

NIDA LACAN STUDY AND READING GROUP: MAY SEMINAR

Date: Wednesday 23 May 2018

Time: 6-8 pm

Location: Tutorial Room, No.3, NIDA, 215 Anzac Parade

Readings:

Freud, (1988), "The Uncanny," *Freud Book 14: Art and Literature*, Penguin Books, London. Pp.339-376.

Lacan, (2014), *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan, Book X: Anxiety*, trans. A R Price, Polity Press, Cambridge. Pp. 41-49; 74-76.

The Uncanny: Between Freud and Lacan

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Many of us might experience profound feeling of relief as soon as we put Lacan's text aside for a moment and begin to read Freud's writing even when his text arouses in us haunting thoughts. Freud's seminal essay "the Uncanny," is such a text where he focuses on that aspects of things that usually have been overlooked in traditional scholarship. At the outset, Freud stresses that his intention and the interest of psychoanalysis are to see the meaning of things beyond their everyday conventional sense. The dictionary definition of the 'uncanny' in general is strange or a situation, a person and so on, which conjure unsettling feelings of fear and dread. Freud suggests that in Jentsch's view, among other things, the uncanny is related to the emotional effect produced in a spectator by watching 'epileptic fits' or impulsive 'manifestation of insanity'. Freud singles out two facets of this definition: the role of the uncanny in the arousing of such feeling (1) and the fundamental attribute that make us determine what is 'uncanny' (2), which foregrounds that which provokes lasting trepidation. He draws parallel between the uncanny and the duality associated with the understanding of the theory of aesthetics, which implies at once the theory of beauty and the notions of 'repulsion and distress'.

Taking his lead from Jentsch's (1906) study of the concept of the uncanny, Freud scrutinizes the meaning of the uncanny from the etymology and the use of the word historically and from his observation of the "experiences and situations which arouse in us the feeling of uncanniness, and then infer the unknown nature of the uncanny from what all these examples have in common," (Freud, 1988, 340). The above two aspects of the uncanny, according to Freud, leads us to the same conclusion—the uncanny implies a dread that has long been familiar to us and then repression has put asunder somewhere in the recess of the unconscious.

Freud exhausts himself with cataloguing seven pages of data from the etymology of the word 'uncanny' in major European languages and the usage of the word in different literary works. He concludes that the uncanny or *unheimlich* (unhomely) in German coincides with its opposite meaning *heimlich* (homely) and authenticates his extrapolation from a quote from German poet and philosopher, Schiller, that he calls a 'poetic licence' for the concept of the

uncanny: “On the left bank of the lake there lies a meadow *heimlich* in the wood...Do you not see? They do not trust us, they fear the *heimlich* face of the Duke of Friedland,” (Schiller, cited in Freud, 1988, 346).

Freud concludes his linguistic exploration of the term uncanny, which like Derrida’s *Pharmakon* (*poison and antidote at the same time*) contains the opposite meaning within itself.

Thus *heimlich* is a word the meaning of which develops in the direction of ambivalence, until it finally coincides with its opposite, *unheimlich*. *Unheimlich* is in some way or other a sub-species of *Heimlich*...If we go on to examine individual instances of uncanniness, these hints will become intelligible to us. (Freud, 1988, 347)

Freud then draws on a striking account of the uncanny in “The Sandman,” a short fiction by German short story writer Hoffmann, whose text like Poe’s could be called the provenance of the uncanny, in order to scrutinize a quintessential clinical example of the uncanny and its effect.

In a nutshell, “The Sandman” tells the tale of Nathanael, a university student, who in a series of letters to his fiancé and his brother-in-law writes about a fearful man called the Sandman who in legends appears to a child who refuses to go to bed. The ghastly creature gouges children eyes and bring them to his own kids. In all cultures, mothers often scare their children by such folktales’ monsters and bogeymen as a punishment for their disobedience. In his letters, Nathanael writes that he thinks that a man called Coppola at the university is no one but the monstrous Sandman. His fiancé and his brother-in-law try to convince the compulsive Nathanael that his story was nothing but a childish delusion. Nevertheless, their attempts were of no avail. When Nathanael returns to the university, one day he meets up with the daughter of one of his professors, Olympia, and instantly falls in love with her. Sometimes later he hears boisterous quarrel when the professor was fighting with Coppola, a mechanic, over the creation of parts of Olympia. They made the doll together. Nathanael also believed that Coppola was in fact his father’s friend in disguise. To his surprise, Nathanael later found out that Olympia was all along a lifelike wooden doll. He again comes home and one day while standing on a tower with his fiancé, in a sudden fit of insanity, he tries to throw her into the gulf bellow. Her brother rescues her and then Nathanael jumps off a bulwark to his own death. The boy was obsessively preoccupied with the Sandman and how did he look like. He identifies the lawyer Coppelius, a mysterious friend of his father who would come to their house for a meal, with the Sandman. This was confirmed in his mind one day when Coppelius “seizes him and is on the point of dropping bits of red-hot coal from the fire into his eyes, and then throwing them into the brazier,” (Freud, 1988, 349). A year later, Nathanael’s father is killed in an explosion and in his imagination, Coppelius was the murderer of his father. After his father’s death, the lawyer disappeared forever. All these episodes and recollection of similar stories from his childhood nurse made Nathanael a perfect example of an obsessive neurotic.

From his painstaking analysis of this story, Freud draws two inferences. First, the Sandman creates a mysterious feeling of the uncanny and dread; Second, the actual fear is about the losing the most cherished organ in a subject’s body, the eyes. Freud recounts the King Oedipus’s blinding episode as a mythical prototype of the loss of one’s eyes as a consequence of castration complex. Other elements of the story especially the status of the Sandman as the destroyer of love relationship increases the strength of that argument. For example, the Sandman ends the love bond between Nathanael and his fiancé and then he destroys his

second love, Olympia at the hand of Coppola—his reincarnation. All these foolproof evidences, “become intelligible as soon as we replace the sandman by the dreaded father [the real father] at whose hands castration is expected,” (Freud, 1988, 353). The infantile castration complex on its part prompts within the subject a compulsive sense of anxiety that its degree of intensity varies from one person to another. In the case of Nathanael, it turns out to be omnipotent disturbing thoughts or to be more precise, a compulsive fantasy.

Another important point of Freud’s argument is the concept of the ‘double’ that we can easily trace it throughout Hoffmann’s story. For instance, Coppelius functions as the double of the Sandman; Coppola as the double of Coppelius; Olympia as the double of the beautiful girl; the father as the double of the Sandman, and so on. Freud discusses the study of the concept of the double by other Western Scholars and then postulates that the cause of the doubling such as the mirror image, shadow, and soul/body, “was originally an insurance against the destruction of the ego, an ‘energetic denial of the power of death’, as Rank says; and probably the ‘immortal’ soul was the first ‘double’ of the body,” (Freud, 1988, 356). Freud pursues the phenomenon of the ‘double’ in myths, literature, dreams, and clinical observation. Another inherent contrivance present in Hoffman’s story is the idea of permanent repetition or the return of the same that one episode calls for the other in a measured sequence. A compulsion to repeat is the principle mechanism in the unconscious and every reminiscent of the ‘inner compulsion to repeat’ provokes uncanny feelings in the story.

A key element in Freudian theory of the uncanny that worth special emphasis is his investigation of the uncanny in literature and art. Freud posed that a fictional narrative of the uncanny exposes the depth of the sense of the uncanny unequivocally and more vivid than the disclosure of the uncanny in real life. This, according to Freud, is the result of the ability and power of the art and literature to bring about unlimited modification and alteration to the primary fantasy about the uncanny. In fiction for example the writer has the power and skill to bring in his text the most unbelievable episodes and creature and situations that would be impossible to imagine in the real world. This itself is a reason why many things in fiction may not be intended to arise uncanny feeling whereas the same situation in the real life may produce profound feelings of the uncanny. In other words, fictional narrative can both evoke and exclude the uncanny in every imaginative circumstance. For instance, in fiction, we are dealing with demons, ghosts and other mythical creature that may be involved in the day-to-day world and never create a feeling of the uncanny in so far as they comply with what Freud calls ‘poetic reality’. This poetic reality is very similar to Coleridge’s concept of suspension of disbelief through which every surreal situation is accepted as a natural occurrence. To take an example, in Nikolai Gogol’s short fiction, “The Nose,” when a nose is found in the bread roll of a barber and his wife and then the nose is walking on the streets and then goes back to its owner, all these don not produce the uncanny feeling at all. This is the power of the imaginary reality to devoid the uncanny from an otherwise uncanny situations. Freud mentions Dante’s *Inferno*, supernatural and ghosts in Shakespeare’s *Hamlet*, *Macbeth* or *Julius Caesar* as examples of situations from which the uncanniness is debarred. It is true that Freud “ends [his essay] by confessing that the uncanny is predominantly produced by fiction rather than actual experience,” (Young, 1999, 212).

The imaginative writer has thus licence among many others, that he can select his world of representation so that it either coincides with the realities we are familiar with or departs from them in what particulars he pleases. We accept his ruling in every case. In fairy tales, for instance, the world of reality is left behind from the very start, and the animistic system of beliefs is frankly adopted. (Freud, 1988, 373)

In sum, Freud's theory of the uncanny begins with the repressed infantile fantasy of the subject about the loss of the most precious thing it ever has. The father who brings about the prohibition and elimination of a primordial mother-child love-bond has a crucial role in this fantasy. In later life, anything (any event, a person, etc) that brings this hidden and horrible feelings to light produces the uncanny. Freud conceptualizes this uncanny feeling as a by-product of castration complex and castration anxiety. Thus, the uncanny refers to anything that rearticulates those repressed infantile imagined traumatic experiences. The last element Freud adds to the list of the uncanny situations is solitude and darkness that recover the infantile anxiety.

Concerning the factor of silence, solitude and darkness, we can only say that they are actually elements in the production of the infantile anxiety from which the majority of human beings have never become quite free. (Freud, 1988, 376)

Let us now turn to Lacan whose gothic style, as I said in the beginning, might harvest the uncanny feeling and emotions in the mind of the readers. Such a quality of psychoanalysis was prophesied by Freud in the essay under review, when he wrote, "I should not be surprised to hear that psychoanalysis, which is concerned with laying bare these hidden forces, has itself become uncanny to many people," (Freud, 1988, 366). Lacan speaks in detail about Freud's theory of the uncanny in his *Seminar X: Anxiety*. He locates the uncanny at the heart of his theory of anxiety as he placed jokes in the foundation of his theory of the unconscious. Lacan postulates at the outset of the seminar that the uncanny is related to the place of the *minus phi* ($-\phi$), the place of a void, a lack and nothingness that he terms as the imaginary 'castration anxiety in relation to the Other'. In support of his claim he writes:

The *Unheimliche* is what appears at the place where the minus phi should be. Indeed, everything starts with imaginary castration, because there is no image of lack, and with good reason. When something does appear there, it is, therefore if I may put it this way because lack happens to be lacking. (Lacan, 2014, 42)

The place of lack or better the lack of a lack is the locus of anxiety. What is lacking is the object of primordial love. Anxiety denies that loss and the denial endure an unbridgeable gap within the subject. The uncanny happens when a situation or an object direct us to that horrible void or lack. Lacan refers to Freud's exhaustive linguistic search for an authentic etymology and the role of the word uncanny the significance of the signifier in Freud's text. Another important finding of Freud in that essay for Lacan was the fact that the unhomely (strange) is defined as homely (familiar), "The *Unheim* is poised in the *Heim*," (Ibid, 47). The wooden doll, Olympia that Nathanael spies on is his specular image shown in the graph of desire as *i(a)*. Lacan emphasizes on Freud's position on the pre-eminence of literature in the production of the effect of the uncanny, which is the fact that fiction has the power to articulate and structure fantasy in a superb way. The fantasy includes desire or in Freud's terms 'wish fulfilment.' This wish fulfilment shows itself in the 'swoons' and 'fits' of the subject, Nathanael, the protagonist of the short fiction which are related to the Other, for desire of the subject is after all the desire of the Other. This is put sarcastically by Lacan, "to put it light-heartedly I'd say that the formula of the fantasy, $\$$ desire of the *a*, can be translated into the following perspective—that the Other faints, swoons, faced with this object that I am, a deduction I reach on account of being able to behold myself," (Ibid, 49).

Lacan's point of focus in the uncanny is the sudden appearance of anxiety, especially when the strange and unhomely thing become homely. As soon as the subject reaches the familiar void within, he is in the realm of the uncanny. This shows us that in Lacan's thinking anxiety

has also an object. The object which is that familiar lack and void. In agreement with Freudian theoretical position, Lacan in this seminar provides a chart for anxiety that begins with turmoil and after morphing into a symptom, it leads to anxiety. To explicate this, let us put this formula in relation to Nathanael's predicament whose turmoil and traumatic experience of loss of the love object constitutes his symptom through the process of the acting out. This persistent process of acting out is played out to restore his infantile fantasy. He sees the wooden doll as a beautiful girl, he is doubling the Sandman with his father's friend and then to Coppola and finally he makes a leap into *passage à l'act* (*passage to act*) as he jumps from the tower to his death. In Lacan's theoretical parlance, passage to act means the departure of the subject in the locus of the Other. Lacan gives credence to Freud's claim that the eyes in Hoffmann's story have an uncanny function. The loss of eyes is enough to evoke mental fright. The preoccupation of Nathanael with the hunt of the uncanny effect, as Hoffman shows us, becomes visible and audible in every one of his action, delusions, and speech.

Notes:

Freud, Sigmund, (1988), BOOK -14: Art and Literature, Penguin Book, London.

Lacan, Jacques, (2014), *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan: Book X*, trans. A R Price, edit., Jacques-Alain Miller, Polity press, Cambridge.

Young, Robert J C, (1999), "Freud's Secret: The Interpretation of Dreams was a Gothic novel," *Sigmund Freud's The Interpretation of Dream: New Interdisciplinary Essays*, edit. Laura Marcus, Manchester University Press, Manchester.