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Blend it Like Beckett: Samuel Beckett and Experimental Contemporary Creative Writing

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A thesis

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In partial fulfillment

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by

Sam Campbell

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ABSTRACT

Blend it Like Beckett: Samuel Beckett and Experimental Contemporary Creative Writing

by

Sam Campbell

Samuel Beckett penned novels, short stories, poetry, stage plays, radio plays, and scripts—and he did each in a way that blended genre, challenged the norms of creative writing, and surprised audiences around the globe. His experimental approach to creative writing included the use of absurdism, genre-hybridization, and ergodicism, which led to Beckett fundamentally changing the approach to creative writing. His aesthetics have trickled down through the years and can be seen in contemporary works, including Aimee Bender's short story collection *The Girl in the Flammable Skirt* and Mark Z. Danielewski's novel *House of Leaves*[1]. By examining these works in comparison to Beckett, this project hopes to illuminate the effects of Beckett's experimentation in form and genre on contemporary creative writing.

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[1] The word 'house' appears in blue to honor Danielewski's decision to have the word printed in that color each time it appears in his novel.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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CHAPTER 1. INTRODUCTION

Samuel Beckett, a Nobel Prize-winning author, penned novels, short stories, poetry, essays, stage plays, radio plays, and scripts for both television and film—and he did each in a way that blended genre, challenged the norms of creative writing, and surprised audiences around the globe. His experimentation paved the way for future authors to write across genres, blend forms, and push against the established boundaries in their writing. Two such authors whose works share similar elements of Beckett's aesthetic are Aimee Bender and Mark Z. Danielewski. By examining these contemporary authors, this project hopes to bring to light the effects of Beckett's experimentation in form and genre on contemporary creative writing. It will examine both form and content in Bender's short story collection *The Girl in the Flammable Skirt* and Danielewski's novel *House of Leaves*[2] in comparison to Beckett's body of work. This thesis will also incorporate these authors' own thoughts on the art of writing, through examining first some of Bender and Beckett's craft essays, then interviews with Bender and Danielewski, and finally, some of Beckett's letters.

On the surface, Beckett could not seem any more different than Bender and Danielewski. Beckett was an Irish writer who never formally studied creative writing in an academic setting but still has been published or produced in every genre imaginable. Bender is a contemporary American writer from Los Angeles, California. She earned an MFA in Creative Writing from the University of California at Irvine, currently teaches fiction in the Creative Writing Ph.D. Program at the University of Southern California, and has published only prose fiction. Similarly, Danielewski is also a contemporary American writer who lives in Los Angeles. He

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[2] The word 'house' appears in blue to honor Danielewski's decision to have the word printed in that color each time it appears in his novel.

earned a degree in English Literature from Yale and earned an MFA from the University of Southern California's School of Cinema-Television. Danielewski has published novels and novellas, and he has worked on musical, theatrical, and artistic collaborations. Stylistically speaking, as well, the three authors do not automatically appear related. Beckett has a minimalist style, Bender's work reads like modern-day fairy tales, and Danielewski's novel is more like a puzzle than a book. However, despite surface-level differences between the three writers, they have all been celebrated and recognized for their literary talent, and both Bender and Danielewski share aesthetics with Beckett. Notably, it appears as though the three writers share a similar philosophy of creative writing.

In her craft essay, "On the Making of Orchards," Bender lays out an extended metaphor comparing writing to fruit-bearing trees. She writes:

> If we look at the process of how fruit is made on a tree, we can see that it mirrors the process that happens in fiction, inside a sentence, inside a paragraph, or inside a whole story. We're hoping the writing will bear fruit. But fruit does not happen in some quick way; it happens through a gradual process. It's not as if a seed pushes out a stick that then bears an apple. Right? The seed grows into a tree, which grows a branch that grows a blossom that bears fruit. ("On the Making of Orchards")

She continues explaining her take on this metaphor, making it universal for all writers and using the analogy as a guide to help writers develop their work. What is interesting is both Beckett and Danielewski also refer to writing through the use of a similar metaphor, but each interpreting it in their own unique ways. In his first published essay, "Dante…Bruno. Vico . . Joyce," Beckett muses on the same thought, although not in so many words. During his analysis of Joyce's *Finnegans Wake*, at the time still titled *Work in Progress,* he writes, "There is an endless verbal

germination, maturation, putrefaction, the cyclic dynamism of the intermediate" (29). His "verbal germination" refers to the development of writing from a seed into a tree, while "maturation" is the growth of the branch and bearing of fruit. Beckett takes the metaphor a step further than Bender with the "putrefaction" and the "cyclic dynamism of the intermediate." He includes decay of the fruit and focuses on the importance of the cycle of this progress, with emphasis placed not on each main point in the cycle, but on the movement that occurs in the intermediate—the space between seed and tree, between branch and fruit. Danielewski takes the metaphor even further than Bender or Beckett and directly relates it to the idea of experimentation in writing. In an interview discussing his approach to writing, Danielewski spoke about how the world continually sends out the message to writers that experimentation is something that is to be avoided, but that writers should not give up writing or exploring the way they wish. He then states, "The fruit lies before you. Eat if you dare" (qtd. in Fassler). Looking at the metaphor this way allows readers to look at the interactivity between a writer's work—the fruit—and the author; to see writing as not only something that the writer cultivates themselves but as something that is to be ingested by both the author and their audiences.

These 21st-century authors' shared approach to writing stems from a shared aesthetic, which all begins from Beckett planting his seeds of experimentation in the 20th century. Beckett's work breaks from traditional genre norms in three main ways: his work is absurd,[3]

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[3] Absurdism, as discussed in this thesis, is a literary technique that authors can use to make a familiar story new and fresh through the use of object displacement, flattened tone, and juxtaposition. Absurdism will be discussed further in Chapter 2.

ergodic,[4] and cross-genre.[5] A timeline of Beckett's authorship shows he was simultaneously writing in multiple genres throughout his entire career as opposed to many authors who focus on one genre at a time or those that dedicate their entire careers to perfecting their craft in only one genre. This parallel study of genres allowed Beckett to see how truly interconnected[6] all of the genres are.

Beckett's approach to writing was assisted by his intricate knowledge of languages; Beckett earned a BA in Modern Languages and was fluent in both English and French. He saw language not as simply a technology developed through time for human use, but as a living organism. In "Dante…Bruno. Vico. . Joyce" he wrote that words were alive and stressed the "importance of treating words as something more than polite symbols" (28). This humanistic view of language, as well as his understanding of how language worked at a foundational linguistic level, afforded him a greater command of language when writing, giving him absolute control and enabling him to write in such absurd, ergodic, and boundary-defying ways.

These experimental approaches to creative writing—absurdism, ergodicism, and genre-hybridization—are not unique to Beckett. I am not arguing that Beckett invented any of these concepts, or that he was the first to employ them in his writing. What I do claim is that Beckett was the first to experiment with these techniques on such a large scale that the use of these experimental forms in conjunction with one another combine to be recognized as a Beckettian

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[4] The term "ergodic" is a transplanted term, borrowed from the sciences to be applied to literature. The term is used throughout this thesis to refer to the added element of physical and mental worth that is required for a reader or audience member to consume a text or production (Aarseth 1-2). Ergodicism will be discussed further in Chapter 3.

[5] Cross-genre, also known as genre-hybridization, occurs when a writer borrows techniques or styles from one genre and uses them in another. Genre-hybridization will be discussed further in Chapter 4.

[6] This concept of genre interconnectedness will be discussed further in Chapter 4.

aesthetic. Furthermore, because of his large-scale experimentation, paired with a successful writing career, Beckett assisted in fundamentally changing the approach to creative writing. By challenging traditional approaches while simultaneously gaining approval and stirring controversy, he helped in making experimentation in creative writing more accepted. His effects—and aesthetics—have trickled down through the years and can still be seen in contemporary authors, such as Bender and Danielewski. These writers are not mere imitators of Beckett's aesthetic, however, as they each expand upon the techniques in their own unique ways.

Beckett did not appreciate the incessant need to categorize. In his essay, he wrote that "The danger is in the neatness of identifications" and asked, "Must we wring the neck of a certain system in order to stuff it into a contemporary pigeon-hole, or modify the dimensions of that pigeon-hole for the satisfaction of the analogymongers?" (19) Beckett did not like the idea of his work being pinned down and labeled as one thing or another.

Danielewski, rather than revolting against the categorization process, developed his own definition to describe his style. In an interview, he states:

> People over the years have constantly asked me if I'm a postmodern writer, or a deconstructionist writer, or whatever phrase was at hand. I finally decided I would invent a terminology myself: I describe my work as 'signiconic,' which is a word that combines 'sign' and 'icon.' What signiconic writing does is embrace the possibility of engaging the mind not only on a visual level but on a linguistic level as well, and at the same time, without ever letting either side claim dominance. We can be completely immersed in text. And we can be completely intoxicated by the visual—whether it's a television screen or an Instagram feed. But by engaging both at the same time, you destabilize both sides, and open the mind up to many other perceptions—even a third perception, if you will. My

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exploration is with how text and image can approach this place where both of them kind

of fall away, allowing the reader to begin to sense a world beyond our purely retinal

limitations or our syntactical, synaptic limitations. (qtd. in Fassler)

By taking control of defining his own "pigeon-hole," so to speak, Danielewski has taken that

power away from others and given it back to himself and his work. Furthermore, by creating a

broad definition, he has not limited his future writing or cut himself off from further

experimentation. It is also important to note his defiance of allowing other people to categorize

him, which is reminiscent of Beckett, who revolted by refusing to acknowledge or accept a

classification for his work. Equally important to note is Danielewski's focus on breaking down

readers' expectations of both text and visuals, which is expertly demonstrated throughout his

novel.[7]

Continuing the discussion of authors and their labels, Bender is often categorized as a

magical realist, and it is easy to see why she is given this label. Magical realism has been defined

in many different ways. However, it is commonly applied to literature to denote when an author

purposefully adds fantasy or magic to an otherwise realistic story. There is apparent randomness

to the magic, separating it from pure genre fantasy, and it is accompanied by a matter-of-fact

tone that mutes the magic, makes it seem as though the strangeness is commonplace (Wechsler

293-95). The term can be traced back to Germany in the 1920s. Art critic Franz Roh introduced

the term to describe a new form of painting emerging in the Weimar Republic. However, "This

initial form of magic realist painting was not confined to Germany: its influence spread so that

similar images could be seen in France, Holland, and Italy" (Bowers 11). The influence of Roh's

term spread worldwide, particularly to Italy and Latin America. Although Beckett was not

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[7] See Chapter 2 for discussion of the ways in which Danielewski does this in *House of Leaves.*

classified as a magical realist, he was a mentee and friend of James Joyce, whom many magical realists point to as an influence, and who is sometimes argued to be a predecessor of magical realism (Wexler 25-26). Unlike Beckett and Danielewski, Bender herself agrees with the categorization designated to her.

In an interview for *Margin,* Tamara Kaye Sellman outright asks Bender whether or not she considers herself to be a magical realist, to which Bender replies, "Sure, why not. I definitely like the term, and I'm proud to be included in that category" ("Distortion Comes from the Truth: Just Ask Aimee Bender"). Bender's approach is quite a different philosophy than Beckett ascribed to, having been famously silent about how his work should be interpreted. However, to take Bender's works and merely list them as magical realism is doing a disservice to the experimentation that is happening at the tip of Bender's pen. There are elements of magical realism in her stories, but like Danielewski, her style is also intertwined with the Beckettian.[8]

Experimentation is important in creative writing because without it there would be no originality. If the purpose of literature is to express life, then every day that new life comes into the world, new art is needed to express it. A writer cannot create new writing if they are merely regurgitating the old traditions, trapped by convention and genre boundaries. Beckett understood this, and the following chapters discuss how Beckett's experimentation with absurdism, ergodicism, and genre-hybridization paved the way for future authors like Bender and Danielewski to not only continue experimenting in their writing, but to take it even further.

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[8] This will be explained and demonstrated throughout the following chapters.

CHAPTER 2. THE TRUE ABSURDISM

The Beckettian aesthetic, as mentioned before, is characterized by the simultaneous presence of absurdism, ergodicism, and genre-hybridization. The first of these, absurdism, is the most difficult to understand. In unpacking Beckett's brand of absurdism, it is imperative to examine the idea as it has come to be understood:

> The term 'absurd' itself has its etymological roots in the Latin *absurdus,* meaning 'contrary to reason or inharmonious,' an intensive of *sardus*, meaning 'irrational or deaf' (hence deaf to reason.) The contemporary common use of 'absurd' still corresponds closely to this original sense and the term is ordinarily employed to identify and describe illogicality or incongruity in everyday life. (Gavins, 1)

The term 'absurd' is often used to describe certain types of literature. Traditionally, absurdist literature dealt with the inability to find meaning in human existence (Gavins 1). The term "Theatre of the Absurd," the most common type of absurdism associated with Beckett, was initially introduced in 1960 by critic Martin Esslin in his essay "The Theatre of the Absurd." Esslin associated absurdism with existentialism, following the philosophical footsteps of Albert Camus, mainly arguing that absurdist literature dealt with themes of meaninglessness. Esslin writes:

> The Theatre of the Absurd attacks the comfortable certainties of religious or political orthodoxy. It aims to shock its audience out of complacency, to bring it face to face with the harsh facts of the human situation as these writers see it…to accept the human condition as it is, in all its mystery and absurdity, and to bear it with dignity, nobly, responsibly; precisely because there are no easy solutions to the mysteries of existence, because ultimately man is alone in a meaningless world. (Esslin 23)

For years this rather cynical approach to absurdism—and the literature labelled as such—was widely accepted. However, alternate ideas of what absurdism is have emerged.

Michael Bennett disagrees with Esslin in his book *Reassessing the Theatre of the Absurd*. Bennett argues that Esslin misinterpreted both Camus's essay and the works of the absurdist writers. His redefining of absurdism is that instead the texts "revolt against existentialism and are ethical parables that force the audience to make life meaningful" (Bennett 2). This definition is the complete opposite of Esslin's and provides a second definition to absurdism. However, absurdism should not be considered in only these philosophical and theoretical ways.

While Bennett openly disagrees with Esslin, it is not my goal to state whether either of them are right or wrong. Both these approaches depend on how the reader chooses to approach the work rather than how a writer creates the work. Esslin's and Bennett's definitions of absurdity both deal with the way that an audience or a reader views a piece of literature—as either having meaning or not. Their concepts of absurdism are lenses of interpretation rather than a technique that authors may use in their writing, and a distinction must be made between the tools that a writer uses in their craft and how others interpret their work. Absurdism is a tool that Beckett used, but whether or not his writing had meaning is left to the interpretation of the audience/reader and has little to do with his use of absurdism. Beckett, in fact, may never have meant for his work to be read/seen one way or another and he famously refused to explain his work.

Jack MacGowran, one of Beckett's friends and an actor who worked with Beckett on stage, television, and radio, recalls a conversation with Beckett on this subject, wherein Beckett states, "People read great symbolism I never intended," and "I will feel superior to my work if I try to explain it" (qtd. in Gussow 22-23). Knowing that this is how Beckett felt towards his work,

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it is possible to view absurdity instead as a type of literary device or stylistic tool that authors may implement in the craft of their writing. Absurdity as a literary technique involves an author taking a story or premise that is familiar to readers and then using object displacement, flattened tone, and juxtaposition in order to tell the story in a new and unique way.

Familiar Plot

At the core of each absurdist piece lies a familiar and commonplace plot—one that readers often never see because of the absurdity. However, when the layers are pulled back it is easy to see. At the core of Beckett's "First Love" is a story about a man down on his luck who shacks up with a young woman. He mooches off her, knocks her up, and then leaves her to avoid the responsibility of being a father. However, with the addition of absurdity, Beckett is able to take this premise and elevate it into a story that is representative of various types of love that are experienced but rarely represented or even named. Simultaneously, Beckett is able to represent not only the abusive, one-sided love, but also infatuation. Beyond this, however, Beckett has also encapsulated the cyclical nature of affection: the experience of falling in and out of love within a single lifetime. When the narrator leaves the cowshed and returns to the bench, Lulu (whom the narrator has renamed "Anna") takes him home and they begin living together. Things go well throughout the spring and summer, until Lulu/Anna becomes pregnant and tells the narrator it is his. He is in disbelief, and he denies it, attempts to convince her to abort it. After this point, the narrator relates, "From that day forth things went from bad to worse, to worse and worse" (44). This is a line that, although the story as a whole is absurd, many readers would relate to in their own love lives as relationships wane and die.

In the end, the narrator leaves as the child is being born. However, leaving is difficult for him and the decision haunts him for the rest of his life, the sound of the childbirth cries following him endlessly. He writes: "For years I thought they would cease. Now I don't think so anymore" (45). While the narrator on the surface is speaking only of the sounds he continues to hear, beneath that is the truth of what he is talking about: for years he thought his feelings for Lulu/Anna would cease, but now he doesn't think so. This ending perfectly encapsulates feelings that many people experience, but by doing so in an absurd way the story is able to capture the emotions fresh, avoiding the familiar.

Furthermore, in Beckett's *Play*, three people—a man and two women—confess their roles in a love triangle. A love triangle, by no means, is in itself a unique or fresh idea to revolve a plot around. It is, as many would say, a tale as old as time. It happens not only in fiction, but also quite often in reality. However, despite the familiarity of the surface-level plot, *Play* is able to, through absurdity, create a new dynamic in the love triangle. By presenting the man and two women as heads in urns, requiring them to repeat their tale over and over again in an endless loop, and introducing an interrogating spotlight as a silent fourth character, Beckett is able to transform an otherwise overdone storyline into something audiences have never seen before.

Bender's stories follow this trend; "Marzipan" is a prime example of Bender taking an everyday story and using absurdity to frame it in a new and interesting way. On the surface it may be a strange tale of a disfigured father and a woman who gives birth to her own mother, but underneath it is simply a story about family and the circle of life. The narrator's parents lose their parents and therefore they lose a part of themselves. This idea is manifested physically by the father having a hole where his stomach should be. However, even though families lose members, they also gain new ones and continue to grow and carry on even as older members die; it is the

circle of life. This idea manifests itself in the form of the mother giving birth to her own mother. On the surface, this would seem like an incredibly impossible occurrence, however when parsing things down to the bone, it actually is commonplace when one considers that parents' genes and grandparents' genes are present in a couples' offspring. By demonstrating this in such a blunt, absurd way, it allows readers to think about the human condition in a primeval way that they may not have done before. That is the beauty of experimentation in creative writing; it allows authors to take situations that readers see so often and turn them around, show them from new angles, make them fresh and different. Despite the familiarity of the plot and despite the ordinary lives of the characters, Bender follows in Beckett's footsteps to successfully interweave real and surreal, making stories that are both fantastical and realistic; Bender is able to create absurd stories that are grounded in complete reality.

Even Danielewski's novel, which is often touted as "reinventing the novel" (Fassler), when parsed down to fundamentals is about a haunted house. The premise of the novel is that a father quits his job and moves his family into a house in southeast Virginia in order for the family to grow closer and reconnect. However, the house turns out to be haunted. Furthermore, the parallel narrative following Johnny Truant is also full of familiar scenes—works scenes with an insufferable boss, and party scenes with his best friend full of booze and drugs where they try to pick up women, which leads to familiar love scenes readers have seen before and hangover mornings that are far too familiar to Johnny. However, Danielewski's approach to telling the story implements absurdism in several ways that position the reader not in the center of the narratives, experiencing as they unfold, but positions readers in various vantage points around the central plot and allowing the story to be told through the lenses of others, thereby creating a novel like no other.

Establishing familiar plots, Beckett, Bender, and Danielewski veer from the commonplace through the use of object displacement, flattened tone, and juxtaposition. These three devices will be explored in the remainder of this chapter.

Object Displacement

Object displacement occurs when one item or thing would traditionally appear, but it has been replaced by something else. For example, in Beckett's "First Love," when the narrator moves from the bench to a deserted cowshed for cover during winter months, he finds that his thoughts circulate only around Lulu. He relates that "I found myself inscribing the letters of Lulu in an old heifer pat or flat on my face in the mud under the moon trying to tear up the nettles by the roots" (34). The sight of a pining lover doodling their crush's name in a notebook is nothing out of the ordinary, nothing newsworthy or surprising. However, by having the narrator write Lulu's name in cow shit, Beckett makes the act absurd, monumentally more interesting, and highlights the strangeness of the human condition.

Object displacement also appears in Bender's works. In "What You Left in the Ditch," Bender opens with object displacement: "Steven returned from the war without lips" (21). In literature, originating in Medieval texts such as Chrétien de Troyes's *Perceval* and carrying through to Shakespeare's works, such as *Henry IV*, and beyond, men are portrayed as having leg or thigh wounds. These wounds typically symbolize castration, or a loss of masculinity (Tracy 26). Here, however, Bender has replaced thigh wounds with lips. There is still the underlying symbolism of lost masculinity, as the wife has initially lost the desire to be with her husband, but by breaking from the established literary trope, Bender implements absurdism and achieves originality in the story. Like Beckett's heads in urns in *Play*, Bender uses the fragmented body to

establish immediately to readers that this is not a story they have read before. Additionally, Bender maximizes the absurdity by choosing an injury that would be almost physically impossible to endure without losing other parts of the face or dying from the wound. By substituting the traditional thigh wound trope with the ridiculous loss of lips, Bender successfully captures the absurdity of both the savagery of war and marriage and because of the absurdity, makes the story believable.

Further object displacement is seen in her work "The Rememberer," a simple story about a couple falling out of love. The narrator's lover seems to be "devolving" species, yet in reality it is simply the narrator evolving—outgrowing a relationship and drifting further and further away from the man who was once her love. The female narrator, Annie, begins, "My lover is experiencing reverse evolution. I tell no one. I don't know how it happened, only that one day he was my lover and the next he was some kind of ape. It's been a month and now he's a sea turtle" (Bender 3). Here, where we would normally see a man, we see non-human animals. By opening the story with these lines of object displacement, Bender invites readers on what feels like a new, yet familiar journey.

Annie fights against her boyfriend's reverse evolution—keeps him close and attempts to stop the inevitable ending of their love. She reminisces about the times they had before, thinks back about the reasons she loved him. She was even okay with the change at first, "I didn't miss human Ben right away…but I didn't realize he wasn't coming back" (6). She struggles with this realization, struggles to let him go. Annie says, "Now I come home from work and look for his regular-sized shape walking and worrying and realize, over and over, that he's gone" (6). Even though Bender is telling a completely absurd story about a woman whose boyfriend is "shedding a million years a day" (3), she is really telling a story that many readers know far too well: the

story of slowly outgrowing a relationship, losing a partner that they still love but know isn't right

for them anymore. In the end, Annie finally lets Ben go. She loads him up into her car in a glass

baking pan and drives to the beach and releases him into the ocean before turning around and

going back home. However, just as Beckett's narrator in "First Love" is haunted by his lost love,

so is Annie. She says, "Sometimes I think he'll wash up on shore. A naked man with a startled

look. Who has been to history and back" (7). Even though Annie has outgrown the relationship,

she sometimes hopes that Ben will return, having learned and grown personally to a point where

they can be together again. If the narrator's boyfriend had remained human throughout, it would

have been more difficult to create an authentic depiction of her gradually losing romantic interest

in him. However, through the gradual transition of her lover from man to ape to eventual

salamander, Bender is able to depict the emotions of a breakup without treading into the territory

of familiar, overly sentimental drama.

Bender demonstrates this technique again in "Marzipan" when the mother goes into

labor: instead of having a baby, the mother gives birth to her own mother, the narrator's

grandmother. Babies are often viewed as a symbol for new life and so the appearance of an old

woman instead of a newborn inverses expectation and allows Bender to explore the ideas of

family and the circle of life through a new perspective.

Danielewski takes absurdism even further in *House of Leaves.* Object displacement is at

play on an intricate level within the novel; the entire book is based on an object that may not

exist. Johnny Truant, not quite the narrator, but perhaps the reader's "guide" through the novel,

questions the existence of the documentary that led to the project*:*

> I fast discovered, Zampanò's entire project is about a film which doesn't even exist. You
>
> can look as I have, but no matter how long you search you will never find The Navidson

Record in theatres or video stores. Furthermore, most of what's said by famous people

has been made up. I tried contacting all of them. Those that took the time to respond told

me they had never heard of Will Navidson let alone Zampanò. (xix-xx)

What is most interesting about this instance of object displacement is that instead of the

documentary film, Danielewski creates other items that all operate as though the documentary

film existed, even though it doesn't. There are academic and scholarly articles, comic strips,

artwork, conceptual models, journal entries, poems, letters, sketches, photographs, and footnotes

referencing journals, magazines, studies, books, and more. The overall purpose of this is to

destabilize the reader's trust in the text, which links back to Danielewski's goal in his writing.[9]

Flattened Tone

In addition to object displacement, the second element of absurdity is flattened tone.

Flattened tone is characterized by a lack of emotion and varying levels of psychic distance

between the reader and the events in the story. This tone is necessary for the delivery of an

absurd story to be believable to the audience. If a story is absurd, yet the tone is emotive, the

suspension of disbelief would be too difficult for readers and the story would not be effective or

entertaining. A flattened tone is the key to avoiding over sentimentality and melodrama, and

allows an absurd story to be told in a rational way, as if the facts of the story cannot be argued or

challenged, thus evenly balancing the familiar and unfamiliar.

In order to achieve this effect, the manipulation of language and mechanics are used.

Traditional grammatical rules are commonly abandoned. Beckett often opted not to use quotation

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[9] Danielewski's goal, as discussed in Chapter 1, is to engage both text and image simultaneously in order to destabilize both, which guides the reader into a new perspective. He calls this style 'signiconic.'

marks, which creates enough distance between the reader and the story for the absurd to become believable. "First Love" is an example of this technique in use, with no conversations appearing in quotation marks:

> What interest could she have in pursuing me thus? I asked her, without sitting down, stumping to and fro. The cold had embossed the path. She replied she didn't know. What could she see in me, would she kindly tell me that at least, if she could. She replied she couldn't. (36)

Despite a conversation occurring between the narrator and Lulu/Anna, there are no quotation marks to denote speech is occurring. Here, the conversation is presented in an almost expository way that causes a tonal shift which makes the conversation seem years in the past even when taken out of context.

Beckett also disregards the use of quotation marks throughout the entirety of his novel, *Watt.* There are differences between the methods of delivery, however, that create variations in the flatness of tone. Whereas the flattened tone of "First Love" creates a psychic distance within the audience that feels like years, *Watt* delivers its dialogue to readers in a flattened tone that feels closer. It is as if the audience is overhearing conversations and watching from across the street—still far enough away for everything to be slightly muted, but close enough that the actions and conversations feel recent:

> I see no indecency, said the policeman.
>
> We arrive too late, said Mr Hackett. What a shame.
>
> Do you take me for a fool? said the policeman.
>
> Mr Hackett recoiled a step, forced back his head until he thought his throatskin would burst, and saw at last, afar, bend angrily upon him, the red violent face.

Officer, he cried, as God is my witness, he had his hand upon it.

God is a witness that cannot be sworn. (8-9)

The rapid back-and-forth between characters, structured in the novel to more closely resemble traditional dialogue, just minus the quotation marks, creates a balanced flattened tone that feels as if what is happening on the pages lie just outside the reader's grasp—close enough to observe, but not close enough to become a part of.

Bender does this as well in "Marzipan." In the story, the narrator's grandparents pass away, and the death affects her parents in strange ways. As the story unfolds, readers notice that the characters converse with one another without any use of quotation marks:

What's that? I asked.

He shook his head. I don't know, and he looked scared then.

Where is your stomach now? I asked.

He coughed a little.

Did you eat? Hannah said. We saw you eat.

His face paled. (40)

This lack of punctuation where one would normally see it carries with it a muting effect. Instead of the action and the words seeming to the reader to be clear and audible, it becomes removed, flattened almost.

Stylistically speaking, authors would not normally want this to be the tone of their stories—it reads matter-of-factly, but also in a bored way, as if the narrator has seen things far more interesting than what she is now experiencing. However, with a story like "Marzipan," in which Bender expertly implements absurdism, it is precisely the effect that is needed to avoid over-sentimentality. If Bender were to tell such an outlandish story and not mute it with a bored,

matter-of-fact tone, the piece would be in danger of taking itself too seriously. Suspension of belief would be far more difficult for readers were the story not told in this tone.

Another way of flattening the tone is draining the piece of color. This is a detail that can be overlooked at first; however, in many of Beckett's plays, he used color to achieve a desired tone. For example, in *Come and Go*, he used color to flatten the tone through the stage directions for lighting, costume, and voices. The lighting of the stage is directed to be "Soft, from above only and concentrated on playing area. Rest of stage as dark as possible" (387). Then, for the costumes he instructs that the coats the three characters wear should be violet, red, and yellow, but that each of them should be "dull" (387). Finally, for voices he indicates that they should be "As low as compatible with audibility. Colourless" (388). These directions all work together to create a flattened tone, so that when audiences view the production each moment looks more like a faded photograph from long ago as opposed to actions and conversations happening right before their eyes.

Colorlessness is a recurring tool Beckett uses to flatten the tone. He does so in his television piece *Eh Joe* to set tone for speaking. He directs that voices should be "*Low, distinct, remote, little colour*" (392). Once more, in *Endgame,* Beckett indicates that the lighting should be "*Grey light*" (91). Also, in *Play,* Beckett makes the urns "*grey*" and has the stage directions indicate that the characters faces should "*seem almost part of the urns*" (356). These are just a few examples from Beckett's works; much of his work implements black, white, and grey to flatten the tone

Juxtaposition

The final aspect of absurdity is juxtaposition in reference to things that are seemingly at odds with one another. Juxtaposition is necessary to highlight the absurdities that are present in reality—for instance, that light cannot exist without darkness, and vice versa. Without the juxtaposition that exposes the reality of absurdity (and the absurdity of reality) the overall effect of absurdism would fall short and fail. What this final element does is wrap the entire absurdist aesthetic together and cause the reader to then look for meaning; whether they find meaning or not is irrelevant, and, ultimately an individual response. For example, in "First Love" Beckett immediately juxtaposes the concept of marriage and love with that of death and corruption.

In the opening line, the narrator simultaneously refers to the relationship he had with a prostitute named Lulu, whom he later renames Anna, as both a "marriage" and an "affair" (25). This juxtaposition of terms immediately initiates the multifaceted nature of the love story. The narrator also outright states that he "associate[s], rightly or wrongly, [his] marriage with the death of [his] father" (25). This association of love with death immediately also indicates that the love story is that of dead love, or a failed attempt at love. The death of the narrator's father is also associated with his relationship because were it not for his father's death, he would never have met Lulu/Anna. After his father dies, his family kicks him out of the house, having never liked him, and he begins living on a bench. Lulu/Anna frequents this bench as well, and the two of them begin an odd romance in which the narrator immediately experiences an erection and eventually tells her to stop coming to the bench. Then, the narrator begins to realize his feelings for her.

Similarly, Bender uses juxtaposition to expand on her object displacement in "What You Left in the Ditch" during the scene where the couple is making love for the first time since the

husband's return. Bender writes, "That night in bed, he grazed the disc over her raised nipples like a UFO and the plastic was cool on her skin" (22). By presenting the moment in this surreal way, juxtaposing a married couple's lovemaking with that of an unidentifiable object, Bender avoids over-sentimentalizing the situation, yet still perfectly capturing the strange, otherworldly feelings that the wife has at the same time. She finally has her husband back, and it's the same, but different. This feeling is amplified later with the juxtaposition of the husband's lack of lips with the young man's lips at the grocery store. The wife believes that she will find what is missing in the man's lips but finds that she cannot because "They were so soft. She kissed them for a moment, and then she had to move away; they were too soft, the softness was murdering her" (28). Here, the ideas of softness and murder are juxtaposed to emphasize the wife's realization that another man isn't what she wants; she wants her husband, even though he is different than before.

Absurdity, through the use of object displacement, flattened tone, and juxtaposition, can take an otherwise familiar story and turn it into something completely new and original. As a literary device, absurdity can help writers avoid sentimentality, melodrama, and help make their writing feel fresh and original. Because of the various ways that authors can implement absurdism into their writing, it can also give a writer's style a unique twist. Absurdism also works well with ergodicisim, the topic of the next chapter.

CHAPTER 3. ERGODICISM

The second way that Beckett experimented and broke away from traditional creative writing conventions was by making his texts ergodic. Ergodic literature is that which requires the readers to make a greater than normal effort in order to process and understand what they are reading. Ergodic pieces do not operate by the same set of rules that readers are familiar with, and they "teach you how to read them as you go" (qtd. in Fassler). Beckett creates this ergodic effect through the use of various techniques, including a disregard of grammatical and stylistic conventions, noise, and remediation. "Text" (1932) is a prime example of this; the piece is overwhelming to see at first and it does not make much sense upon an initial, or even a second or third read-through (see Appendix I). Many readers give up and label it a nonsense poem. However, when dissected bit-by-bit the work reveals itself to the reader. The key to reaching understanding is through defining the words, analyzing the symbolism, and recognizing the various instances of figurative language present. It requires effort of the reader to work to understand, however, and not all readers are willing to put forth the level of effort required.

The first step is to see beyond the madness of the page and to begin identifying information. From the first line, there is a speaker, character, or an "I" narrator. The first line states, "cull me bonny."[10] "Bonny" is a word that was commonly used to refer to a pretty girl. If readers continue looking up unfamiliar words, they will discover that in the second line "springal" refers to a young man, and "twingle-twangle" refers to the "twang of a musical instrument." (Merriam-Webster). Furthermore, "Kerry" could be referring to County Kerry in

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[10] I am not using parenthetical citations for Beckett's "Text" in this section due to the fact that it is only one page long. The piece can be found in Samuel Beckett's *The Collected Shorter Prose*, and in Appendix I.

Ireland, but it can also be a person's name. It is reasonable, therefore, for readers to come to the conclusion that there are now two characters: the female narrator and a young musician who is either from County Kerry or who is named Kerry. Moving forward, line three mentions the narrator's "week of redness with mad shame." Here, it becomes even clearer that the narrator is a woman, as the color red is often associated with blood and a week of blood would refer to a woman's menstruation cycle.

The next lines go on to state that the narrator is "lust-belepered and unwell." The first word here is a compounding, wherein Beckett has joined lust with belepered. A leper is someone that suffers from the chronic and infectious disease, leprosy. So, by adding the word "lust" to "belepered," the narrator is revealing that she is chronically infected by lust. She then through the next four lines presents readers with a couple sexual analogies of her and her lover, each ripe with phallic innuendo such as "coxcomb" and "potystick." The narrator gets caught up in her sexual fantasies and then remembers that her menstruation began: "day of the red time opened its rose and struck with its thorn." She flips a common analogy of a woman to a rose around and accentuates upon the painfulness of womanhood.

Immediately after this, the language appears to completely break down with the line "oh I'm all of a gallimaufry or a salady salmafundi single and single to bed." When dissected, this line becomes the key to understanding the entire poem. The opening words, "I'm all of a" indicate that whatever comes after is meant to describe the narrator. Although "gallimaufry" may look like a garble of nonsense, it is in fact a real word. The definition is "a confused jumble or medley of things" (Merriam-Webster). Thus, the reader discovers that the narrator is a confused jumble. The contraction "or" gives readers another option, making the narrator a "gallimaufry" or a "salady salmafundi." If readers remove the suffix -y from the end of "salady" they are left

with "salad," a word that also means "a mixture." "Salmafundi" is not a word. However, it is possible that it is a malaprop for "salmagundi," which is a type of salad originating in English and also means "a general mixture or miscellaneous collection" (Merriam-Webster). Therefore, the speaker in this line is saying that her head is essentially a messy mixture of thoughts. The last part of the line "single to bed," can be taken literally. The narrator is going to bed alone, as opposed to having her lover. The last few lines reveal that there is a third character, a "she" that says, "I'll have no toadspit about this house." Toadspit is another word for cuckoo spit, which is a white, frothy secretion found on plants. Taking into consideration the content of the piece, "toadspit" is most likely a double entendre for intercourse. Since the third character seems against the narrator having sex in her house, she is most likely a mother or caretaker of some kind. The last few lines include more of the narrator's fantasies, but center equally on both the sexual and the adolescent desire for maturation and freedom.

"Text" demonstrates the beauty of ergodicism. Because readers have to put in effort to get to the story underneath, they become more invested in the work and, in the end, it means more to them than if they had simply read and consumed the story. Ergodicism, through making the work initially unreadable, succeeds in making a work that readers can return to multiple times to continue unearthing meaning.

Disregard of Grammatical and Stylistic Conventions

One prime method of creating an ergodic text is a disregard of grammatical conventions. Grammar, while often viewed as unnecessary torture by schoolchildren around the globe, serves as an important roadmap to readers on how to navigate a text; punctuation indicate when to stop, pause, where to place emphasis, and what is what within a sentence. Without it, readers would be

unable to discern where one idea ends and other begins, or for a more specific example, where one character's dialogue ends and when another begins speaking. It is self-explanatory as to how this disregard of grammatical conventions is an ergodic element. However, it is important to note that the disregard of grammatical conventions is different than a disregard of grammar. On this subject, Beckett once wrote in a letter to a friend, catalogued in *The Letters of Samuel Beckett Volume I: 1929-1940,* that:

> It is indeed getting more and more difficult, even pointless, for me to write in formal English. And more and more my language appears to me like a veil which one has to tear apart in order to get to those things (or the nothingness) lying behind it. Grammar and style! To me they seem to have become as irrelevant as a Biedermeier bathing suit or the imperturbability of a gentlemen. A mask. It is to be hoped the time will come, thank God, in some circles it already has, when language is best used where it is most efficiently abused. (518)

The irony here is that Beckett does not treat grammar as irrelevant in his work. He treats grammatical *conventions* as irrelevant. He breaks grammar rules in order to elicit specific effects. In fact, he even does this in his letter through purposefully writing sentence fragments to add emphasis. He is a skilled wordsmith familiar with the tools at his disposal. It would not be possible for just any author to break the rules as well as Beckett does.

"Text" contains only a single stopping point: one period at the very end. Other than that, there are only three hyphens and a few apostrophes in contractions, and those are the only punctuation marks present in the entire piece. This gives the work a rushed feeling, as though the words are tripping over one another as the lines flow down the page. The utter lack of

punctuation emphases how important punctuation is normally to understanding how to read a piece. Without it, "Text" becomes even more overwhelming to digest.

Another example of Beckett's unique use of grammar is in "First Love." The narrator writes:

> It had something to do with lemon trees, or orange trees, I forget, that is all I remember, and for me that is no mean feat, to remember it had something to do with lemon trees, or orange trees, I forget, for of all the other songs I have ever heard in my life, and I have heard plenty, it being apparently impossible, physically impossible short of being deaf, to get through this world, even my way, without hearing singing, I have retained nothing, not a word, not a note, or so few words, that, that what, that nothing, this sentence has gone on long enough. (37)

This comically long rambling, when compared to "Text," can highlight the different ways that punctuation can be manipulated to elicit different effects while simultaneously creating ergodicism. In "Text" there are no stops or pauses, with the only punctuation throughout being hyphens and apostrophes—punctuation meant to connect and create continuity and flow, which creates ergodicism through a rush to read the words without a pause to comprehend them. Alternatively, the rambling section of "First Love" demonstrates a rather long passage with commas sprinkled throughout. This elicits a slower progression through the passage that interferes with comprehension by continuously pausing the reader and interrupting comprehension and train of thought.

"Text" and "First Love" demonstrate Beckett's ergodic disregard for grammatical conventions. They are run-on sentences, but more than that, they are *intentional* run-on sentences. Therein lies the difference between a disregard for grammatical conventions and a

disregard for grammar entirely. Beckett could have written these portions in grammatically "correct" fashion. However, were he to have done so would have completely ruined the intended and desired effect of the passages. In "Text" the rush of thought is intended to mirror the internal mental state of the narrator. In "First Love" the effect is that the narrator is rambling, his thoughts wandering from his initial purpose of relating the story into internal musings and then realizing what he was doing and snapping back into the story. By never breaking these sentences up in passages, readers are able to become caught up in the narrator's inner thoughts and lose themselves in their consciousnesses in a way that would have been impossible were Beckett following "formal English."

Danielewski feels similarly regarding grammar and style. In an interview for *The Atlantic*, he states that he has an "attraction to books that invent their own narrative grammar" (qtd. in Fassler), which is apparent in *House of Leaves,* his novel which must be read in a way that is unique to the book. No other work conforms to the set of rules that this particular novel creates and abides by. Danielewksi goes on to state, "I love texts that confront us with new grammar in this fashion, teaching us new ways to read and interpret as we go" (qtd. in Fassler). Again, *House of Leaves* is a creation born out of this love. The text is full of interesting grammatical and stylistic choices that forces readers to adapt their reading and interpretations as they move through the text.

Early on, readers learn and recognize that different fonts indicate different narrative branches and voices, with Times New Roman indicating Zampanó, Courier denoting Johnny Truant's voice, and some others used throughout as well. Other sections that implement the use of empty brackets to indicate missing words: "'Look what you done. [   ] shot yourself a doe.' [   ] I almost killed myself then but I guess I thought it couldn't get any worse. [

] that was the worst" (329). The use of brackets in this way is opposite of their traditional

usage, which is to add new words into a passage or quote.

Even more interesting is Danielewski's implementation of the strikethrough as a

grammatical element. There are several passages throughout the novel where things are written

and then struck through: "~~Navidson is not Minos. He did not build the labrynth. He only d[~~

~~]covered it~~…" (336). This punctuation is indicating that someone, in this example Zampanò, has

attempted to delete the passage from the text, which is remarkably interesting because in most

texts if something was meant to be deleted, it wouldn't appear in the printed novel at all.

Danielewski wants these passages to be read, however, and for the reader to understand that

someone else didn't want them read, which creates a new type of conflict that wouldn't exist if

he were following traditional grammatical and stylistic conventions.

Contrastingly, there are entire passages that have been 'destroyed' in various ways,

represented by lines of "Xs" as shown on page 354 in a footnote that reads: "Perhaps

XXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXX…" The "Xs" continue on for several lines and end with a

corresponding footnote in which Truant explains the reason that the text is unreadable, writing

that it is "Crossed out with what looked suspiciously like black crayon and tar" (354). This, in its

own way, is also a type of grammatical or stylistic convention. Danielewski has created a new

grammatical tool in his novel, wherein capital Xs can be interpreted as an indicator of a

destroyed passage.

These ergodic grammatical and stylistic methods operate on multiple levels in

Danielewski's novel. Not only does the reader have to learn how the different pieces of

punctuation are operating in the context of the passage, but also, they must sort through the

punctuation to try to uncover the meaning behind it. The bracketed blanks, strikethrough

passages, and X'd out passages all, each in their own unique ways, make the meaning of the text more difficult for the reader to consume and comprehend. It takes time and effort on the part of the reader to learn the book's new grammar and style and understand what meaning lies behind it.

Beyond this sentence-level disregard of grammatical and stylistic conventions, Danielewski takes it even further, as is his style. *House of Leaves* sets up convention of form and then slowly breaks it down. For example, Chapter I opens up innocuously enough. If a reader were to glance at the page out of context, it would appear to them as any other scholarly text looks. There's a familiar shape, a few footnotes adorning the bottom of the pages, nothing too out of the ordinary. It begins, "While enthusiasts and detractors will continue to empty entire dictionaries attempting to describe or deride it, 'authenticity' still remains the word most likely to stir a debate" (3). This is an intriguing start to a scholarly text examining the legitimacy behind a highly discussed artifact—except this is supposed to be a novel, not an academic journal.[11]

Moving into Chapter II, Danielewski's approach of presenting the novel as a scholarly text continues until page 12 when he begins breaking down the conventions of scholarly texts, as well as the expectations that readers have built up to this point. He executes this breakdown by presenting the reader with footnote 18, which is four pages long and digresses into a parallel narrative that is not wholly related to the main article of the chapter. Chapters III through VI continue this slowly and ever-increasing breakdown of the convention of academic writing. The footnotes are long and eventually readers even begin to question what is accurate and what is

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[11] It is important to note that novels do not generally include scholarly or academic writing within them. Neither Beckett nor Bender incorporate these effects in their work.

not. If outside research is done, it can be found that some referenced materials exist outside of the novel and some are completely made up. Some information is true, and some is fiction. In this way, Danielewski has taken the form and convention of this type of genre—academic and scholarly writing—and slowly broken it down within his novel. Thus, Danielewski achieves his goal of the 'signiconic' and also creates a mentally, as well as physically, ergodic text.

Danielewski does this throughout the novel, but another specific example are the letters from Johnny Truant's mother to him during his youth, which is present in Appendix E at the back of the book. The letters begin on page 587 appearing as innocent, normal letters from a mother to her son with nothing amiss. Yet, things are not right because the section is titled "The Three Attic Whalestoe Institute Letters," which indicates that the mother is in some type of institution, which is why she is away from her son. As the letters go on, they slowly become more urgent in tone and more paranoid in content. They retain the normal form and shape of a traditional letter until the one dated May 8, 1987 (620), in which the letter makes no sense at all unless readers take the first letter of each word and decode the actual message. After this letter, the breakdown of form and convention escalates. The next letter is written in diagonal tilts across the page, followed by a letter that has sideways writing, a letter that has upside-down writing, and a few letters in which the words on the page overlap one another.

Danielewski "destabilizes both sides," meaning text and art, by starting out with conventional forms and then breaking them down. He uses the text as art and creates art through unique uses of text. Often, his breakdown of text and art coincides and runs parallel with the breakdown of characters' mental states. In the example of scholarly articles, which ends up blending into narrative and exposition, the breakdown of text and art coincides with the mental breakdowns of the two main characters, Navidson and Johnny Truant. In the case of the

Whalestoe letters, the breakdown is synchronized with the deteriorating mental state of Truant's mother, which is seen in a cyclic manner, since the letters destabilize and then re-stabilize again in the end right before the mother's death.

This conceptual objective of destabilization, in its essence, is Beckettian; the desire to open up a third perspective is absurdist, combining text with visuals is genre-hybridization, and the attempt to destabilize and bring the reader beyond their limitations to a new understanding is ergodic. Danielewski's self-classified signiconic style, while self-empowering, is not wholly accepted by others. Critics, booksellers, and readers still attempt to classify *House of Leaves,* and Danielewski, as everything from horror and romance to postmodernist and satire.

Bender, although not as intensely as Danielewski, shows a disregard for grammatical and stylistic conventions. "What You Left in the Ditch," in addition to having no quotation marks at all to signify dialogue, Bender uses hyphens for everything that the lipless husband, Steven, says, "The-doctors-are-going-to-put-new-skin-on-in-a-few-weeks-anyway" (21). Added to her description of the way Steven talks "in a strange halted clacking," these hyphens provide a visual that elicit the halting motion and slows readers down as they read his speech. This is an opposite effect than Beckett elicits uses hyphens in "Text," which speeds up the flow of speech rather than slowing it down. Comparing the two effects garnered from the same punctuation showcases how versatile grammar and style can be when approached experimentally.

Bender's "Legacy," a short story remnant of fairy tales, depicts the story of a girl who gets pregnant and is sent to live with a hunchback in his castle. Throughout, there are interesting grammatical choices that break tradition. In the opening paragraph there are intentional sentence fragments. When the girl's parents decide what to do with their now-pregnant daughter, they exclaim "That castle! Your weird brother!" (143). These sentence fragments are meant to add

emphasis. Later on, after the girl has been living with the hunchback and has had the baby, she finds out that his hunchback was surgically installed on his body. The grammatical elements of that particular section are quite interesting. Bender writes:

> You mean you're not for real? she screeched, and she ran outside to the weed while the baby slept and she poked at his hard back until he said You're hurting me and she said You're a fake fake fake! and scooping up the baby she flew down the four hundred stairs. (145)

Despite the presence of end-of-sentence punctuation such as the question mark and the exclamation point, the sentence continues on. Not only have quotation marks been removed and commas all but abandoned, but Bender has also taken the power out of all but the period. The form in this instance is mirroring the content of the story, which hearkens back to Beckett's ideas of content and form being related in "Dante . . . Bruno . Vico . . Joyce." Because the narrator is so upset in this section, the structure of the story begins to reflect her psyche; as she is becoming more emotional, the grammatical structure begins to break down as well, making this use of ergodicism even more poignant and also showing that grammar is more than just punctuation.

Noise

The second element of ergodicism, noise, is like static on a radio or a shoddy cell phone connection. Noise can be any interference that distorts a reader's understanding of the message being transmitted. Examples of noise can be stream of consciousness or rambling passages that lose focus, the introduction of foreign or unknown words, unconventional narrative organization, and more. Beckett takes the structure of his writing seriously. In "Dante…Bruno. Vico. . Joyce" he writes, "…form is content, content is form" (27). While he is speaking of Joyce's work in this

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context, he applied the same practice about the relationship between form and content in his own works.

Beckett understood each mode he was writing in and catered the type of noise he implemented to each. For example, in his prose, the narrator of "First Love" interrupts the flow of the plot and withdraws into inner dialogue that sometimes spans for half a page to a page, causing the reader to sometimes lose themselves in the rambling thoughts and forget where they were in the progression of the plot. At one point, the narrator even interrupts the thoughts that had interrupted the plot. He says, "this sentence has gone on long enough" (37). He then immediately returns to where the plot had ended before the digression. Beckett recognized the strengths and limits of the prose form and tailored the noise to fit the medium.

To contrast, consider his play *Waiting for Godot*. Beckett introduces noise into his play through Lucky's monologue, which is delivered rapidly in a single breath and is comprised of a seemingly random assortment of words, all while the other three characters are on stage moving about, reacting to the agonizing noise and as such attempting to distract the audience from the speech. Similarly, *Not I* begins with the "*Mouth's voice unintelligible behind curtain*" (405) and ends with "*Curtain fully down. House dark. Voice continues behind curtain, unintelligible, 10 seconds, ceases as house lights up*" (413). This unintelligible speaking is not only literal noise that the audience hears but is also impossible for them to understand. Furthermore, noise is created in *Not I* even when Mouth's words are recognizable, the way that it speaks continues creating noise for the audience through its continuous rapid bursts of loosely connected phrases that appear to be a one-sided conversation.

Danielewski's *House of Leaves* is an extremely noisy novel, with almost every page having some sort of distraction working to divide the reader's attention, confuse them, or cause

them excess work in order to sift through the story. One of Danielewski's favorite ways of introducing noise is through the use of footnotes.[12] This tactic is embedded in the intricate threading of the novel's various narratives, as until Chapter XXI, Johnny Truant's entire narrative appears only via footnotes. These footnotes can appear at any time during the Navidson narrative and oftentimes have either a very loose connection or nothing at all to do with what is occurring in the main text. For example, in Chapter IX, in the midst of a scholarly article in which Zampanò is weighing the evidence on whether or not The Navidson Record is real or fiction, footnote 195 has Truant directly speaking about the text, however within footnote 195 there is footnote 196, which breaks away into Truant relating to readers a hookup he'd had that went poorly.

Truant's narrative, while the most obvious, is not the only way that footnotes cause noise. Sometimes, simply the placement of a footnote in a particularly climactic situation will interfere with the flow of the action, halt the buildup of momentum and suspense, and force readers to keep a distance that they may find frustrating to have to keep. Two such examples of this are during a time when Jed and his friend Wax are lost in the labyrinth of the house and are unable to find their way out:

> In the final shot, Jed focuses the camera on the door. Something is on the other side, hammering against it, over and over again. Whatever comes for those who are never seen again has come from[198] him, and Jed can do nothing but focus the camera on the hinges as the door solely begins to give way.[▷] (151)

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[12] As mentioned in the previous section, *Disregard for Grammatical and Mechanical Conventions.* Also discussed there, strikethroughs, missing words, and "destroyed" text indicated by a string of "Xs," are all also types of noise.

Footnotes 198 and |> interrupt a suspenseful and critical moment in the story to give anticlimactic information. Footnote 198 merely states: "Typo. Should read 'for'" and Footnotes |> is placed to indicate, "(No punctuation point should appear here) See also Saul Steinberg's *The Labyrinth* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1960)" (151). Neither of these footnotes are necessary, since it would have been easier from an editorial standpoint to simply fix the two typos and move on. However, fixing the typos would eliminate the noise, and the point is for the footnotes to interfere with the delivery of the moment.

Footnotes are not the sole way that noise occurs in the novel. In fact, some of the most interesting noise is caused by cyphers, scattered text, and the implementation of varying forms of reading. All three of these types of noise are, for the adventurous readers, fun and interesting additions to the novel. Cyphers, in particular, require readers to use a code in order to pull a hidden message out of a text. Most prolific of these involve The Whalestoe Letters, as mentioned earlier. In the letter dated April 27, 1987 Johnny's mother writes to him:

> Pay attention: the next letter I will encode as follows: use the first letter of each word to build subsequent words and phrases: your exquisite institution will help you sort out the spaces: I've sent this via a night nurse: our secret will be safe.
>
> (619)

The following letter, dated May 8, 1987, at first glance appears to be nothing but nonsense. The letter begins, "Tell hope everything you hear and value every fine outward understanding near day at windows and yore told over by rectopathic elephants announcing karmic meddling ends" (620). However, using the cypher provided from the previous letter, readers can work through and pull out the first letter of each word and find the hidden letter inside that reads: They have

found a way to break me.[13] This acrostic style code can be used in multiple places throughout the novel as well to find hidden Easter eggs.[14] For example, if you take the first letters from footnotes 27-42 it spells out: Mark Z. Danielewski (22-37). While some of the noise is fun to work through and figure out, other ciphers are easier to decode, yet ultimately irrelevant. Take, for instance, the backwards writing on pages 120-42. These squares of text can easily be decoded by holding the book up to a mirror. However, doing so reveals nothing that the reader hasn't already read before, on the previous page. The blocks are just a mirror-image of the words that appear on the flipside of the pages. Taking the time to hold the book up the mirror and reveal that, however, causes a disruption in the reading and presents more noise. The only way to find this out, however, is to physically go through the action of holding the book up to a mirror, or by flipping the page back and forth, comparing letter placement. Either way, the noise the author intended is achieved.

Similar to mirror image text, scattered text creates noise by requiring the reader to move and position the book in more active ways, different than the normal holding of a book and reading pattern that goes left to right and top to bottom. Scattered text appears in several pages throughout the entirety of *House of Leaves.* Scattered text refers, literally, to text that is physically positioned on the page in a way that is not traditional. The first occurrence of scattered text appears on page 119, with a blue square holding the text of footnote 144 in the top

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[13] Not all of the hidden messages and cyphers are quite so readily handed to readers, however, which is what makes *House of Leaves* such an intriguing text. Often, readers do not know where a hidden message exists, or what the cypher is. One common question is: why is the word house always blue? Furthermore, Danielewski sows so much doubt into the narrative that when a pattern does emerge, readers often question whether it is real, or even intentional. This doubt is in itself another type of noise.

[14] An Easter egg is an unexpected or undocumented feature in a piece of computer software or on a DVD, included as a joke or a bonus (Merriam-Webster).

right-hand side of the page and all of the other text on the page wrapping around it. The next pages scatter text even further. The squares of floating text continue, but now even more than that there are columns on the left and right sides of the pages. The columned text on the right-hand side also appears upside down so that a reader would have to flip the entire book around to read it. This layout continues until pages 130-31, when more scattered text is added to this already overwhelming layout. The new additions are blocks of text that appear sideways and upside down within the main text of the page. It might be difficult to picture, but at this point in the novel there exists normal left to right, top to bottom text on the same page with columns of text, floating text boxes, and text that also lies sideways on the page, as well as upside down. This noisy arrangement of text continues, in varying iterations, over the course of the next several pages until the chapter ends.

Chapter XII demonstrates a more minimalistic approach to the scattered text. Here, an entire page might be taken up by one or only a handful of words. For example, on page 287 there exists only a single word, which is the last word of the sentence that began on the previous page. The word "top?" floats upside down in the top right-hand corner of the page. More scattered text appears on page 289, with two sentences being broken up letter by letter and spread out, again upside down, across the entire page. This pattern of upside down and stretched out words continues on the following pages until, on pages 294-296 it reaches its culminating point, wherein a single word, "snaps" is spread out across the three pages, with "sn-" appearing at the bottom right hand corner of the first page, the "-a-" floating upside down and crooked, slightly off-center in the second page, and the "ps" appearing at the top of the third page.[15] This scattered

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[15] Fun fact: "snaps" is a semordnilap. Semordnilaps are words that spell another word backwards (Merriam-Webster). If you look at it backwards, it creates the word "spans," which is a joke because the word "snaps" spans three pages.

text simultaneously propels readers forward while slowing them down. When a section contains only a few words per page, it quickly becomes a page-turner. However, the constant flipping of the book upside-down to read, or the piecing together of letters to make out what is being written, or perhaps even the amount of time a reader might take to wonder at the purpose behind it all—all of these things are the effect of the noise created by the scattered text, slowing down the reader and interfering with the message of the book.

One final way that Danielewski adds noise to his novel is through the use of various types of reading.[16] Throughout the novel there are sections that use different languages, braille, sheet music, and even Morse code. These passages all create noise for different readers in different ways, depending on languages they are familiar with. The first instance of a language other than English appears on the first page of the novel, after Truant's introduction but before Chapter I. It reads: "*Muss es sein?*" (1). This noise immediately interrupts the flow of reading by causing readers to look up the word, which is German and translates to "Must it be?" Throughout the book there are nearly a dozen or so different languages, from French to Hebrew, that require varying degrees of dedication on the readers' part to translate.

The translations of the different languages are sometimes given to readers, though, as with the opening of Chapter XX, which appears in braille. On his website, written in hidden text that requires visitors to highlight the page in order to read it, Danielewski explains the meaning behind the use of braille for this passage:

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[16] This will be the final way discussed here. There are many other ways that Danielewski adds noise, including but not limited to: the mashup of narrative voices, missing pages, unreliable narrators, contradicting information provided to the reader, etc. One could write an entire book on noise in *House of Leaves*, and unfortunately this project is limited to a broad overview.

It is important to point out that this passage in particular is in Braille because it is ironic in the sense that the passage is describing how smooth the walls are and devoid of any texture. Hence, even the blind can not read where they are in that hallway. The blind are rendered completely blind. Braille relies upon reading by feeling textures and bumps. Yet here, it is describing something in the dark that can't be seen or felt. ("Exploration Z*")
Pieces of insight like this revelation of author's intent remind readers that very little is unintentional in this book. Both the silence and the noise have meaning.

The meaning is not always handed to the readers, as with the braille, or even readily available for translation. The Morse code, for example, is never explained and the translation is not online for the reader to find. The only way to discern what it says is for the reader to learn Morse code and decode the passages themselves. Furthermore, consider the sheet music on page 479. There is no footnote, no indication of what song Navidson is singing in the darkness. If the reader is a musician, they might be able to recognize the tune. If not, there is no Google Translate for music. You cannot type in musical notes into a search engine and find the answer. Therefore, readers are left with only two choices to figure out this page of the book. They can either learn how to read sheet music or they can connect with other readers of the novel until they find a reader who does read sheet music. Noise, effectively, has created a type of community amongst *House of Leaves* readers trying to discern meaning beyond the static of the page.[17]

Unconventional narrative organization, another way an author can create noise, occurs when an author veers from the familiar bell-curve of plot structure: the exposition walking

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[17] Thankfully, a community did emerge out of readers' shared interest in *House of Leaves*. Because of this, curious readers can easily search the question of the sheet music and find an answer: it is a familiar tune called "When Johnny Comes Marching Home."

readers uphill into rising action until reaching the summit, or climax, and then heading back down through falling action until making it to the end, the resolution.[18] Unconventional narrative organization occurs in *Play,* where Beckett twists the plot inside out and makes it unique through the use of stage directions: "*Front centre, touching one another, three identical grey urns about one yard high. From each a head protrudes, the neck held fast in the urn's mouth. The heads are those, from left to right as seen from auditorium, of W2, M, and W1*" (355). The stage directions go on to indicate how lighting and speech is to be handled—darkness, save for a lone spotlight that shines on each character when it is their turn to talk. When the characters speak, they are to have a "*rapid tempo throughout*" (Beckett 355). These stage directions eliminate the familiarity that audience members would have with a more traditional play. The lack of light, scenery, and the increase speed of actors' speech all would add noise, making understanding the play more difficult for audiences. Furthermore, the play does not follow a traditional narrative structure with a clear beginning, middle, and end. The audience witnesses a retelling of the main story after the events took place, but the characters do not tell the story in an orderly fashion. Instead, the characters skip around, mixing up the beginning and middle portions and never directly stating what occurred. It is up to the reader to fill in the gaps and put the pieces together to understand the love triangle and adultery that takes place.

The noise enhances the depth of the play. Where before an audience member might have simply seen characters who make questionable moral decisions, now they see not only that but a consequence of these decisions: a dark afterlife where the characters are made to tell and retell their story, for as one of the final stage directions notes, "*Repeat play*" (Beckett 366). This

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[18] Writers can break from traditional plot structure in several ways, including flashbacks, dream sequences, and cliffhanger endings, among others.

potentially never-ending scene is a prime example of one of the ways Beckett rejects creative writing norms and refuses to stick to a traditional three-act play and narrative structure.

Bender also breaks from conventional plot structure in her stories. She believes that, "All stories do not need to have the same arc, the same progression of character, the same twenty-page Times-New-Roman beginning-middle-end movement. We can allow our writing to form its own shape" (Bender "On the Making of Orchards"). This belief of hers can be seen in "Marzipan," where Bender increases the story's believability by beginning *en media res,* which is Latin for "in the middle." In creative writing, the phrase is applied to stories that skip exposition and rising action and opt to open the story at the climax or during a crucial situation.

Bender opens the story with: "One week after his father died, my father woke up with a hole in his stomach" (39). By choosing to start here, Bender hooks in the reader and compels them to keep reading, despite not having set the reader up to understand what happens or know who the characters are. She has cut out the entire first half of the traditional plot structure. Then, just as things might begin to enter the falling action stage, a space break interrupts the flow and the story transitions straight into another crucial moment: "My parents went to the doctor the next day" (40). The father is pronounced to be in great health, but the mother is pronounced pregnant. Just as the situation is again about to enter into falling action territory, another space break occurs, and readers are thrown headfirst into yet another critical moment—when the parents tell the narrator and her sister the news. This pattern of critical event then space break and then another critical event recurs throughout the entire story, with only one variation.

Halfway through, there is a space break that brings readers to a full stop, as indicated by three dots centered on the page. This occurs during what is truly the climax of the story: the narrator's mother has just given birth to her own mother. While the space breaks continue

throughout the rest of the story as well, propelling the pattern of crucial event following critical event with no falling action or denouement, this particular break is emphasized to draw reader's attention to a shift in the story, to make them pay closer attention to the sections immediately before and after, to make them notice subtle changes that are occurring in the actions and thoughts of the characters. This nontraditional plot structure that focuses on the high-intensity scenes and completely cuts the transitional exposition keeps readers propelled throughout, making them invested, while the absurdity simultaneously keeps them far enough at bay that they feel they cannot touch it. "Marzipan" is like a disaster or a miracle; readers can see it happen from a distance, can believe that it is happening, but it is the kind of thing they also cannot believe because it will never happen to them—or so they think. This effect is caused, cumulatively, by the stylistic choices that Bender makes.

Bender's "The Girl in the Flammable Skirt" implements space breaks, except this story takes the noise one step further by presenting the sections out of any discernable order. In fact, the sections do not always appear on the surface to be related to one another, nor do they seem to flow in any particular order. The story follows a narrator, who is a schoolgirl of an indiscriminate age, whose father is wheelchair bound and has various other health concerns. As one reads through the piece there are sections that depict her interacting with her father, who makes her sometimes wear a stone backpack, but there are also scenes of her keeping her boyfriend locked in her bedroom closet, and also a section that depicts nothing but a conversation between two rats.

At the outset, it is difficult for readers to discern what the connections are between these scenes, why the scenes jump around the way they do, and what the purpose is of the absurdism when the story already seems so inaccessible. For an ergodic text, however, this seeming

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inaccessibility is the point. Ergodic texts want readers to think they are impossible but work to

eventually figure them out. The work must be worth the reward, though, and that is the risk that

writers like Bender, Beckett, and Danielewski face when creating experimental pieces that rely

on the reader to do part of the work. On this point, Bender advises, "remember that things can't

be boiled down—allow for mystery. . .We know that things are complex; we want things to be

complex so that, together, we can look deeply into the layers of an open system" ("Character

Motivation" 59-60). Simply put, authors should take the risk to trust their readers to be able to

figure out what they are saying.

In the case of Bender's "The Girl in the Flammable Skirt," the work is definitely worth

the reward of seeing all the pieces come together and fit neatly in such a satisfying way that a

traditionally structured story could not achieve. In order to understand the underlying meaning

beneath the scenes, they need to be understood in connection with each other. The first scene

shows an interaction between the narrator and her father: "When I came home from school for

lunch my father was wearing a backpack made of stone. Take that off, I told him, that's far too

heavy for you. So he gave it to me" (Bender 173). The narrator questions the backpack, what it is

and why he has it, but the father isn't interested in talking to her. When she goes back to school,

she tells her teacher, "It's so heavy. . . everything feels very heavy right now" (Bender 174) and

her teacher brings her a Kleenex to show her something light.

The following vignette is a scene about the two rats, but it cannot be understood fully by

reading it linearly or chronologically. Following it is another scene between the narrator and her

father, in which she tries to connect with him again:

I love you more than salt, I said. He seemed touched, but he was a heart attack man and

had given up salt two years before. It didn't mean *that* much to him…maybe you should

give it up too, he said. No more french fries. (Bender 175)

Already readers can begin to see a pattern across the seemingly random scenes. Anytime the

narrator attempts to make an emotional connection with her father, she is met with distance and

disinterest. Following this exchange, the narrator relates that her father uses a wheelchair and

remembers a day when her father had requested her to sit in a chair like he does and "try it out

for a day" (Bender 175). The narrator complies for an entire afternoon until she becomes jittery

and fidgets and her father scolds her. Here, we can see another pattern forming of the narrator

being placed in uncomfortable physical constraints by the father.

At this point in the story, the space break is more pronounced—the three dots on the page

as opposed to simply white space. This is punctuation, just as a comma tells you to pause and

period tells you to stop. This visible space break tells us we need to pay close attention to what

comes immediately after it, which is the scene where the narrator has her boyfriend, Paul, in her

closet. It is in the exchange between Paul and the narrator where readers realize what is going on

in the story. Through their conversation it is learned that the narrator is suffering: "I haven't

made a joke in this house in ten years at least. Ten years ago, I tried a Hellen Keller joke on my

parents and they sent me to my room for my terrible insensitivity to suffering" (Bender 177). It is

within these few lines that the entire story comes together and the metaphorical significance of

the stone backpack, the tissue paper, and sitting in the chair is illuminated. The narrator is

weighed down by the burdens of her parents, particularly her father, and feels confined and

trapped by them. Once—just once—she knew what lightness was, but that was more than a

decade ago, and in order to make sure that his daughter was sensitive to suffering, the father has

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in turned given his daughter suffering. The narrator says, "I've learned my lesson and I'm terribly sensitive to suffering. Poor poor Helen K, blind-and-deaf-and-dumb. Because now I'm so sensitive I can hardly move" (Bender 178). The narrator has attempted to be so empathetic to others' burdens that she has taken them on as her own and now she is weighed down by suffering that at first wasn't hers, but now is.

Now that readers understand the psychological depths of the story and the intricate connections between the vignettes, they can understand the most seemingly out-of-place portion of them all: the one with the two rats in the labyrinth. It is a joke that the narrator has heard—one that she cannot tell in her house. It is funny because in the end it is not two rats at all, but a rat and a dog. It is poignant to the story because the rat is suffering, and the dog has taken on the rat's suffering until the dog itself is mistaken for a rat. This is a humorous way of relating the message, whereas it is sad that a teenage girl takes on other people's suffering until she cannot feel peace.

The story does not have a resolution, which is a stylistic choice that is typical of Bender, but hearkens back to Beckett. All of Beckett's plays, with the exception of *Waiting for Godot,* end in a tableau—the play freezes and there is no curtain call; there is no ending. Instead, the audience is left to presume that the play keeps going even though they are not there to continue witnessing it. For Bender, readers are left with the feeling that the characters' lives keep going even though the scene they've been witness to has ended. Concerning endings, Bender writes:

> Often, writers will rush to an ending that completes, or sums up, or reduces their story as opposed to moving to a place where it goes to something they may not understand and that may be incomplete but is more honest. That rush doesn't do a service to anyone. It

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doesn't do a service to the work, and it doesn't do a service to the reader. ("Character

Motivation" 60)

Instead of a resolution, however, the last two scenes offer a culmination of sorts that leads to the revelation about the character. In the first, the narrator's father is in the hospital, on his deathbed (again), and the narrator finds the ordeal difficult to take seriously: "This has happened a few times before and he never dies. The whole deathbed scene gets a little confusing when you play it out more than twice. It gets a bit hard to be sincere" (Bender 179). Immediately after having these thoughts, the narrator goes to the hospital chapel and prays as hard as she can, feeling guilty for not being sensitive to her father's suffering. Afterwards, she leaves the hospital and feels a glimmer of freedom: "No one is around . . . I'm scot-free and young in the world. I am as breezy and light as a wing made form tissue paper" (Bender 180). However, she does not know what to do with these feelings, this opportunity, having never had it before. She says, "I don't know what to do with myself . . . Where is my father already? I want him to come rolling out and hand over that knapsack of his; my back is breaking without it" (Bender 180). The narrator has been so long in the world carrying other people's burdens that she feels lost without them.

Within the final vignette, which also would seem random upon an initial read-through, is the culmination of the narrator's thoughts. In it, she thinks about an article she had read in the news about a girl whose skirt caught fire while she was dancing. In this section, the narrator acknowledges the girl's suffering, "She got third-degree burns up and down her thighs" (Bender 180-81) but does not feel empathy. Instead, she feels a glimmer of jealousy and wonders if the girl felt alive in the moment before the suffering began, after the skirt caught fire but before it burned her. It becomes clear that perhaps the narrator can deal with the suffering, so long as it is her own and she can experience that moment of passion that comes before.

Ergodicism in literature deals with the amount of work a reader has to exert in order to read and understand a text. This refers physically to how the reader interacts with a book; normally the reader goes left to right down a page and occasionally must flip a page to continue. However, ergodicism can complicate that process, requiring a reader to turn a book upside down or sideways or hold it up to a mirror to read. Ergodicism can also refer to a higher level of mental or intellectual work that must be done to read a story, such as having to stop often to translate foreign languages, lookup unfamiliar words, to reference other outside sources in order to comprehend what the text is saying. Ergodicism is a relatively new and unique way that contemporary writers, such as Bender and Danielewksi can make their work new and exciting to readers. Furthermore, ergodicism can occur naturally through genre-hybridization, which is discussed in the next chapter.

CHAPTER 4. GENRE-HYBRIDIZATION

The third way that Beckett breaks from norm is through his cross-genre writing, also called genre-hybridization. Genre-hybridization is when a writer takes elements from one genre and incorporates them into the writing of another. For example, a poet might decide to structure a poem in paragraphs instead of verses, or a novelist might decide to write an entire chapter in iambic pentameter. These types of choices would not traditionally fit in the writers' respective genres. However, by incorporating elements of other genres into their writing, authors can find new ways to tell their stories. Two ways that Beckett, Bender, and Danielewski blend genre boundaries are through stylistic choices and remediation.

Stylistic Choices

Some elements, like metaphor, irony, or imagery, cross over easily and often. That is because those elements often deal more with plot or narrative content. When one begins considering stylistic choices, crossing genres becomes far less intuitive and accepted. Perhaps one of the best examples of Beckett's cross-genre experimentation is his work "Text."

The first line of "Text" opens up with "come come and cull," (29) an example of alliteration caused by the repetition of the initial cuh sounds. This is followed by the word "cull," which is most likely a malapropism. The word is defined as "to select from a large quantity" with a connotation often referring to animals being selected for slaughter (Merriam-Webster). This word choice evokes the bloody and animalistic imagery ever present throughout the piece, while also adding to the confusion and unreliability of the narrator. However, it is also similar in sight

and sound to the word "call" which would make more sense contextually to the piece, making this a malaprop that works on multiple levels.

Next, "bonny bony doublebed cony swiftly" (29) demonstrates the poetic device, consonance, with the repetition of the ending -ee sound carried through by the -ny and -ly suffixes. The next few lines exhibit both hyphenated and unhyphenated portmanteaus, with "twingle-twangler," "lust-belepered," "shemost," and "shenews." There is more alliteration in the middle lines with the recurring buh sounds in "bird to bird and branch" and even more consonance with the middle -o and ending -ee sounds in the line, "goldy veins for my wicked doty's potystick trimly . . ." The alliteration continues towards the end with the initial repetition of the -s in "salady salmafundi singly and single" as well as the -t sounds in "Taubchen take my tip" and the -g sounds in "Greek galligaskins."

Repetition also presents itself in this piece through the implementation of anaphora with the word 'gone' in "gone the hartshorn and the cowslip wine gone and the lettuce nibbled up nibbled up and gone nor the last beauty day" (29). Furthermore, individual words are repeated in close proximity, such as "shame," "news," "rose," "grow" and "red." In addition to the rhythm created by the repetition and sound play, an internal rhyme exists with "to bed she said." Together, all of these elements combine to give "Text" a rhythmic quality that lends itself to be read aloud in a way that is expected of poetry, but generally absent in prose.

Oftentimes, prose writers do not play with the words on the page in ways that are common for poets. However, cross-genre writers like Beckett, Bender, and Danielewski are exceptions to this rule. These authors' implementation of blankness, their use of space on the page, are key elements in their writing. Bender often approaches this through the use of space breaks, such as in her stories "Marzipan" and "The Girl in the Flammable Skirt," as discussed in

Chapter 2. These space breaks utilize the white space on the page in a conscious way that prose writers often neglect. Even though Bender has not published poetry, this shows that her prose is full of poetic elements that enrich the writing and breathe fresh air into her literature.

In "On the Making of Orchards," Bender also talks of the importance of white space, of page and chapter breaks. In it, she is examining Nabokov's *Lolita,* although it is fair to assume that she applies her observations to her own writing as well. She states:

There's a gap in which we have a moment to try to digest what we've read, but it is also somewhat indigestible…the white space gives us a moment to feel, briefly, this punch in the gut, which then we may also continue to feel in faint reverberations throughout. ("On the Making of Orchards")

Thinking about space on the page in this way is not something prose writers normally do. Poet generally worry more about the blank parts of the page. This consideration by Bender is an indication of her boundary-defying writing.

Danielewski as well considers the importance that blank space has in writing. Throughout his novel, he uses space in varying ways. Whether it is filling up every conceivable inch on the page to elicit claustrophobic feelings from the reader or spending a whole page for just one line or word, Danielewski ensures that every centimeter of the page is working towards whatever goal he has in mind. The deeper readers go into *House* of *Leaves,* the more readers can see elements of concrete poetry.[19] Danielewski explains:

My view of placing text on the page—aside from being influenced by the likes of E. E. cummings [sic] or maybe John Cage—was actually cinematic. The point wasn't just to

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[19] Concrete poetry is a type of poetry in which the typographical arrangement of words on the page reflects the topic of the poem (Sims).

get really obtuse in the placement of the word. I was very interested in how the reader

moves through a book. I've never talked to anyone who didn't feel a sense of elation

when they'd read, say, 80 pages in an hour, because something was moving quickly—or

expressed some sort of frustration because it took them an hour to read ten pages. So I

began to realize that cinema has an enormous foundation of theories on how to control

the viewer's perceptions of a film. (qtd. in Sims)

Knowing that this is how Danielewski approaches his writing, it becomes easier to see the

concept mirrored within the pages of *House of Leaves.* For example, when Navidson is lost in the

corridors of his house, crawling down a narrow tunnel, the page's layout shrinks to a confining

and narrow string of words (Sims). When the environment around him changes, so does the

arrangement of the text on the page. For example, when the ceiling drops, the words drop in a

line from top to bottom of the page. When it rises again, the words float diagonally from the

bottom to the top of the page. If the hallway widens, the separation between words in a sentence

widens as well, creating a corridor of words on the page.[20]

<center>*Remediation*</center>

Remediation, as outlined by Hayles, is the channeling of one media through another, i.e.

adapting a novel to a movie format or taking a film and staging it in live theatre (*Writing*

Machines 5). However, the term can also be applied to remediation that occurs within the

parameters of a story. Simply put, remediation occurs when an author takes something from one

form and turns it into another. For example, in "First Love" the aforementioned

acknowledgement of a sentence going on long enough paired with his later exclamation about

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[20] See *House of Leaves* pages 426-431 for examples of this discussion.

"The things one recalls! And records!" (Beckett 40) can lead one to believe that the story has been written down by the narrator and it is that written document that we are reading. As such, the entire story "First Love" itself is a remediation. This is not only a blending of genres through the structure of the piece, but it is also ergodic because the reader is subjected not to the actual events, but to the events as told through the eyes of the narrator, who is looking back and reminiscing on something that happened to him in the past.

In his play *Krapp's Last Tape,* Beckett experiments with remediation. An old man named Krapp is listening to recorded tapes of himself that he made each year on his birthday recounting what happened that year. There are seven layers, or remediations, in the piece: the first is Krapp as he lived his life. This is a layer that the audience is not shown, because we only see 69-year-old Krapp, not the young or middle-aged man who is out living life and then comes home to record tapes. Similarly, Danielewski's novel is one with multiple layers. The first layer is the lives that Navidson and his family lived. This is also a layer that readers cannot see because the novel never provides exposition or direct narrative of Navidson's life.

The second layer is the ledger that Krapp uses to catalogue his tapes: "*[briskly]* Ah! [*He bends over the ledger, turns the page, finds the entry he wants, reads.*] Box . . . three . . . spool five" (222). The second layer of *House of Leaves* is the documentary that the father from the family, Navidson, makes about the haunted house that he has moved into. This documentary, known as *The Navidson Record*, supposedly details the harrowing events that happened in the house.

The notes that Krapp has written about his life and uses to make the tapes once he has returned home are the third layer. He keeps these notes with the tapes and refers to them later when he is listening again: "[*He peers at ledger, reads entry at foot of page]* Mother at rest at

last . . . Hm . . . The black ball . . ." (222-23). The third layer of *House of Leaves* is the scholarly articles that Zampanò has written about the documentary. These appear as the central text of most of the chapters of the novel. Chapter I is a scholarly article that discusses the debate as to whether or not *The Navidson Record* exists; Chapter V examines the importance of sound and echoes in the documentary; and Chapter VI looks at the importance of animals in the film.

The fourth layer is Krapp listening to the tapes, his life itself remediated to a new form. The fourth layer of *House of Leaves* is the project that a character, Zampanò, has been working on as he is trying to piece together various bits of information to create a book of scholarship about the documentary. The book that is in readers' hands is supposed to be the finished work of a project that Zampanò had began. The following examples will use a section of the text from Chapter XI:

> As Scholem writes: "Frank's ultimate vision of the future was based upon the still unrevealed laws of the Torah of *atzilut* which he promised his disciples would take effect once they had 'come to Esau,' that is, when the passage through the 'abyss' with its unmitigated destruction and negation was finally accomplished." (252)

This portion is linked to footnote 242. Anything in the book that appears in Times New Roman is purportedly Zampanò, therefore footnote 242 was written by Zampanò. He states, "See Genesis 27:24" (252). Footnotes like this, with Zampanò's font, appear throughout the novel, making him an ever-present voice.[21]

The fifth layer of *Krapp's Last Tape* extends beyond the confines of the work itself to include the production of the stage play. The recordings that are used to stage the play are real.

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[21] Furthermore, Zampanò is credited as the author of *House of Leaves* in the front matter of the book, on the title page.

The actor cast as Krapp records the text that a sound tech operates in the back so that it matches the actor's movements on the stage. These recordings are done within weeks of the stage play opening to audiences, yet they are made to seem as though they are years apart. The fifth layer of *House* of Leaves is Johnny's story when he takes over Zampanò's project and pieces together the book that we are reading. Johnny's voice cuts in only through footnotes for most of the novel, and his narrative voice appears in Courier font, as mentioned before. Still using the previous example in which Zampanò referenced Genesis, Johnny cuts in by adding footnote 243 to Zampanò's footnote and saying: "Wrong. See Genesis 27:29." (252). Johnny is often correcting Zampanò, or trying to unearth and share things that Zampanò attempted to destroy. Furthermore, Johnny has his own narrative that runs parallel to the Navidson narrative and Zampanò's narrative. He is living his own life, finding loves and losing friends, dealing with work and family drama.

The sixth layer in *House* of Leaves are the editors of the book, who have made changes after Johnny and leave notes as to when and where they have done this. One example follows along with the Genesis correction that Johnny made to Zampanò's footnote. The editors leave footnote 244 on Johnny's footnote to state: "Mr. Truant also appears to be in error. The correct reference is Genesis 25:27. –Ed" (252). For Krapp, this layer is self-editing. Krapp repeatedly edits himself, often hesitating in the words that he records, stopping often to think about what he should say, consulting an envelope that he eventually tosses away. Furthermore, Krapp even edits his past self through fast-forwarding through things he does not want to hear.

For *Krapp's Last Tape,* the final layer is the audience and their interpretation of—though not so much our interaction with—the play. This final layer exists because the audience does not have access to the tapes themselves, and can only hear what Krapp wants them to hear as he is

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constantly changing tapes, fast-forwarding and rewinding through them so that what the audience receives are only bits and pieces.[22]

The final layer of *House of Leaves*, like in Beckett's work, includes the reader of the book and the way they interact with and interpret the text, which is a definitive break from narrative norms; texts are produced traditionally for readers to consume, not to interact with. Cottrell notes that the novel "aims to represent the potentialities of printed literature, following [Danielewski's] conviction that books are 'remarkable constructions with enormous possibilities'" (Cottrell and Danielewski). The possibilities for interaction are throughout the book, and the reader is even pulled in and made into a character that Johnny speaks directly to. For example, one instance in the text quotes filmmaker Ken Burns as having said something about *The Navidson Record.* In a footnote, Johnny addresses the reader, "As you probably guessed, not only has Ken Burns never made any such comment, he's also never heard of The Navidson Record let alone Zampanò" (206).

Beckett and Danielewski craft and interweave multiple layers through remediation, which can lead to interesting and unique storytelling. Remediation as a narrative device is inherently ergodic because it can cause confusion in the audience/reader and it buries the original story or message underneath multiple layers that require work to sift through. Even then, however, the audience/reader may never be able to experience the layer that begins it all, as is the case for both *Krapp's Last Tape* and *House of Leaves.*

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[22] This also causes noise by interrupting the message, altering the audience's interpretation, and inhibiting understanding.

CHAPTER 5. LOOKING FORWARD

Samuel Beckett forever changed creative writing through his experimentation. His aesthetics can be seen as having trickled down through the years and are ever-present in the contemporary works of Aimee Bender and Mark Z. Danielewski. The Beckettian aesthetic namely consists of the simultaneous use of absurdism, ergodicism, and genre-hybridization.

Absurdism, as explained in Chapter 2, is a literary technique that authors can use in their work, much like any other literary device. Absurdism is characterized by having a familiar plot that is made new through the use of object displacement, flattened tone, and juxtaposition. Ergodicism involves creating a text that requires more work on the part of the audience/reader to understand it. Common methods of achieving ergodicism include a disregard for grammatical and stylistic conventions, noise, and remediation. Genre-hybridization occurs when authors use the elements of one genre in another. One example of this is poetry/prose hybridization, in which elements of poetry and prose are blended. While these techniques were not new to Beckett, he did combine them and utilize them throughout his works so that, together, they become identifiable as a Beckettian aesthetic.

The question arises: has either Bender or Danielewski actually read Samuel Beckett? Bender has, and in fact recommends *Endgame* and *Act Without Words I* as two of her favorite books ("The Author's Bookshelf: Aimee Bender"). This research was inconclusive about whether or not Danielewski has ever encountered Beckett's work. Danielewski and Bender, however, are known to be friends, with Danielewski even referring to Bender as a "sounding board" (Kipen).

Time and space have, unfortunately, limited this project. Given the opportunity in the future, further research for expanding this project would include: an even more in-depth analysis

of the works and approaches already discussed here; a consideration of works by these authors that is not included here; a consideration of not only genre-hybridization, but media-hybridization as well; and an exploration not only of the structural and stylistic similarities of the shared Beckettian aesthetic, but the thematic parallels also.

While this project provides in-depth discussions of the elements of the Beckettian aesthetic, opportunities for discussion were missed, such as a discussion of flattened tone and juxtaposition in *House of Leaves*, as well as a discussion of noise in Bender's *The Girl in the Flammable Skirt.* These elements are present in the works but were not discussed in this project.

This project focused on only one work by each of the contemporary authors, Bender and Danielewski. To provide a more comprehensive analysis, this project should be expanded to consider their other pieces, including Bender's other short story collection as well as her novels, and Danielewski's novellas and artwork. Furthermore, while the project attempted to provide a comprehensive look at Beckett's work, it unfortunately does not discuss any of his poetry, his film, or his collaborations, such as his libretto for the opera *Neither*. These are all works that, given the time, this project would expand to include discussions of.

Furthermore, the discussion of genre-hybridization in this project was shortened to only truly discuss the idea of poetry/prose hybridization, which is merely the tip of the iceberg. These authors blend not only different genres together, but different mediums as well. Danielewski and Beckett both blend text and visual elements that lead their work to straddle the line between writing and visual art, sometimes even performance art. Even more, Danielewski's degree is in cinema-television and there are so many cinematic elements to his, Beckett and Bender's work that it would be interesting to delve deeper into film theory and analyze the genre-blending of film and text.

Finally, the connections between these authors go beyond style and include thematic elements as well. The idea of the cyclical nature of life, which is explored in Bender's "Marzipan" is present in Beckett's works as well, including *Waiting for Godot* and *Endgame.* The concept of the heavy versus the light load that the girl in Bender's "The Girl in the Flammable Skirt" is also present in *Waiting for Godot* in the load that Lucky is forced to carry. Sex is a shared theme between all three authors, from Johnny Truant falling in love with a stripper to Bender's librarian in "Quiet Please" taking various patrons to the back room to Beckett's narrator in "First Love" experiencing an erection the first time he talks to a woman. The list of connections continue: the fragmented body; an exploration of the concept of masculinity; the concept of silence and echoes; the use of animals in the text; violence, and even war are all thematic elements the three authors share. It would be interesting to see not only the links the authors share in the execution of their craft, but also in their content.

Experimentation in creative writing is important for both the readers and audience as well as writers. Through experimentation, writers are able to find new ways of storytelling that will excite an audience and speak to them in new ways that they aren't familiar with. Writers can also, now more than ever, refuse to be boxed into specific categories by arbitrary rules that have defined genre in the past. Instead, they are free to play with both form and content in order to find their own unique style and, by not being defined as one particular thing, these experimental contemporary writers can define the future of creative writing.

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APPENDIX: SUPPORTING DOCUMENTATION

"Text" by Samuel Beckett

Come come and cull me bonny bony doublebed cony swiftly my springal and my
thin Kerrry twingle-twangler comfort my days of roses days of beauty week of
redness with mad shame to my lips of shame to my shamehill for the newest news
the shemost of shenews is I'm lust-belepered and unwell oh I'd rather be a
sparrow for my puckfisted coxcomb bird to bird and branch or a coalcave with
goldy veins for my wicked doty's potystick trimly to besom gone the harshorn
and the cowslip wine gone and the lettuce nibbled up nibbled up and gone nor the
last beauty day of the red time opened its rose and struck with its thorn oh I'm all
of a gallimaufry or a salady salmafundi singly and single to bed she said I'll have
no toadspit about this house and whose quab was I I'd like to know that from my
cheerfully cornuted Dublin landloper and whose foal hackney mare toeing the line
like a Viennese Taubchen take my tip and clap a padlock on your Greek
galligaskins before I'm quick and living in hope and glad to go snacks with my
twingle-twangler and grow grow into the earth mother of whom clapdish and
foreshop. (17)

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