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From the Blueprint; An Analysis of Freud's Uncanny in Poe's "The Black Cat" (1946)

In Sigmund Freud's article "The Uncanny" (1919) he clearly outlines his argument for the nature of what creates feelings of uncanniness. Freud claims in this publication that the uncanny is the result of something that was once familiar is understood to not be that familiar thing, but then later revealed as that familiar thing. Essentially, it is the subversion of expectations or beliefs about what something is that evokes feelings of uncanniness. These instances are marked by details that make things not as they should be. Edgar Allan Poe's "The Black Cat" (1946) seems to follow Freud's structure of the uncanny exactly. Poe's "The Black Cat" is a perfect example of Freud's concepts of the uncanny.

Before delving into the particular etymology of words that describe uncanny, Freud first claims that the "uncanny" is that class of the terrifying which leads back to something long known to us, once very familiar" (Freud 1919, 85). However, he draws issue with this claim as it is not reversible. While it may be true that everything uncanny exhibits characteristics of something that was once familiar, it is not always true that something that was once familiar is always uncanny. For instance, despite the fact he agrees that the uncertain nature of an animate thing looking inanimate or vice versa is definitively uncanny (1919, 87), Freud says that "children have no fear of their doll coming to life, they may even have desire [of] it" (1919, 90). However, if the context of the subject's expectations or desired outcome is taken into consideration, then we can exclude the notion that the animate/inanimate uncertainty is not

always uncanny. This is to say, if one desires for or expects something inanimate to be animate, then they would not experience uncanniness if that thing were to become animate. However, in the case that the subject has a neutral position, meaning they have no expectations or desires of the outcome, or a negating position, meaning they expect or desire the thing to remain inanimate, it would undoubtedly create feelings of uncanniness in the subject if that inanimate thing were to become animate. Regardless, Freud maintains that instances of animation or re-animation are indeed uncanny.

Secondly, Freud establishes through analysis of other texts, particularly about the childhood story of the Sand-man who steals the eyes of misbehaving children that do not go to bed when they are told to, that the event of losing one's eyes is terribly uncanny. If we can ignore Freud's obsession with wombs, genitalia, and general phallusisms, he does clearly define the act of losing one's eyes as uncanny (1919, 89). The stance of this paper is that uncanniness is found in the distance between one's expectation or desire for things to be as one expects or desires them to be and the reality of how things are. In the case of losing eyes, the rational thought is that eyes belong in or a part of the body that is in possession of those eyes. Thus, losing them presents us with something as it should not be, which creates feelings of the uncanny.

Along this vein, Freud reveals another case in which the uncanny is present: the case of doubling. For the purposes of this paper, "doubling" refers to general repetition rather than exclusively to the singular "extra" of something or someone. In this theme, Freud draws from an experience he had while walking through a town in Italy. He had become somewhat lost, and had somehow found himself returning to the same place despite a multitude of paths he had taken to get back to a piazza he had been at previously. Of this experience, he says "I hurried away once more, but only to arrive yet a third time by devious paths at the same place" (Freud 1919, 91).

This instance of repetition defies his senses, understanding of space, and expectations, which in this case is also affected by inexplicable repetition, resulting in a feeling of uncanniness. Freud speaks further on this, saying “if we begin to notice that everything which has a number— addresses, hotel-rooms, compartments in railway-trains— always has the same one... we do feel this to be ‘uncanny’” (Freud 1919, 92). While Freud concludes that this uncanniness from repetition is due to human’s innate “compulsion to repeat” (1919, 92), he also postulates towards a sense of greater meaning. As Freud says “unless a man is utterly hardened and proof against the lure of superstition, he will be tempted to ascribe a secret meaning to this obstinate recurrence of a number” (1919, 92). It seems that there is an acceptable perceived degree of coincidence before a series of coincidences (repetition) reaches an intolerable, expectation/ belief defying degree wherein the uncanny resides. Within this same effect lies the uncanniness experienced during moments of so-called future-sight. Freud describes a patient of his that at one point lived in a particular room in a “hydropathic establishment” which was then taken by another man. When the patient returns and hears of this, he exclaims ““Well, I hope he’ll have a stroke and die”” to which Freud says “a fortnight later the old gentlemen really did have a stroke” (Freud 1919, 92). In this case, it is the unlikeliness of the circumstances coming about in accordance to a negated desire that brings about feelings of the uncanny.

To develop on the notion of something as it should not be, Freud discusses psychosis and epileptic episodes. He says “The uncanny effect of epilepsy and of madness has the same origin. The layman sees in them the workings of forces hitherto unsuspected in his fellow-man, but which at the same time he is dimly aware of in a remote corner of his own being” (Freud 1919, 94). When people act erratic or completely illogically in the literal sense, it brings about a sense of uncanniness due to the way that these events are perceived to be against the correct or natural

actions of what they are. As people, we are perceived as logical, rational beings. Thus, when people enter periods of psychosis or extreme psychiatric distress, it can be utterly uncanny to witness their behaviour and actions. Furthermore, similarly to the case of losing eyes, Freud says “dismembered limbs, a severed head, a hand cut off at the wrist, feet which dance by themselves — all these have something particularly uncanny about them” (1919, 94). All of these instances become uncanny due to our perceived notions of things as they should be, and as they should not be. Hands belong attached to wrists, heads belong attached to bodies, people belong to rational minds, etc.

Lastly, Freud seems to be unsure of the effect of resurrection on creating uncanniness. He says that “the resuscitation of the dead in miracles, as in the New Testament, elicits feelings quite unrelated to the uncanny” (Freud 1919, 96). However, this idea has already been resolved through this essay. As a widely known figure whose deeds and miracles are nearly universally known, people expect that Jesus, the son of God, should be able to bring the dead back to life. Because of the expectation/ belief, there is no uncanniness or unease at this happening. He is the son of God, the creator of the universe, of course he can raise a man from the dead, or so it would go.

To summarize, Freud establishes cases where uncanniness can be found. In essence, the uncanny is found when our expectations or beliefs are subverted, either by the nature of something to be revealed as something we do not understand or something that we did not want or expect it to be. It seems that Poe’s “The Black Cat” (1946) exemplifies these conditions perfectly. Poe references the uncanniness of “madness” in the transformation of the main character that goes from being “noted for the docility and humanity of my disposition” to a man that had been “exasperated... to madness. Uplifting an axe, and forgetting in [his] wrath the

childish dread which had hitherto stayed [his] hand, [he] aimed a blow at the animal” (Poe 1946, 477, 481). As well, Poe directly evokes the uncanniness of losing an eye when the main character says “I took from my waistcoat-pocket a penknife. opened it, grasped the poor beast by the throat, and deliberately cut one of its eyes from the socket!” (Poe 1946, 478). In addition to this, Poe creates a sense of resurrection. After the original cat dies, the main character finds a cat that is almost exactly the same in appearance and temperament. With the context of remorse felt by the main character, this doubling presents as terribly uncanny (480). And again, in exceedingly unlikely circumstances of chance, after a fire had burned down the main character's home, there appears a black mark on what is left of the white plaster walls which clearly shows his cat that he had killed (479). It is clear that, in Poe's text, nearly all examples Freud employs to present his argument of the uncanny can be found.

Works Cited

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