

# What is 'The Uncanny'?

Alen Itty Jose

Student

Department of English

Marthoma College, Thiruvalla, Kerala, India

**Abstract :** The concept of 'The Uncanny' has remained to be elusive. Different writers over the years have put forward their interpretations and understandings of the concept of the uncanny. Nicholas Royle in his seminal essay "The Uncanny" explains the uncanny in the light of few other concepts. This paper aims to put analyse the points dealt with by Nicholas Royle.

## The Uncanny and Modernism

Nicholas Royle puts forth the views of certain modernist thinkers regarding the uncanny.

Martin Heidegger opined that, 'At bottom, the ordinary is not ordinary; it is extraordinary, uncanny'. He held the view that the fundamental character of our being in this world is uncanny, unhomely, not-at-home. We take things' ordinariness for granted. But when looked closely, we can find strangeness in them.

The notion of the uncanny occupies a significant position in the philosophy of Ludwig Wittgenstein. His works were impelled by a desire for security and peace. He yearned for thoughts that are at 'peace' but held that this 'peace' is strange. He compared it with a gift in a fairy tale which appeared enchanted inside the magic castle but when taken outside became an ordinary bit of iron. Peace thus becomes uncanny, an estranged ordinariness.

The very concept of literature as propounded by the Russian Formalists, especially Victor Shklovsky (His famous essay, *Art as Technique* (1917) is important in this context. For them, the very purpose of literature is *defamiliarization* or to 'make strange' the familiar. Formalism was impelled not by a desire to domesticate and control literature but to unleash its power within by defamiliarising, by making strange and unfamiliar all sorts of familiar perceptions and beliefs. In other words, reality itself.

In the context of THEATRE in the twentieth century, Bertolt Brecht's notion of *Alienation effect* or *A-effect* is of great significance. The A-effect consists, Brecht argued, "in turning the object... from something ordinary, familiar, immediately accessible, into something peculiar, striking and unexpected" (Barry 51). Brecht does not name it as uncanny but the *effect* it creates could be considered in this way. It attempts to combat emotional manipulation of the audience in the theatre, replacing it with an entertaining or surprising jolt. For instance, the actors rather than investing in or "becoming" their characters, they might emotionally step away and demonstrate them with cool, witty, and skilful self-critique. The director could "break the fourth wall" and expose the technology of the theatre to the audience in amusing ways. The audience is encouraged to feel dissociated, uneasy and alienated. Thus the audience could be entertained without being manipulated. Like the Formalists, Brecht too believed that making the familiar strange could provide impetus to revolutionary possibilities.

## The Uncanny and Psychoanalysis

Of all the texts published on the subject of the uncanny, the most significant is Sigmund Freud's essay *Das Unheimliche*, translated into English under the title *The Uncanny*. In the essay he regarded the concept of uncanny as of only peripheral relevance to psychoanalysis. He considered uncanny as a subject of the aesthetics which was concerned with 'the theory of the qualities of feeling'. Royle put forward four points on Freud's text:

1. Freud's account of the uncanny offers new way of thinking ethics and politics. Julia Kristeva, in *Strangers to Ourselves*, points out that Freud 'teaches us how to detect foreignness in ourselves'
2. *The Uncanny* is a great text in its problematic, confused and paradoxical lines of argument and demonstration. It is an extraordinary text for what it does not say as well as for what it does.
3. *The Uncanny* itself seems uncanny in the sense that it keeps doing different things not only to the reader but also to *itself*. At times, when we feel that we are familiar with what Freud is trying to say, something new and unexpected will shift into focus.
4. Freud teaches us that the uncanny is something one does not know one's way about in. It does not mean to give oneself to a sense of alienation but to follow a path with a sense of rationality. This essay portrays the difficulty in writing about the uncanny owing to its very indeterminate nature.

Freud's essay is a crucial text for an understanding of contemporary culture in general, as well as for the unfolding tale of psychoanalysis. Throughout the essay Freud tried to classify certain things as uncanny but every attempt to isolate and analyse a specific case led to another. He opined that a living person with evil intentions can be thought of as uncanny, that an uncanny effect is produced when the distinction between imagination and reality is effaced and long goes the list. Freud himself cannot control the uncanniness of his material. He is subject to the subject: 'We have drifted into this field of research half involuntarily'.

So what kind of a text is *The Uncanny*? Harold Bloom opined that the essay is the only significant contribution the twentieth century had made to the aesthetics of the Sublime. He saw Freud as a writer and not a Scientist. Freud held uncanny outside the realm of psychoanalysis. But the power of psychoanalysis consists in its uncanny character as an invasive metadiscourse, providing forms of questioning and conceptual displacement, constantly capable of grafting itself on to, and thus transforming, other discourses. Thus the language of psychoanalysis to 'analyse' what Freud is or is not doing. In Bloomian terms, Freud's essay offers a powerful, self-reflexive model of 'great writing'. What makes a work canonical or great is its uncanniness. Great works come to us as if composed in a foreign yet strangely unrecognizable language. *The Uncanny* revealed to us certain things about psychoanalysis that perhaps ought to have remained hidden and secret (one uncanny thing leading to another). It also demonstrated how psychoanalysis can succumb to the madness or more precisely to literature. In these respects, psychoanalysis can be posed as a theory of the uncanny.

### **The Uncanny and Literature**

The strange resistance of literature to psychoanalytical and philosophical accountability renders it uncanny. Freud's realization that the uncanny is liable to arise 'when the distinction between reality and imagination is effaced' is decisive here. Unsettling the ground of both poles (imagination/reality), literature entails the experience of a suspended relation. The uncanny is never a question of a statement, description or definition but always has a performative dimension, something unpredictable and additionally strange happening in and to what is being stated, described or defined. Freud opined that 'an author's words are deeds'. They are deeds to the extent that they can produce unpredictable and strange effects (imagination embracing reality).

According to Helen Cixous, *The Uncanny* is 'a strange theoretical novel'. The uncanny is an experience of writing. And conversely of reading. One tries to keep oneself out, but cannot. One tries to put oneself in: same result. The uncanny is an experience of being *after oneself*. It calls for diplomacy, an art of negotiation, a kind of double talk, double reading, and double writing. Cixous went on to say that Freud's essay is a ghost-work in which we never encounter 'Freud himself' as anything other than double. It is impossible to think about uncanny without having a sense of one's own experience. But it is also impossible to conceive the uncanny without a sense of ghostliness and strangeness.

The question of uncanny in literature needs to be acknowledged in a formal, performative sense. We must analyse the ways in which a *text does not belong*. There are mixing, deformations and transformations of genre. The uncanny calls for a different thinking of genre and text, and of the distinction between the literary and non literary, academic and non-academic writing.

Tzvetan Todorov in his work, *The Fantastic: A Structural Approach to a Literary Genre* (1970) opined that 'the fantastic' as a literary genre had to do with 'ambiguity' and 'hesitation'. He linked it with 'the uncanny' as a literary genre and noticed its instability as a genre. Then he came up with the concept of 'meta-uncanny'. Meta-uncanny meant that every allegedly uncanny text is always a text about the uncanny. The uncanny is always meta-uncanny. But there can be no meta-uncanny since we can never fix the place or borders of where the alleged discourse of the uncanny ends and 'meta'-discourse begins. As a figure at once inside and added on, always already at home yet an outsider, the 'meta' itself may be uncanny. The uncanny overflows. The uncanny is not a literary genre nor is it a non-literary genre. It overflows the very institution of literature.

### **The Uncanny and Religion**

In the context of religion, uncanny is what does not 'seem to come in God's name'. The uncanny always posed a challenge or threat to religious belief particularly in the first half of the nineteenth century which was marked by The Enlightenment. The Christian religious belief had to face a lot of heat during this era. In a work published in 1845, Brierre de Broismont opined that faith apart from reason led to superstition and reason without faith always resulted in pride and that the religious belief or 'religious sentiment' preceded and ruled over the uncanny. The Enlightenment era witnessed the emergence of a strangeness that *ought* to remain secret and hidden subsumed within a Christian understanding, including a Christian understanding of mystery. Many events in sacred history which Christians regard as the result of divine agency were questioned. The haunting presence of the uncanny defined the very project of the Enlightenment. Mladen Dolar opined that a specific dimension of the uncanny

emerged with modernity which was previously covered, in the pre-modern times, by the area of the sacred and untouchable. But with the triumph of the Enlightenment, this privileged and excluded place ceased to exist. Freud in *The Uncanny* offers a new way of thinking about religion. It is an unstated assumption of Freud's essay that the uncanny is to be theorized in non-religious terms. The experience of the uncanny, as he seeks to theorise it, is not available to a Jewish or Christian 'believer'. He makes this clear in his essay on religion, *The Future of an Illusion* (1927). Freud opined that in the context of 'the terrors of nature', 'the cruelty of Fate, particularly as it is shown in death', a belief in God or some 'evil Will' or a variety of divine 'Beings' will insulate us from 'senseless anxiety' and we can feel at home in the uncanny.

### The Uncanny and Postmodernism

The uncanny is an important key to bring into light the nuances of both modernism and postmodernism. Critical to such understanding are **psychoanalysis** and **deconstruction** both of which can be described as uncanny modes of thinking, uncanny discourses.

Psychoanalysis is uncanny on account of what Freud himself calls its capacity for 'laying bare...hidden forces'. It makes the familiar (the self, desire, memory sexuality) uncomfortably, frighteningly unfamiliar. It teaches us to be uncertain, to question, to experience, in strangely new ways. If psychoanalysis makes the world uncannily different, it is possible to see psychoanalysis as a branch of the uncanny. The uncanny overflows psychoanalysis.

Deconstruction on the other hand can be called uncanny as it strives to make the most apparently familiar texts strange and self-assured statements uncertain. It shows how difference operates at the heart of identity, how the strange and even unthinkable is a necessary condition of what is conventional, familiar and taken-for-granted. Freud's essay, for Derrida, is concerned with the resistance of the literary fiction to the general law of psychoanalytical knowledge.

Both psychoanalysis and deconstruction teaches us not to simply give ourselves up or over to the uncanny. There has to be an abiding attachment to the familiar and grounding in the rational in order to experience its trembling and break-up.

### **Works Cited**

[1] Barry P. *Beginning Theory: An Introduction to Literary and Cultural Theory*. Manchester University Press. 1955.