Summary of "The Uncanny"

Published in 1919, Freud’s essay “The Uncanny” is an important work of psychoanalytic criticism that moved away from analysis of authors to focus on themes present in literature that make the reader uneasy. In the essay, Freud explains his definition of “uncanny” as something that is at once frightening, yet familiar. He uses the German word unheimlich and its opposite, heimlich, to illustrate this point. Within the many definitions for unheimlich, the word reaches a point in which it means its exact opposite, without the word changing itself. Unheimlich means both “familiar” and “unfamiliar,” and translates into English as “uncanny.” Freud uses Hoffmann’s story titled “The Sand-Man” to explore what is uncanny, focusing on images and events that he believes are related to the fear of castration. These include: the loss of sight, specifically through the removal of eyes by the Sandman, and severed limbs. He connects this fear of castration to males’ belief that “there is something uncanny about the female genital organs.” According to Freud, the female’s genital organs are uncanny because they are the entrance to the home where everyone came from, and as a home, they are both familiar and unfamiliar. Near the end of the essay, Freud says that what is uncanny in literature could be experienced differently than what is uncanny in real life. This is in part because we accept the world introduced in literature as separate than our real world, with different rules governing what can and cannot happen. Freud uses fairy tales as an example. We do not view Snow White’s return from the dead as an uncanny moment, nor do we suggest the resuscitation of the dead in the New Testament is uncanny. Uncanny moments in literature do occur when the author places the story in the real world the reader lives in.

What Is Uncanny?

Freud explains that an “uncanny effect is produced by effacing the distinction between imagination and reality” (15). This is why the events in fairy tales do not make us uneasy; we assume it is an imagined world, completely separate from our own. This is also why readers are uneasy when they believe something is going on in a novel but cannot easily prove it without applying an interpretation. The following is a list of what Freud mentions as being uncanny in his essay:
Dolls are a common example of this. Children often pretend their toys and dolls are alive because children do not distinguish clearly between what is living and what is dead. In fact, children often wish their toys would come alive, or believe they do, without any fear. Adults understand the difference between alive and dead and have left this stage far behind. When an inanimate object exhibits behavior one would expect from a living object, an uncanny effect is produced.

Involuntarily returning to the same place, or encountering a scene you have seen before but do not recall when, are two examples of this. The feeling of helplessness and the sense that some outside force is controlling your thoughts or actions creates an uncanny effect.

Freud provides a list of things that are uncanny: “dismembered limbs, a severed head, a hand cut off at the wrist, feet which dance by themselves” (14). Each of these items, whether animate or inanimate, produces an uncanny effect. They are all a part of a whole, something cut off from a familiar object. The complete object is familiar, as are the individual parts, but only when attached to the original collective.

The “double” is directly related to human’s fear of death. Freud believes it was created “as a preservation against extinction” and can often be found “in the language of dreams” (9). This concept changes as an individual grows. For a child, the “double” is “an assurance of immortality,” but an adult understands the “double” as a “harbinger of death” (9). The idea of death, especially the idea of being buried alive, is “the most uncanny thing of all” for many people (14)

Related to this idea of the “double” is repetition. In both dreams and reality, repetition is uncanny because it also creates a sense of immortality for the thing being repeated and what it represents.

For a further explanation of Freud’s concept of the “double,” see Important Quotations Explained.

All of these examples are connected. Repetition and the “double” create an uncanny sense of immortality, which makes the object being repeated both familiar and unfamiliar. It also blur the line between animate and inanimate, as the object appears to take on a life of its own, continuously appearing before you. These effects also play with our basic understanding of the life and death cycle, making us think about our reflection in the mirror and our dreams as places where we can continue to exist, even after a bodily death. Can the “double” exist without the original? Can they coexist? What is reality? These questions can be uncomfortable because of the uncanny effect produced by confusing that distinction between what is real and what is imaginary.
Uncanny Moments in Literature

Below are some examples of uncanny characters and events in literature:

*Dracula* by Bram Stoker

“With his left hand he held both Mrs. Marker’s hands, keeping them away with her arms at full tension” (300)

This scene shows Mina and Dracula exchanging fluids in her bed. It also suggests Mina wants more of Dracula as he has to hold her hands back while still having this intimate interaction. Mina continues to be connected to Dracula, and continues to mix fluids with him, after he leaves as his blood “smeared her lips and cheeks and chin” and her own blood trickled “from her throat” (301). Compare this suggestive scene to any time Mina is described as with her actual husband, Jonathan Harker, in their bedroom. Jonathan rests “on the sofa, so as not to disturb her” when she is sleeping and tries “not to wake her,” choosing to converse with his male friends instead (271; 280). Even when they are first married, they only spend time together when both are awake (115-116).

The relationship between Dracula and Mina Marker is uncanny. It imitates the relationship between husband and wife, but is described as sinister, more as if they were predator and prey. The relationship between husband and wife is familiar, and the relationship between predator and prey is familiar, but only when they are separate from each other. Combining the characteristics of these two separate pairings and applying them to a single relationship between Dracula and Mina, creates an uncanny effect.

**Discussion Questions**

- Are other relationships in *Dracula* uncanny? How so?
- Why is the idea of Lucy, or any vampire, uncanny?

Please visit the Wiki page on *Dracula* to learn more.

*“The Lifted Veil” by George Eliot*

“I could see the wondrous slow return of life; the breast began to heave, the inspirations became stronger, the eyelids quivered, and the soul seemed to have returned beneath them” (41)

Latimer’s friend, Charles Meunier, has just attempted a blood transfusion on a dead woman, Mrs. Archer. The result was a temporary reincarnation of Mrs. Archer. Latimer and Meunier react with scientific interest to these strange events, which makes the reader feel uneasy. They are not reacting in an appropriate manner. Bertha, Latimer’s wife, has the most natural reaction. Instead of being interested, she stood “at the foot of the bed and gave a stifled cry” (41). To see an inanimate object acting like an animate object is one of Freud’s basic examples of an uncanny event.
Discussion Questions

- Why is telepathy an uncanny ability?
- How is Bertha an uncanny character?

Please visit the Wiki page on “The Lifted Veil” to learn more.

Mrs. Dalloway by Virginia Woolf

“one feels even in the midst of traffic, or waking at night, Clarissa was positive, a particular hush, or solemnity; an indescribable pause; a suspense...before Big Ben strikes” (4) 

The idea running throughout the novel is that multiple people, if not all, are connected through some form of telepathy. The main way this is possible in Mrs. Dalloway is through time. Shifts between characters often occur when otherwise unrelated characters share a thought about the time when Big Ben strikes. People are sharing these thoughts simultaneously. The presence of Big Ben also makes people constantly aware of time, creating the sense everybody is always thinking the same thing.

The idea that all people are connected through their thoughts is uncanny. This is especially true in Mrs. Dalloway because the people cannot control it. They are not even aware it is happening. The world around them could be manipulated into having them all think the same thing at the same time, or share the same thoughts throughout the day, without them knowing. This is why Clarissa Dalloway always feels “that something awful was about to happen” (3). Although telepathy has not been used for this purpose yet, it could be.

Discussion Questions

- Mrs. Dalloway does not present a traditional understanding of telepathy. Does this make it more or less uncanny?
- Other than the presence of telepathy, are there other events in the novel that are uncanny?

Please visit the Wiki page on Mrs. Dalloway to learn more.

1984 by George Orwell

“A bowed, gray-colored, skeletonlike thing was coming toward him. Its actual appearance was frightening, and not merely the fact that he knew it to be himself.” (271) 

This is the first time Winston has seen himself in a mirror since being imprisoned in the Ministry of Love. Winston’ s encounter with his reflection plays on Freud’s idea of the “double” and on the familiar being unfamiliar. The combination of these two creates an extremely uncanny effect, especially for the character Winston. As he walks toward his image, he “stopped short” and let out “an involuntary cry...because he was frightened” (271). The narrator is hesitant to even call the image a reflection, using phrases like “skeletonlike thing” and “the creature” and “forlorn, jailbird’s face” instead (271). Both Winston and the narrator are trying to distance themselves from the reflection because it is so uncomfortable.
Discussion Questions

- How does the Two Minutes Hate create an uncanny sense of telepathy?
- How is technology uncanny in the world of 1984? In the real world?

Please visit the Wiki page on 1984 to learn more.

Important Quotations Explained

"Thus *heimlich* is a word the meaning of which develops towards an ambivalence, until it finally coincides with its opposite, *unheimlich*" (4). (1)

Freud begins his explanation of what is uncanny and why with an exploration of the German word *unheimlich*. Because Heimlich means “familiar,” he concludes “that what is ‘uncanny’ is frightening precisely because it is not known and familiar” (2). He claims that “something has to be added” to the known in order for it to become uncanny (2). This suggests that everything begins familiar and can become uncanny; things are not uncanny initially. This is reflected in the German words *heimlich* and *unheimlich*, where something is added to the word for “familiar.” Instead of *unheimlich* standing on its own and having something taken away for it to become familiar, it is only in association with the original, familiar word that it can be defined as uncanny.

Amongst the definitions of *heimlich* and *unheimlich*, Freud points out the growing similarities between the two words. *Heimlich*’s main definition is “familiar,” “not strange,” but it also means “arousing a sense of peaceful pleasure and security as in one within the four walls of his house” (3). The meaning of *heimlich* is slowly becoming more ambiguous. Heimlich can also mean “concealed, “kept from sight,” withheld from others,” at which point *heimlich* and *unheimlich* seem to be synonymous (3). The definitions for *unheimlich* are often the opposite to the first definitions of *heimlich*, but are rarely used as opposite to the last definition, mostly because they are too similar to be opposites. In this way, the very word for uncanny is itself uncanny.

"There is scarcely any other matter, however, upon which our thoughts and feelings have changed so little since the very earliest times, and in which discarded forms have been so completely preserved under a thin disguise, as that of our relation to death.” (13) (1)

Freud believes fear of death is a primitive fear shared by all humans, that traces back to “the old belief that the deceased becomes the enemy” of the survivor (14). Part of the reason we fear death so much is because we know absolutely nothing about it, from a scientific standpoint, except that it is a guarantee. Freud shies away from stating death is the fate of absolutely every being by suggesting science has yet to discover a way to make it an “avoidable event in life”” (13).
One of the solutions humans have come up with, in Freud’s opinion, to deal with this inevitable fate is to create what he calls the “double.” The “double” is formed during the stage of primary narcissism where the child’s representation of the ego projects onto other objects as an extension of the self as “an assurance of immortality” (9). Once the individual moves on from the stage of primary narcissism, the “double” takes on a different meaning; instead of guaranteeing immortality, the “double” becomes the “harbinger of death” (9).

Because the soul is tied to death in this way, humans fear it. Freud postulates that “the ‘immortal’ soul was the first ‘double’ of the body” (9). The idea of a soul stems from this initial “double,” giving humans that assurance of immortality once more and alleviating some of the fear associated with death. Part of what makes the “double” uncanny is the idea that it is in some way separate from what an individual would consider the “self,” and acts on its own once the physical body has been destroyed.

**Discussion Questions:**

- Does all of Freud’s fear explanations, such as the fear of castration, come back to the fear of death? Is not the loss of something a form of death?
- Is it a fear of death or a fear of being completely out of control that is the root for the fear of the “double”? Does fate play a part in this fear?

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**Adaptation of “The Sand-Man”**

**The Sandman**

According to the creator of this short film, it was shot in the German Expressionist Silent Film style. It is an adaptation of E.T.A. Hoffman’s short story “The Sand-Man,” which Freud uses in “The Uncanny.” (7)

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**References**