Johnny he describes how he came into possession of Zampanó's belongings.

While it may seem strange out of context, I think that Johnny makes alot of sense when you take into account how he tells the story. Johnny expresses doubt for Zampanó's name before he even knew anything about Zampanó saying that nobody "knows where his name really came from... maybe it's authentic, maybe made up, maybe borrowed, a nom de plume or--[Johnny's] personal favorite--a nom de guerre (xii)." As I've tried to make clear through my mock-up of Johnny's writing, Johnny only uses commas when strictly necessary. This gives him an uneducated appearance but--as also seen in his mother (but that's to come later)--Johnny is far more intelligent than he lets on. This is evidenced in the excerpt through Johnny's use of the terms nom de plume or nom de guerre. Rather than saying fake name (but I know there's a better word for it)[2] Johnny prefers to spice his writing with certain phrases and words to let the reader know he is more than what he appears.

In terms of tone analysis Johnny constantly expresses his paranoia through his interruptions, but he also expresses a false devil-may-care attitude towards the beginning that disappears as the novel wears on. When Johnny writes about having to deal with Zampanó's trunk of writings he expresses his personal belief that if Zampanó's passages become "irksome" to

[2] Jack likely meant the phrase 'pseudonym'. --Ed.

the reader, the reader can “go ahead and skip it. [Johnny] couldn’t care less how [the reader reads] any of this” (31). As evidenced later, Johnny really does care how Zampanó’s book is read but he can’t let himself admit it at this point in time.

In case it seemed strange to the reader, I am purposefully alluding to the future of this essay. Johnny frequently does so I figured I would to the same to mock his style. Additionally by allowing myself to pick up on Johnny’s analysis later I can be even more true to his style by interrupting Zampanó’s analysis. You can read those interruptions too. Or don’t. Just act like they aren’t there and keep reading Zampanó’s analysis. I don’t care.

You might miss out on the story, though.

The Zampanó Analysis

I

Zampanó places a somewhat tangential quote here…

-- Some famous person

Though his writing is very much academically styled, Zampanó cannot help but let his ego shine through his writing. The font, the tone, the word choice--it's clear to the reader that Zampanó thinks himself an intellectual, and consequently he takes himself very seriously in his writing. The interesting thing that the reader must note about all of Zampanó's writing regarding *The Navidson Record* is that Zampanó is a blind man. Through this context, Zampanó loses credibility in the reader's eyes--after all, no blind man can watch a documentary.[3] Nonetheless, Zampanó stands by *The Navidson Record* and its authenticity to a fault.

One theme that Zampanó constantly addresses is the credibility of his writing. Zampanó does all that he can do to make his writings rival that of an academic article. Ironically, some things he does to make his writing more credible actually weakens his ethos. As Johnny comments on it, "Zampanó likes to obscure his secondary sources he's

[3] The funny thing about Zampanó is that he writes alot about visual things. Certain shots from The Navidson Record are explained in great detail, though there's no way that Zampanó had seen it. This begs the question: is Zampanó just making this all up?

Despite contrary evidence Johnny wants to believe Zampanó. As Johnny puts it, he saw the trunk that contained the written account of The Navidson Record and what he found inside "appalled [him]." He felt like he was looking "at the old guy's corpse" itself, and as a result he felt the need to respect it in some way. Previous to seeing it as the old man's legacy, Johnny originally planned on "[tossing] it by the end of the week" (21). Of course, I would have considered something like that. I mean, it's not Johnny's responsibility so who cares what some dead guy has to say?

Johnny claims the reason he didn't throw the trunk away was because it reminded him of himself but I think it wasn't that. I think that the writings of Zampanó reminded him of his dad--his real one, not his drunken fake one--and he didn't want to lose his father again.

using in order to appear more versed in primary documents" (107). Though it isn't known to the average reader without the assistance of Johnny's fact checks, Zampanó tends to quote secondary sources because that is how he knows primary sources. Nonetheless, he cites the primary source itself to appear more credible in his writing.

Though this paper will not dwell on the matter of themes too terribly long, *House of Leaves* has an undeniable motif of credibility and second-hand sources. The *House of Leaves* is a compilation of writings from a drug and sex addict about a blind man's review of a documentary from an established photojournalist he saw about a family moving into an impossible house. It is a tertiary source about a secondary source about a primary source. In other words, the information contained is not to be trusted without skepticism.

Mit anderen Worten, nehmen Sie die Informationen mit einem Salzkorn.

To exemplify the need to inspect Zampanó's words with a doubtful eye, Zampanó attempts to liken Navidson's video shots to that of photographic art; the sources that he cites as being similar to Navidson's shots is quite an expansive one. It spans roughly three pages of names of photographers. The only problem with this overwhelming amount of names to attribute art to--aside from the fact that he had never seen these shots in the first place--is that every single name on the page is random and made-up.[4]

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[4] This isn't fully true. Johnny talked to one of Zampanó's scribes, Alison Adrian Burns, and she said that they "just picked the names out of some books and magazines he had lying around" (67). It wasn't exactly random but it was pretty close. I think it's strange how Zampanó was so loose with his citations and sources despite giving the appearance of being a scholarly guy. I mean, he put some serious time into these citations and footnotes. By the end of Zampanó's account of The Navidson Record there are 427 citations.➢ Who knows how many of them are false?

 Jack neglects to include further evidence which changes his point. He forgets to include that there are exceptions such as "Brassai, Speen, Bush and Link" (67) to the list of false names. --Ed.

➢ Not exactly correct. Numerically, there are 427 citations by page 527. However, this does not take into account the numerous citations which did not use numbers but rather symbols, and this also doesn't take into account Johnny's and the Editors' footnotes.Ω --Ed.

Ω Due to the limitations of Google Docs (the service I am employing in writing this paper), I'm afraid I have to include a slight discrepancy from the original style of Danielewski's novel. You see, Danielewski uses special symbols as footnotes when he thinks certain symbols make more sense than numbers. For instance, the Editor uses a "➔" symbol when translating braille on page 423. There are a variety of cases when he employs this style of footnotes, such as airplane communication symbols to give a hidden meaning to the citation for which that symbol applies. In my case, however, I cannot use numbers as footnotes for footnotes, and so I must use symbols instead.

Distantly connected to Zampanó's use of secondary sources, Zampanó also likes to use other languages in his writing to further establish a form of credibility through impressing the reader with his massive expanse of knowledge and experiences. When paraphrasing a French academic lecture on architecture from 1967, Zampanó not only chooses to leave the excerpt in the mother language but also states that the original source "is too complex to address here; for some, however, this mention [of *L'ecriture la difference*] alone may prove useful" (112). As a result, Johnny is left to translate not one but two passages from the same lecture. In the same manner that Sigmund Freud patronizes his readers in his academic writings, Zampanó feels that explaining certain allusions and logical reasonings is below him.

Zampanó also frequently plays around with the spacing of his writing. He writes on a larger scale than what appears to the reader, and this is merely a byproduct of it. He uses spacing as a means to evoke certain feelings in the reader. For instance, when Holloway and his team embark on their initial exploration of the house, the text is relatively normal. However, as the passage--both the book and the journey--wears on, the spacing begins to shift and modulate.[5] Seemingly random boxes of text appear on the page, each of which distorts the natural flow of text on the page. Suddenly, the reader has to adapt and work around these boxes. One explanation for this strange formatting is that it mirrors the surroundings of Holloway and his team as they break walls and search for normalcy only to discover "another windowless room with a doorway leading to another hallway spawning yet another endless series of empty rooms and passageways, all with walls potentially hiding and this hinting at a possible exterior, though invariably winding up as just another border to another interior" (119). As evidenced with these strange boxes of text floating in the middle of the page, each strange border simply contains more and more text to explore. Following this page, the text boxes get progressively stranger. Instead of one box, there are now a minimum of four on each double-page; one box contains a footnote from the previous page (though every character is written backwards), one box describes what kinds of 20th century works the house doesn't resemble, one box is a continuation of some footnote about the various utilities contained in a regular house, and one box is simply a list of names upside-down. This forces the reader to get comfortable with the uncomfortable, which simply does not occur. The reader cannot help but feel cramped in this section, confused by the seemingly alien layout of a book. This situation is very reminiscent of the emotions Holloway and his team must be experiencing. This house is nothing like they've ever seen before, and it is very unsettling to this team of renowned explorers.

Not even fifty pages later, Navidson, Tom, and Reston must enter the depths of a house which has apparently consumed and confused expert explorers. In this moment, Zampanó perfectly shows the tempo shift of the book through the new type of spacing. Instead of tight,

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[5] Modulate means to change, not to be changed. Does Jack imply here that the spacing screws with the reader or the explorer? And by spacing, does he mean the text spacing or the spacing of the house?

cramped and alien sections, the spacing becomes less about an overflow and more about a mysterious lack of it. By this point in the book, the reader has known to expect unorthodox

formatting. The new situation the reader finds themself in is one of many pages but fewer words. Around eighty percent of each page is empty space, seemingly unused. That is, until the reader realizes the importance of this space. The reader rapidly flips from page to page, caught in the quick pacing of events and the short amount of words on each page. This juxtaposes the immediate previous section, one of hyperdense text meant to confuse the reader. Zampanó did

this to show what Navidson, Tom, and Reston felt upon entering the house to rescue Holloway's team. Where it took Holloway's team days to explore, it took Navidson minutes. What was seemingly "thirteen miles down" for Holloway was "no more than 100ft down" for Navidson (159).

What had taken days for a team of experts had taken twenty minutes for a

cripple. What had seemed complex and long for Holloway was simple and short for Navidson. This is mirrored in their respected[6] sections, as Holloway's section was hyperdense and cramped whereas Navidson's was

[6] Jack likely meant 'respective'. --Ed.

quick and relatively empty. Make no mistake, however, both

sections confuse

the

reader

equally.

Zampanó also uses spacing in other ways to suggest certain things to the reader. Perhaps the most prevalent and clear evidence of this is the entirety of VIII. Zampanó writes the first three paragraphs relatively short; at least, short for his historical style of writing. He double spaces between each paragraph during this section, and after the first three paragraphs he places three periods, three hyphens, and another three periods. Following these symbols, he writes three lengthy sections--again, double spacing between each one--and closes with three periods, three hyphens, and another three periods. As expected, Zampanó closes the chapter with three short sections followed by three periods, three hyphens, and three periods.

This case of bigger-picture writing is rather on-the-nose when compared to Zampanó's other subtle messages hidden within the confines of spacing. After all, he uses a hidden SOS message when writing about the hidden SOS message in *The Navidson Record*.[7]

[7] Again, I cannot help but feel that Zampanó is patronizing me. Well, the reader but in my case, me. He's either waving it in our face to make the reader feel good about themself or he's doing it because he doesn't think his reader is smart enough to find the clear-cut. Did he mean to make this particular stylistic distress signal so obvious? He might've meant it then. Maybe the old man was lost within his own mind and this was his version of Jed's knocks.

I've no clever transition from discussion about Zampanó's writing to discussion about Pelafina's writing. Going from Johnny to Zampanó was easy; all I needed to do was mimic the style that could be found in the book. Now, for this transition, I would need to completely end my essay so that some other figure could come by and add a section about Pelafina. That's how it happened in *House of Leaves*, anyways. Danielewski made it easy for himself. If I did that, though, it wouldn't have the same effect. I apologize for the lack of a creative and true-to-the-book transition. Trust me, I'm disappointed in myself, too.

Well, while I've already disrupted the immersive experience of my essay, I might as well take this chance to explain a slight discrepancy between my mockery of Pelafina's writing and her real writing. Her writing is in a font called Dante, which is quite clever of the Editors. Or is it Danielewski who I attribute this cleverness to? I suppose it doesn't really matter, they are one and the same. I digress; I'll talk more about why her writing is in Dante in her letters, but I want to mention before that section that, due to the limitations of Google Docs, I must use a look-alike font called Garamond. It is extremely close to Dante, but they are not the same. I've got no reason to apologize for the discrepancy there, it wasn't really my fault. Still, keep that in mind as you read it.

Dearest child of mine,

I write as Pelafina does now, which is in a somewhat flowery and eloquent manner. Her writing appears on the page larger than that of the previous writings do, and so I have turned the font size larger to reflect this. A menial difference not worth discussion, however. As I had previously alluded to, I write in the Dante look-alike font. Pelafina's writing likely appears in Dante to reflect several things.

Firstly, I believe it reflects the flowery and romantic aspect of Pelafina's personality. When she is sane, she writes in a highly dignified and intelligent manner. She oft quotes famous writers in her letters, as well. As Pelafina writes, "As old Goethe wrote, 'Wouldst shape a noble life? Then cast no backward glances towards the past, and though somewhat be lost and gone, yet do thou act as one new born'" (589). She offers advice to her son, Johnny, that is poetic and well-spoken. She clearly comes across as someone of high intellect.

Secondly, I believe it also reflects the journey of Dante in the first part of Dante's Divine Comedy entitled Inferno. In Inferno, Dante finds himself exploring several layers of Hell. The interesting thing to note is that Dante later finds himself in Purgatorio and later Paradiso.

Now, this letter is longer than Pelafina's typical letters, so I shall end it here and pick up on what I was writing in the next letter.

Love,

Mommy

Dearest dear Johnny my flesh spirit and son,

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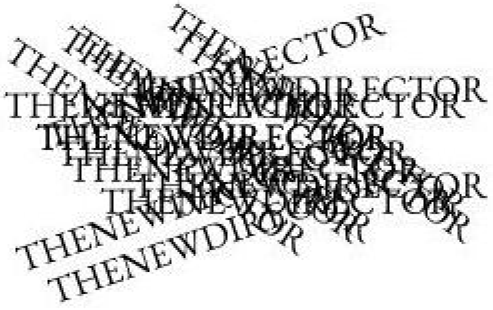

P.

Dearest Johnny,

As I was saying, Dante eventually escapes Hell and begins his ascent. Pelafina, as evidenced in later letters, fully expected to one day escape her situation. You see, she finds herself in the Whalestoe Institute, an institution for those with rather weak mental foundations. Pelafina would have fits of madness occasionally, and so Pelafina is placed in the care of professionals.

She requests that Johnny "purchase for [Pelafina] a suitcase." She is told by the Director that, due to her rate of improvement, she "might even be able to leave" (640).

Now, it is quite clear to the reader that Pelafina was never in a fit enough condition to leave. She would become enraged when Johnny would tell her that he had been hospitalized or if Johnny didn't respond soon enough; so much so that one time she had actually "escaped this old English Manor in search of [Johnny's] tormentor" after hearing he had been injured. Her anger was so abundant that "the attendants had to fit me with a canvas suit lest [she] hurt them or further damage [herself]" (596).

In a way, Pelafina did actually end up leaving. Whether she ascends like Dante or descends into Lucifer was to be seen, but Pelafina hangs herself after writing about her feeling that Johnny had abandoned her in her time of need. This isn't necessarily a part of her character so much as a plot point, but I thought it better substantiated to the reader the claim that she was mentally damaged and suffering from bouts of psychosis.

Love,

Mom

And now I've gone through all the perspectives. I gave my analysis of Johnny through his writings, I gave my analysis of Zampanó through his writings, I gave a small insight as to the role of the Editors as shown through their sparse writing, and I gave my analysis on Pelafina through her writings.

But the essay continues, so you say. Hmm. How curious.

Well, I'll tell you why it continues. There's another character that didn't write a single word, and it's because of this they had the largest role of any of the people I've talked about. Is it Navidson? No. Is it Tom? No. Reston? No. Karen? No.

I'll stop you there. It's me. It's you. It's the reader.

It's up to the written characters to convince the reader they tell a truthful story. It's up to the reader to believe the written characters. Based on this relationship, it's undeniable who holds the power.

When I started this essay, I wanted to convey this as best as possible. In order to do that, I had to analyze the reader. The soundless speaker. What better way to analyze the reader than to analyze myself, the reader in my own story?

There's no coincidence I chose to write in the Cambria font. Cambria means 'the people' in Welsh, and so here I represent the people. Cambria also brings forth imagery of a scholarly place due to the phonetic similarity to Cambridge. As a student, I thought the Cambria font would make an excellent champion for myself. As for the look of the font, Cambria is relatively academic. It is, however, much more smooth and casual when compared to Times New Roman or Arial. Like Zampanó, I had to build up this credibility in the reader's eyes through my word choice. I had to prove I was a relatively smart guy and that my writings were worth reading.

I write the parts as myself in a persona which captures my spirit pretty well. I tried to write in a fun-but-intellectual way, and I think I succeeded in this venture. I tried to convey my personality through my tone. Go ahead, flip back to the beginning. Read it again, and you'll see my infusions of personality. My role in the story of *House of Leaves* was that of the student. I am Jack Cordell, and I am the high school student who writes the essay mimicking the compilation of writings from a drug and sex addict about a blind man's review of a documentary from an established photojournalist he saw about a family moving into an impossible house. I am Jack Cordell, and I am nothing but the character who writes the outermost layer of Danielewski's masterpiece entitled *House of Leaves*.

Now you are a character too, and you have already formulated an opinion on this expansion to Danielewski's book. Maybe you don't get it and consequently you hate it. Maybe you get it, but you hate it all the same. Maybe you get it and you love it. Just know this: *This is not for you.*[8]

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[8] Take a look inside House of Leaves and find page ix, or the dedication page.☆

☆ Page ix is as follows: "*This is not for you.*" --Ed.

Works Cited

Danielewski, Mark Z. *House of Leaves.* Toronto: Random House, 2000. Print.