

THE SEDUCTIVE STRUCTURE: DOMESTIC RELATIONS,
TRANSFORMATIVE SEXUALITY AND VISUAL ORGANIZATION IN JUNJI
ITO'S *HAUNTED WOOD MANSION*

by

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This thesis consists of a close reading of mangaka Junji Ito's short story *Haunted Wood Mansion*, utilizing classic and contemporary understandings of the projection of the human body onto architectural domestic space to connect the monstrous transformations that occur to the house to the transformations of the relationships between father, daughter, absent mother, and step-mother. Emphasis will be put on how meaning is constructed through the unique comic form, as well as through the work's connection to familial and sexual trauma as it exists in literary canon and other forms of media.

To conduct this analysis, I will traverse the work in a mostly temporarily linear manner, documenting each major transformation that occurs in a chapter by chapter format. The first chapter will focus primarily upon the unaltered house in relation to a spatial and temporal historical context, and the role that its inhabitants play in maintaining the house's relation to that context. The second chapter focuses on the advent of change brought by the introduction of a stranger into the home, and the ways in which personal boundaries and authorities are tested, bent, and warped. The third chapter investigates the culmination of those warpings, and the ways in which the architecture of the house aids and abets the growing levels of disconnect between each inhabitant, while the fourth lingers on its climax, and on the way in which the language of the comic exaggerates and bends to meet the culmination of these familial and sexual disconnects.

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Introduction

Haunted Wood Mansion is a short story featured in Junji Ito's horror anthology manga *Ma no Kakeru*, or *Fragments of Horror*, a collection of short stories that had each been successively published within the 2013-2014 relaunch of *Nemuki*, a long-running horror-shoujo manga magazine that had been first established in the 1960s¹, and then translated and re-published in 2021 as an anthology under VIZ Media. All of Ito's works within *Fragments of Horror* center around either a wide-eyed, naive heroine or a wicked female antagonist, with the overarching narrative themes of each story focusing explicitly on horror occurring within the domestic and romantic sphere. *Haunted Wood Mansion* sits upon the center of the intersecting diagrams that make up this anthology collection, detailing the slow erosion of a family's treasured house following the appearance of a strange woman at their house. The story itself centers around three characters— Megumi, the single only child of her nameless divorced father, the aforementioned father, and Kino Manami, a self-proclaimed architecture major and enthusiast. Under the pretense of studying the house to further her architectural studies, Manami begins to live alongside the father-daughter duo in the house, taking care of their needs in lieu of payment and eventually becoming the wife of the father and the stepmother of Megumi. However, Manami's polite, caring demeanor hides salacious intentions, and Megumi eventually walks in on Manami having an affair— with the house itself. The house physically transforms and fuses with Manami, traumatizing Megumi and her father and leaving the pair homeless. Out of all of Ito's works, *Haunted Wood Mansion* is one of his more explicitly sexual works, wherein the physicality of the house as an architectural structure is interacted with in a way that contends explicitly with the concept of non-normative fetishes and the way in which fetish (and by

¹ <https://www.tcj.com/reviews/fragments-of-horror/>

extension, all sex that can be interpreted as “disruptive” or non-normative) intersects and “corrupts” the domestic sphere.

I analyze *Haunted Wood Mansion* as a comics-specific manifestation of what I am referring to within this thesis as the “living house”, a very close relative of the much more iconic “haunted house”. Unlike the haunted house, the living house is not necessarily defined or controlled by the imprints left upon it by its inhabitants. Rather, it is a living, breathing organism, which processes the flow of its inhabitants like a body processes nutrients; it is shaped and imprinted upon by the movements of its inhabitants, and in turn, informs the inhabitants’ actions and thoughts in response. The living house has a mind of its own, is capable of acting upon emotional whims, and reacts to internal and external pressures. Most importantly, however, the living house seeks active participation, whether that be from the characters that inhabit it, or from the visual traversal of its space by the reader, similarly to the investigation of a real house.

Frames of Reference

In regards to utilizing other kinds of “living house” media and literature comparatively in relation to the analysis of its manifestation as a malleable trope, I will be drawing on game developer Kitty Horrorshow’s indie horror work *Anatomy* as a point of comparison for *Haunted Wood Mansion*, in order to showcase the malleability and prevalence of the living house trope in other media. The game *Anatomy* is a short, repetition based exploration game wherein the player repeatedly navigates an abandoned suburban house, collecting VHS tapes that, when combined, contain a small thesis about the ways in which the house can be seen as functionally analogous to a human body. The tapes go over the literal structural parallels between the two, and the more ephemeral, emotionally charged reactions that a person has to abandonment and domestic abuse are “felt” by the house itself. Kitty Horrorshow’s house-body allegory mirrors that of

Renaissance architect Filarete's description of the Vitruvian projection of the human body onto the building within his *Treatise on Architecture*, specifically in regards to the mirrored effects of nourishment and abandonment:

I will [then] show you [that] the building is truly a living man. You will see it must eat in order to live, exactly as it is with man. It sickens or dies or sometimes is cured of its sickness by a good doctor. In the first book you have seen, as I have demonstrated to you, the origins of the building and its origins in my opinion, how it is proportioned to the human body of man, how it needs to be nourished and governed and through lack it sickens and dies like man. (qtd. in Spencer 12)

As *Anatomy's* house is navigated, however, the house-body dichotomy morphs from the purely somatic connection Filarete describes to the emotional— the abandonment that *Anatomy's* house has undergone has embittered it against being inhabited, its rage inflaming the more it is traversed and eking out concerningly warped versions of the initial thesis, implying an extremely visceral connection between the voice and the house. This inflammation eventually culminates in the house physically warping around the player, absorbing it into its walls. This understanding of the house-as-person, in literal, ephemeral, and emotional senses, is one that is integral to the concept of the living house and this thesis at large, and will therefore be consistently referred to throughout this work to supplement my analysis. I will also briefly bring in other examples that similarly contain living houses, although only insofar as it serves to underline aspects of the living house within this text. Although these countertexts are not comics, they provide helpful contrasting examples of living houses as they exist in other forms of media, which I will occasionally use to further emphasize certain aspects of *Haunted Wood Mansion*.

When a fictional house manifests properties analogous with that of a human body— when it becomes the living house— the structure's newly manifested characteristics create a vividly novel dynamic between house and inhabitant, in which the connection between the two is engendered in some ways and prohibited in others. These non-normative relationships often

dramatically transform the inhabitants of said house, mirroring the effects of domestic and relationship-based trauma between humans. As called for by Halberstam's *In a Queer Time and Place: Transgender Bodies, Subcultural Lives*, to understand this matrix of domestic, domicile-based relationships, the structuring of time, space, and place requires what he refers to as a "much more rigorous understanding of the gendering of domestic space" (8), specifically through the lenses of trans and queer studies and lived experience. Postmodern queer studies, as understood by Halberstam, have revealed a transformative linkage between the identity politic and the locational politic: "the notion of a body-centered identity gives way to a model that locates sexual subjectivities within and between embodiment, place, and practice" (5). In analyzing the positionality of characters within their houses, I will simultaneously rely upon and question this "inherent" cis-heteronormative delegation of certain kinds of people to certain parts of the house through the lenses of queer potentiality, as well as the projection of gendered attributes onto the house itself.

The Gothic genre similarly serves as a useful touchstone for analyzing *Haunted Wood Mansion*, as it aligns broadly with what Claire Kahane outlines the archetypal characteristics of the narrative, which consists of "an imprisoning structure" within which the protagonist, "typically a young woman whose mother has died, is compelled to seek out the center of a mystery, while vague and usually sexual threats to her person from some powerful male figure hover on the periphery of her consciousness" (334). However, the niche of Gothic that *Haunted Wood Mansion* preoccupies itself departs from this traditional understanding of the Gothic narrative, in a way that aligns much more concretely with what Kahane defines as the "Female Gothic", in which the fleeing of paternal predation is replaced with the chasing of the maternal, the "spectral presence of a dead-undead mother, archaic and all-encompassing, a ghost

signifying the problematics of femininity which the heroine must confront” (336). This framework serves to contextualize the reactions and non-reactions of Megumi to the changes that slowly accumulate around her, contending with both the absence of the idealized, absent mother and the growing presence of the lecherous step-mother.

Within these relational matrices that are so steeped in the act of house-sex, an investigation of the depiction of domestic trauma and its relation to its internal and external contexts will also be conducted, as the thematic core of *Haunted Wood Mansion* centers around the corruption and perversion of domestic security and relationships. Christina Schönfelder’s essay “Theorizing Trauma: Romantic and Postmodern Perspectives on Mental Wounds” provides a sturdy understanding of the ephemerality of the trauma narrative, one that I will be using to inform my analysis in which the characters within *Haunted Wood Mansion* interact with one another, as well as their transformations as a result of their environment:

Literary trauma texts often expose and work with the essential paradox that characterizes trauma narratives in general: the attempt to communicate that which resists ordinary processes of remembering and narrating, of representation and comprehension. Trauma narratives raise important questions about the possibility of verbalizing the unspeakable, narrating the unnarratable, and making sense of the incomprehensible. (30)

This process of contending with events that would otherwise resist representation is one that must take into account the ways in which a work both fails and succeeds to speak to a literal or emotional reality. The dramatization that occurs through the lens of imagined transformation is, therefore, capable of speaking to the patterns in which domestic abuse and trauma manifest and impact the individuals caught within those relational snares, on both an individual and collective level.

Due to *Haunted Wood Mansion* being a manga originally written and published in Japanese, this thesis will provide cultural and historical context throughout, so as not to take

Haunted Wood Mansion out of the context in which it was written, and to preserve the historical significance of the house depicted as well as its significance in Japanese architecture. A concession must also be made to the close reading of the text provided, as I am working off of two different translations within this thesis. The first translation is provided within the physical VIZ media edition of *Fragments of Horror* by Jocelyne Allen, from which I will be sourcing the majority of my quotes (as noted in the in-text citations). The second translation was provided by Iemonsy, a hobbyist translator who ran a popular blog that hosted the majority of accessible online translations of Junji Ito's work. Though her blog has since been deleted, her translated works are considerably well known in online spaces due to their accessibility. For the visual citations within this thesis, Iemonsy's work will be utilized, as their digital version is currently the cleanest digitized scan of *Haunted Wood Mansion*, and the most widely circulated. While there will be acknowledgements of the contrasts between both translations, the focus of this thesis will remain on close reading these translations in tandem with the unaltered aspects of the work.

Fields of Reference

And now, I provide a more thorough address of the analytic lens of comics studies, which will be relied upon considerably within this thesis. Within the field of literary studies, the realm of comics studies has only recently been welcomed into the fold as a literary form deserving of and provided with the same level of academic rigor, analysis, and time as more codified forms of literature. The "newness" of this field of study is a factor that must be addressed, however briefly, in order to establish where comics studies fall within the English discipline. Therefore, a brief overview of the field of comics studies and its intersection, or more rightfully, position *within* the world of literary academia, is integral to prefacing the ways in which the field of

comics studies both overlaps with and departs from the realms of literary studies, media studies, and cinema studies. A brief overview of the field of comics studies reveals how the history of pop media perception has acted as a major stumbling block to the legitimization of the field. Hatfield's *Alternative Comics: An Emerging Literature* gives a succinct summary of the contentions and contradictions that have followed the realm of modern comics studies following the initial industry boom of the 1930s, which, in short, displays how comics struggled to maintain relevance in the academic sphere outside of being viewed as inherently anti-literate, or “preliterate” literature (Hatfield 34). The current sphere of comics studies, as observed by Hatfield, is still embroiled in the processes of discerning what constitutes a comic, even as comics research moves in a variety of different directions in connection with other literary fields, and as a distinct field of study.

When analyzing *Haunted Wood Mansion* as it operates as a comic, I will employ Groensteen's understanding of comics as spatio-topical systems, within which, as translators Beaty and Nguyen explain in their preface, “meaning is constructed first and foremost in comics by the specific placement of panels upon the page. Processes of breakdown and page layout are shown to be central to the production of reading, with aesthetic effects generated by the panel, the gutter, the frame, and the margin proving central to the operative logic of comics as a system that communicates meaning” (Beaty, Nguyen viii). Within his work *The System of Comics*, Groensteen lays out this system as such— to best provide a frame of reference for the terms used within this thesis, a brief overview of this relational system will be relayed. The “singular panel”, defined as “a portion of space isolated by blank spaces and enclosed by a frame that insures its integrity” (25), is often conceptualized as a reference unit, within which iconic, plastic, and verbal components intertwine and play off one another. These singular panels belong within a

larger sequential continuity, wherein there are three parameters that give a general overview of how they operate:

The first two are geometric: they are the *form* of the panel (rectangular, square, round, trapezoidal, etc.) and its *area*, measurable in square centimeters. This spatial dimension of the panel is summarized and resides in the frame. The frame is at the same time the trace and measure of the space inhabited by the image. The third parameter, which is the *site* of the panel, concerns its location on the page and, beyond that, within the entire work. (Groensteen 28)

This understanding of the relational framework of panels, on an individual and structural level, will be integral to my analysis of *Haunted Wood Mansion*'s contents, as I will be telescoping into and dissecting the contents of panels, as well as looking over the various forms of interplay between these parameters of layout.

This thesis is not so bold as to presume it is pioneering a completely new ground within the field of comics study. Rather, its intent is to comparatively acknowledge this pattern of house-human relations within the realm of comics studies through a close analysis of Junji Ito's *Haunted Wood Mansion*, and to draw parallels to more canonical literary works, as well as iterations of similar relations within other visual media. I intend to draw attention to not only the importance of iconography and visual form, but also to the tensions that are inherent to the process of comics reading itself, the tensions that exist between comics and the media that surrounds it, and finally, the tensions between comics studies as a self-contained realm of study and as a component of the much larger and much more diverse field of media and literary study.

Chapter 1: This is (Not) My Beautiful House

“In the psychology of the modern civilized human being, it is difficult to overstate the significance of the house. Since as early as the neolithic era, humankind has defined itself by its buildings. Buildings for washing, buildings for socializing, buildings for protection, even buildings for the commemoration of the dead. But of all the structures mankind has invented for itself, there is little doubt that the house is that which it relies upon most completely for its continued survival.”

- Disembodied Voice, *Anatomy*

Spic and Span: Location and Cultural Context

Besides small glimpses at what is assumedly a surrounding forest, the setting of the story is confined solely to Megumi and her father’s house, a traditional Japanese wooden mansion that had been cared for by Megumi’s family for generations. Within the beginning of *Haunted Wood Mansion*, the eponymous structure has yet to be transformed. Despite the house’s initial lack of agency, the power it holds over the movement of Megumi and her father’s life is all-consuming. The first page of *Haunted Wood Mansion* emphasizes the house’s centrality within their lives— it is the focal point of every panel it occupies, enveloping the page with both its external and internal space. The first panel immediately focuses upon the house’s exterior, serving as the establishing shot of the structure that will contain the eventual unfolding of the story, and become the host of transformation.

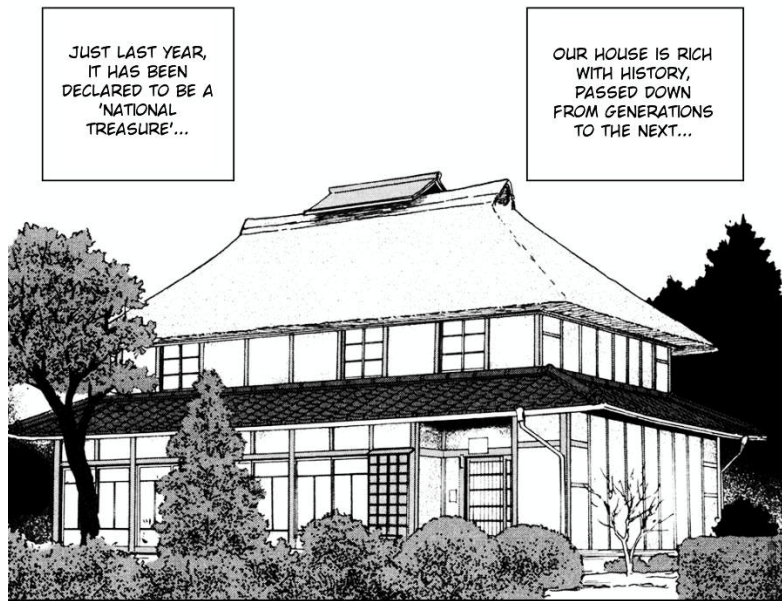


Figure 1: The first panel of *Haunted Wood Mansion*, depicting the titular house pre-transformation and its surroundings.

Within this first glimpse of the house, the visual aesthetic and textual context makes it easily identifiable as a *minka*, or a “house of the people”, a traditional vernacular house constructed and occupied by those within the non-samurai caste, although the association with the Japanese caste system has been largely erased within modern popular conception². Prior to the de-stratification of the Japanese caste system, *Minka* could typically be differentiated into four different categories: farmhouses (*noka*), fishermen’s houses (*gyoka*), mountain houses (*sanka*) and urban houses (*machiya*). When taking the architecture of the house in mind, the mansion’s structure seems to be reminiscent of urban *minka*, which would frequently be built upwards, consisting of two stories rather than the typical one story floor plan due to their proximity to other houses within cities and other similarly organized urban spaces³.

² Nishi, Kazuo; Kazuo Hozumi (1996). *What is Japanese Architecture: A Survey of Traditional Japanese Architecture*.

³ <https://www.worldhistory.org/article/1426/a-traditional-japanese-house/>

While the layered architectural structure displayed within this first panel seemingly fits the description of how an urban house would have been constructed, the glimpse given of its surroundings seems to suggest otherwise. The house stands alone against the natural landscape, framed by what appears to be a modest garden and set against the dark outline of a treeline. This external shot, alongside the one other that bookends the work and the references made to visitors and appraisers, displays the extent of the house's connection to the outside world: a domestic beacon, swaddled away from any immediate contact with urban life. This disconnect from the larger sociological landscape serves almost to isolate the house and its inhabitants from the realities of the world it exists in, emphasizing the all-encompassing importance and significance of the house and what it represents in a manner not too dissimilar to the rural mansion of Nobuhiko Obayashi's cult classic movie *House* (1977). While *House* dedicates a good fourth of its runtime to visualizing the distance between the seemingly idyllic pastoral setting of the house and the crowded commercial bustle of urban life, *Haunted Wood Mansion* utilizes no such distinctions of distance—the traditional home requires no kind of travel montage to access, as its key players are already “home”, holding no regard for whatever length of distance separates them from strangers. Although the nuances of its construction have yet to be revealed within the work (or are kept purposely vague due to the confines of the short story format), the visual and textual information within this panel serve as both a vital cultural touchstone and shorthand for the temporal and spatial connection (or lack thereof) that the house maintains with society at large, despite the story of *Haunted Wood Mansion* being almost completely contained to the space inside of the house.

Throughout the work, the events of the story are viewed through the perspective of Megumi—her first piece of narration appears in conjunction with the character-exempt first page.

The first string of narration immediately contextualizes the mansion as her house: “My house has a pedigree; it’s been in my family for generations. Last year, it was selected to be a registered national tangible cultural property” (Allen 12). Paired with the holistic external illustration of the house, Megumi and her father are initially rendered as explanatory props to bolster and explain the house’s value— while their status of belonging to the generations that had built and maintained the house is integral to its historical value, neither of them need to be visually present within the external representation of the house’s physical, architectural value. In this sense, the value and centrality of the house within *Haunted Wood Mansion* is defined by the way in which it exists as a seemingly static encapsulation of a national sense of identity, despite being home to a family that has resided within its walls for generations.

Although Megumi identifies herself and her father within this opening page, they are both absent as the panels linger over the intricacies of its architecture and construction, both closing in on and eventually entering the house. The transition to the interior of the house reveals this internal world Rybczinski understands as the “appearance of the internal world of the individual, of the self, and of the family” (35), although there doesn’t seem to be much of an internal world at all: much like its somewhat blandly pretty inhabitants, the house seems to consist of an almost spartan amount of personal embellishment, a reality of the interior that is thrown into contrast whenever a personal item or tchotchke indicating a lived-in house manages to appear⁴. Even as Megumi elaborates on this connection, the page reads as almost holistically sterile, the picturesque depiction of the “money shot” aspects of the house’s external and internal architecture evocative of a tourism pamphlet.

⁴ Such as the tiny heart-shaped table that features in Megumi’s otherwise empty room, or the swing that once hung from the rafters in the living room when she was a child. The house seems to be perpetually ready for a house tour, otherwise.

Through the intertwining of Megumi's narration describing the different points of value of her house and the slow telescoping inwards of the setting itself, the house's interior is made synonymous with Megumi's internal world as an individual. The importance of Megumi's role as narrative viewpoint is characterized through this disembodied narration that floats around and through the house, alongside specific visual choices made continually throughout the story. The depiction of the house and its inhabitants, therefore, is irrevocably tinged with the subjective gaze of the protagonist, and the powerful, emotional familial connection she has with the house. Despite the way in which her voice contextualizes the numerous kinds of value it holds, it is the house that serves as the near all-encompassing focus of both her and her father's attention.

Emphasis is placed on a simultaneous structural stability and emotional stability, as both Megumi and her father have direct familial ties to the home in a way unique to them, as descendants and inheritors of the space. Their individual experiences vary, however, due to the specificity of their respective roles, and the expectations and relative control and power each is capable of exerting over the space. Megumi bonding with her father over their shared living experience is an experience simultaneously shared *with* the house— their respective feelings and actions are layered over the same space, imbuing the structure with emotional significance through association and maintenance. As succinctly stated by the disembodied voice that guides the player through the tapes in *Anatomy*, the emotional resonance of the house “is due in some small part to seeing them as a reflection of ourselves” (Kitty Horrorshow). The house within *Haunted Wood Mansion* stands alone on this page, its exterior the reflection of traditional Japanese domestic architecture, while the personal lives of the inhabitants themselves are hidden away somewhere within its interior.

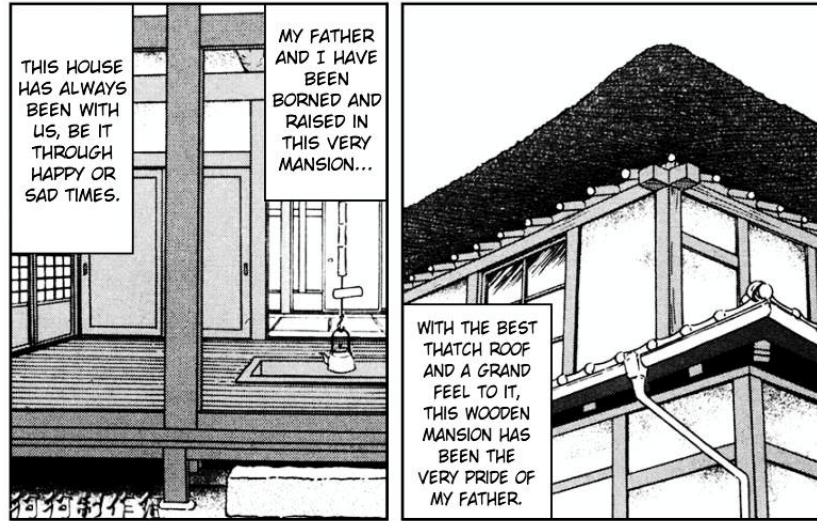


Figure 2: An external and internal shot of the house, devoid of its inhabitants. The irori and thatched roof feature prominently.

As the inside of the house is opened up, the internal hallmarks of what could be considered iconic “traditional” Japanese interior design and architecture is also revealed, alongside Megumi and her father. Laurel L. Cornell provides a basic schema for what these aforementioned hallmarks are: “The ‘traditional Japanese house’ is often thought of as a light, airy structure, built with wood, with sliding paper walls (*fusuma*), translucent paper windows (*shōji*), straw-matted floors (*tatami*), and an elaborated display alcove (*tokonoma*)” (Cornell, 21). In the interior of *Haunted Wood Mansion*’s house, all of these components eventually make an appearance: the sliding paper walls, shōji windows, and tatami mats immediately feature upon this first and second page, while the tokonoma’s appearance can only be briefly glimpsed, considering its typical function as the focal point of the house⁵.

5

<https://www.britannica.com/technology/tokonoma#:~:text=tokonoma%2C%20alcove%20in%20a%20Japanese,focal%20point%20of%20the%20interior.>

While the tokonoma takes a focal backseat, the irori, a traditional Japanese sunken hearth, serves to repeatedly appear throughout the manga, tying the house down to its historical roots in a way that is eventually warped and cannibalized in the wake of the house's transformation. The irori makes its appearance within this first internal shot on page one, and consistently appears throughout the entirety of the story as the characters repeatedly return to the living room space. The iconography of the hearth as the "heart" or "core" of the house is a consistent and popular metaphor for utility, as it provides a warmth that serves to revitalize and concentrate the residents of the space into the "living room". Within Kitty Horrorshow's first-person game *Anatomy*, the mysterious narrator provides a somewhat similar understanding of the living room: "It is the room most often to be found 'beating,' as active and vivacious as its name would imply. The comparison is only strengthened when we consider also the living room is most commonly the room to contain the fireplace, making it additionally a locus of actual, physical heat" (Kitty HorrorShow). The irori and the living room hold a similar kind of magnetic allure to them within *Haunted Wood Mansion*, and both are repeatedly returned to throughout the story itself in moments of revelation and obfuscation. Understanding the significance of the living room in relation to both the act of being occupied and being built to occupy is integral to understanding the forces of attraction that drive the characters to their positions within and outside of the house. The appearance of the irori, therefore, serves to iconographically unite the locus of heat and energy of the abode with the most picturesque of historical Japanese hearth-keeping and familial intimacy.

Not-So-Full House: Family, History, and Family History

As the panels make the transition from the external to the internal, the way in which Megumi describes the value of the house shifts. Within the first panel, she provides a brief

understanding of the value of her home from an external perspective, emphasizing its place within both a historical and modern context. The second panel emphasizes the value it holds for her father, her brief narration paired with a more carefully detailed look at the aspects of the house he takes pride in, emphasizing the emotional impression left by the architecture itself. The importance of the “inside/outside” dichotomy in regards to this separation between the public and the private life is one that also finds precedent within the history of Japanese domestic architecture. Examination of historical records of the architectural boundaries in traditional Japanese residences shows an extensive, detailed amount of consideration put into the spaces occupied by insiders and outsiders of a house:

While the edges of a property were marked, the edges of buildings were also marked with clear boundaries and clear differentiation of space from outsiders... Thus, viewing the house from the outside, one observed a property with clearly marked borders; a house with impermeable walls and a tall sill; and an all-encompassing roof, under which one would arrive by crossing two boundaries. (Cornell, 25)

This clear, codified delineation of space adds further precedent to the hermetic feel of *Haunted Wood Mansion*'s eponymous house: the societal mores and political laws that influenced its initial architecture remain crystalized through the static nature of the structure itself. The boundaries that had been erected around the house, however, were ones crafted within and for an extremely different social context— within the “modern” world that Megumi and her father belong to, the opening of the structure is one that is explicitly encouraged from the Japanese government through the aforementioned designation of the house as a “registered national tangible cultural property”, despite the ways opening up to general tourism may directly oppose the initial structuring and purpose of the house.

Finally, the value the house holds to the two of them as a familial unit and herself is revealed, paired with the first rendering of the interior of the house, showcasing the living room

and the irori, a traditional Japanese sunken hearth. Within this final panel, Manami emphasizes the importance of familial lineage and consistency in regards to her connection with the mansion, as she and her father “were both born and raised in this house. We shared joy, sadness, **everything** with this house” (Allen 12). The emphasis on familial lineage here is integral to understanding Megumi and her father’s relationship with the mansion– it is *their* origin point, a steady, reliable home throughout the length of their family’s lives, a simple encapsulation of the span of the preceding lifetimes of their ancestors (and their own) in relation with the house. This subtle distortion of time and space isolates Megumi and her father further from the flow of the outside world within what Halberstam refers to as the “time of inheritance”:

The time of inheritance refers to an overview of generational time within which values, wealth, goods, and morals are passed through family ties through one generation to the next. It also connects the family to the historical past of the nation, and glances ahead to connect the family to the future of both familial and national stability. (5)

Asides from Megumi’s “studies” that are mentioned by her father in passing , both she and her father move through time with a near-completely singular focus on the time of inheritance– they are the inheritors of this place, and they both work tirelessly to preserve it for the prospective next generation of descendants, as well as those who also wish to connect with the historicity embedded into the structure.

These inhabitants are soon revealed outside of boxed narrations, as the second page serves as Megumi and her father’s visual debut in the story. They enter the story in the process of dutifully cleaning their house– Megumi dusting the higher beams, while her father scrubs the floor. If the interior of the setting of *Haunted Wood Mansion* works to establish the internal world of its subjects, Megumi and her father’s private lives and identities are immediately further intertwined with caring for their house: they are the inheritors and caretakers of the living space

first, dedicated to the maintenance of its historical value and aesthetic. The subtextual tensions between the domestic and external value of the house are made vocally explicit through the conversation between Megumi and her father, as she voices her concerns over opening their house up to perusal from outsiders, “But, dad, to be honest, I don’t really want strangers coming into the house. This is where we live” (Allen 2). Megumi’s attempts to make an appeal to the continued preservation of their house as a wholly domestic space is lost on the father, who responds, “What do you mean, Megumi? As owners of a cultural property, it’s our duty to let the public see the house” (Allen). Embracing the mansion’s more holistic role in belonging to a larger cultural understanding of Japan’s history means embracing the codification of their house as a crystalized display of historical domesticity, disregarding the living family in favor of a more generalized history and opening the internal life of those who live within the house to an external public. In this sense, the external depiction of the house that is provided upon the preceding page can be understood as representative not only of the literal physical reality of the house, but the limit of the external world’s perception and understanding of the house’s value. Up until her father’s decision to allow outsiders into their home for the sake of the value it holds in a broader, historical sense, Megumi and her father had solely retained the ability to access this more intimate and internalized understanding of the mansion.

While it is possible to perceive the existence and potential for a domestic world to exist in the interior of the mansion, to the outside world, the interior and exterior ultimately serve the same purpose. The surface-deep unification of external and internal serves to symbolize a shared conceptualization of a generalized traditional and historical domestic existence, within which Megumi and her father’s shared life can be also regarded as symbolic, or disregarded completely for the preservation of the historical value assigned to the residence. This contrast between

internal and external life is most easily understood through the Freudian dichotomy of heimlich and unheimlich, which translates roughly into “canny” and “uncanny”. Everything within the realm of the heimlich is everything considered familiar, known, and therefore safe, while everything within the realm of the unheimlich is “all that is terrible—to all that arouses dread and creeping horror” (Freud). It is in seeking to cast this seemingly simple dichotomy over the complex physical, temporal, and social structures that make up the world that “heimlich” and “unheimlich” become subject to a hyper-specific contextual subjectivity. Therefore, when looking to understand how or why a piece manages to elicit uncanniness through its form or content, a thorough investigation must be made between the work itself and the real-life structures it seeks to evoke.

To return to a more holistic view of how these panels are operating, these collective panels of the house serve to establish the house as the setting that this particular story will eventually unfold within, with Megumi and her father as the subjects located within it, earnestly dedicated to its upkeep. However, to reduce this opening page to the function of establishing the form of the setting and subjects would be to undercut the importance of the relationships established: that between the mansion and the domestic reality cultivated by Megumi and her father, and that between the mansion and the non-domestic social reality of the external world. Ultimately, these established relationships are soon warped and distorted with the introduction of a third member to the household: the lady of the hour, Ms. Kino Manami of prospective house-fucker fame.

Chapter 2: This is (Not) My Beautiful Wife

The anatomy of the house is such that this analogy is less superficial than at first it may seem. To carry it further, if we were to dissect a house as we might a human cadaver, we would find ourselves able to isolate and describe its various appendages and their functions in a decidedly anatomical fashion. There is even a fair number of direct comparisons to be drawn between those organs of a house and those of a human body.

- Disembodied Voice, *Anatomy*

Silhouette of the Stranger: The Inside/Outside Dichotomy

No sooner than two pages into *Haunted Wood Mansion*, the harbinger of the sexually uncanny appears at the door in the form of Kino Manami, an architecture major keen on getting a chance to tour the mansion. Her silhouette can be glimpsed briefly through the screen door of the main entrance, a tall, shadowy presence rendered anonymous beyond the screen. She is relegated to this vagueness in the last panel of this introductory page: in extreme contrast to her eventual level of physical contact with the mansion, the only part of her that touches the house is her shadow.



Figure 3: Megumi goes to the door to greet Manami, who appears as a tall, shadowy figure behind the sliding door.

Manami's introduction proceeds upon the subsequent page, with Megumi looking up at Manami from an over-the-shoulder shot from outside of the house. In these moments of silence and visual impression, Manami's height in comparison to Megumi is greatly dramatized, emphasizing the way she looms over Megumi, her height placing her nearly at eye-level with the wooden beam of the entryway. Manami then proceeds to give Megumi a formal introduction, telling Megumi that she had "heard about [their] wonderful house, and so [she] came by hoping [they] might allow [her] to take a look at it" (Allen 14). Her mannerisms towards Megumi are enthusiastic and polite, her general poise prim and clean as she holds her hands folded politely over her waist. Megumi firmly refuses Manami's request to take a personal tour around the mansion, informing her of the hours in which her home is open to the general public. In response to Megumi's denial of access, Manami pleads to her: "couldn't you make an exception?"(Allen). Manami's pleading is confined within a wispy dialogue bubble, a closeup shot on her face encompassing the entirety of the space within the panel. The dialogue covers up one of Manami's eyes entirely, with only one eye, her nose, lips, and the outline of her face being displayed as her black hair frames the rest.

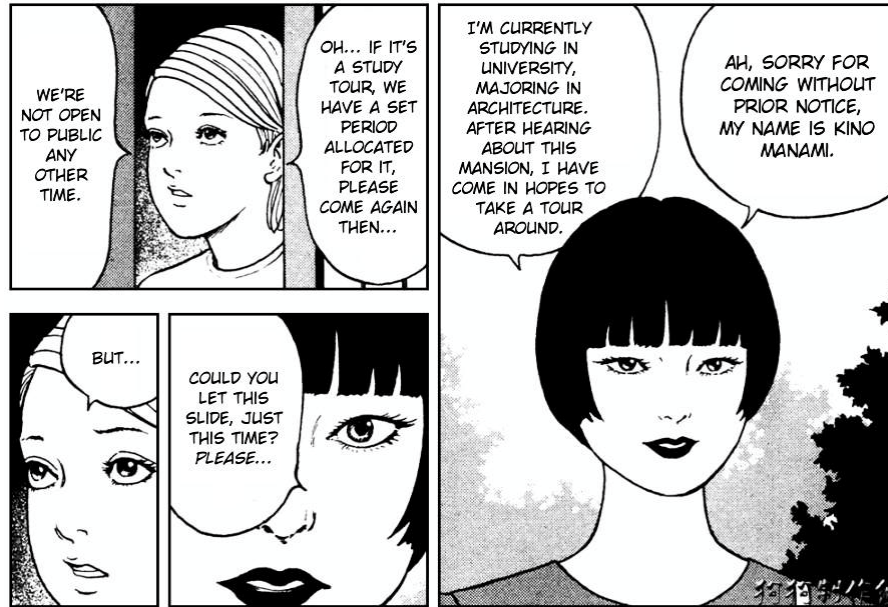


Figure 4: Manami insists on entering the house.

The sudden closeness of Manami in relation to the panel boundaries seems to imply an unwavering sense of pressure, an insistence that presses up against the otherwise polite and amicable demeanor Manami adopts. Manami’s insistence constitutes the first and most clear-cut example of her pushing the boundaries of the familial structure that she soon thoroughly entangles herself within. Megumi’s attempts at re-affirming the boundary between the external world’s fascination with her house (embodied by Manami) and the internal world of her home are challenged and eventually forced into submission by the father, who comes to the door himself to override Megumi’s dismissal of Manami, allowing her past the threshold of the doorway and into the house.

Bachelard’s more ephemeral meditation on the tensions between “outside” and “inside” provides an apt understanding of the lingering senses of tension and force at play within this brief interaction outside of the more spatially based understanding elaborated upon in the previous section, referring to these designations of space as “a dialectic of division, the obvious geometry of which blinds us as soon as we bring it into play in metaphorical domains. It has the

sharpness of the dialectics of *yes* and *no*, which decides everything” (Bachelard 227). To presume the most simplistic dialectic between inside and outside in the context of this interaction between Manami and Megumi, Manami’s asking for permission of entry unites the division of the internal and external space of the house with these dialectics of “yes” and “no”, and simultaneously with that of “belonging” and “un-belonging”, as Megumi cites “not being open to the public” (Iemonsy) or “visitors outside of the tour group” (Allen 14) as the boundaries that would cordon away the house from Manami, who ostensibly belongs to both groups. The eventual corrosion of these boundaries, therefore, results in a change in the household of what is designated as “belonging” within the house, giving Manami a foot in the door to being incorporated further and further into the internal world of the house.

Upon inviting Manami into the living room of the home, the father provides another glimpse of context for where the house is located both spatially and temporally, insisting that Megumi let Manami in as “she’s come all this way” (Allen 15), an innocuous statement that affirms what the external shot of the house implies— near-complete seclusion and isolation from the urban and suburban world, an internality capable of further calcifying in an undisturbed, maintained stasis. Outside of these two pieces of context, there is no reference point for how near or far the house is in relation to other structures, an omission that serves to further isolate the house and its inhabitants from the outside world and any potential support systems outside of the house itself.

First Contact: Perception and Dismissal of Sexual Intent

Within Allen’s translation, the father gives a very specific historical origin point for the house: “This house was built in 1854, the first year of the Ansei era. We’re direct descendants of the builder; our family has maintained it for generations” (Allen 15). The Ansei era of Japan,

which lasted from 1854 to 1860, is one of the shortest eras in Japanese history, its beginning coinciding with (but not caused by, as is common misconception) Commodore Matthew C. Perry's expedition to force Japan into ending its isolationist period. Throughout the short span of the Ansei period, a plethora of natural disasters would underline the political turmoil resulting from the navigation of Japan's reopening, eventually culminating in the assassination of the Chief Minister of the Tokugawa shogunate in 1860⁶. This brief sliver of historical context serves to further locate the house within a national history that both Megumi and her father are acutely aware of, while also potentially providing a historical parallel for the turbulent, brief time period that constitutes Manami's stay, and the dramatic, systematic change that succeeds it.

Manami comments politely on the father's brief elaboration of the house's history, moving past him to what she finds a markedly higher interest in— the physical form of the building itself. She lingers over the architecture of the house, making physical contact with its structural components (floor, wall, pillar), these three points of contact leading to her penultimate assessment: "They're very sexy" (Allen 16). Within this panel, Megumi leans down to touch the floor of the house, her dark hair starkly framing her pale face similarly to the dark outlining of the white dialogue bubble, linked in similarity and proximity against the wooden floor panels that interlock with the panels of the page. The reader's line of sight is directed to Manami's own eyes, which glance mysteriously up and away into the upper right corner, momentarily giving the impression that she is glancing up at the panels of her physical assessment of the house, retrospectively mentally lingering on these points of contact. When read in conjunction with the subsequent panel, Megumi's dad appears in a stark white box, the pacing and placement of the two panels creating the static equivalent of a jump cut between the two of them as he reacts to

⁶ *A History of Japan, 1582–1941: Internal and External Worlds.*

her rather forward compliment towards the house. This may imply the direction of Manami's intertextual gaze as one literally directed at the father, but in relation to the structure of the page as a whole, Manami's gaze avoids Megumi's father, pointed in the opposite direction entirely. While literal eye contact is communicated, a more ephemeral, emotional gaze doesn't even find him within its radius.



Figure 5: Manami touching the house during her “appraisal”.

Manami is drawn in a manner that progressively suggests seduction— she slowly transitions from standing to kneeling, a process that fits her entire body snugly within the panel she occupies. This puts her in a markedly closer and intimate proximity to the physicality of the house as she crouches closer to the floor, while also presumably making direct eye contact with the father, who is juxtaposed against Manami within the adjacent panel as he looks back at her, his confusion at her actions palpable. Manami's intent with the house and her desires, while not

outright stated, are simultaneously understood and given the benefit of the doubt through the body language and gazing that she performs. The contrast between the panel content of the panel the father is visually contained within and the panels Manami inhabits seems to momentarily displace the father from the house itself, relegated to a rectangular white backdrop previously mentioned as Manami reaches out to touch the house in an implied sequentiality, languidly stretching across its scenic detailing.

She then proceeds to look further upwards, to the beams that form the roof over her head and shelter her, and towards the boundaries that form the panels that contain both herself and the house. For a single, subtle moment, the beams cross diagonally across the threshold of the panel, the mesh of boundary and wooden beam further framing Manami from where she gazes, the layers of overlapping wood emphasizing the grand expansiveness of the structure as the conjoining walls and roof fade into the darkness. As she looks up into the beams, she points out how the physicality of the house informs a specific reading of gender onto the house, and the response it engenders within her: “I can feel a masculine strength within the joists in the ceiling. Somehow, I get chills looking at them” (Allen 16). This momentary gendering of the house (and Manami’s response) is evocative of what Anthony Vidler refers to as an extended form of projection of human traits upon architecture, a clarification on the extension of the Vitruvian model:

Here, the building no longer simply represented the whole or a part of the body, but was seen as objectifying the various states of the body, physical and mental. Edmund Burke, followed by Kant and the Romantics, described buildings not so much in terms of their fixed attributes of beauty, but rather in terms of their capacity to evoke emotions of terror and fear. (4)

Manami’s reaction to the architecture aligns with Vidler’s understanding of buildings as vessels for objectified bodily conditions— her reading the supportive joists as physically masculine (and,

taking her previous comment into account, physically sexy) the resulting “chills” evoked are implied to be similarly sexual in nature. This objectification of the building points to an underlying sexual desire on Manami’s part that is capable of escaping detection due to how far outside of the scope of “normative” sexuality it lies. This thesis lingers heavily on this specific interaction between Manami and the house very pointedly: while it is not Manami’s literal first interaction with the house, it is the first moment—in a visual medium—where she focuses her gaze upon it. To the retrospective reader, this scene lays the flirtation foundation for the transformative sexual climax of *Haunted Wood Mansion*. It is a blatant sizing up and appraisal on Manami’s part, a consideration of the structure as a prospective paraphilic partner, with a euphemistic playfulness as she marvels at how *big* and *masculine* the house is, all too willing to rub up against its wood.

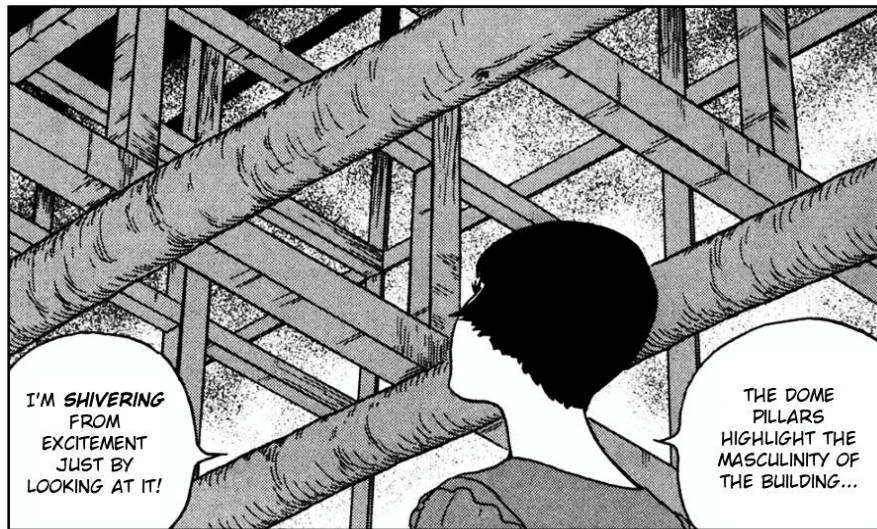


Figure 6: Megumi marveling at the wooden pillars.

Identifying the role of sexuality within this scene, and by extension, within *Haunted Wood Mansion* as a whole, is integral to understanding the ways in which the house transcends its role as part of the setting, and the way in which Manami transcends the limits of her respective positions as guest and prospective stepmother through sexual pursuit. Only in

conjunction with the two explicitly sexual interactions of Manami with the structure is this scene of appraisal confirmed as a kind of seduction “misdirection”, as she turns her attention to the father, politely prying into the family structure. After the father gives her an idea of the scope of the house’s size (consisting of a luxurious count of 11 rooms), Manami innocently inquires into the whereabouts of his wife, as the spacious interior of the mansion seems to conflict with the size of the exceedingly small father-daughter duo. Her subtle facial details, such as the quirk of her lips and slightly shrinking of her pupils as she asks “goodness! What about your wife?” (Allen 17), seem to betray an opportunistic excitement that only grows once the father reveals that he has been divorced for several years— within this perfectly traditional house, the position of “mother” lies vacant. It is this perceived gap in the domestic relational framework that Manami seizes upon, immediately begging the father to allow her to live in the mansion for a time under the guise of furthering her architectural studies. Upon the father’s sheepish approval of her request, Manami begins her own transformation from an individual representative of the general public to a resident of the house itself, seamlessly slotting herself into the dynamic of the currently existing family.

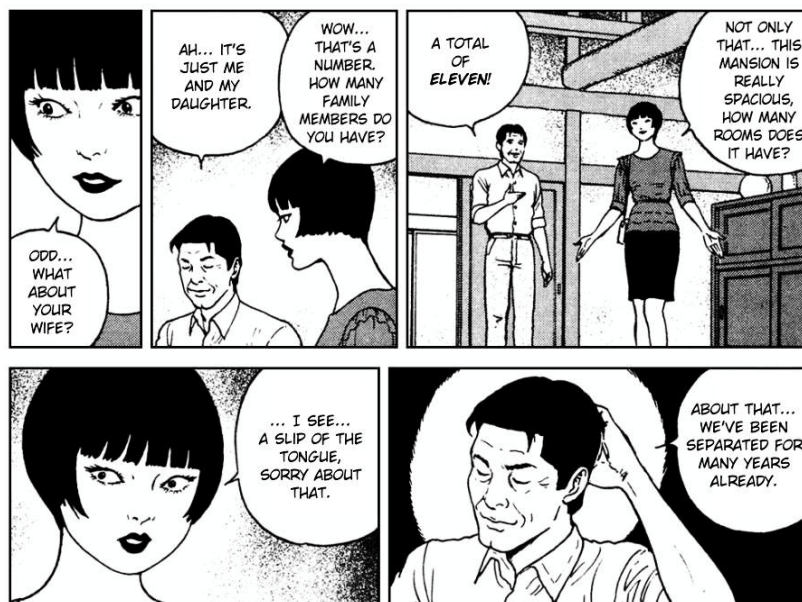


Figure 7: A conversation between Manami and the father, where a gap in the family structure is revealed.

As previously discussed in the analysis of Manami's initial appraisal, the significance of eyes, specifically the role they play in symbolizing recognition and perception, proves to be instrumental in informing the relationships between both characters and place within *Haunted Wood Mansion*. Megumi's own perception of Manami's eyes and the way in which she uses them belies her polite facade, enabling Megumi to read her not-so-subtly communicated sexual intent while her father remains willfully unaware. As she protests against her father's decision to let Manami live in their house, she focuses on her actions, and the way in which they read as clearly suspect, pointing out how Manami was "Going around to other people's houses and talking about how sexy they are. And she was making eyes at you, dad. She was" (Allen 19). Through Megumi's eyes, a two-panel close-up on Manami's leering face accompanies her accusation, the limits of her sight centering Manami within an interpanel circular focus. To Megumi, Manami's movement of pressing her face softly against the doorframe, eyes glancing to the side, is indicative of an attempt at the seduction of her father. It is a flirtatiousness that Megumi is warily sensitive of due to the potential disruption of the domestic space Manami's dual presence and flirtation threatens. Despite the projection of sexual desire operating atypically in regards to the normative Gothic predation plot, Megumi's ability to recognize Manami's attempts at seduction are indicative of her own capability of understanding Manami's multiplicity as an unknown stranger, her ability to hold ulterior, potentially sexually-driven motives for requesting a longer stay in the house. This potentiality is one that her father quickly shuts down, dismissing her concerns as "just [her] imagination" (Allen 18). The implication of Megumi's sensitivity as a result of a paranoid imagination in this exchange (a continuation of the nature of their brief exchange over allowing tourists into the home) serves to immediately invalidate Megumi's concerns about Manami, causing her to lapse into an uneasy silence, both in

response to her father and later on to Manami, when she reappears for a more permanent visit.

This brief exchange between father and daughter, and Megumi's resulting silence, is one that is evocative of the practice and effects of what Foucault refers to as the Repression Hypothesis:

Silence itself—the things one declines to say, or is forbidden to name, the discretion that is required between different speakers—is less the absolute limit of discourse, the other side from which it is separated by a strict boundary, than an element that functions alongside the things said, with them and in relation to them within overall strategies... There is not one but many silences, and they are an integral part of the strategies that underlie and permeate discourses. (Foucault 1.27)

While Megumi is never explicitly told to avoid discussing Manami in relation to her prospective sexuality, the line of discussion is heavily discouraged by the father, and framed as the result of an internal, paranoid imbalance within Megumi—clearly, the behavioral red flags noticed by his daughter must be the product of an overactive imagination, something to be soothed and then disregarded. This dismissive silencing serves to form the foundation for the eventual mismatch in perceptions between Megumi and her father, both blind to what the other is seeing and trying to communicate. In the end, the line of discourse is ended, Megumi quietly submits to the authority of her father, and Manami soon arrives at the house for an extended stay.

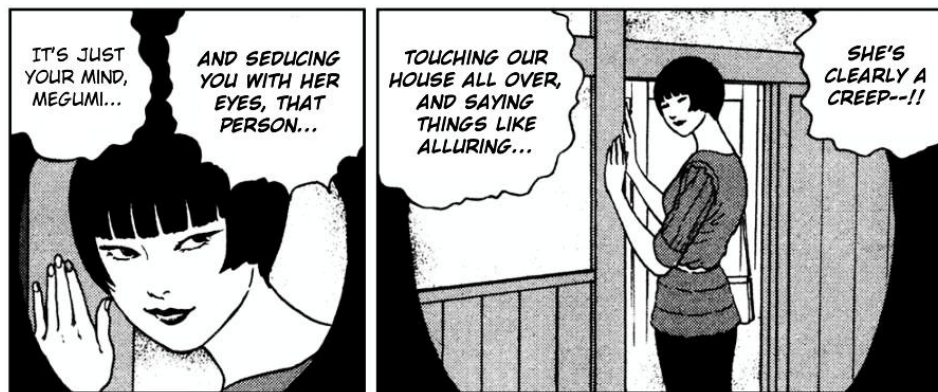


Figure 8: Manami through Megumi's eyes.

Megumi's perception of Manami is formed by the ways in which Manami performs the act of looking. Megumi and her father represent the simplified multiplicity of interpretation of

Manami and her intentions, Megumi clearly distressed by the way in which Manami carries herself and communicates, and the father dismissive of the potential for there being any sexual undertones to the way in which Manami looks over the house. Manami's eyes, therefore, are simultaneously indicative of what she truly wants, while simultaneously providing an air of ambiguity that allows for her to move unencumbered towards the root of her desires. Her scope of the house is simultaneously of the academic architect and the prospective sexual partner, and if the house can be understood as its own body, the simple matter of her existence within the premises can be understood to be penetrative in some manner. However, unlike the hostile, shuddering intestinal tract of Anatomy, this house refuses to reject its new inhabitant. It remains upright, only beginning to soften into something darker once Manami brings her sexual fantasies into reality.

Chapter 3: What Is that Beautiful House?

“In the psychology of the modern civilized human being, it is difficult to overstate the significance of the house. Since as early as the neolithic era, humankind has defiiiiiiidead. But of all the structures mankind has invented for itself, there is little doubt that the house is that which it relies upon most completely for its continued survival.

{Audio indecipherable} Why do human beings of our modern age foster this tremendous sympathy sympathy sympathy sympathy”

- Disembodied Voice, *Anatomy*

Mother Dearest: Silence and Maternal Role-Playing

As Manami integrates herself into the home, Megumi begins to gradually warm up to her as a result of Manami’s cheerful fulfillment of a litany of motherly duties: she’s more than willing to take care of the household chores on top of the rest of the family’s daily needs, and to top it all off, she’s an amazing cook. This domestic capacity is demonstrated by a brief, page-long transition period consisting of Manami’s silent, dutiful diligence, her eyes closed or obscured at a distance as Megumi watches owlshly, peeking at her father and Manami as she assists him in dressing into a suit: “Manami Kino took perfect care of everything for us... My impression of her changed. I even wondered what it would be like if she were to marry dad” (Allen 22). As she hides behind the door, emphasis is put upon her gaze as she appraises Manami, the idyllic domesticity of her servitude allowing Megumi to quietly slot her into the position once occupied by her own mother. Their union is officiated in the subsequent panel, communicated through a depiction of their marriage portrait, triply framed through the frame of the photo, the surrounding darkness, and the frame of the panel itself. This page serves as a stark example of the service-based value Manami holds in relation to Megumi and her father– it is her capabilities as a caretaker that endear them to her, rather than any real understanding of her personage beyond those abilities. She remains a silent stranger, only speaking in polite

formalities, and otherwise remaining silent, only ever speaking to either thank them or proclaim her love for the house.



Figure 9: Manami silently caring for Megumi and her father, and Megumi warming up to Manami.

This is when the first inklings of transformation begin to occur. An undisclosed period of time after their wedding, Megumi stumbles upon her father sitting cross-legged in the dark of their living room, scrutinizing the woodwork of the structure. The untextured darkness that obscures Megumi’s father and linear gloom that eclipses both of them communicates an unease through an illustrative technique jokingly identified by cartoonist Mort Walker as “emanata”, the lines that emanate off of characters within a comic to indicate their emotional state⁷. Within the VIZ media edition of *Haunted Wood Mansion*⁸, the linework of the wooden house emanates

⁷ Walker, Mort. *The Lexicon of Comicana*, 1980

⁸ Sadly, the scanned Iemomy edition seemed to be missing them—there should be a set of tightly bunched vertical lines descending down the wall within the rightmost panel in Figure 10, similarly to those in the leftmost panels, that nearly intercept the silhouette of the father.

from the father in the panel where his back is turned to Megumi, working in tandem with the featureless silhouette that eclipses Megumi's father. The long, creeping lines seem to both emanate from and weigh upon the father, conveying both an absence of clearly readable facial emotion and dark, emotional pressure, all congealing within the silhouette. While the structure of the house has yet to undergo its eventual physical transformation, the tonal transformation of the space as a conduit for the father's emotion is notable in the dark, heavily lined interior of the living room. The simple, clean glow the living room took on upon Manami's first inspection of the house and the brief domestic joy brought by the 'montage' of her integration into the family disappears into the unlit structure, the father's face unseen as he stares obsessively at its walls in an attempt to figure out what has caused this shift, both within the house and within himself.

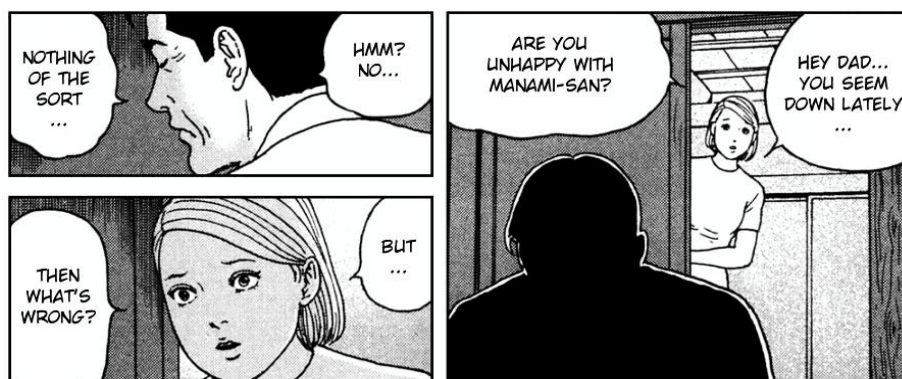


Figure 10: A concerningly vague conversation between Megumi and her upset father.

When Megumi asks him if there's something wrong with his relationship with Manami, her father confides that he is currently tormented by something he considers unrelated. He can perceive something "off" about the house, prompting her to "look carefully... the walls... the pillars...the joists... something's weird..." (Allen). This dialogue is confined to a characterless panel depicting the darkened panels and pillars of the living room, which, while visually identical to the way in which it is drawn in tonally brighter scenes, seems to take on a much more sinister tone as the beams give way into unseeable corners. Megumi peers up into the eaves of

the house with her father, before eventually admitting “I can’t see anything” (Allen), and within the other text “... I can’t feel it...” (Iemonsy), an interesting contrast in translation that implicates “seeing” and “feeling” as equivocal senses, or forms of sensing.

This exchange between Megumi and her father about both Manami and the house signals a marked reversal from their initial conversation about Manami coming to stay with them. Satisfied by her ability to perform as a maternal figure, Megumi no longer perceives Manami in the salaciously-coded manner she once had, the “seduction” that she had warned her father of becoming something she herself actively condoned and hoped for, as her conceptualization of the kind of attraction both Manami and her father would be capable of was seemingly sanitized by virtue of further contributing to an extended domestic landscape. Romantic and sexual relationships between the father and Manami make the transition from abhorred into normative and expected of the specific domestic niche Manami has seemingly situated herself in. Unbeknownst to Megumi, however, is that Manami has no real interest in truly fulfilling the familial roles she has taken on— or rather, if she does take an enjoyment in performing motherhood and wifehood, it is a tertiary desire. Her relationship with the father ultimately acts as a “beard”, a shield to hide her true desire: fucking that house.

Splinters: Sex, Taboo, and Unwilling Voyeurism

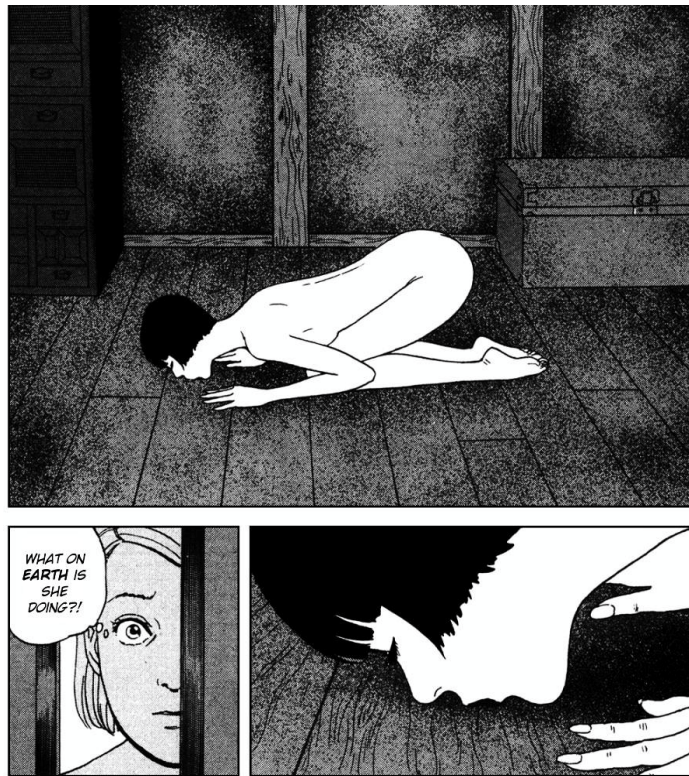


Figure 11: Manami, naked, kissing the wood as an act of “floor”-play. Megumi looks on in horror.

As Manami leaves her father to focus intensely on the wooden intricacies of the house (in a soon-to-be-revealed-as misdirected scrutinization of what is causing his own feelings for the house to change), she ascends the darkened stairs alone, calling out to Manami. As she slowly slides one of the tatami doors of an ambiguously purposed room open, she finds Manami— stark-white naked, her kneeling silhouette pressed flush against the grainy darkness of the wood floors. The subsequent panel frames Manami’s face, the line art disappearing into the darkness of the wood grain and her own shadow as she kisses the floor in an earnest, nearly chaste manner, contrasting almost as strongly with the strangeness of her supplicative sexual position against the house positionally as her silhouette is aesthetically. As Megumi peeks through the crack in the door, only a sliver of her horrified face and widened eye to represent her presence in the scene,

the potentiality of demure contact between Manami and the house begins to slowly evaporate. Manami lets out a wispy, fluttering “Aahh, ahh” as she presses her face flush against the floor, her face still stark white, but beaded with an anticipatory, excited sweat. She crawls up the walls into a standing position, situated against a wooden support beam, and begins moving her body against the house with a lustful fervor. The movement itself is left ambiguous— the panels in which she presses herself against the wall seem insistent on capturing a still, concentrated and comprehensive image of Manami’s body against the wood, clearly delineating an easily definable and readable sexuality uncomplicated by movement. Ito only delegates snapshots to Manami’s sexual encounter with the house, rendering her relationship ambiguous even within its blatant sexual context. Her role in opposition of the house in this encounter is masturbatory and duplicitous: she is sequestered away in her bedroom, keeping to her personal intimate space, while still maintaining the delicate, strong beauty that encapsulated the ways in which she has previously moved through the house. The house remains stoic, still, rigid and angular against Manami’s organic, twisting form: the desires Manami has begun implanting within its structure have yet to fully take root, and the distant grandeur seems to draw her in further, attracted to the dramatic contrasts between herself and the building.

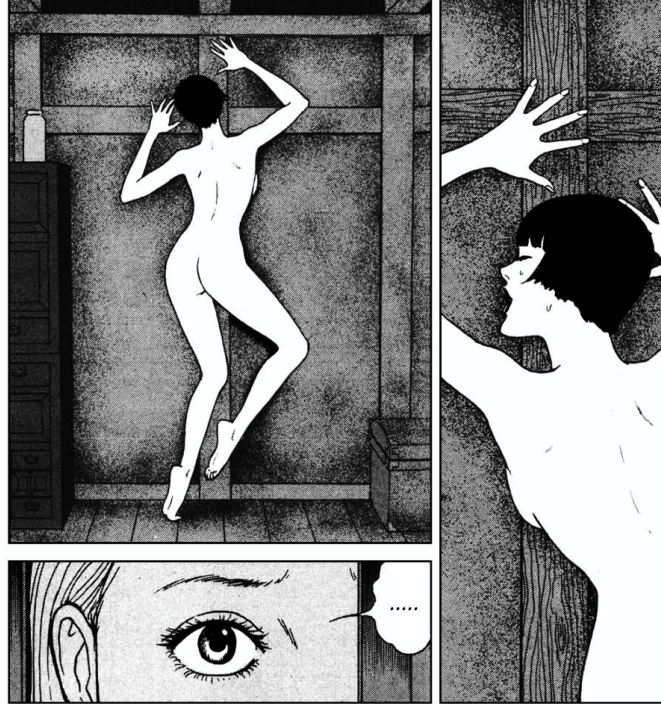


Figure 11: Manami grinding against a wooden beam in the wall, while Megumi continues to watch in stunned silence.

This scene can very easily be read as one of two major transformational horror “reveals” of *Haunted Wood Mansion*: while a physical change has yet to occur between Manami and the house, a psychological and relational change that has been percolating between Manami and the other inhabitants is revealed through her display of desired sexual intentions with the house. Megumi’s position as an unwilling, unconsenting voyeur strikes at a specific, unspeakable yet foundational domestic fear: encountering sex in the domestic space in a way that alters one’s perception of the space and its inhabitants. This scene evokes the quintessential trauma of “walking in on” parents, while simultaneously pulling attention to the fact that the horror doesn’t stem from this potential for sex— it stems from the fact that Megumi *isn’t* walking in on her father and newly gained parental figure. The normative romantic and sexual relations that have a specific place within preserving the idealized family unit is superceded by the not only the affair, but by how the affair changes both the perception and reality of the relationship between

Manami and the father, Manami and the house. The exorbitant amount of rooms and floors, of unoccupied *space*, serves to sequester Manami away from her husband in what could be identified as the elevated sleeping place, while he is relegated to a scrutinization of the work space frantically attempting to appraise the very same walls that Manami had sung the praises of. This attempt to decipher her perspective while simultaneously searching to identify why his own perspective on the value of the house is changing is a futile one, however: Unable to locate the source of these atmospheric changes, he becomes obsessed with maintaining the surface, unaware of the metamorphosis occurring within.

The transformation here is of Megumi's perceptions of Manami, one that results from the redirection of Manami's attention away from the family unit and towards the house, receding further and further away from the lighter, open areas of the house and into its recesses. This positional change is one that echoes heavily throughout the canon of houses in horror, especially that of the Gothic— the initially welcoming and comforting illusion of safety promised by the familiarity of the structure slowly drains away as it is traversed deeper and deeper, and the outside world seems to fall away in favor of the hidden internal world of the home. It is within the rooms inaccessible to the pedestrian outsider, the rooms only traversable by those who occupy them or those who pry, that the horrors of the enclosed domestic structure can be revealed. Megumi's momentary, panel long journey up the stairs, into what could be one of eleven guest rooms, evokes the imagery of the protagonist's precipitous passage into the jaws of the structure— Navidson's insistence on continuing deeper into the impossible hallway in *House of Leaves* is one that causes the house to continue stretching in response, his family drifting farther and farther away as he treks deeper within, and Gorgeous' simultaneous ascension into the bridal suite and the inheritance of the cannibalistic mansion in *House*, a journey that reveals

her mother's gorgeous wedding regalia and a mirror that allows her unmarried aunt to possess her, leading the rest of her friends to their doom at the maw of the house. While all of these positional traversals of the home have wildly different significances and contexts, each one is a journey made in either a purposeful or accidental attempt to reach what constitutes the "core" of the structure, its most private spaces— and as a result, the familial either disappear around a hallway corner, or twist and subsume the protagonist into an extension of their will. Regardless of the nuance, there is no return, and the familial dynamic has been irrevocably changed.

This moment is pivotal in erasing all of the goodwill Megumi held towards Manami— not only has she been revealed to have a disturbingly involved fetish⁹, but she is using the house itself to get off. It is here that the house's role as subject and its significance begins to shift— the imperceptible changes and "imperfections" that the father can detect (but cannot pinpoint) are linked both by metatextual proximity (Megumi immediately stumbles upon Manami after that conversation with her father, with only four panels of separation of Megumi seeking out Manami separating these events) and intertextual proximity (Manami is only a room and a floor away from Megumi and her father as she conducts these acts). The house structurally necessitates this closeness between all parties, despite the house being the sole receptor of what are portrayed as Manami's "true" desires. Her time spent as step-wife and step-mother is implied to be somewhat facetious in nature, simply a means to a house-fucking end. Manami's sincerity towards fulfilling familial roles is not investigated any further— the reveal of her non-normative sexual desires towards the house is used as a shorthand to confirm that, no, being a wife had never been where her devotion had lied. Those roles were the transactions she was more than willing to undertake in order to get closer to the house: she was willing to "do anything... anything... please!"

⁹ As do a lot of Junji Ito antagonists and victims alike— a common recurring theme within the other *Fragment of Horror*

(Iemonsy 7). Manami’s fixation upon the house was clearly established from the start; it is the revealing of the sexual desires cloaked as an academic, aesthetic appreciation that throws her desire into conflict with the roles she has taken on to fit within the domestic relational frameworks of the house. Within the world of *Haunted Wood Mansion*, and within the larger world of Ito’s works¹⁰, this sexual fixation cannot coexist healthily within a domestic reality. It is the lynchpin that causes everything to transform beyond the realm of the comfortable and understandable, destroying the very framework itself as it tries to come into being.

Chapter 4: My God, What Have I Done?

“{Audio indecipherable}

{Audio indecipherable}

{Audio indeciphhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhurts}

{Audio indecipherable}

And if we were to dissect a house, we would find ourselves a stomach throat spine and eyes and eyes *teeth and sinew* and dreams and memories and a mouth that will bite down”

- Disembodied Voice, *Anatomy*

Wood Rot: Sound and Smell

In the somewhat ambiguous stretch of time that spans between Megumi walking in on Manami and the final transformation and fusing, the framing of the comic is solely centered around Megumi’s perspective. Transitioning from an exterior shot of the house’s hallway filled with ominous “crunch, crunch” sound effects, the subsequent panel is of Megumi as she lies awake in her bed, surrounded by the visual representations of the ambiguously sexually charged

¹⁰ See the remainder of other short stories within *Fragments of Horror*: stranger sexual fetishes tend to be attributed to the spiritually warped and deranged, such as in *Dissection-chan* or *Tomio Red Turtleneck*

onomatopoeia. The “crunch, crunch. Creak” surround Megumi as an intertextual representation of Manami’s intercourse and masturbation with the house: metatextually, the panel of the wide-awake, painfully aware Megumi resides within the last lower-left panel page, wedged tight into the corner of the borders of her own room, and the corner of the page itself, boxed in by Manami’s sexual acts and the depictions of the architecture of the house.

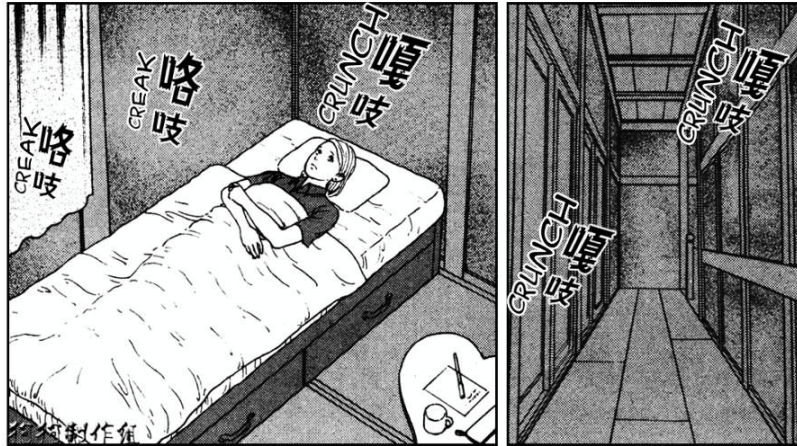


Figure 12: Megumi unable to fall asleep, surrounded by the noises of what is assumed to be Manami having intercourse with the house. Also, check out that cute little heart table.

Literally and ephemerally, Megumi is trapped within both the house and Manami’s desires. She is unable, and perhaps unwilling, to disturb the family dynamics that have blossomed from Manami’s integration of the household, but disgusted and unsettled by the sexual manner of Manami’s true intent for becoming a part of her family. Megumi’s silent resignation is a subtle but fascinating character choice on the part of Ito: Her disgust is blatantly internally vocalized through her thought bubbles that complain “she’s weird... she really is a weirdo, after all...” (Allen 28). Her positionality as her father’s daughter implicates her desire to tamp down on her own righteous realization with the desire to maintain the perilously fraught inter-house relations, keeping the awareness of Manami’s “freakiness” to herself and herself alone. Not even Manami is aware of Megumi having witnessed her, as throughout her depicted

intercourse with the house, her eyes are completely closed: she navigates solely through her sense of touch, her ability to physically maintain contact with the house, a process that closes her off from recognizing or realizing when she herself is open to an unsuspecting and unconsenting voyeur.

Megumi's silence as she lays awake in her bed internally mulling over Manami's freakiness is indicative of an unwillingness to further contend with Manami's sexuality, a more severe self-silencing with upsetting circumstantial results, as this repression on Megumi's part acts as "a sentence to disappear, but also as an injunction to silence, an affirmation of nonexistence, and, by implication, an admission that there was nothing to say about such things, nothing to see, and nothing to know" (Foucault 4). Megumi's repression and subsequent internalization of her fear, wariness, and judgment of Manami is a process that has been subtly reinforced by both her father and Manami herself leading up to this point—the consistent cajoling on both their parts for Megumi to lower her suspicions, to not view Manami through the lenses of prospective sexual intent, has thrust Megumi into a position where her silence is integral to maintaining the image of domesticity that her father has seemingly found romantic fulfillment within. To speak of Manami's sexual activities would be to reveal Megumi's own involvement in and exposure to sexuality, which, as demonstrated within the father's casual brushing off of Megumi's initial concerns about Manami "making eyes" at him, is a conversational realm where Megumi is frequently disregarded and silenced in her attempts to speak out.

In opposition to Megumi's silence, the distorted onomatopoeic lettering that surrounds Megumi while sequestered away in her room is the first hint at the final transformation between Manami and the house. The difference in lettering between the Allen and Iemonsy translations is made abundantly clear in this regard, as the Allen edition has been thoroughly edited to fully

replace the original kanji onomatopoeia with translated romanized equivalents, while the Iemonsy edition either layers the original lettering with a translated, similarly lettered version, or relegates the translation to the panel gutters. Within the Iemonsy edition, the lettering twists and distorts, the crisply wooden fraying of the kanji “ ___”, translated as a “crunch”, replaced with a breathy, wavering “ ___”, translated as an onomatopoeic “haa~”. This new sound, a phonetic and visual representation of breath, arcs through the air surrounding Megumi. Unlike the “crunch”, which punctuates the air in short, static bursts, the breaths arc lazily through the air, the two kanji that make up the onomatopoeia connected by a stretched, distorted tilde in a manner that implies a drawn out, moaning breath. In the panel subsequent to the one where Megumi sits up in her bed, claspng her hands over her ears out of disgust for the new layer of sound replacing the similarly loathed but familiar grinding, a new emulation of sense is laid upon the page. She moves from claspng at her ears to her nose as smoke-like wisps accompany the breathing onomatopoeia, hesitantly speculating to herself through a wavy, nervous speech bubble; “... something smells... almost like... bad breath...?” (Allen). The gradual layering of sound, sight, and smell serves to slowly but dramatically change the atmosphere of the environment Megumi inhabits. Having previously caught Manami within the act, her awareness of the sound, which emanates from down the hallway into her room, is one that she cannot escape from. Manami’s fetish echoes audibly through the structure, growing stronger, more bodily, and, to Megumi, more repulsive. This signaling of repulsion is signaled not only by these visual representations of sense, but by the contrast between the ephemerally warped and distorted emanations that surround Megumi and the consistently unblemished form of Megumi herself. While she is capable of sensing these emanations, her physical form is not altered by them— she is mentally

disturbed, but physically unincorporated¹¹. She remains unhindered and untouched as she leaves her room, nervously taking note of the stench and sounds in a way evocative of a damsel traipsing through a castle haunted by the reverberations of sexual desire and trauma¹². In the singular panel that establishes her leaving the bedroom to enter the rest of the house, she peers nervously around the darkened staircase that she descends; she is hemmed in by the layering of the wooden support beams, the visualized smell and sound, and the frame of the panel itself, a nauseatingly claustrophobic fit in what has been previously established to be a large, roomy house. She descends into the darkness of the living room, and in descending into that darkness, is enveloped by an intensification of sense, an overwhelmingly fraught contention with the architecture itself. The manner in which she is depicted within this panel also serves to evoke the sense that something lurks beyond what Megumi or the reader can see— she is observed from a point up within the beams itself, a nearly security-camera-esque angle that subtly evokes the notion that there is a force within the house watching over her as she moves.

As Megumi descends the stairs into the living space, the structure itself begins to shake, adding another layer of audio input alongside the implied grinding and breathing. At the center of the living room besides the irori, her father scrubs frantically at the reverberating floor on his hands and knees, the sounds emanating from him with the same wooden font and consistency of the “grinding” onomatopoeia that had echoed through the house. In the panel where he makes his first re-appearance, he is depicted from Megumi’s viewpoint, as a small, kneeling figure facing away from her, attention completely held by the cleaning of the house. Their respective positions within this panel directly opposes their more idyllic, relaxed appearance at the beginning of the

¹¹ Megumi and the father remain seemingly unscathed by the repeated usage of the physical corruption and fusion trope by Ito, outside of the trauma accrued by the incident. For examples of this trope as utilized by Ito, look to *Dissolving Classroom*, *The Enigma of Amigara Fault*, or *Uzumaki*.

¹² See *Castle of Otranto* or *A Sicilian Romance*.

story, where the cleaning of the house was a mutual task, emblematic of a congenial, healthy relationship between father and daughter. The act of cleaning, spurred into an orgy of sound and movement, is now an isolating, obsessive task taken on by the father alone, the only one capable of seeing the way Manami's infidelity changes the physical structure of the house. This blatant depiction of dedication and maintenance to the house occurs as the father's visceral response to the changes occurring with the house, his "scrubbing" an indirect reaction to Manami's "grinding". This disconnect between Megumi and her father is the manifestation of the cognitive and domestic rift that has been consistently widening between the pair: the familial closeness implied through the shared maintenance of the house now isolates them within the rapidly alienating structure. The house now serves to drive them apart rather than bring them closer together, a phenomenon that can be traced back to Manami's absence in the familial space and self-enacted confinement to the bedroom. In the simultaneous absence of the ideal mother and presence of the masturbatory mother, the entire familial structure is undermined, the previous fond associations with the structure fading in favor of a fetish-focused identity.

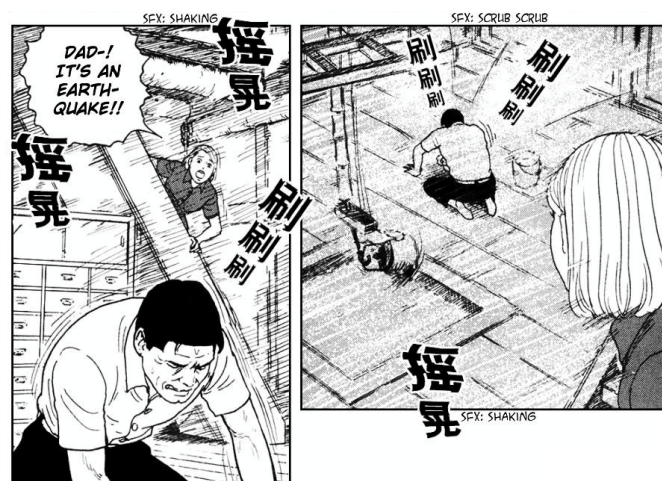


Figure 13: Megumi calls out from the stairs to her father while he continues to scrub: besides the “earthquake”, the house still appears relatively normal.

While both Megumi and her father are isolated by Manami’s relationship with the house in different ways, it is the father that holds a romantically charged relationship with Manami as her husband. In repeatedly engaging with her house-related paraphilia, both are driven to different kinds of obsession with the domestic space: she with sexual fulfillment, and he with the purging of its transformative, immutable effects. This obsession with cleaning and hiding away the emotional and literal transformations that occur within the living house is one that blatantly mirrors a very palpable human response to domestic trauma— the reflexive erasure and denial of its existence. The process of repression, once used to quiet Megumi, now metamorphoses within the father, the act of cleaning is transforming into a desperate bid at erasure rather than a polishing of upkeep, similarly to the bloodstained key to Bluebeard’s room of dismembered, gutted dead wives, persisting even as the wife tries frantically to scrub it clean. The evidence of normative violations, however, is embedded into the item— fused with the blood, with the ocular organs itself. The beautiful, expansive house is ruined with the running of bodily fluid that seeps into the hearts and dispositions of the inhabitants, be it blood or cum¹³.

Megumi races down the stairs to her father, frantically trying to shake him from the cleaning process by alerting him of the “earthquake” shaking their house, only for him to angrily reply that “Now is not the time!... I scrub and I scrub and it doesn’t come off” (Allen 30). As Megumi runs to her father, there is no visual indication of an “it” to be cleaned off, as Megumi’s awareness of Manami’s interaction with the house only extends to knowledge of the sexual act, not of the effects that reverberate through the structure itself. It is only once Megumi runs down

¹³ Bodily fluids are never depicted within *Haunted Wood Mansion*, but the implication of the orgasm, of the twisting, sagging growth of wood, implies some kind of wetness.

the stairs in attempt to shake her father from his obsessive scrubbing that she sees exactly what kind of blemish he so desperately wants to erase: a cluster of grotesque, hyper-realistic eyes, seemingly graffitied over every knoll in each wooden panel. The upcoming moment reveals the extent of the eye's "realism" as it slowly winches, re-opens, and then affixes its glare upon Megumi and her father, the languid, ambulatory horror of its sentience stretched over the entirety of a page. In this moment, it is the presence of the eyes, and their ability to return Megumi's gaze, that serves as the lynchpin of horror: these organs belong to the house itself, and its first visibly sentient act is detecting the individuals within it, a reversal of the consistent scrutiny and evaluation that has been placed upon it by all of its human inhabitants throughout the story. This panoptic upset of the domestic structure is simultaneously a reconstruction of these domestic relationships as well. Megumi's father sobs as she shrieks, both of them caught in the emotional throes of horror and grief as the house they worked so hard to care for is perverted into a structure perverted by sensation and sensory development, by the wild, unpredictable growth that all living organisms must surrender to.

Wood Frot: Organism and Orgasm

While the house moves and lives, consideration must be given to the ways its limited actions and glances could potentially signal in regards to its potential internal desires and wants. The most exaggerated and noticeable movements of the house are the development of its newly organic traits and tendencies, the most striking of which are its eyes. The way in which the house directs its numerous different ocular organs embedded in its wood paneling is a detail that can be noted within every panel that the house interacts with Manami, Megumi, and her father: the way it squints and glares in reaction to the father's frantic attempts to scrub one of its eyes away, the "smiling" leer it gives to Manami as her newly wooden body rides the beams of the living room,

and the wide-eyed stare it gives Megumi when she eventually faints and hits the floor. The “body” allegory seemingly falls apart as the house erupts in these ocular pustules in a way that a human’s internal organs and limbs would be (thankfully) incapable of. However, this transformative overemphasis on specific bodily movements and organs aligns with a body-building allegory that, even in aligning with the actions or effects of the human form, defies normative bodily centrality: “its forms, literal or metaphorical, are no longer confined to the recognizably human, but embrace all of human existence, from the embryonic to the monstrous; its power lies no longer in the model of unity, but in the intimation of the fragmentary, the morcellated, the broken” (Vidler 3). The transformative emphasis on the change of eye-like wooden knolls to animate, literal eyes, therefore, underlines the resting capability of the house for this kind of transformation– the Freudian “magical thinking”, of a malignant sentience resting in the grain of the wood, is brought into the reality of the mansion, dependant on “our faculty of projecting onto objects states of mind and body” (Vidler 8). The external structure of the paneling gives way in the face of this shifting onslaught, and the wooden panels rush like a sickening stream to lap at the borders of the page itself, demanding a visual and tactile involvement as, in the reverse of Manami’s initial appraisal, the floors, walls, and pillars warp antagonistically in relation to the bordered space, culminating in an illustrative spread that takes up the entirety of the page it occupies.

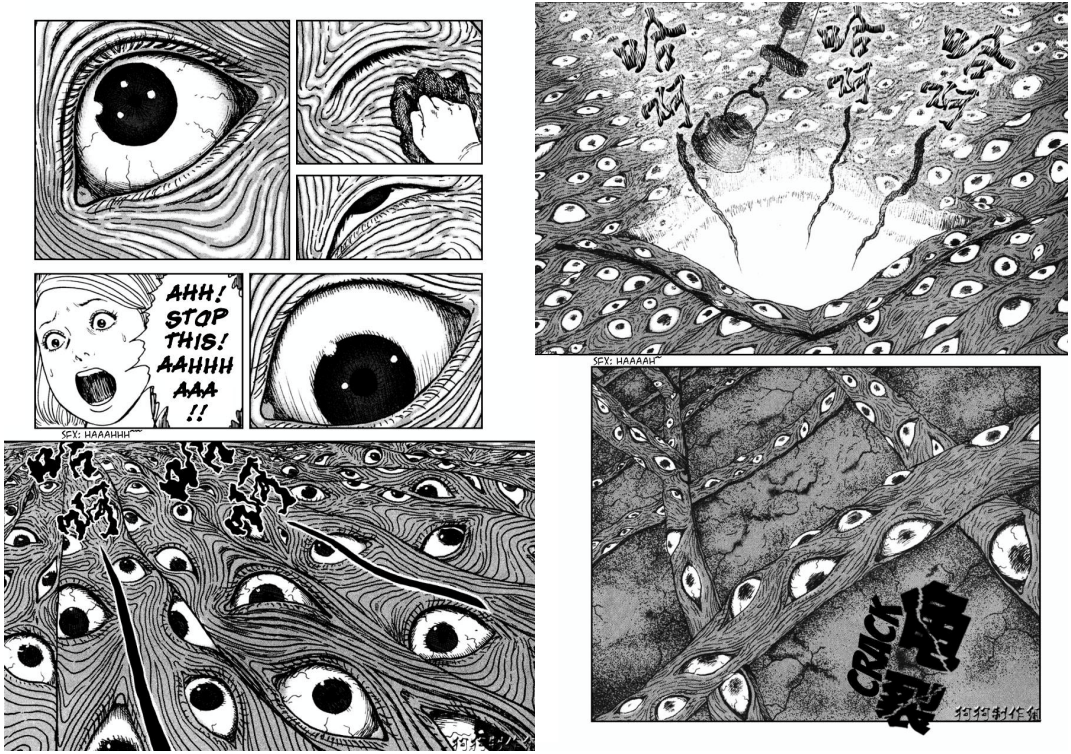


Figure 14: The eye looks back at Megumi and her father, and she screams.

Figure 15: The irori opens up as the house throbs, emanating sound and heat.

Figure 16: The proliferation of eyes through the house, the culmination and full-page climax of the organic transformation.

The reveal of the house's new ocular organs are hardly the peak of its transformation. The subsequent panel after Megumi's horrified reaction pulls back from the singular eye, eclipsing the typical panel borders and gutter space completely. The irori opens up, emitting a cacophony of light and sound, revealing itself as the source of the seemingly human "breathing" onomatopoeia. The structure begins to buckle and warp, the implication of a consistent, shifting movement implied as it continues to emit shifting, shaking noises, both from organic and material sources. The irori here remains a source of heat and energy, but the nature of that heat has dramatically shifted— it functions now as a vent for an inner heat held by the house, both implicitly vaginal and oral, transforming into an unfathomably deep chasm from which the house breathes and cycles off excess energy. The eyes, the irori, and the consistent warping movement of the house all lead to the final reveal of Manami's location and newfound form within the house— as Megumi frantically looks around the newly living house, she directs her gaze upwards, to the dome pillars formerly fawned over by Manami for their shiver-worthy "masculinity", and finds none other than Manami, riding one of the main beams and laughing maniacally, her body transformed to wood, eyes replaced with whorls.

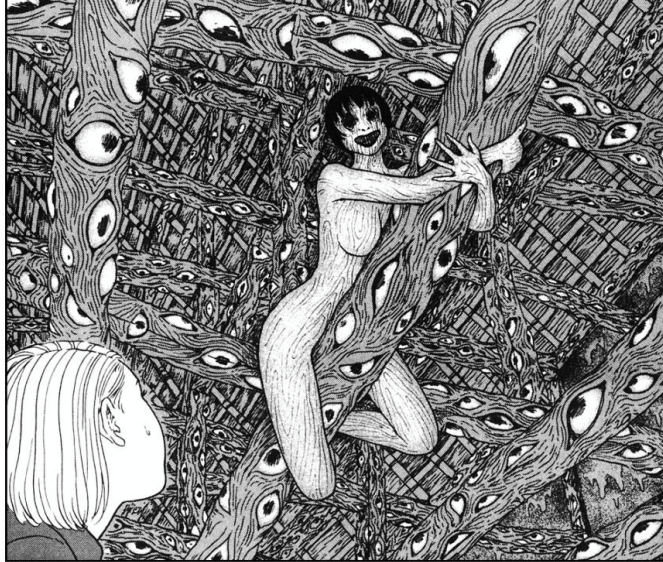


Figure 17: Megumi looking up to see Manami, transformed into wood and riding an eye-ridden beam.

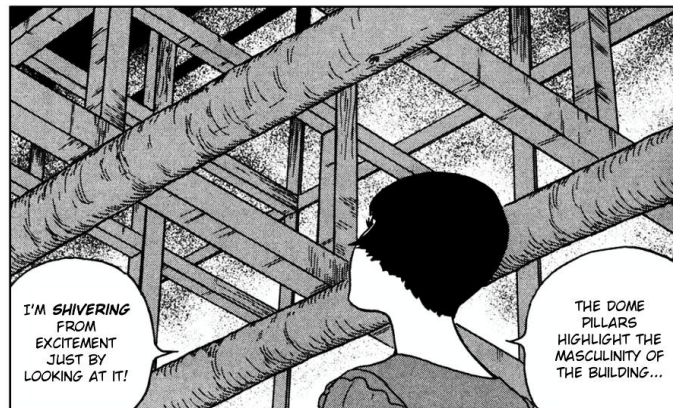


Figure 18: A purposeful repeat of Figure 6, mirroring Megumi's position in Figure 17.

The parallels between the upward gaze shared by Manami and Megumi in figures 17 and 18 imply a fascinating connection between the two moments and the two women. Transposed over the image of her wildly riding the undulating, misshapen pole, Manami's initial gaze upwards seems to imply that this outcome was one that she had been internally appraising the house for— the internal fantasy turned outwards. As Megumi occupies Manami's position as the one conducting the gaze upwards, the two are transformed: Manami is the loci of the fantasy, the master of this undulating, feverishly living house, and Megumi “appraises” this fantasy in abject

horror, the structure far beyond the control of her or her father. Within the physical copy of *Haunted Wood Mansion*, this transposal is a literal one: the order of the pages allows for a retrospective flipping between the page where Manami looks upwards to the beams and the page where Megumi looks upwards to the beams, each respective panel fitting perfectly in line with each other's layout structure to create a perfectly aligned page. As Manami's desire re-informs the structure of the house and her body, Megumi's sense of comfort and safety is endangered and eventually broken completely, causing a complete and utter momentary collapse in Megumi, and she faints, receding into her own fantasy.

Megumi dreams of her childhood, a period of time where the house still maintains the idealistic form, her birth mother still an occupant. This dream consists of her memories of being nurtured by the house and her mother, emblematic of the idyllic fantasy that she had implicitly placed upon Manami, which she exploited to assure her position within the house. This moment of "dreaming" signals an internal transformation conducted through Megumi's gaze that had occurred long before Manami had ever laid eyes on the house— the fusing of her mother and her home, both united through the feeling of security and ease they provide. In this sense, the wordless mother is evoked through her ability to maintain that feeling of domestic security and safety, its own momentary evocation serving as a shelter from the viscerally uncanny transformation of the domestic structures and roles of both Manami and the house. It is this dreaming, this reveal of Megumi's innermost desire, that reveals the way in which Manami and Megumi directly mirror one another: They both harbor a bone-deep, intense desire for intimacy. Manami's desire for a sexual intimacy that can only be fulfilled through using the house as a fetish partner, however, comes into conflict with Megumi's desire for a familial, maternal nurturing relationship that is nurtured by the house.

This moment in which the house affixes its gaze on Megumi is the one panel where the extent of what we can see of the house has unilaterally diverted its attention and potentially, its sensibilities and concern, to the way in which Megumi crumples against the floor. The leering wooden Manami and the subsequent calming dream she has of the house and her mother, and the way in which she wakes up peacefully on the floor of the spent, unmoving transformed house implies a simultaneous connection and contrast between Manami and Megumi's mother, between the warped and pristine houses. This tension between Megumi and the "mothers" aligns heavily with the tenants of a subset of the Gothic primarily concerned with the relations of women, aptly referred to as the Female Gothic:

In these narratives authored by women and focusing on female protagonists, traditional elements of the Gothic genre are elaborated in particular ways, notably through the central character's troubled identification with her good/bad/dead/mad mother, whom she ambivalently seeks to kill/merge with; and her imprisonment in a house that, mirroring her disturbed imaginings, expresses her ambivalent experience of entrapment and longing for protection. (Rubenstein 312)

The internal mental retreat into the "self" as a means to relive the comfort provided by the caring but absent mother to stave off the despair of being lost within a once-familiar structure that has been transformed beyond recognition by the "bad/mad" replacement mother signals to the kind of ambivalent merging process identified here by Rubenstein. The literal merging between Manami and the house is a perverted, de-familiarized mirroring of the emotional merging of the birth mother and the house enacted by Megumi, in which the internal desires for maternal comfort and care are made external and uncanny, unrecognizable through their transmission.



Figure 19: Megumi fainting and dreaming of her childhood, featuring the first and only instance of her absent birth mother.

If the house can be understood as being shaped by the desires placed upon and enacted within it, while simultaneously existing within a stage wherein it can reach out and reflect that influence upon those shaping it, the gazing upon Megumi and the subsequent dream can be interpreted as the evocation of comfort and care, influencing Megumi through the echoes of influence left on both her and the house by the absent mother.

Upon waking, the house is no longer in motion, its beams saggy and riddled with empty eye sockets and its irori vacantly still, irrevocably changed by the transformative climax. As Megumi stirs, her posture when sleeping mirrors her positioning within the last flashback, drawn laying her head asleep upon her mother's lap, the literal overlay combining the lap of Megumi's mother with the warped wooden floor paneling of the house. This overlay signals the way in which Megumi views motherhood as infused into the structural makeup of the ideal, conceptual

“home”: it consists in conjunction with the house, a symbiotic caretaking process that perpetuates itself so long as the house and its inhabitants both fulfill a very specific kind of normative familial purpose. With the absence of her birth mother, however, Megumi projects motherhood onto the house itself– it becomes a maternal figure, and Megumi and her father’s dutiful maintenance of the mansion keeps it open and receptive to the eventual continuance of the nuclear family structure through the incorporation of a new human mother figure, the perpetuation of inheritance and familial lineage.

If the house can be understood as a “mother” by virtue of this convergent imprinting upon by the acts of the idealized past mother, the positionality of the house in regards to domestic, sexual, and general societal understandings of gender must be considered. As an initially inhuman, inanimate object, the house can be understood as a structure simultaneously incapable of assuming or embodying gender in a human way, while also being a structure that is consistently put under the process of being gendered in conjunction with its purpose and occupation. Depictions of the kitchen as a place for “feminine” service to be enacted, or the basement as a place where a “masculine” escape from domestic life can be obtained, are both derived from expectations of cis-heteronormative behaviors in the domestic sphere. The wooden mansion is a domestic sphere deserted by its original matriarch, Megumi’s mom, the vacancy she occupied filled by Manami as she cooked, took care of laundry, and attended to the father within the previously mentioned transition montage earlier on in the work. In this sense, the house is both the benefactor and benefactee of the maternal figure, giving the shelter needed for that kind of gendered service to be perpetuated, and relying upon that care as an inanimate structure. It is codified into understandings of sex and gender as a container for those who can embody it, and incapable of embodying sex and gender itself. Being both used and attended to by Manami

sexually, the house was transformed from a place wherein gender could be enacted to a living being that would have gendered behavior projected upon it. As a sexual partner, the house is thoroughly engaged physically with Manami, up until the point where Megumi faints— after this point, the house recedes back into a stasis, albeit one that is irrevocably warped by having momentarily been a living, wanting thing.

In the aftermath of the transformation, Megumi drags her distraught father from his frantic attempts to burn down the house. As they walk, Megumi realizes that Manami is absent. She turns to her father to ask if he saw what had happened to her, to which he responds, “no clue!! Maybe she got bored of the house and left... or else she became a part of it” (Allen 40). Situated within Megumi’s perspective, no clear-cut answer is given to where Manami has gone after having sex with the house— her absorption into the structure, her death, and her flippant abandonment of the structure is equalized as equivalently condemning and rage-inducing in the eyes of the father. He continues to hypothesize on the nature of Manami’s relationship with the house, angrily stating that “[Manami] was... a pervert... she lusted after buildings, and they lusted after her... our house isn’t ours anymore” (Allen). This dialogue is paired with a panel focused squarely on the father’s profile as he gazes out at the structure, the second to last assessment the mansion receives. The renouncement and revoking of the house’s status as home is quickly followed by the final panel and text of *Haunted Wood Mansion*, a shot of the newly transformed exterior that parallels the text’s very first panel and establishing shot of the mansion, bookending the transformative process with what seems to share near-humorous parallels with the concept of the “before and after” image: a house before and after gaining sexual autonomy. The thatched roof covers the structure in a mess of long, drooping pubic-esque hairs, the natural

boundaries surrounding it transforming from a domestic retreat to a sexual, societal abandonment, safely cordoned off from the rest of the world.

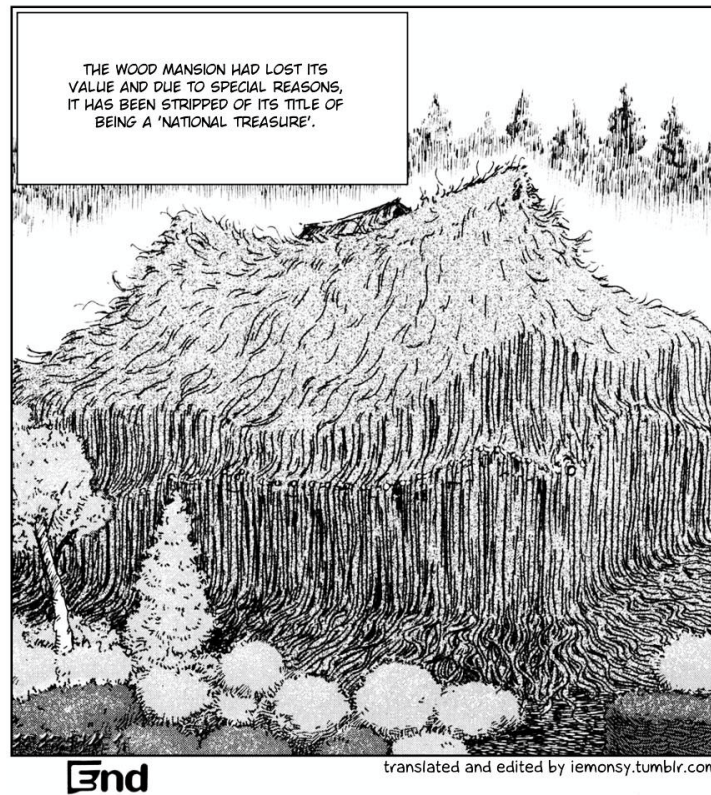


Figure 20: The last panel of *Haunted Wood Mansion*, depicting the titular house post-transformation and its surroundings.

In Conclusion

“There is an important distinction that must be drawn between the words dissection and vivisection, a distinction that would appear to be lost on you. Your purpose was to listen and yet at every turn you have pried, you have prodded and you have interfered. Have you not been paying attention? Did it not occur to you that as an organism existing within a greater organism, your intrusion would be felt? And still you harass. And now, like the wayward spider who witlessly settled on a sleeper's tongue, you will be swallowed. Because the truth is this. When a house is both hungry and awake, every room becomes a mouth.”

- Disembodied Voice, Anatomy

Haunted Wood Mansion stands out as a fascinatingly unique deviation from the typical “haunted house” trope, taking implicated connections between the domestic and the sexual, the strange and the familiar, and melding them into a delightfully horrific assault on the senses and sensibilities. Through the varying relationship dynamics between Megumi, her father, Manami, and the house, Ito weaves a bizarro horror where normative family dynamics are turned on their head, the repressed secrets held within the frameworks of architecture and silence eventually boiling over into a gyrating, oozing ocular horror. Ito communicates the household’s connection to a larger simultaneous traditional and contemporary context through visual shorthand, smartly allocating dialogue and page space to the subtleties of the respective communications and relations that propagate through the house. Megumi’s shifting conceptualizations of Manami, alongside her visceral desire for a return to the domestic security promised by the presence of a mother, results in her slow cede of control of the house over to Manami, desperate for the motherly care Manami initially appears more than happy to provide. The father stands idly by, wholly oblivious to the tense dynamics of stepmother and daughter, dismissing Megumi’s concerns even as he finds his own feelings towards the house shifting as a result of Manami’s undetected actions.

Even as Manami is actively condemned and depicted as the abject, unquestionable horror, her sexual desire and acts let a unique, non-normative sexuality breathe through the pages of *Haunted Wood Mansion*, in tandem with a startlingly earnest depiction of the domestic trauma caused by the shifting of family structures and unexpected sexualizations of the literal domestic “structure”. Analyzing *Haunted Wood Mansion* through a variety of structural, contextual, and literary lenses, and the effect of the comic format in conjunction with centering the body and its capabilities, has hopefully been sufficiently emphasized as a literary mode capable of communicating information in a densely rich, layered format.

The “living house” trope is one that exists within numerous different storytelling mediums, each fraught with its own unique implications concerning the connections between humans and the architecture they inhabit. *Haunted Wood Mansion* as a comic provides a bizarrely beautiful depiction of domestic and sexual horror through its metonymic visual structure and the themes of domesticity and sexuality. Through emphasizing the unique form of storytelling and communication that occurs through the comic form, I hope to cement the significance of the “living house” as a distinctive trope, and to provide a potential reference point for other iterations of fictional homes that similarly take on organic attributes in regards to the connections the transformation has to internal and external contexts.

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