

The Stereotypical Labyrinth: Mark Danielewski's Critique of The Literary and Academic Imprisonment of Women in *House of Leaves*

Mark Danielewski's *House of Leaves* acts as many things: horror, puzzle, collage, but at its heart it exists as a commentary, at times approaching satire. Danielewski mimics academia and its analysis of life and media through the novel's discussion about and criticism of the fictional *Navidson Record*. While Danielewski criticizes, subverts, and reinvents many aspects of academia, from the use of footnotes to bizarre conclusions drawn out of far too in depth reading, one of his most poignant criticisms lies in his critique of the treatment of women, both real and fictional, by academia and writers alike. Danielewski criticizes foremost the use of female characters or the interpretation of female figures as simply story-progressing devices, someone without the independence and rationale of a fully-fleshed out character, someone who is simply there to serve the story or the male character. Through the use of women as cogs in Johnny Truant's perverted machine of sex therapy and the parody of academic criticism of Karen Navidson as a "character" rather than a human, Mark Danielewski criticizes the way in which women and female characters in literature are so often denied their humanity and the full freedom to be their own character in the story and in the world.

The most direct criticism against the pigeonholing of female characters exists in Johnny's narrative portions of the text. These sections of the novel are more akin to a typical fiction story than the analysis of the *Navidson Record*, and Danielewski thus assigns the female characters of Johnny's life the most typical and unfortunate stereotypes of women, both in fiction and nonfiction: the sex symbol, the character only seen when the male protagonist has something to gain from her, the comforting lover for a hero going through struggles. As Johnny proves himself an unreliable narrator, it becomes difficult to know which of his sexual encounters are delusion

and which are reality, but all that matters is how Johnny views them. After an encounter with Tatiana, he writes that the experience “seems to have helped [him] somehow. As if getting off was all [he] needed to diminish some of this dread and panic” (Truant 115). This line encompasses the heart of the purpose of the women in Johnny’s life, from Tatiana to Thumper to Kyrie and the many others. They are consumed and framed by his love and lust and his desire to think of anything other than *The Navidson Record* or his many breakdowns. This exemplifies a common role for female characters in media, simply existing to be loving, comforting, or pleasurable. At the heart of it, these women exist to be used by Johnny, and to progress his story from one trouble to the next. Thus, the hyper-sexualization of these women reveals not only a fault of the character but also of the author, as they are broken down to the effect of a conjunction in between two independent clauses or a bridge from city to city. They exist only to connect and move the story along. When analyzing these characters, however, it remains important to keep in mind that *House of Leaves* serves as criticism and commentary, and even though Johnny’s narrative stands separate from the analysis of *The Navidson Record*, it still exists in this context of academia and criticism. Johnny’s writing highlights the flaws in how many female characters are written. It is crucial to understand that Johnny is the author of those sections, and Danielewski is the author of Johnny (and perhaps Johnny is the author of Zampanó). Danielewski uses Johnny’s writing of the female characters in such a manner to criticize the widespread and deep flaws that create these one-dimensional and agency-lacking female characters in popular fiction.

While Johnny’s narrative underscores problematic tropes in the writing of female characters, Karen Navidson’s character and the treatment of her by the academic world surrounding *The Navidson Record* comments on how the academic world often exacerbates these

issues and breaks down female characters, even well-written ones, into a one-dimensional story progressing device as well. For much of the book, Karen exists as a fictional character such as Johnny, and thus Danielewski places her character into many of the same boxes as the women in Johnny's narrative. Karen is essentially an extension of her husband's character, an embodiment of the side of him that loves his family and wants to settle down, the antithesis of his desire to explore. Her sexuality is used to drive a rift between Navidson and his newfound domestic life. Danielewski describes her as irresistible to many of the men Navidson brings into his home. When Navidson catches her cheating with one of these men, it gives him further motivation to explore the house. Thus, Karen exists to be an extension of one half of Navidson's personality and the antithesis and antagonist of the other half. Danielewski even drives this point home in the names of the characters. Navidson is Navidson, or Navy, known by his last name rather than his first. He embodies all the Navidsons and their family, and Karen Navidson stands as only part of him and his story, undoubtedly his story, not hers. As the text points out, Karen and Navidson are joint-owners of the house, but "Navidson frequently implies that he is the sole proprietor" (Zampanó 385). Karen lives simply as a complement to Navidson, another female character to progress the story from one plot point to the next.

As the novel begins to reach its conclusion, Danielewski suddenly shifts away from this use of Karen's character as the "story-progressing woman" by pulling her character out of the narrative, giving her agency over the story, and critiquing the actual analysis of female characters rather than the manner in which they are written. When Karen returns to New York, separately from Navidson, she begins to become her own character, and even removes herself from the narrative entirely. This fourth-wall violating act gives Karen the agency previously denied to her. She no longer exists as a character in *The Navidson Record*; she exists as one of its creators,

compiling the segment “A Brief History of How I Love.” She no longer exists as an extension of Navidson, she exists as her own person, and this allows her to exert influence over the texts, both *The Navidson Record* and *House of Leaves*. Danielewski, however, is not finished with his criticism. In fact, he makes his sharpest criticisms of the text in Karen’s interviews with different critics of *The Navidson Record*. Karen talks to different experts and creators, hoping for feedback and advice on her work, but she mostly receives bitter and vulgar analysis of herself as a “character” and even crude sexual advances by the men and women she interviews. One professor ends his analysis by asking if Karen has “ever worn a maid’s outfit” (Zampanó 357). When Karen asks another critic about her fear of darkness, he rebukes her, remarking that the script was “written by a man,” then asked, “what self-respecting woman is afraid of the dark” (358). Even as she sits in front of them, these people reduce her to a trope and a sex symbol. Only the fictionalized Stephen King seems to acknowledge that the story might be real and that Karen might be real, though even he is said to be “[studying Karen],” just as every other critic studies her, and just as women are “studied” in the academic sense and in the real world (362). Karen is studied as a sexual object, as a character who must exist to be the device of a man, as someone who exists to be studied. These interviews present this in an unavoidable and disgusting manner, but they also reveal that this “studying” has been happening throughout the whole story, and it happens throughout literary criticism at large, and it happens in the real world with real women as well. Danielewski’s method of criticism — to stereotypically write a character then give that character the freedom to escape their stereotype only to immediately give the “intellectual world” the chance to push them back into the confines of the stereotype — works in a roundabout but effective way. He connects three different worlds, the world of fiction, the world of literary criticism, and the real world, and exemplifies how the treatment of women in

these spheres interact and overlap, specifically attacking the idea that women exist for the use of men.

Danielewski uses many other female characters in *House of Leaves* to critique the stereotypical treatment of women. There is Delia, the suffering child who exists only to be the guilty conscience of Navidson, and Johnny's mother who only serves as a painful reminder of his past and the source of his mental anguish. It may well be a flaw of Danielewski's writing that, in criticizing this stereotype, he must restrict his own female characters for this purpose. Perhaps it reveals another criticism of the systems that he writes in that he must do so. Perhaps this gives Danielewski too much credit, and he merely falls into the traps of these stereotypes even as he pushes back against them. In the end, it appears clear that Danielewski at least attempts to call out the literary and academic world for their treatment of female characters. Beyond this point, going any deeper into the criticism and Danielewski's mind risks entering a maze more winding and confusing than the labyrinth of the Navidson House itself. Instead, simply studying the use and treatment of female characters and people in *House of Leaves*, and giving Danielewski a little bit of the benefit of the doubt, reveals an example of how not to write a female character, a warning against falling into the same traps as the various authors of this text, and a call to authors, critics, and any person who picks up this text to actively fight back against the stereotypical pigeonholing of women in every realm of life, of the idea that women exist as mere accessories of men.

Works Cited

Danielewski, Mark. *House of Leaves*. Pantheon Books, 2000.

Zampanó and Johnny Truant. *House of Leaves; With Introduction and Notes by Johnny Truant*.
Pantheon Books, 2000.