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## **Navigating the labyrinth of House of leaves through a postmodern archetypal literary theory**

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NAVIGATING THE LABYRINTH OF *HOUSE OF LEAVES* THROUGH A  
POSTMODERN ARCHETYPAL LITERARY THEORY

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By

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Spring 2022

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## Chapter One Introduction

"The words that oscillate between nonsense and supreme meaning are the oldest and truest" - C.G. Jung

The Minotaur, born of lust and embodying deformity, was banished by King Minos of Crete into the center of a labyrinth constructed by the architect Daedalus. If we could look with empathy toward the creature, we might understand why this happened, but he is forever understood as the creature valiantly slain by the hero Theseus in Greek mythology. With a man's body and a bull's head, there is a rumor that he was the offspring of King Minos himself, and it is his ugliness that spurred Minos into hiding away the beast. The Minotaur was nursed by his mother Pasiphae before he began to eat humans; perhaps there was something more to him, beneath the exterior.

Minos's daughter Ariadne aided Theseus with a sword and a spool of thread. The thread would be used to help Theseus find his way back, lest he became lost in the twisting, turning trap of the labyrinth. Both the labyrinth and the Minotaur are central archetypal ideas present in Mark Z. Danielewski's postmodern opus *House of Leaves*. I will return to them in Chapter Three but I want to foreground this work with the story, both its tragedy (that of the deformed, banished child) and its heroism (the slaying of the beast by Theseus). Ultimately, this thesis is tackling the question, "What is a book?" It is an enormous question, one I believe to be posed by Danielewski's novel. It is, dare I say it, a *labyrinthine* question that provokes many responses, criticisms, and theoretical approaches.

The goal of this thesis is as follows: 1) First, I will present the history and context of archetypal literary theory. 2) Then, I will provide my own conception of archetypal literary theory which directly addresses the inherent contradictions, anxieties, and criticisms presented by the contemporary prevalence of postmodernism and post-structural theory. 3) From there, I will analyze Danielewski's *House of Leaves* through this revised archetypal theory, paying special attention to prevalent archetypes in the novel and their potential meanings. 4) Finally, I will conclude by looking ahead to the practicality of this theory, both as a tool of literary analysis and of both individual and social development.

The social and pedagogical utility of grand narratives has diminished under the close scrutiny of postmodernism. Postmodernism seeks to undermine existing structures and stories by exploring infinite meanings and subjective senses of truth; such an approach has dominated the academic environment for decades now. Some of the criticisms posed by postmodernists are significant (true too, in many respects). The structuralists, sometimes unwittingly, reinforced universalisms that late-20<sup>th</sup> century academia came to consider wrong, misguided, and even dangerous. Universalism, which is the theoretical approach that ideas can have universal applicability or understanding, eventually led to inherently dogmatic social hierarchies, some of which have caused genocidal disaster in the sociocultural landscape. Beyond the literary application of theory, there is inevitable social critique. Literature, as commodity and as art, is a social product, one that ripples and reflects throughout history. In this regard, the historicists and poststructuralists have aptly identified the socio-cultural significance of literature. Structuralism and post-structuralism, or modernity and postmodernity, are at an eternal

ideological struggle to be reconciled with one another. A new form of archetypal theory, drawing upon the earliest scholars (such as Jung, Frye, Neumann, and Campbell), and more recent, postmodern approaches (Hillman, Rowland, Dobson, and others) will help bridge that divide.

Though universalist, a new conception of archetypal theory should be viewed as the sum of many parts, wherein each part can be applied contextually in ways both socio-cultural and psychological. By granularizing archetypal theory, itself, the impact it can have will rejuvenate the quickly tiring breakdown of postmodern criticism in a productive fashion. Scholars will understand that universal archetypes can be understood as both objects “used by all” or “interpretable by everybody” *and* specific to socially constructed meanings contextualized by the cultures they belong to (Oliveira 18). The scholar will learn to assimilate Frye’s basic process identified in *Anatomy of Criticism*, while also assessing the archetype’s deconstructed form. This new view of archetypal theory will allow scholars to experience a text as *simultaneously* an individual, imaginative production and a contextual, historical, and constructed social document. A new approach to archetypal theory may not bridge the theoretical gap between structuralism and poststructuralism, but it will certainly act as a stepping stone toward a rejuvenating approach to literature that borrows from multiple perspectives.

However strongly postmodern theory chooses to deconstruct humanity’s grand narratives, there is use for a kind of coordinating principle. Eventually, academia will enter Tom Turner’s “post-postmodern” (Turner 28-30), where there will be nowhere left to turn but toward the universal signifiers that are inherent in literature. Postmodernity will be forced to contend with these ideas now that the very notion of truth itself has been

ripped to pieces. While this approach is useful in interrogating the structures, institutions, and societies that influence our thinking and behavior, there inevitably comes the question of “what now?” This does not mean postmodernism should be tossed out, just as it is unfruitful to toss an archetypal approach to literature. There is a way forward, I believe, in which criticisms and anxieties about both theoretical approaches may be contended with at the same time, so that we may build something new.

*House of Leaves* by Mark Z. Danielewski presents a solid case for archetypal readings of postmodern texts. Published in 2000, the novel became a cult classic due to its aggressive complexity and typographic messiness. Text bleeds onto multiple pages, some text is blocked or shaped in various ways, and occasionally pages contain a single word. The novel is a stacked narrative containing multiple narrators and plotlines at once. On the exterior, the novel is nearly impenetrable and difficult to consume or understand for the average reader, but underneath there is story that is fundamentally archetypal, directly engaging with images and archetypes such as the labyrinth, the shadow, anima and animus, and even the hero. These archetypes point toward a more stable sense of meaning within the novel’s inherent instability. Through my analysis of *House of Leaves*, the analytical utility of a postmodern approach to archetypal theory will prove fruitful and productive.

Other scholars have understandably pursued the postmodern, deconstructive aspect of the novel, which is clearly present in nearly every page. Ridvan Askin describes the message of the novel as, “The more you dig, the closer you come to the building blocks . . . at the same time, the more you dig, the more these building blocks tend to vanish until one is surrounded by nothing but empty darkness” (173). The suggestion

here is that what lies at the center of the labyrinth of this story is *nothing*, and that the project of deconstruction will reveal a void within the puzzle of existence. Similarly, Will Slocombe says that “The House symbolizes absence and to live inside absence is impossible” (92). Because the structure of the novel is indicative of the house itself, scholars have assumed that absence becomes the meaning—a nihilistic embrace of the void. Sean Travers connects this idea back to postmodernism by writing, “the house undermines discourses and principles used to make sense of the world such as geography and time... the house is characterized by a sense of emptiness and meaninglessness and is thereby at times literally devoid of these entities” (68). These scholars have pointed out how both the novel and the house consistently attempt to undermine their own existence as a practice of Derridean deconstruction. While this is true, my analysis understands the postmodern angle of the novel as fundamentally archetypal; it is directly related to Jungian concepts of individuation and the death-rebirth myth present within the image of the labyrinth.

While the nihilistic approach to the novel’s meaning is common and present, some scholars have attempted to reexamine what the postmodern approach really means for its characters and its readers. Timothy J. Welsh argues that “rather than fall into nihilism, the novel’s mixed realism challenges the reader to examine our responses to the fragmented, incomplete versions of reality on which we increasingly rely” (106). This sort of analysis is a key shift away from viewing the novel as merely a postmodern blackhole—that there *is* some sort of method to the madness. What I have taken from Welsh’s approach is the idea that the postmodern anxieties present in the novel are asking the reader to interrogate the nature of existence itself—not to find nothing, but to find

*something*. Along this line of thinking, Katherine Cox concludes that, “From a site of mythic contestation and architectural difficulty, Danielewski reveals a current labyrinth whose structural bonds denote fatiguing impositions of familial ties. Yet these denigrating . . . alliances are softened by the walking of the labyrinth . . . through the transformative qualities of the structure” (14). This analysis contributes to Welsh’s shift away from nihilistic meaninglessness and toward a more stable or present sense of meaning. Unlike Welsh, Cox manages to identify the mythic aspect of this novel, which I will take up, as well as the connection to family and trauma. What results is a merging of the postmodern and the mythically universal. The novel’s representation of archetypal ideas like the labyrinth are particular and individual, but nonetheless point toward a pattern of storytelling.

The question remains: how *exactly* does one approach postmodern literature and theory with an archetypal lens? While I will expand on this in the next chapter, a brief summary of relevant research shows that scholars have been attempting to rectify the problem of postmodernity and the universality of archetypes since the 1980s. Susan Rowland’s book *Jung: A Feminist Revision* was instrumental for me in understanding how Jungian ideas have transformed over time, as theory evolved into directly combating and questioning the grand narratives that archetypes suggest. The *Journal of Jungian Scholarly Studies* has consistently published works of literary analysis that attempt to reconcile with the postmodern criticism of archetypal theory. Darrell Dobson’s piece, “Archetypal Literary Theory in the Postmodern Era,” has greatly influenced this thesis by proposing a conjunction between the psychological ideas of Jung, the literary application of Northrop Frye, and the postmodern revision of Susan Rowland. Fundamentally,

Dobson, along with Rowland, has made a clear distinction between *archetype* and *archetypal image*, which transforms the way we think about and understand archetypal theory as a literary practice. Rather than treating archetypes as somehow fundamentally universal and knowable, these scholars have gone back to Jung's writings and understood that archetypes are in fact *unknowable*. Not only that; they are also dependent on things like culture, history, and social environment, all primary frames of analysis for postmodern and historicist critics alike. This delineation between archetype and archetypal image will form a foundational basis for the revision of archetypal theory that I propose, and it will also inform *how* exactly I will analyze *House of Leaves* by treating archetypal images as external, postmodern analysis, while the archetype is an internal, psychological phenomenon.

With my analysis of *House of Leaves*, the goal is to move beyond merely identifying archetypes and their related images. This is a key part of the process, but it is the close examination and analysis of these images that constitutes an archetypal theory that is able to coexist with historical, poststructuralist, and postmodern readings of the text. For instance, the labyrinth is a key archetypal image in the text, one I will focus on, but I will also examine the *different* representations of this image in the novel and how they compare to each other. Additionally, I will explore what this archetypal image points toward, both psychologically and philosophically. Ultimately, this new archetypal theory will point toward a humanistic focus on self-development of both the individual and the community of readers. In order to do that, one must resist merely identifying archetypes and move toward understanding them; this includes their cultural and historical particularity, which is what a contemporary postmodern reading requires of us as

scholars. We simply cannot abandon the development of postmodern thinking over the past few decades. Instead, we must find a way forward. Through the development of this theory, and through the analysis of the novel, a path forward will become clearer and more present—a path to walk through in the confusing labyrinth of literary theory.

A literary scholar living in the postmodern age can use this new conception of archetypal theory to fully encounter both the universal and historically finite presences in our world cultures and literatures. As a byproduct, the scholar's new understanding of what an archetype really is can impact their cultural surroundings by treating literature as not merely a reflection of the human condition, but as the human condition itself. By acknowledging this, literary theory is a large step closer to a coordinating principle. Through my archetypal analysis of *House of Leaves*, you will see that such an approach will foster a humanistic reading of even the most apparently nihilistic texts. The question of what lies in the center of the postmodern labyrinth becomes a question of life and the pursuit of truth. The question points toward something higher and more unconscious than the standard materialistic or historical reading.

My goal is not to revert to some elusive “golden age” of literary criticism. I am not suggesting that there are “good old days” we must return to. Instead, I aim to merge the past, present, and future scholarship on archetypes and archetypal images, so that we may dispense with the universalistic pitfalls of structuralism, while also attempting to move beyond the spiraling deconstruction of postmodernism, which presents no end in sight. Much of the academic discourse in the humanities is currently focused on the external and the superficial (and I do not mean that derogatorily). Our primary concern is the development of the society through social justice reforms, activism, and greater

awareness of diverse perspectives and experiences. This approach forces us to become laser-focused on the socio-political reality that undergirds the literature we read. Through the use of feminist theory, Marxist theory, critical race theory, and poststructuralism, we are tasked to analyze the frame of society, its artificiality and construction.

A new form of archetypal literary theory could achieve similar goals through the deep analysis of archetypal images as rhetorical devices. The new archetypal scholar can ask questions like, “What is this particular archetypal image saying about society during the 18<sup>th</sup> century?” or “What does the development of this archetype over time suggest about how a culture evolves?” But we can also view them as manifestations of something truly archetypal, underneath the exterior and within the deep facets of the collective unconscious. This approach encourages the development of the individual first, then the development of the society after. Analyzing literature archetypally asks the scholar to look inward, then outward. Archetypal theory developed out of depth psychology, a field that embodies the very idea of introspection and individuation. Ultimately, Jungian concepts are an extension of therapy and personal development, something that archetypal literary theory produces if done correctly. This is important because there is a personal element of literature—the engagement and interplay between the reader and the writer. Everything we read transmits images and ideas that are beyond our conscious reasoning and control, and the analysis of archetypes forces us to contend with those images. It moves *beyond* merely identifying an archetype through its related image. Anyone can read a book and acknowledge a pattern they notice from other stories. The task of archetypal theory would be to *analyze* those patterns by considering their

rhetorical purpose, their cultural meaning(s), and the subsequent repetition and reinforcement of those images.

Perhaps most crucially, I will argue that the process of reading itself is an archetypal one—characteristic of transformative rituals. Reading, and by extension storytelling, is an archetypal process that inhabits shared traits. Drawing primarily from Mircea Eliade and Joseph Campbell, my addition of ritual and transformation to archetypal theory will force scholars to recognize many stories as *stories of transformation*, both internally and externally. So that even in the most labyrinthine, complex, and aggressively postmodern texts (such as *House of Leaves*), there is an underlying archetypal structure that, upon closer analysis, reveals new discoveries and new mysteries about the human experience and the society surrounding it. This leads further into a particularly humanistic approach to understanding literary theory, in which the process of reading and subsequent analysis becomes a catalyst for real social and individual change. I acknowledge the potential leap one must make to understand reading as a collective or archetypal act. However, my analysis of *House of Leaves* will show this concept in action, within literature, as the novel points toward the transformative, cyclical nature of art and literature being the central theme of the book.

My primary argument regarding *House of Leaves* is that it consciously uses archetypal images (such as the labyrinth, the Minotaur, the shadow, etc.) as rhetorical devices suggesting something hidden beneath its harsh exterior. I picked *House of Leaves* as my primary text of analysis because it is a quintessential postmodern text specifically designed to frustrate and block out careful analysis. Danielewski is highly attuned to the possibilities of academic and literary analysis upon the work and has seemingly made it

impenetrable for both the common reader and the English scholar due to its typographical design, stacked narrative, multiple narrators, separate storylines, and its mixture of dense academic prose with stream-of-consciousness. Attempting to do a structuralist reading of such a postmodern work may seem like a foolish task, but ultimately, I will prove that archetypal literary theory holds enormous value for *all* texts. The gap between structuralism and poststructuralism will inch closer to something like a bridge, rather than an enormous chasm. The successful and fruitful archetypal analysis of such a dense work that is often *satirizing* the kind of academic writing and thinking present in this thesis will prove the validity and utility of this conception of archetypal literary theory in the postmodern era of the humanities.

But then, we must return to the question of “What is a book?” As I said earlier, the question defies all solid answers, just as *House of Leaves* does, which is precisely why I think this is the question the novel asks of the reader. We can think of a novel as a grand narrative (or, as a structure), and Danielewski, through style, form, and function, is attempting to reveal the artificiality of the novel, the *construction* of it. But the question reaches even further than that; when the artificiality of the novel is revealed, what else is there? When we have reached the center of the labyrinth, what do we find? Do we find the Minotaur, waiting to be slain? Or do we find nothing, the postmodern blackhole? I think the answer to these questions lies directly within the novel. We shall use archetypal literary theory as the sword and the spool of thread to guide us through the maze of the labyrinth, toward something deeper, toward the center.

In the next chapter, I will examine the history of archetypal literary theory and review the recent scholarly developments in the field. From there, I will explicate my

own conception of this theory based on the prior works. Then, in Chapter Three, I will apply these concepts through a postmodern, archetypal reading of *House of Leaves*. In the concluding chapter, I ruminate on the potential of a postmodern archetypal literary theory and look forward to its practical uses and effect on literary studies.

## Chapter Two Bridging the Gap: A Postmodern Archetypal Literary Theory

### An Introduction to Archetypal Theory

Tackling an entire theory with a decades-long history requires separation into two distinct parts (or “eras”) of research. The first part is what I have termed “The Foundational Era,” which starts in 1912 with the publication of Carl Jung’s *Psychology of the Unconscious* and continues until 1977. I have picked 1977 as the end of this era because it was the beginning of the reappraisal and common popularity of Joseph Campbell’s work upon the release of *Star Wars*. There is a distinct gap in significant research related to archetypal literary theory, and in many cases, the gap is still present (a problem I am attempting to rectify through this thesis). But there is a movement of scholars dedicated to revisiting archetypal literary theory. This process began with the rise of feminist approaches to archetypal theory, one of which is *Feminist Archetypal Theory: Interdisciplinary Re-Visions of Jungian Thought* by Estella Lauter and Carol Schreier Rupprecht in 1985. This work has continued into the present by scholars like Susan Rowland with *Jung: A Feminist Revision* (2002) and *Jungian Literary Criticism* (2018). This period from the 1980s to the present I have termed “The Revisionist Era” because it primarily consists of these new scholars grappling with the postmodern conundrums, criticisms, and difficulties presented by the work of the foundationalists. First, I will explicate the base knowledge and understanding of archetypal literary theory as established by the earliest scholars. Then, I will review the literature from the past few decades that is most relevant to this newer, postmodern archetypal theory.

The father of all this work regarding archetypes and the unconscious is Carl Gustav Jung, a Swiss psychoanalyst and the primary thinker behind many psychological concepts still being discussed today such as the collective unconscious, introversion/extraversion, anima/animus, and archetypes. Before Jung began using the term “archetype”, which comes from the Greek *archein* (original) and *typos* (pattern), he used the phrase “primordial image.” From the beginning, there is a suggestion that archetypes are somehow beneath or beyond our understanding, and that they are unfathomably old. The genesis of this idea appears in “The Structure of the Psyche,” in which Jung elaborates on the collective unconscious, which he says “appears to consist of mythological motifs or primordial images” (39). From here, we derive the idea that archetypes exist separate of consciousness (or knowability). They exist deep within, so far deep that we cannot firmly *know* them. Instead, archetypes are projected as archetypal images. In the same section, Jung states, “the whole of mythology could be taken as a sort of projection of the collective unconscious.” Stories, dreams, myths, rituals, and art are all, in the Jungian sense, seen as projections of the unconscious onto the conscious mind.

One of the earliest uses of the term “archetype” appears in the same essay, in which Jung directly identifies archetypes as existing in the unconscious. He says the unconscious is “the source of the instinctual forces of the psyche and of the forms or categories that regulate them, namely the archetypes” (45). There is a key association with the Jungian concept of “instinct” in this claim. For Jung, archetypes are instinctual, meaning they do not appear or exist as particular rhetorical concepts or tools; rather, they come to us without conscious meaning or purpose. The unconscious mind contains forces

that are instinctually driving us, and we are not always aware of them. Jung makes another association between instinct and archetypes in “Instinct and the Unconscious” when he says, “Instinct is essentially collective . . . universal and regularly occurring phenomenon . . . Archetypes have this quality in common with the instincts and are likewise collective phenomena” (53). This is where Jung derives the idea that archetypes are “collective”—that they are universal. Because Jung views instinct as a collective phenomenon and archetypes as inherently instinctual, the logical conclusion for Jung is that archetypes are also universal.

There is a key distinction to make between archetypes and archetypal images. As Jung explains, archetypes are fundamentally unknowable, abstract, unconscious ideas, concepts, characters, and stories. They are manifested and represented to us as archetypal images, which are present in dreams (where Jung first discovered and explored them), myths, and stories, primarily. In his autobiography *Memories, Dreams, Reflections*, Jung describes archetypes as “a priori structural forms of the stuff of consciousness” and that they “do not in any sense represent things as they are in themselves, but rather the forms of which things can be perceived and conceived.” In this sense, the archetype does not exist tangibly until it is represented as an image, a story, a dream, etc. Archetypes “account only for the collective component of perception,” not *perception itself* (347). The other aspect Jung clarifies in this book is the fundamental *unknowability* of archetypes. He says, “But insofar as the archetypes act upon me, they are real and actual to me, even though I do not know what their real nature is” (352). This is crucial because it suggests that archetypes can only be known in their conscious projections and manifestations *not* their original forms. With this separation between the *a priori*

archetype and the constructed image, it is easy to see why many subsequent scholars struggled to parse out the difference and craft a wholly applicable form of archetypal theory to practice on literature.

Later scholars sought to adapt Jung's claims into the realm of literary scholarship. The most notable of these scholars is the Canadian literary critic Northrop Frye. Both Jung and Frye were influenced heavily by James Frazer's foundational text, *The Golden Bough*, which could be considered the first piece of archetypal criticism; it proved the apparent existence of at least "one vast multivalent archetype: the figure of the dying-rising god and its annual resurrection" (Gill 397). This archetype is recognizable in nearly every world religion and mythos. Frye even directly labeled Frazer's work as "an essay on the ritual content of naïve drama," as opposed to strictly a piece of anthropological study (109). While Northrop Frye argues that literature is "clearly as much a technique of communication as assertive verbal structures are," he still does not fully engage with Jung in a substantive manner. Nevertheless, in *Anatomy of Criticism*, Frye offers one of the first and most substantial examples of archetypal criticism.

Even before the rise of postmodern thinking throughout the 1960s and 1970s, Frye was already identifying potential problems with this resistance toward grand narratives or categories of analysis. During his time, it was the cultural critics who began to toy with historicity and sociological readings of texts. He writes that literary criticism "seems to be badly in need of a coordinating principle, a central hypothesis which, like the theory of evolution in biology, will see the phenomena it deals with as parts of a whole" (16). He even flat-out rejects the idea that there could be a sociological analysis of literature (19). Frye believed that there could be a "literal understanding" of texts as

well as a symbolic one (77). Because he is a formalist, Frye wants to make clear that while literature contains “life, reality, experience, nature, imaginative truth, social conditions,” it only *contains* them because, “literature itself is not made out of these things” (97). He describes archetypal criticism as being primarily focused on “literature as a social fact and mode of communication,” which is a deeply structural way of understanding archetypes. Northrop Frye is unable to make the distinction between archetypes and archetypal images, which presents a large problem when trying to reconcile Frye’s ideas with postmodern criticisms. The first task of a postmodern archetypal scholar is to take the base of Frye’s claims and merge them with the Jungian separation of archetype and archetypal image.

Nonetheless, Frye still views archetypes as containing both universal and culturally particular values. But he deviates from Jung in the sense that he does not believe (or at least, explicitly believe) that archetypes are unconscious and unknowable. Instead, Frye believed that “most archetypes have to be established by critical inspection alone” (101). This would presuppose those archetypes are, in a sense, created by the scholar; they are identified and analyzed on their own merits, and do not hold a deeper psychological connection. From this idea, the archetypal critic is pushed to read archetypes as rhetorical tools for analysis and observation, as opposed to holding significant, discoverable meaning. However, he does acknowledge that archetypes are “associative clusters, and differ from signs in being complex variables” (102). This acknowledgement shows an understanding of the cultural and historical particularity of archetypal images. So, while Frye is not using the term “archetypal image,” there is a

present awareness that the patterns of literature and myth are uniquely dependent on the variability of individual experience and social environment

A key development and connection Frye makes is literature and ritual. He says that “the narrative aspect of literature is a recurrent act of symbolic communication: in other words a ritual. Narrative is studied by the archetypal critic as ritual or imitation of human action as a whole” (105). This statement argues, then, that because archetypes are recurrent and repetitious, they should be viewed as imitations or mimicry of human behavior. This idea connects back to Jung’s conception of archetypes as instinctual because it suggests that they are an inherent part of human behavior and psyche. The “ritual” aspect is where archetypes find their manifestation, but again, Frye does not explicitly come to this conclusion. He later says, “Myth, therefore, not only gives meaning to ritual and narrative to dream: it is the identification of ritual and dream” (107). This statement further shows an awareness of myth and archetype as being fundamental to human experience and existing, at least, somewhere at the base of our psychic processes, as Jung would believe. Because Northrop Frye lacks the proper knowledge or vocabulary of Jungian thought, these distinctions and nuances are not made. Therefore, it is now the contemporary postmodern archetypal scholar’s responsibility to make these connections.

The early archetypal theorists were primarily concerned with identifying archetypal images as a cohesive pattern of worldwide storytelling. While Joseph Campbell could not be described as an archetypal theorist/critic in the formal sense, much of the work he did *is* identifying and analyzing archetypes. He makes direct reference to Jung’s idea of “archetypal images” in the introduction to *The Hero with A Thousand*

*Faces*, his most well-known and popularly read work (17). This acknowledgment of the term “archetypal image” is a major development from Frye’s understanding. The key concept Campbell introduces to archetypal theory is the idea of the *monomyth*, or the universal story, or more colloquially understood as “the hero’s journey.” Campbell was also primarily concerned with the practical application and understanding of archetypes for individual and social development. He did not view them as merely stories or characters; he believed the monomyth to be a pathway toward Jungian individuation and fulfillment. In that sense, Campbell is the first popular scholar to acknowledge and understand archetypes as a powerful and potent source for literary analysis. However, he is dogmatic in his approach, due to his insistence on a universal monomyth, which is susceptible to postmodern criticism.

It is less important to understand the structural component of Campbell’s theory and more crucial to dissect the psychological and philosophical underpinnings. The “hero” is the primary archetype that Campbell analyzes in *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*. He writes that the “hero is the man of self-achieved submission.” The ultimate conclusion from the hero’s journey is that “only birth can conquer death—the birth, not of the old thing again, but of something new” (16). Here, Campbell is continuing with the fundamental archetypal death-rebirth story that early scholars claim all myths contain. Here, the pattern of inward/outward becomes paramount to understanding how to read stories archetypally. Campbell’s claim is that all stories (and I am using the word “story” interchangeably with “myth” here) are, in a sense, stories of crossing the threshold or stories of transformation. He labels this underlying structure as “separation-initiation-return” (30). The postmodern archetypal scholar should be hesitant to agree with

Campbell's claims of universality, but this description of stories being inherently transformative and archetypal is unavoidable.

Something that contemporary, postmodern scholars have mostly avoided is the connection between archetypes, storytelling, and ritual. Campbell, like Frye, also acknowledges the ritual component of myth. He writes, "there is something in these initiatory images so necessary to the psyche that if they are not supplied from without, through myth and ritual, they will have to be announced again, through dream, from within" (12). Here, Campbell evokes a similar idea presented by Mircea Eliade that rituals are identifying with and practicing something that always came before—they are eternally recurring. The connection with myth means that storytelling itself is a ritual act that is consistently repeating patterns, ideas, and images, which is where Campbell derives the idea of the hero's journey. It is once again pertinent to notice that Campbell is primarily concerned with the development of the individual in society, not with analyzing literature, as he says that Jung viewed the archetypal images of both mythology and religion as serving "positive, life-furthering ends" (13). Campbell is fascinated with the possibility of integrating myth and archetype into our personal conscious psyche as a means toward wholeness and peace, which is a deviation from the Jungian idea. Jung understood archetypes such as the "shadow" as necessary for challenging our own conception of the Self. This is a rupturing, painful process—one that many archetypal death-rebirth stories focus on. So, while I acknowledge and use Campbell's understanding of the ritual component of stories, I will avoid the monomyth and the wholeness idea with my analysis of *House of Leaves*. Instead, I will focus on how the

postmodern anxiety and confusion of the novel leads to Jungian individuation, while also presenting an archetypal, Campbellian death-rebirth story.

While Jung and Campbell are similar in that they seek individuation, Jung believed that archetypes could also reveal our most repressed or hidden selves—the archetype of the “shadow”. Northrop Frye, on the other hand, is not concerned with individuation or personal development at all; his concern is with literary analysis and criticism, but I think there is room to make a connection between these three disparate applications and understandings of archetypes. They all connect back to Jung’s original ideas. With this base understanding of Jung, Frye, and Campbell, the postmodern archetypal scholar will be able to recognize what concepts should be kept and what ideas should be dispensed with. From here, it is necessary to review how these concepts have evolved in recent decades with the revisionist scholars.

It would seem impossible (or at the very least, difficult) to consider the assimilation of a new archetypal theory in the postmodern age of the humanities, in which the primary goal is to undermine, criticize, and analyze grand narratives and the power they hold over societies and cultures. The very base philosophy of poststructuralism argues that there can be *no such thing* as a grand narrative, universal story, or objective reality. These are important, valuable, and enticing criticisms that *still* must be engaged with to this day. There has been a small but important group of scholars over the last few decades that have attempted to reconcile some of these problems. These scholars have contended with the separation between archetype and archetypal image, primarily, so that will be the focus of this review. Additionally, the revisionist scholars

have built upon Jungian concepts as a path toward individuation and postmodern analysis.

Early on, revisionist scholars have attempted to separate the archetype from the archetypal image, even if they did not yet have the terminology in place. In his 1985 piece “Healing Fiction,” James Hillman brings forth the importance of story and narrative within Jungian analysis when he says, “Entering one’s interior story takes a courage similar to starting a novel. We have to engage with persons whose autonomy may radically alter . . . our thoughts and feelings.” These “persons” Hillman discusses are unconscious archetypes being communicated through story, and he connects them back to Jung’s encounter with active imagination, in which he created “characters” he would speak to in his daydreams. Hillman argues that it is this merging of the real and unreal that “threads into a *mythos*, a plot” (131). Here, we have Hillman bringing forth the literariness of archetypes and their significance in narrative, which suggests that they can be analyzed independently or as a part of narrative form. Hillman’s claim is the beginning of a separation of archetype from archetypal image because it argues for individual analysis and deconstruction of stories that are representative of Jungian archetypes. He later writes that we could read stories “with an archetypal eye toward their form.” Instead of focusing on the abstract concepts or universal ideas, we could analyze the “rhythm, the language, the sentence structures, the metaphors . . . form, too, is archetypal.” This is a radically significant idea because it would reveal a potential rhetorical purpose and understanding of archetypal images that could be understood in poststructuralist lenses. The question would not be “what are the commonalities?” Rather, the question would turn to “what are the particular differences between these

archetypes, across cultures and societies?” Hillman argues that “were the story written another way, by another hand, from another perspective, it would sound different and therefore *be a different story*” (136). So, even if there *are* universal qualities of archetypes *as such*, the images will be radically different, and those differences are worth analyzing and understanding.

Later postmodern scholars would take up this separation and make it more explicit, identifying the much clearer terms of “archetype” and “archetypal image.” The first and most significant postmodern thinkers to do this were feminist archetypal theorists. Susan Rowland’s book *Jung: A Feminist Revision* presents a comprehensive overview and analysis of feminist scholars who have taken up Jung’s ideas and attempted to assimilate them into feminist and postmodern readings. Once again, we see the revisionists intensely pushing for a reclamation of Jung’s separation between archetype and archetypal image. Rowland writes, “An archetype is an inborn *potential* for a certain sort of image,” whereas the archetypal images themselves “reflect the conscious experiences of the person as a subject in history, culture and time” (29). Here, Rowland makes the case that archetypal images are influenced and determined by subjectivity, despite the *a priori* potential of archetypes being universal. She later says, “archetypes *make* the person by representing themselves in the person’s life” (32). This is achieved through archetypal images. Rowland does not completely rectify some of the postmodern problems presented by Jung’s thinking. She admits clearly, “archetypes *are* structuralist in suggesting an underlying (if unfathomable) code” (102). However, she does *begin* to reconcile this problem by suggesting that “Archetypal images are created in a dialogue between biological inheritance and culture” (108). This means that there is not a distinct

separation between the archetype and the image because the two are coexistent and variably dependent upon culture and experience. She also argues for a “postmodern Jungian feminism” that would “pay attention to the act of reading: to read fiction is to submerge and reimagine subjectivity through narratives not claiming the authority of truth” (151). In nearly all of the revisionist scholars’ work, we see a focus on the reading process and the effect archetypal images have on the subjectivity of the reader and author. By understanding the reading process as inherently subjective, a merging of archetypal ideas with postmodernism is possible.

In revisionist scholarship, we find writers attempting to think of Jungian, archetypal ideas in postmodern terms. Michael Vannoy Adams draws a direct comparison between Hillman and Jacques Derrida’s deconstructionism. He discusses Hillman’s separation of “concept” and “image,” which he views as identical to Derrida’s development of Ferdinand Saussure and Charles Sanders Peirce’s terms “signified” and “signifier.” Adams summarizes Hillman’s claim as: “Analysts have . . . opposed the concept to the image and privileged one over the other. They have regarded the concept as primary . . . the image as secondary” (241). He later concludes that Hillman’s preference of the image over the concept means that “interpretation is thus simplification, an exclusion of those imaginative possibilities that Hillman says are so much more important to the dreamer” (245). The focus on image over concept, in literary terms, would force the reader to contend with the differences and the logic of oppositions. Adams says, “Derrida and Hillman would reverse the logic of oppositions and the order of priorities” (248), which have consistently focused on the signified over the signifier

(the concept over the image). In Jungian terms, the concept is the a priori archetype; the image is the archetypal image.

By acknowledging the difference between an archetype and its related image, revisionist scholars have found a new home for archetypal theory in the postmodern humanities. Most importantly, some revisionist scholars believe that the base ideas from Jung and Frye already contain postmodern ideas, which should lead the contemporary theorist to reconsider these original ideas. Darrell Dobson's piece "Archetypal Literary Theory in the Postmodern Era" is one of the most recent and succinct summaries of revisionist thinking when it comes to archetypal theory. Dobson engages in a direct criticism and conversation with Northrop Frye's work. He writes that "Frye's work was and is criticized as hopelessly modernist," but there is room for "postmodern critique regarding the role of ideology in literary analysis" (2). He acknowledges that Frye only means "a recurring pattern" when he uses the word archetype. Dobson explicates Frye's use of the word "ideology" as an "applied mythology," and that Frye prioritizes myth over ideology because it is external (3). Like Rowland, Dobson acknowledges the inevitable postmodern critique that archetypal theory *must* consider that which is universally shared (6). But also, like Rowland, he places emphasis on the difference between archetype and archetypal image. The significant addition and revision here is the premise that "Frye's assertions that mythology and ideology can be separated were an attempt to distinguish between the archetype and the archetypal image but . . . he lacked the depth of Jungian archetypal theory to articulate his distinction" (7). Both Rowland and Dobson argue that these foundational texts and concepts contain elements of postmodern thinking in them already, and it is the job of the archetypal scholar to bring

out those postmodern elements in clear view. Of Susan Rowland, Dobson writes, “Her optimism regarding Jungian thought derives at least in part due to his subtle formulation of archetypal theory as shared yet situated, political yet apolitical, and androgynous yet gendered” (11). In other words, the unknowability and instability of Jung’s a priori archetypes provide proper grounding for a postmodern view of archetypal theory. He makes a similar case as Hillman when Dobson writes, “it is in comparing the differences between the particularities of this work and those of previous manifestations of an archetypal image that interest and meaning is found for the archetypal critic” (14). Again, the analysis of archetypal images requires a use of Derrida’s deconstruction in order to make meaning of them.

This review of archetypal theory is admittedly limited (for brevity’s sake). There are many other scholars who have contributed to both the foundationalist period and the revisionist. But I have chosen the ones who have made, I believe, the most significant progress toward a contemporary understanding and practical use of archetypal literary theory. With this grounding, we may begin to understand how a newer, postmodern conception of archetypal theory could synthesize all these ideas into a unified, meaningful whole.

#### **A. The Great Mother: Setting the Stage for Imaginative Discourse**

One of the essential breaks Jung made from Freud was his insistence that the psyche contains unconscious elements even deeper than what can already be deduced from an apparent subconscious. He took it a step further by naming a separate, more socialized plane of unconsciousness, one called the “collective unconscious,” which “appears to consist of mythological motifs or primordial images” (Jung, *The Structure of*

*the Psyche* 39). This observation is the birthplace of archetypal literary theory, for it is the claim that “mythology could be taken as a sort of projection of the collective unconscious” that has eluded both formalist and materialist theorists alike for well over a century. Anyone with even a passive knowledge of sociology would question how *all* of humankind could come to understand the same symbols and archetypes across time and space. It seems improbable.

Yet, comparative mythology (primarily the exhaustive canon of Joseph Campbell) proves this claim to be true enough to not disregard it entirely. Northrop Frye’s *Anatomy of Criticism* seeks to adapt these claims into the realm of literary scholarship. Jung and Frye were inspired by James Frazer’s *The Golden Bough*. While not inherently a piece of archetypal theory, the work does argue for the prevalence of “one vast multivalent archetype: the figure of the dying-rising god and its annual resurrection” (Gill 397). This is an essential archetype present in many stories. A postmodern archetypal theory resists this type of universal categorization. But Frye’s description of *The Golden Bough* proves useful. He calls it, “an essay on the ritual content of naïve drama,” as opposed to strictly a piece of anthropological study (109). The new archetypal scholar must reckon with this discovery. Understanding the archetypes as products of the unconscious still leaves space for a culturally and historically informed reading practice that simultaneously does not discount the presence of cross-cultural archetypal frameworks.

One way to conceptualize a postmodern archetypal literary theory is to acknowledge the inherently social aspect of literature and storytelling. Conceiving of literature as social fact means understanding its ritual component. *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* is, despite its cultural reputation, more than *just* an identification of

stages along the so-called “hero’s journey.” Campbell really *believed* the mythologies he read, even beyond their structural design. He describes the story as an act of social ritual, one that serves to individuate (to use a Jungian term) the person’s place and purpose in the social order in which they live (Campbell, *Myths to Live By* 45). Frye also acknowledges the ritual process of literature: “the narrative aspect of literature is a recurrent act of symbolic communication: in other words, a ritual” (105). The production and consumption of literature is entrenched in ritual practice because it is recurrent, cyclical (in the sense that those who consume art can also produce it), and narrative, fostering a symbolic language a community uses. However, as post-structuralism has aptly excoriated, this process is entirely dependent on the contextual social environment into which the individual is born. To be sure, this is not lost on any of our archetypal theorists, but they do not always properly contend with these problems. The new archetypal scholar recognizes the ritual process of reading and storytelling as both a mythological, archetypal action *and* a cultural practice. So, instead of declaring the universality of *content* in texts (as our original archetypal theorists do), the new scholar will identify the universality of a shared ritual process that is informed by cultural and mythological archetypes. The reading process, which is inherently psychological, becomes a reflection of the mythological rebirth. A reader comes out of a freshly mythological text *reborn*, in a sense. This process is naturally reflected cross-culturally, as well as in the stories themselves.

The psyche’s imaginative properties *must* intentionally reflect these themes of rebirth and suffering, romance, tragedy, comedy, and drama, because that is its chief purpose. We can tie the human psyche’s creative impulse to Jung’s conception of

intuition, or instinct: “instinctive action is characterized by an unconsciousness of the motive behind it . . . Only those unconscious processes which are inherited, and occur uniformly and regularly, can be called instinctive” (Jung, *Instinct and the Unconscious* 51). Jung correlates intuition with archetypes; one could frame archetypes as instinctive, imaginative manifestations of the unconscious. How can this occur in a literary sense? The semioticians have relentlessly studied the manufacturing of signs and their related signifiers. One could understand these in psychological, archetypal terms, however. The easiest way to explain these postmodern ideas archetypally is through the crucial separation of archetype and archetypal image. The postmodern archetypal scholar recognizes that archetypal images are conscious, external, known manifestations of unconscious, internal, unknown archetypes.

Read this phrase: *The Great Mother*.

Upon reading it, you might have instantly conjured an image in your head. What that image is, precisely, is dependent upon your individual experience, imagination, and environment. It is obvious that the Great Mother is not a cultural or mythological archetype that is tied to any one culture. Yet, the reader always has an image of this archetype, no matter who or what appears to them. The mental image, a product of the psyche’s imaginative process, becomes a symbol of its own, informed by the reader’s prior encounter with what the Great Mother could or would look like. Archetypal theory can read this sentence as both a product of the unconscious *and* a culturally informed, socially constructed image. Once the phrase “the Great Mother” is written, the reader has engaged in a telepathic process between the reader and the writer, in which archetypal images are being constructed by the reader in response to the writer’s transmission of the

archetype. Even if the author describes in great detail who the Great Mother is, the reader still has their own image. Regardless, a postmodern archetypal theory would require the scholar to pay special attention to the way in which the writer constructs such an image.

This, in essence, is the patterned process that a new archetypal theory could seek to engage the reader with. The reader begins to think about why or how archetypal images are formed individually and collectively, in ways both harmful and beneficial. This ties back to the shared ritual process described earlier in which the *act* of reading becomes essential to the archetypal mode. Frye identifies the movement of “death and rebirth” as an essential archetypal pattern (158). The postmodern archetypal scholar would recognize this as an oversimplification, because Frye considers this archetype’s presence but not its *purpose*. To fully engage with archetypal theory in the postmodern age, the scholar must examine *how* the archetypal image appears, not merely declare that it exists. This is the beginning of an imaginative discourse, one based on the analysis of instinct and unconscious knowing. The disruptive undermining of grand narratives from postmodern theory can be accomplished alongside an archetypal reading of texts. The reader embraces their creative impulse, and a new key has been unlocked in the deeper strata of archetypal data accumulated over a lifetime of engagement with a materially constructed world that hides deeper meaning beneath its seemingly plastic surface.

### **B. Literature as Being: The Individuation Process**

Once the imaginative and archetypal discourse has occurred, its pedagogical impact must be assessed. Why should the scholar activate this creative impulse? Why should the scholar even work to identify, let alone understand, archetypes? The postmodern humanities discourse has asserted a focus on Derrida’s *many meanings* as

opposed to any single meaning. Yet even the staunchest postmodernist must recognize the theory's limitations in understanding the human condition. Not every reader seeks to discover the unlimited material meanings of the sorcerer's stone. Often, the reader accepts the text as it is, then analyzes later (or doesn't). Once one has unconsciously discovered something's archetypal quality, they can either accept it or choose to reveal its difference, or lack thereof. This is especially true for novels like *House of Leaves*, which (despite being postmodern in content and form) is telling an archetypal story and dealing with archetypal images throughout.

A postmodern archetypal theory can help decode meaning without simplifying or universalizing. Frye describes his archetypal view of literature as "a total form and literary experience as a part of the continuum of life, in which one of the poet's functions is to visualize the goals of human work" (115). Frye's understanding can easily slip into universalism, as keyed by the "total form" identification. However, archetypal theory is more than *just* the total form of human imaginative function; it is also a 'continuum,' one that is composed of disparate parts that come together. These parts can be analyzed independently in the way postmodernism has taught us, *and* they can be viewed in summation. So, though the Great Mother could either be interpreted as one's own mother, or a character from a novel, it is still *the Great Mother*, the unknowable archetype. The Great Mother is the axis symbol, which is interpreted as an archetypal image differently based on the reader's cultural and historical context, but it is nonetheless a persistent symbolic idea.

Once the scholar has attempted to understand this total form of the Great Mother, they have engaged in a literary and critical form of what Jung calls the individuation

process, which can be described simply as the process of “coming to selfhood” or “self-realization” (Jung, *Relations Between the Ego and the Unconscious* 123). The first point is that individuation is inherently an archetypal process. As Campbell pointed out, “in order to live as a released individual, one has to know how and when to put on and to put off the masks of one’s various life roles” (*Myths to Live By* 68). These masks are what Jung calls ‘personae’, which are archetypally motivated, as Campbell shows. Later, in *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*, he says that “the hero is the man of self-achieved submission . . . Only birth can conquer death – the birth, not of the old thing again, but of something new” (16). The mythic death and rebirth process are fundamentally archetypal. It is no coincidence that Western religion’s axiomatic symbol is someone who was brutally murdered and then rose from the dead. That is an essential part of the individuation process, and it is indeed, the most mythologically represented aspect across cultures and histories. In the classroom, students and scholars can see this story being played out in their own lives, as well as in the texts they read. A new archetypal mode of reading helps the reader assimilate this archetypal process into their own lives by recognizing it and investigating the meaning it inevitably produces in their own individuation.

Individuation is not only a solitary process. While Jung describes it repeatedly in individual, psychological terms, later Jungian thought (in which Frye can be included) extrapolated it outward as a potentially collective experience. Jungian scholar Ciúin Doherty writes, “If, at the individual level, this integrative process is about seeking to become conscious of our total selves, then individuation at the planetary scale could be imagined as our waking up to our inherent interconnectivity with, dependence upon, and

responsibility toward Earth and all its species” (Doherty 3). Ecologically and socially this kind of observation is significant because it dispels any postmodern argument that archetypal theory could ignore cultural, material production of meaning (or, in essence, become *too* universal). The individuation process does not have to be burdened by purely socio-cultural practice; it can be achieved transnationally and globally by anyone willing to interpret texts in an individuated manner. For example, reading *House of Leaves* archetypally, as I will show in the next chapter, requires introspection and an understanding of the mythic inward-outward process of individuation. We can connect this idea to postmodernism because it is melding of the internal, psychological framework of archetypal theory with the external, sociological frame of postmodernism.

Archetypes are not rigid or centralized. As Frye puts it, they are “associative clusters, and differ from signs in being complex variables” (102). Upon reading a text, the new archetypal critic can identify these clusters and explore how and why they exist culturally or individually. This idea works with Roland Barthes’ poststructuralist conception of mythology as a “tri-dimensional pattern” of shared language (Barthes 81). This affords the current humanities scholarship a validity in its granular, socio-cultural approach while simultaneously integrating the structuralist process embedded within archetypal theory. One could view the integration of formalist archetypes within a postmodern framework as an act of scholarly individuation, one that releases the academic from the weight of a postmodern mode of thought. Instead of declaring the death of grand narratives, the scholar can critically examine these narratives in an archetypal fashion that does not discount post-structuralism because the process is still influenced by deconstructionist practice.

### C. Literature as Dream: Reading as a Ritual Act

Literary discussions in the classroom are often littered with questions of reality, whether consciously or not. Students are often asked, “If this is fiction, is it fake or real?” This question, fact or fiction, can be extrapolated into every facet of our lives. It is a question that *House of Leaves* ruthlessly pursues through its postmodern form; the question, “What is a book?” asks a similar task of the reader. The postmodern humanities seek to continually probe this question through all its historicist understanding of literature and art. A new archetypal theory would probe this question by analyzing the shared ritual process of reading as a fundamentally unconscious act. Earlier, we recognized the significance of the archetypal death-rebirth story as representative of the reading process. Because the *process* has been identified as a universal archetype, there is now spacious room to recognize the cultural and historical limitations of universalizing content. Once the reader understands the archetypal, dreamlike action of reading, they will begin to see the utility of the rebirth process, as well as the implications of the postmodern question: what is real? Erich Auerbach’s seminal work, *Mimesis: The Representation of Reality in Western Literature*, describes how reality in texts becomes a stylistic choice, rather than a direct reflection. This is important for the new archetypal scholar because it allows them to read texts as fundamentally constructed *and* instinctual (informed by the unconscious). An author’s conception of reality becomes both an aesthetic and cultural meaning.

The ritual process of reading can be described as a dreamlike process because, like dreams, it is shared by all human beings but fundamentally unique to each. Though the content in dreams *can* be shared, especially regarding mythological content (as Jung

noted), it is often informed by our own psyches and social environment. We all dream, but we do not all dream the same dreams. This is what Frye loses track of in his original conception of archetypal theory. While he acknowledges the social fact of literature, he disregards the multiplicities of meaning and interpretation found in archetypes and their subsequent archetypal images. This requires us to return to the “Great Mother” example.

It can be summarized by this arithmetical statement:

The Archetype (the Great Mother) + Reader’s Society and Culture = Archetypal Image

In the same way that one reads the Great Mother in a variety of ways unique to their experience, so does one *dream* of her. This links the unconscious directly to reading because, as Jung wrote extensively, dreams are a product of the unconscious. The new archetypal scholar recognizes this, while also paying careful attention to the ways in which our unconscious processes are informed by culture and history. With this in mind, you will see that it is not the Great Mother’s image that is universal, but the archetype itself. We can never fully know the Great Mother because archetypes are fundamentally unknowable, as Jung said. What we can know is the archetypal image produced through the act of reading in conjunction with our social environment, history, and culture. Readers have had the archetypal image shaped and molded by their culture and environment, but it is also influenced by the archetypal, ritual process of reading itself. We see this idea manifest itself in *House of Leaves*, in which Danielewski relies on a variety of interpretations of the labyrinth image to guide the reader. There is the story, the symbol of the labyrinth on the cover, and the labyrinth of the house itself—all of which contributes to an overall, archetypal story which contains recognizable elements.

The ritual process of reading is an archetypal process, meaning it is universal, firmly unknowable, but manifests itself in a variety of ways. All ritual processes contain some aspect of the unconscious within them, and storytelling (as well as story-reading, story-listening) contains that as well. The way in which we reflect or think about a text, the way its archetypal images appear to us, is influenced by our social environment. But the process *itself*, that of reading the words that signify the image, is in many ways an unconscious, ritual process. Book clubs are a perfect example of this: people around the world all choosing to read a particular text at the same time, then meeting to discuss it. While their interpretations may be multiple and differentiated, the process upon which those interpretations arrived is fundamentally archetypal. For a postmodern archetypal theory to exist, it is imperative to recognize the universalistic, ritual aspect of reading itself in order to then pull apart the images themselves. Additionally, the fact that reading and writing stories is an archetypal process means that a postmodern novel like *House of Leaves* finds itself inevitably producing a story about stories—a metanarrative.

In sum, to engage with a text is to engage with the author's dream – the product of their unconscious instinct and imagination. Of course, not all authors complete their works in a totally unconscious fashion – some even work tirelessly to avoid that. But the imaginative discourse that results from the writing act ultimately transfers to the reading act, when the reader must conceptualize their own image using what the author has given them. But the question always remains of *what to do* with such an image? How do we analyze archetypal images in a manner that acknowledges the potential universal archetype underneath, while also understanding them as particular, unique, and undoubtedly influenced by culture and history? By describing reading itself as an

archetypal act, I am focused on the bigger-picture engagement with literature. If we acknowledge reading as a ritual process that contains an element of archetypal truth, then we can further acknowledge that the images that are produced from that reading are individual and unique. Just as cultures have their own customs, traditions, and rituals, all of which are influenced by historical and societal factors, the way we read and consume literature does as well.

Conceptualizing this shared ritual process of reading as essentially dreamlike gives the new archetypal scholar the tools to understand the multivariable differences present in texts, whether cultural, individual, or collective. While reading *House of Leaves*, the postmodern archetypal scholar will continue to ask the question, “What is real?” while never losing sight of the fact that the question itself only exists because a conception of reality was first written by the author. The unconscious element of reading literature is revealed through the analysis and understanding of archetypes.

**Chapter Three**  
**“This is Not for You” – Confronting the Labyrinth of *House of Leaves* through a  
Postmodern Archetypal Theory**

I will never forget the first time I discussed *House of Leaves* with an English class of about fifteen students. The class was held over Zoom, at the height of the COVID-19 pandemic, and the look of shock, confusion, frustration, and dismay on all of our faces promised an exciting and difficult conversation. Ever since then, the novel has haunted me—calling back like the echoes in its titular house. I desired an explanation, some kind of comfort that would order the novel’s chaotic contents into a structure that made sense. It was through this confusion, this puzzle, that I began to understand what the novel was asking its readers. Mark Z. Danielewski is clearly in tune with Derrida, attempting to undermine and question his own work through the production of it. The book is a postmodern conundrum, with its divergences and diatribes, its stacked narrative (a movie within a book within a book within a book), and its typographical nonsensicality. All of this works to strong-arm the reader into questioning literature itself—it asks the question: “What is a book?”

By using archetypal theory, we can discover potential answers to the question. I also seek to discover structure within the structureless, while avoiding the possibility of artificially enforcing a particular theory or view. Part of archetypal theory is its acknowledgment that *all* stories hold inherent archetypal qualities, regardless of how postmodern or resistant to universality and grand narratives they are. The key to understanding *House of Leaves* through an archetypal lens is understanding the archetypes themselves. First, I will engage with what I consider to be the most primary

archetypal idea in the novel—the image that graces its cover—the **labyrinth**. From there, I will analyze and explore the subsequent archetypal images that are born out of that image and present throughout the novel.

But first, a brief summary of the novel. *House of Leaves* is a stacked narrative that contains two major plotlines. The first is a book by a character named Zampanò called “The Navidson Record,” which is an analysis of a documentary film made by Will Navidson. The story of the film is about Navidson and his family’s discovery of their confusing and shifting house; there is a room that is bigger on the inside than it is on the outside. As Will continues to explore the room, it gets bigger, eventually resulting in a massive, inescapable labyrinth with never-ending staircases and endless hallways. The expeditions into the house result in death, a fractured marriage, and consuming terror. The irony of “The Navidson Record” is that none of it, so we are told, is actually real, and Zampanò is a blind man, who could never have seen this documentary in the first place. We learn this from our second key narrator, Johnny Truant, who has discovered and compiled the manuscript for Zampanò’s work. Johnny’s tale is told through extensive footnotes throughout “The Navidson Record,” as we learn about his troubled, chaotic life and the effect Zampanò’s work is having on it. There are other stories at play here as well, including an extensive appendix with journal entries from Johnny Truant’s mother, who is in a mental institution. While the narrative is postmodern and labyrinthine itself, so is the book’s form. The typography, at a certain point, becomes nearly unreadable when blocks of texts are overlaid over the main text. Text is organized haphazardly at times—even consisting of a single word per page. Text is color-coded in some places, too, such as the word “house.” All this creates a sometimes-impenetrable novel, which

consistently attempts to undermine itself and force the reader into confusion and frustration.

There are a few assumptions and conclusions about the novel that I must set up before the analysis. This book prompts a variety of interpretations and understandings—many of which may be true or false, and the purpose, it seems, is to never truly know the answers. This thesis is written under the assumption that it is true that the Navidson Record is a fiction created by Zampanò. This is important because it places Zampanò as the primary author of the story of Will Navidson and the House on Ash Tree Lane. In Appendix B of *House of Leaves*, a journal entry from Zampanò reads: “Perhaps in the margins of darkness, I could create a son who is not missing; who lives beyond even my own imagination and invention” (Danielewski 543). This effectively reframes the reader’s notion of what *House of Leaves* is, and more specifically, what function the house serves for the elusive author of “The Navidson Record.” Here, Zampanò admits to the fabrication of this story – of *which* story, Johnny Truant’s or Will Navidson’s, it is not exactly clear. However, what stands solid is the notion that such a house, where the laws of physical, perceivable reality are fractured and illogical, could only exist in the confines of the human mind.

The scholars cited in my introduction adamantly pursue the postmodern, deconstructive angle of the novel. This angle is valid and academically productive, but it encounters a consistent difficulty with any postmodern text: if the meaning is endless, with no universal understanding or grand narrative, what do we believe? In the absence of the house, the thinness of its foundation (*leaves*), there is, in fact, nothing. The nothingness and uncanniness of the house is its feared quality, but the idea of an empty

construct is indeed itself a construction. Despite its postmodern deconstruction, the novel can still be read with a semblance of meaning through the passage I've quoted. The "margins of darkness" are Jung's concept of the "collective unconscious," and it is in that darkness where meaning is fully formed and discovered, even with the deconstructive façade overlaying it. This is where Zampanò has dreamed a reality for himself, one that is multivariate and confusing, but provides a sense of security for him. With this in mind, we will be able to see how Zampanò (and by extension, Danielewski) uses archetypal images throughout the story.

### **A. The Archetypes in *House of Leaves***

The archetypal image of the **labyrinth** manifests itself throughout the novel's contents and through its form and typography. The *text* itself becomes disorienting, difficult to read, and complex beyond rational understanding or readability. The most obvious labyrinth is the titular house, with its ever-expanding space, never-ending staircase and the propensity to get lost within its hallways and rooms. The trial the house inflicts upon these characters naturally produces sustained anxiety, which seeks to either align or destroy their psyches. Postmodern scholars have described the anxiety of the house as a fracturing of universal reality. Ridvan Askin describes it as "the projection of a veritable differential cosmology" (153), while Timothy J. Welsh argues that it "challenges the reader to examine our response to the fragmented, incomplete versions of reality on which we increasingly rely" (106). These responses are indicative of an expected response to the house's nearly impenetrable meaning. They also represent the common and inevitable approach to analyzing *House of Leaves*, which is through the postmodern lens it was written from. These interpretations are valid, but there is a vast

array of archetypal imagery throughout the novel. Understanding the labyrinth as the key archetype means recognizing the novel's imbedded archetypal qualities on a narratological level and even a formal one. But I must also recognize and agree with the interpretation that the house is an imagistic representation of psychological challenge and postmodern anxiety.

However, what is not accounted for is the notion that that fragmented reality is a symptom of what Jung calls the "individuation" process, which is an alternate term for the actualization of the Self. He writes, "All these moments in the individual's life, when the universal laws of human fate break in upon the purposes, expectations, and opinions of the personal consciousness, are stations along the road of the individuation process" (78). The unconscious is of course a complex labyrinth of its own, and our consciousness is what attempts to make sense of such invention. When Will Navidson and Johnny Truant are exposed to the nonsensical, cracked reality of the house, they are dropped into the tribulations of individuation. Individuation is an archetypal process because it follows a particular structure seen repeatedly across times and cultures. Joseph Campbell closely identified individuation with his conception of the monomyth—separation, initiation, return. Individuation is the "initiation" stage. This process is characterized, as Jung describes, by significant tribulation and fracturing of reality and psyche. This process has been accomplished ritually in many cultures through initiation rites. Many college fraternities practice hazing rituals which serve the same process—to completely destroy someone's psyche so that they may be symbolically "reborn." The challenge and trial of the labyrinth serves the same archetypal purpose.

In order to recognize the labyrinth as an archetype in the novel, it is necessary to understand what particular qualities of the labyrinth make it archetypal. Though there are multiple examples of labyrinths in *House of Leaves*, there are key aspects of the symbol present in all of them. Erich Neumann, a student of Jung, identifies the archetypal qualities of the labyrinth as well as its narrative and mythological significance. Crediting John W. Layard, Neumann says, “The designs [of labyrinths] are held to represent a way through the underworld . . . that is to say, *the way* that throughout the world forms a primordial component of the earliest rituals” (175). He also lists the main archetypal traits, as composed by Layard. I have reproduced them here, with the **bolding** of text being my addition:

1. That it always has to do with **death** and **rebirth** relating either to life after death or to the mysteries of **initiation**.
2. That it is almost always connected with a cave (or more rarely a **constructed dwelling**).
3. That in those cases where the ritual has been preserved the labyrinth itself, or a drawing of it, is invariably situated at the entrance to the cave or dwelling.
4. That the **presiding personage**, either mythical or actual, is **always a woman**.
5. That the labyrinth itself is walked thorough, or the labyrinth design **walked over, by men**. (176)

Early literature about labyrinths equates the journey with the death-rebirth archetypal story. Frazer, Jung, Campbell, and Frye all identified the death-rebirth process as being a primary archetype. The labyrinth is a form, an archetypal image, of the transformation story. This transformation story is indicative of the individuation process

laid out in the previous chapter. Neumann brings forth some key additions here. First, the labyrinth is almost always connected to something—in this case, he says a cave, but adds a “constructed dwelling” as well. The House (the constructed dwelling) is both the labyrinth and that which allows one to enter in. There are parts of the house that are not confusing or shifting—only one particular space. I also highlighted that the “presiding personage” is a woman because, as you will see later, the relationship between men and women, both sexual and emotional, becomes a significant theme in *House of Leaves*. It is also worth noting that it is indeed only the *men* who walk through the labyrinth of the house, which is exactly what occurs in the novel.

There is a connection to be made between labyrinths, transformative death-rebirth stories, and rituals. Campbell correlates labyrinth stories and imagery with “threshold rites.” He describes the spiral image of the labyrinth (the one we find on the cover of the novel and in other places throughout the book) as “a constellation of images denoting the plunge and dissolution of consciousness in the darkness of non-being” and that they “represent the analogy of threshold rites to the mystery of the entry of the child into the womb for birth” (66). Here, we have another example of the labyrinth as womb or the birthplace. Threshold rites consist of a metaphorical dying and resurrecting—which the characters in the novel experience through the house. Of the mythological significance of the labyrinth as threshold, Campbell writes that it is important to learn the “secret of the labyrinth before death” because it is a journey through the underworld to discover new life (69). It begs the question of what is at the center of the labyrinth. What do our characters find in the house? The labyrinthine structure of the book and its typography begs the same question for the reader’s own journey through it. This equates the reader

with the same labyrinth journey the characters embark, which builds upon understanding storytelling as a recurrent, cyclical process that contributes to individual psychological development and social wholeness. One must traverse the trials of the labyrinth in order to become whole.

The house is clearly a key example of the labyrinth, but we can also read the novel's construction as labyrinthine. What appears to allure many of the postmodern scholars is the novel's form. Danielewski playfully destroys the conventions of typical, typographic form. Juha-Pekka Kilpiö has coined the term *kinekphrasis*, which is used to "designate verbal representations of cinema or other forms of moving image" (Kilpiö 58). "The Navidson Record" is an example of *kinekphrasis* because it is a written text about a visual image. This is complicated further by Johnny Truant's editing, which now places *House of Leaves* as a text about a text about a movie. The layers are seemingly boundless and indeterminable, which can make the text itself a daunting horror. The book becomes a labyrinth of its own, and Truant's stream-of-consciousness diatribes lull the reader into a dreamlike state of unconscious reading. The reader is trapped between the boundary of postmodern nihilism and structuralist language. The reader's attempt to make sense of the text competes with its abrasive form. Thus, Zampanò becomes an archetypal "god," one who controls the structure and the meaning it could produce. Playing with that only further reinforces the house's unconscious properties. Like Truant, the reader becomes desperate for a semblance of structure, meaning, or understanding.

This begs the question: how does one find meaning or structure in a constantly shifting labyrinth? For one, the reader must dismiss the idea that there is no meaning underneath it. It is easy to define deconstructive strategy as a manner of rupturing

meaning. This is a common misconception. Will Slocombe writes, “While *House of Leaves* is full of such tropes, and could thus be read as a deconstructive text, it is important to realize that while *House of Leaves* uses deconstructive strategy, its primary aim is to undo the violent hierarchy of its own existence” (Slocombe 92). The novel (and by association, Zampanò) seeks to produce a variety of meanings by interrogating the structured, singular meaning that has been attached to ideas of hominess and family. So, he is not destroying meaning; rather, he is producing *more* of it. Jung viewed the unconscious psyche as a well of undiscovered meaning. This fits nicely alongside Zampanò’s “margins of darkness” description because the unconscious is unknown (darkness). The meaning is not produced or invented; it is discovered. From this, it is *necessary* to deduce that Zampanò has constructed a disassociated, fragmented labyrinth from which meaning can be discovered. He aims to create a son who “consequently bears the burden of everyone’s tomorrow with unprecedented wisdom and honor because he is one of the very few who has successfully interrogated his own nature” (543). This “wisdom and honor” are more products of the individuation process—the delving into the unconscious well. Zampanò desires an imagined son who can face demons that he already has, one who can right the wrongs that Zampanò himself may have committed in his younger years. Zampanò appears to feel unvindicated, estranged from his former sense of the world. *House of Leaves* becomes a practice of discovered meaning within a labyrinthine, empty construct.

Zampanò has devised a house that, despite its dynamism, is able to produce some semblance of meaning for its subjects, but only after the fact. This is consistent with the ritualistic nature of the trials accompanying the individuation process. Once Navidson

enters the house, he is forever changed. When he leaves, he realizes that his trial there has been left unfinished, and he is consumed by the need to finish the process. Any doubtful stones cast toward the house as a psychological product are immediately dispelled by Zampanò's own claim of its effect on the subjects. Sean Travers describes this admission as such: "Zampanò suggests that the house's mutations are a projection of the individual's 'psyche' because each person who enters the labyrinth appears to experience it differently" (69). Despite the similarities found in human neuropsychological makeup, we are still individuals with our own variable ability to make out a devastatingly complex environment. Travers later writes that the house's meaning is "multiple and subjective" (70). Note that he does not reject meaning, but rather describes the house as complicating meaning. The process of discovering meaning in the unconscious requires an amount of suffering and desperation. It is not sprung upon a person easily. As previously stated, the fragmentary reality is what forces a subject to reevaluate their current ideological framework. This is most clearly manifested through Johnny Truant's encounters and contention with the **Minotaur**.

While the house serves as a labyrinth for the characters, and the novel as a labyrinth for its readers, it would be a mistake not to recognize Zampanò's own reference to the story of the Minotaur at various points. The first reference begins on page 109, and it immediately stands out to the reader because it is the first time that words in the text are colored red and struck out. In one of the footnotes, Zampanò indicates great sympathy for the Minotaur. He says, "the Minotaur is a gentle and misunderstood creature, while the so called Athenian youth are convicted criminals" (110). Zampanò is attempting to reframe the narrative of the Minotaur as an abomination. Through this passage, he is also

suggesting a connection between the labyrinth of the house and labyrinth of the Minotaur's story. As we later find out, there is something devouring and stalking those who enter the never-ending space, and the implicit connection is made to that of the Minotaur. Will Slocombe makes a specific connection between that supposed creature and the one that haunts both Zampanò and Johnny Truant. He thus concludes that the Minotaur's presence represents "the response of the House to this invasion." He later connects this to Derridean deconstruction by saying "*House of Leaves* is an attempt to bring forth nothingness into literature, not by writing about it, but by such literature destroying its own literariness from within" (105). So here we have the Minotaur as a postmodern device representing the consuming and devouring nature of the postmodern void found within the labyrinth. An archetypal lens shows how this idea also represents that of the archetypal "shadow"—Jung's term for the repressed and most unwanted part of our psyche.

The shadow is a familiar archetype to many, as it has been represented throughout history and mythology continually. Jung identified a confrontation or contending with the shadow as a necessary stage in individuation and personal development. Susan Rowland succinctly describes the appearance of the shadow as occurring when an individual is overly reliant upon our conscious persona. She writes, "The shadow is literally the image of the thing the person has no wish to be" (31). From a storytelling perspective, the shadow is perhaps the easiest and most common archetype to manifest. Jung says that there are elements of the shadow that are impossible to reconcile with and are thus manifested as projections. It is the individual's ability to recognize and contend with those projections of the shadow that leads to the integration of the shadow. Jung writes,

“He must be convinced that he throws a very long shadow before he is willing to withdraw his emotionally-toned projections from their object” (*Aion*, 9). In narrative terms, we can understand archetypal images of the shadow as an unconscious manifestation of a character’s shadow. We see this clearly for many of the characters in *House of Leaves*, but most clearly for Johnny Truant. Because the novel has asked the reader to traverse its own labyrinth, the reader must also identify this shadow. We are engaging in the same archetypal story the novel is presenting to its characters.

Johnny’s shadow first manifests itself through unavoidable fear of something stalking him. He says, “Something’s behind me. Of course, I deny it. It’s impossible to deny” (26). He proceeds to describe in vivid detail the physiological effects of this fear on his body and mind. Danielewski presents this fear in deconstructive fashion by pairing opposite statements together like in the previous example. Another example of this is “Don’t look. I didn’t. Of course I looked” (27). This speaks to the inevitability and the pervasiveness of the shadow. Later, the presence manifests itself in uniquely physical ways. He says, “This time it’s human. Maybe not. Extremely long fingers . . . But it’s already too late, I’ve seen the eyes. The eyes” and “Everything falls apart. Stories heard but not recalled . . . Words filling my head . . . Without meaning—I’m afraid not. The shape of a shape of a shape of a face dis(as)sembling right before my eyes” (71). The confrontation with the shadow breaks Johnny’s psyche apart, and we discover where some of his greatest fear lies—the apparent lack of meaning or orderliness. The shadow is nested in the unconscious and when revealed to him becomes too frightening to bear or understand. What the shadow represents to Johnny—his sexuality, his mother’s illness and abuse, or trauma—can be debated, but its existence is powerful and palpable to both

him and the reader. The fear within the novel is a fear of postmodern, post-truth anxiety—the fear that nothing matters and meaning is endless and unstable. The confrontation of this fact is a confrontation with the shadow: a postmodern approach to archetypal storytelling.

We also see the appearance of this unnamed and unknown creature within the Navidson Record. This stalking, unbearable presence appears the farther the group wanders into the labyrinth, eventually driving some of the characters to insanity and murder. Will Navidson survives the expeditions into the house, and while the results of each of these instances are not immediately clear, Navidson's survival is a key choice made by Zampanò because it suggests that there was a trait Will had that the others did not. Will was able to integrate the shadow successfully, so to speak. Will Navidson is a photographer, and there are repeated suggestions throughout the novel to his profession and ability to capture images artistically and meaningfully. Johnny Truant is clearly a writer, and he too survives these confrontations with the shadow. Both characters are artists in their own right, and perhaps Zampanò feels that the production of art offers escape and safe place to confront the shadow, thus leading to individuation, peace, and newly discovered meaning within their chaotic lives. This furthers the necessary connection between art and eternal ritual. To consume art means to later produce it. Meaning must be replicated across time in patterns so that we feel stable.

The struck-out references of the Minotaur by Zampanò reveal a deep insecurity or fear of the story—one that keeps reappearing throughout. It is my belief that both major appearances of the shadow in this book are closely tied to the Minotaur. Zampanò's attempted erasure of any mention of the Minotaur throughout the Navidson Record shows

an unwillingness to deal with the story; yet, at the same time, the red font and strikethrough text calls out to the reader distinctly—another example of deconstruction at work. In Zampanò's eyes, the Minotaur is an abomination, and as I wrote earlier, he feels a degree of sympathy for the creature. Perhaps he sees himself in the Minotaur, a blind man consumed with this fictional ideal story he is trapped within until his death. Johnny becomes 'infected', in a sense, by this same drive to discover meaning with the void at the center of the labyrinth. The continual search for meaning in a sometimes-meaningless world drives them both to the brink of insanity; this is what the Minotaur does archetypally—it drives the characters toward a confrontation with the darkest parts of themselves, so that they may be reborn through the production of art. The archetypal images call to both the characters and the reader as a pathway toward the center of the labyrinth, where meaning of the greatest kind may be found, and we may begin to make sense of the nonsense.

### **B. Making Sense of the Nonsense: Archetypes as a Pathway to the Center**

So, I have identified some of the primary archetypes present in the novel and explored their potential meanings. The next step is to understand the thematic prevalence of these images; how do they contribute to the problem of the postmodern void? Ridvan Askin cites French philosopher Gilles Deleuze, who wrote this about labyrinths: "It designates firstly the unconscious, the self; only the Anima is capable of reconciling us with the unconscious, of giving us a guiding thread for its exploration" (155). The Anima is a concept introduced by Jung as the feminine part of the male personality. Anima, in the case of *House of Leaves*, is the mother figure; it is Karen, who attempts to finish Will's representation of the house; it is Pelafina, who seeks to guide Truant through a

troubling adolescence. Exploring the house is impossible without a sense of purposeful drive that is at once challenged and supported by the Anima of Navidson's personality. Similarly, Zampanò's very act of constructing such a house serves as the thread that pulls him through a life passing its zenith, where a sense of security must be obtained. There is peace in knowing that the sufferings of life are not exclusive to our individual existence. Pain is the constant universal in a world that appears to deny structure and meaning. This peace is not born out of sadism or malevolence, but rather empathy for our descendants and our families. The suffering the house brings only serves to orient its denizens, just as the unconscious serves to balance order and chaos, the known and the unknown. This is individuation; it is the balance of the past and future, and it is the manifestation of dreams destined to become the focalized center of the Self.

Karen's presence in the novel is key to unlocking both Zampanò and Johnny Truant because the subjects of the house discover mythological revelations about the nature of family and memory. If there is a consistent theme to be identified throughout *House of Leaves*' multiplying constructs, it is family and parenthood. In Zampanò's journal passage, he desires for his imagined son to "fulfill a promise I made years ago but failed to keep." A significant part of individuation is family and homeliness - when one feels secure about their legacy and their lives beyond death. This security is not trivially obtained (Jung, *Symbolism of the Mandala* 211). This struggle is present in each major "author" of the book: Zampanò's need for a wholly actualized son, Navidson's desire for a peaceful marriage and the protected sanctity of childhood innocence, and Johnny Truant's punctured, desperate relationship with his mother. In Katherine Cox's "What

Has Made Me? Locating Mother in the Textual Labyrinth of Mark Z. Danielewski's *House of Leaves*," she discusses the mythic quality of such struggles. She writes:

The physical and emotional 'nearness' of family life is teased out as understanding and reunion are approached through journey, specifically through the mythic confrontation with the labyrinth. Gradually, through allusion to mythological struggle and unavoidable psychoanalytical ties, the novel implicitly confers a transformation of the family through a journey of remembrance. (Cox 4)

The "journey of remembrance" Cox describes is another symptom of the unconscious mind, where bits and pieces of the past (and sometimes the future) are scattered upon a bout of familial conflict. It is a coming-to-terms with mistakes, and a reaffirmation of the structural peace of family. Zampanò wishes to return to such security, and his construction of an "imaginary son" who undergoes his own journey of remembrance will provide a clearer window into a troubled mid-life view of the world.

Zampanò represents this journey through Johnny Truant, who similarly struggles to find peace in a world where his mother could be so fundamentally destroyed, battered, flawed, and broken. Her existence fractures Johnny's previously secure reality. Katherine Cox later says, "Truant's emotional journey is grafted onto the Navidsons' self-discoveries in their physical labyrinth, and like them Truant becomes engaged in a nightmare of self-evaluation and peripeteia" (6). Cox gets the closest to touching upon the Jungian unconscious and archetypes. Perhaps inadvertently, Cox has described the significance of stories and mythos within the collective unconscious. Many mythological stories directly represent the "journey of remembrance" Cox describes, including that of the Minotaur, as Zampanò's direct reference and attempted erasure bring forth. Myth and

story provide a map towards a sense of self-discovery and individuation—an orderliness within the chaos of existence. Having multiple narrators reveals the effect of story on each one, a nested production of meaning that is cyclical.

If mythology serves as a map for meaning and understanding, archetypes are the guides. Danielewski firmly plants *House of Leaves* within a mythological, archetypal framework for the reader to operate within, despite its inherent disorderliness. An archetypal analysis of this text requires the reader to see the individuation process of the characters (and their related archetypal images) within themselves *as readers*. The central image of the labyrinth, in postmodern fashion, points the reader and the characters simultaneously toward some semblance of meaning. Cox writes, “Truant’s journey is articulated in terminology associated with the labyrinth; where the labyrinth’s guiding ‘clue’ unwinds to reveal disorientation . . . At the core of this description is his projection that when the book and labyrinth are complete the yarn will be lost” (10). Here, Cox specifies what I believe to be *the* postmodern anxiety of the book: that through careful analysis and understanding, we will find a void at the center of the labyrinth—the absence of meaning, rather than the surplus of it. The fear is that upon facing the shadow and overcoming trauma, there will be nothing left, and whatever guided those characters will no longer be useful. But an archetypal analysis proves the opposite true—because the archetypes never disappear. They continually call back to us, as readers and authors, whether we are aware of them or not. Archetypes are the thread that pushes Johnny into finishing Zampanò’s work, thus participating in the ritual of reading and production of story.

Danielewski tortures both the characters and the reader through scattered and nonsensical typography, as well as seemingly never-ending diatribes and footnotes about topics that feel, in the present moment, meaningless or unrelated to the core narrative. But these difficult sections of the book only serve to force the reader into submission along with Johnny Truant and Will Navidson, who each undergo their own confrontation with the bizarre, absurd, and confusing. Both key narrators survive the story. Navidson emerges from the final expedition into the house transformed, and it is that transformation that embodies an archetypal reality and truth within the novel. Zampanò's final remarks in "The Navidson Record" point us toward that conclusion by stating that Navidson ends his documentary on "what he knows is true and always will be true . . . he focuses on the empty road beyond . . . where nothing moves and a street lamp flickers on and off until at last it flickers out and darkness sweeps in like a hand" (528). It is tempting to read this statement as a nihilistic proclamation of the void's existence, but that analysis renders the whole archetypal death and rebirth of our characters as fundamentally at odds with many of their behaviors and conclusions. Earlier, Zampanò writes that "Navidson has never stopped wrestling with the meaning of his experience. And even though it has literally crippled him, he somehow manages to remain passionate about his work" (527). Instead, we can read the image of darkness as the fundamentally archetypal reality that suffering and its often-elusive meaning or purpose must always be wrestled with, and the production of story, art, myth, and archetypal imagery is one of the foremost ways we contend with meaning in a sometimes-meaningless existence.

The archetypal images in the novel are the pathway toward the center of the postmodern labyrinth. The labyrinth itself serves as a central archetypal journey the

characters must go on; thus, due to the novel's labyrinthine nature, the reader must go on that same journey of introspection, discovery, and individuation. But the reader should not fret; as Joseph Campbell writes, "we have not even to risk the adventure alone; for the heroes of all time have gone before us; the labyrinth is thoroughly known . . . where we had thought to travel outward, we shall come to the center of our own existence" (25). The postmodern archetypal scholar engages in the exact same process. We will emerge from the novel transformed and destined to reproduce these images and their inherent meanings for eternity, until the last bit of darkness sweeps in, and the final page is finished.

### **C. A Book is You: Revelations Within the Void of the Labyrinth**

I would like to finish this chapter where I began: with the question that Zampanò, Truant, and Danielewski himself continually grapple with throughout the novel. What is a book? It is a question I posed to a group of undergraduates to whom I taught a unit on *House of Leaves*. This is a question that is surely unanswerable in any strict sense, but the novel is persistent in undermining its own existence. In true postmodern fashion, Danielewski forces the reader to contend with the whole concept of literature and its eternal production. With this question, I always reinforce that the point of such a question is not to have the *right* answer; the goal is to have *an* answer. With this in mind, the group of students were eager and willing to pursue this question—coming up with surprising and often specific answers. They ruminated on books being a source of terror, books as a way to combat or understand trauma, and books as a representation of our often difficult and chaotic lives.

What becomes abundantly clear through any single person's answer to that question is that *all of those answers are true*. It is the wholistic collection of our experiences and life paths that make up the labyrinth itself, and it is the terror of it all that we must confront and grapple to understand. But there is a question that overshadows the whole analysis: *why?* What are we to do with this recognition of the archetypes of the unconscious and their hold on the way we process the human condition and the stories we tell about it? How does this reconcile the philosophical contention between structuralism and poststructuralism? How does the acknowledgement and analysis of archetypal images reveal an inner truth about the human condition? What truly lies within the void at the center of the labyrinth? Johnny Truant offers a possible final thread.

In one of Johnny's final passages, long after his all-consuming confrontation with trauma and darkness through the compilation of Zampanò's work, he walks into a concert at a bar in Arizona. The band plays a song with lyrics that make a reference to Zampanò's work. Johnny approaches the band and asks them about it. The drummer hands him a book and tells Johnny to be careful because "It'll change your life" (514). The book is *House of Leaves*, in its completed form, the very book the reader is also holding in their hands. As Johnny flips through its pages and examines the marks and notes within the margins, it becomes a moment of catharsis for him. He sees himself reflected through the work, and thus realizes the impact of art and literature on those who wish to dive in and understand themselves. Within the margins of darkness, Zampanò has created a son indeed, one who will live beyond imagination and invention into the hearts and minds of anyone who chooses to engage with that archetypal reality that avoids all firm knowability and understanding. Readers will do this, both within the novel and outside of

it, so that we may continue the eternally recurring cycle, ritual, and archetypal journey of death and rebirth, the actualization of the Self, and they begin to understand the nature of their own existence.

The archetypes present within *House of Leaves* indicate focus points for a shedding away of fear, anxiety, pain, and suffering and a reformation in the form of art and literature. In this final scene with Johnny Truant, the novel makes its full presence known as something more than pages or pictures or words. In the very last page of the novel, a reference is made to Yggdrasil, the mythological world tree. A tree is made up of branches and leaves, but Yggdrasil can be understood as the sum total of spiritual and physical existence. We are more than leaves or branches, just as novels are more than the product of trees and material. To analyze and understand a book as merely the pages or product of history is to think of a painting as the frame, rather than the whole picture.

## Chapter Four Conclusion

The final contentious aspect of archetypal theory is the question of whether literature reflects life or stands as a representation of life. The semioticians, post-structuralists, and cultural theorists claim that art, in general terms, is a multiplicity of representations and meanings (nestled within a cultural framework that produces such meaning). Frye's archetypal theory would suggest that literature is a reflection that is translated into language: "in reading a novel we have to go from literature as a reflection of life to literature as autonomous language" (351). A newer archetypal theory should argue that literature is indeed a reflection of life, but that it is communicated through language that is, in essence, made up of representations (archetypal images). This would synthesize Jungian archetypes with Frye's more rote, centralized conception of the literary archetype. However, the archetypal theorist should not forget that the goal of this new form is not to displace each archetype or representation from its source; instead, the chief aim is to draw the link between the cultural representations in order to present a fuller picture of the human experience.

Through an archetypal analysis of *House of Leaves*, I have shown that even the most postmodern, deconstructive text contains archetypal images that can be analyzed in a multitude of ways, each one pointing toward something deep in our unconscious that speaks out in art and writing. From here, the beginning of a postmodern archetypal theory emerges. More broadly, the archetypal story of the labyrinth, which is indicative of the death-rebirth story told across times and cultures, must simultaneously contain some element of universal truth, as well as the undermining of that truth, so that we may grow

and become individuated selves. Not only is this a key claim of this revised archetypal theory; it is a chief claim within *House of Leaves*, in which both the characters and the reader undergo such a transformation.

In this thesis, I have laid out the early scholarship of archetypal literary theory by exploring what Carl Jung has written about archetypes and archetypal images. Subsequently, I discussed the early scholars who followed, primarily Northrop Frye and Joseph Campbell, and how their ideas about archetypes bleed into one another and become the starting point for an archetypal analysis of literature. Then, I ruminated on the criticisms of postmodernism, as well as the revisions later and more present scholars have made to archetypal theory. With that history in mind, I proposed a fully postmodern archetypal theory, one that recognizes archetypal images as external, socio-culturally influenced pieces to be analyzed for infinite meaning, while simultaneously indicating a deeper archetype and pattern underneath. I then applied these ideas to *House of Leaves*, not only proving the theory's applicability and practicality, but also its relation to the novel's themes. From here, we may consider the future of this postmodern archetypal theory.

I have proven that texts can be effectively analyzed through an archetypal lens without disregarding the crucial work of postmodern theory. Beyond that, however, is the suggestion that there is something archetypal about the *process* of reading and writing itself. *House of Leaves* indicates a larger archetypal reality about the novel, in which the catharsis that art production gives us is the meaning that we strive to find within ourselves and within our stories. Even further, we understand this process is shared across the world in a ritual manner because it is repeated and cyclical, just as the death-

rebirth story is. The reader “dies” through diving into that unconscious place of story and myth and is subsequently “reborn,” coming out of the story with something new to share with the wider world. This is the inward-outward process of development that both Jungian depth psychology and mythology points toward. A postmodern archetypal theory presents ample opportunity for fruitful literary analysis that aims to critically examine grand narratives and acknowledge the patterns within them. This ultimately provides pedagogical and scholarly opportunity in which both individual and social development become key humanistic results of literary scholarship.

This new postmodern archetypal scholar will walk away from a text with a renewed sense of literature’s transformative power across nations and places, while still paying astute attention to each archetype’s cultural peculiarity. Frye calls for a unifying purpose in the study of literature, and the form of archetypal literary theory this thesis argues for will get the field of theory closer to a unified understanding of literature’s psychological essence, an essence that is not bound by a mechanized structure of universalization. Under postmodern archetypal theory, literature becomes a worldwide project of individuation, and this process is deepened by a critical, intimate look at the patterns it reveals. These patterns are not *merely* symbols that stand in for meaning; they *are* holistic, human meaning. The new archetypal critic reads literature as fundamentally human, a product of the unconscious instinct, the imaginative discourse, and our unique and varying cultural postmodern conceptions of art.

Within the imaginative capacity of the unconscious lies a well of meaning, one that is not strict to some identified utilitarian function. It is malleable, clustered, and fraught with discoverable purpose and understanding that goes beyond cultural

implication (though society and culture remain inexorably linked to archetype). Jung writes, “Thus, just as the one-sidedness of the individual’s conscious attitude is corrected by reactions from the unconscious, so art represents a process of self-regulation in the life of nations and epochs” (Jung, *Relation* 322). For it is this admission from the archetypal scholar, that literature bleeds into life, life bleeds into literature, and the summation of these symbols bleeds out into world, that unlocks the key to a part of the psyche that is often overshadowed by a conscious underlining of a text’s material meaning. It is possible to return to early Jungian scholarship with a contemporary postmodern lens and understand how archetypal images are rhetorical devices. We can explore the power archetypes hold, while also examining their internal psychological significance.

Upon engaging with a text archetypally and on a deeper, unconscious level, the postmodern archetypal scholar understands the deep responsibility they hold to their fellow human beings. This oneness, self-regulation, and individuation, once activated by the individuals in a group of collective readers and thinkers, will bring about greater social understanding, and even broader change in their families, communities, and cultural systems. The archetypal scholar recognizes the divine purpose of literature’s historical project: reveal humanity’s differences as unified under the claim that each individual has an imaginative, yet entirely *real*, potential to better themselves and their surroundings through art, literature, and the mythological, heroic act of storytelling. For it is literature itself that holds the key to unlocking the labyrinth, the thread that will guide us toward the center, not to slay the Minotaur, but to understand it and to embrace the shadow it represents, so we may return from our journeys with the boon of wisdom we

can transfer through the page, through the arrangement of words, and through the power of the archetype.

So, what is a book, according to an archetypal analysis of *House of Leaves*? A book is *you*—complex, labyrinthine you, with all your heartbreak and tragedy, your romance and humor, your darkness and rage, fears, pains, and joy. A book is what you find within the center, the labyrinth, the dark void of nothing. You begin to interrogate your own nature, in the margins of darkness, or the margins of a page. And you find meaning of the most labyrinthine kind—the kind that calls to you and says, “You are meaningful. You have value.” You hold your own Self in your hands, and you flip through its pages, confronting the dark void straight on, and discover that what appears to be made of leaves is something much, much more.

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