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Haunted Houses: Accessing the Deranged Mind Through the Uncanny in Gilman's "The Yellow Wall-Paper" and Poe's "The Fall of the House of Usher"

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Introduction

Mental insanity, madness or derangement, has been a recurrent trope in gothic fiction throughout the years, as characters whose sanity is uncertain or dubious are not rare in this tradition. Within this trope, we can find a more specific character whose sanity is called into question: the deranged narrator. The works that use these narrators are very likely to have a first-person narration, this is crucial as those kinds of narrations offer a window to the point of view of the deranged character, and of their derangement. In this line, the present work will examine the role of the uncanny, as an aesthetic resource, in the representation of the narrator's altered mind in Charlotte Perkins Gilman's "The Yellow Wall-paper" and Edgar Allan Poe's "The Fall of the House of Usher". In order to do this, it is important to differentiate between how the uncanny acts within the narrative, not only impacting the reader, but influencing directly on the character. This difference is made so that it is possible to identify the uncanny not only as a mere representation, but as an articulatory aesthetic element of the narration. Exploring this topic is relevant because it allows us to understand the way in which aesthetic devices, in this case, the uncanny, are used to both represent and to shape narrative tropes such as the deranged narrator.

In order to interpret both short stories and their relationship to the subject, the key terms need to be previously discussed. These are mental derangement, the haunted house and the uncanny. The main term developed in the analysis is the latter, whose meaning was originally defined by the German philosopher Friedrich von Schelling in his *Philosophie der Mythologie* published in 1835. In addition to being understood as a concept of aesthetics that produces a psychological experience, the uncanny (*das unheimliche*) was described by Schelling as “everything that ought to have remained secret and hidden but has come to light” (Freud 933).

However, the understanding of this concept is not limited to that. The complexity of the word *unheimlich*, which is uncanny in English, has been worthy of several studies and explorations that seek to understand the nature and meaning of the concept. One of the most relevant explorations is German psychiatrist Ernst Jentsch’s 1906 essay “On the Psychology of the Uncanny”, which addresses uncanniness from a psychological perspective. Jentsch, while useful as a foundation for later elaborations of uncanny, fails to represent or come close enough to the essence of what we understand today as something uncanny. By understanding the word *unheimlich* simply as the opposite of *heimlich*, the German psychiatrist defines the uncanny as a product of an intellectual uncertainty emerging from an old, known and familiar context, which assaults the intellectual certainty that ‘provides psychical shelter in the struggle for existence’ (Jentsch

15). This incomplete exploration by Jentsch was useful, however, to give Sigmund Freud the opportunity to expand the understanding of the uncanny in his essay “Das Unheimliche”. The definitions, the different edges and the impacts of the uncanny elaborated by Freud will be discussed and analyzed in detail through the first chapter of this dissertation, as his essay is the most relevant theoretical source for our understanding and application of the concept. Broadly speaking, according to our interpretation of Freud's essay, the uncanny will be understood as an aesthetic element of the narrative in both Charlotte Perkins Gilman's “The Yellow Wallpaper” and Edgar Allan Poe's “The Fall of the House of Usher”, which occurs through the return of either a primitive belief that had been overcome by us —or by “our primitive forefathers”— or of a repressed childhood complex (Freud 949 and 950).

There are many elements and themes that can be commonly found in the different literary works of Gothic fiction. Madness is undoubtedly a central theme of Gothic literature that, while certainly did not have its origin in the Gothic —there were already examples of madness in literature such as Don Quixote and Ophelia, for instance—, was present in the first Gothic novel, Horace Walpole's *The Castle of Otranto*, as well as in many other examples from the 18th, 19th or 20th century Gothic fiction. However, this concept needs to be expanded for the analysis of Gilman's “The Yellow Wallpaper” and Poe's “The Fall of the House of Usher” done in this dissertation, so we will refer to

derangement as a more general concept. This is because, while in both stories there are characters who portray madness, only in Gilman's story is this character the narrator. This dissertation, as mentioned, will focus on the narrators specifically. Therefore, Poe's tale would present a drawback, as the narrator does not succumb, at least not explicitly, to madness. However, the inconvenience would be solved by using the term derangement, as it is a state of mind that manifests a lack of control in behaviour or a strong difficulty in thinking clearly. This would not necessarily be linked to a specific mental illness or disorder, but rather a broader condition that is more representative of what Poe's narrator suffered and experienced. It also allows us to refer directly to madness in the "The Yellow Wallpaper", as madness could be considered a mental illness or a type of derangement. Furthermore, the narrators' deranged mind will be presented and analysed as a product of the uncanny.

The haunted house is an extension, or rather a possible feature, of the gothic mansion, which is a frequent and relevant element in gothic fiction as well. Evidence of the importance of the Gothic mansion in the literature of the aforementioned genre is its presence in both "The Yellow Wallpaper" and "The Fall of the House of Usher", whose plots and events arise primarily due to the arrival and stay in typical Gothic mansions. On the one hand, the mansion in Poe's story functions as a haunted house as a whole and is also explored and described to a great extent by the narrator. On the other hand, in

Gilman's story what suggests the haunted characteristic of the house is a single room. However, this does not exclude such a characteristic for the rest of the house. The story is merely set primarily in this room and not in the remaining areas of the mansion, so the room could be more of a representation of the haunted house. Thus, the Haunted Houses must be understood in relation to the concomitant evidence seeming to confirm the supernatural, but more importantly, as a manifestation of the uncanny that derives from the use of the expression '*unheimliche* house' in the German language as a replacement for 'haunted house' (Freud 945).

Although the uncanny, gothic mansions and madness are recurrent devices in gothic fiction and have been the subject of several investigations, even in relation to the short stories of Gilman and Poe, the connection between the three devices has not been sufficiently elaborated for the analysis of "The Yellow Wallpaper" and "The Fall of the House of Usher". Most authors have focused their attention on different types of manifestations or sources of uncanniness in the aforementioned stories. On the one hand, Poe's story has been mostly analysed in relation to the theme of the double as its main source of uncanniness for the reader. On the other hand, the presence of the uncanny in Gilman's story has mainly been linked to the wallpaper as its sole or most important manifestation. Moreover, some authors have investigated the presence of the haunted house and madness—little is said about derangement—in various works of gothic fiction,

including the stories discussed here. Few essays or articles, however, have been concerned with the connection and mutual impact of these two elements with the uncanny. Thus, the following dissertation proposes that in both Charlotte Perkins Gilman's "The Yellow Wall-Paper" and Edgar Allan Poe's "The Fall of the House of Usher", the mental derangement of the narrators is, on the one hand, represented by aesthetic elements of the uncanny and, on the other hand, produced by the uncanny as its main, fundamental source. Consequently, this analysis will aim to add a different, meaningful insight on the uncanny experience in literature and the connection that it has when shaping the character's development.

The following dissertation is divided into three chapters which will gradually explore the influence of the uncanny in the narrator's deranged mind. The first chapter is devoted to the definition and contextualization of the concept of the uncanny, mainly (but not entirely) based on Sigmund Freud's essay mentioned above. It also states its relation to the deranged mind and explains the aspects of the uncanny that are relevant to our analysis in the selected corpus. The next chapter will focus the analysis on "The Yellow Wallpaper", arguing that the madness of the narrator is due to an uncanny episode surrounded by infantilization, paternalism and patriarchy as components that enhance the uncanny event. Finally, the last chapter will examine the uncanny experience in "The Fall of the House of Usher", focusing on the haunted house phenomenon and different bonds that create this experience.

Chapter One: Understanding the Uncanny and its Impact on the Mind

Before exploring the presence and influence of the uncanny in both Charlotte Perkins Gilman's "The Yellow Wall-Paper" and Edgar Allan Poe's "The Fall of the House of Usher", the concept requires to be precisely defined. We must then establish the approaches with which we will discuss the uncanny. This will provide a closer understanding of the concept to analyze its presence and impact in the previously mentioned stories.

Defining the Concept of the Uncanny

In order to discuss the uncanny and to analyze it within literature, it is almost impossible not to refer to Sigmund Freud's essay of 1919, "Das Unheimliche". This exploration of the concept, which Nicholas Royle, in his book *The Uncanny*, describes as 'the most indispensable' text about the uncanny, describes the concept as a province in the field of aesthetics, even though Freud says that it has been "neglected in the specialist literature of aesthetics" (Royle 6; Freud 930). This neglect described by Freud finds its origin in the tendency of German critics of aesthetics to focus on what is beautiful, attractive and sublime, leaving aside, for example, that which is frightening.

Freud comments that the uncanny is precisely related to what is frightening, but he mentions the lack of clarity and studies concerning this concept. However, he then proposes a first definition, which would arise either from the word *unheimlich* —from its etymology and history in the German language and as the opposite of *heimlich*, which literally means homely in English (931)— or from reflecting upon some key experiences of uncanniness: “the uncanny is that class of the frightening which leads back to what is known of old and long familiar” (930). This meaning may result problematic, as it is unusual for the known and familiar to be regarded as frightening. According to Royle, who develops the concept from a Derridian —Jacques Derrida, who explored the uncanny in his book *The Specters of Marx*— rather than a Freudian point of view, “The uncanny ... is a peculiar commingling of the familiar and unfamiliar”, which “can take the form of something familiar unexpectedly arising in a strange and unfamiliar context, or of something strange and unfamiliar unexpectedly arising in a familiar context” (1). Despite the fact that we do not consider this second form that the uncanny “can take” to be correct, and nor is it mentioned by Freud, the peculiar mixture of the familiar and unfamiliar suggests the possibility that the uncanny is more than the opposite of homely.

This possibility becomes stronger when Freud highlights how “among its different shades of meaning the German word *heimlich* exhibits one which is identical with its opposite, *unheimlich*. What is *heimlich* thus comes to be *unheimlich*” (933). This

resemblance between “opposite” words arises from the dual signification of *heimlich* — being something known and familiar (I), but also concealed and kept from sight (II)—, which leads Freud to the definition of Shelling: “everything is *unheimlich* that ought to have remained secret and hidden but has come to light” (934). It still seems somewhat weird and ambiguous, perhaps, that a word and its opposite coincide in meaning, which is actually the linguistic phenomenon Freud starts from.

After assessing both the different instances and the most relevant representations or sources of the uncanny —of which we will focus, for the discussion of the short stories, on the infantile complexes being revived, the haunted houses, the doubles and the suggestion of supernatural primitive beliefs, such as animism and omnipotence of thought—, Freud states that, if one considers the existence of the frightening element as something repressed that is repeated and produces anxiety in these instances mentioned, the uncanny would be “nothing new or alien, but something which is familiar and old established in the mind and which has become alienated from it only through the process of repression” (944). This confirms that in the psychoanalytic understanding of the uncanny (*unheimliche*), it is an extension of its opposite (*heimliche*) and thus represents the return of what has been repressed, which specifically traces back to infantile sources. (Freud 940).

Although they manage to satisfy the interests regarding the uncanny from the psychoanalytic approach —experienced in real life—, these parameters do not manage to cover every possible instance of the uncanny (Freud 948). Some instances within fiction contradict or call into question the hypothesis of the return of the repressed in childhood as an absolute indicator of the uncanny, which, according to Freud, “suggests that we should differentiate between the uncanny that we actually experience and the uncanny that we merely picture or read about” (948). This suggested need to differentiate between what is experienced as uncanny in real life and what would be an encounter with the uncanny through fiction, which will be further developed in the next section, requires a broader definition for what we understand of the concept. Therefore, Freud states that “an uncanny experience occurs either when infantile complexes which have been repressed are once more revived by some impression, or when primitive beliefs which have been surmounted seem once more to be confirmed” (950). This definition presents the two fundamental sources of uncanny, both in relation to the return of something that was surmounted or repressed at some point in life or history.

Considering that the last definition will be the fundamental basis of our analysis for the stories we will be working with, it is pertinent to delve deeper into this definition and its relation to fiction. Why do we experience the uncanny differently in reality in comparison to what is exposed in fiction?

Literature and the Uncanny

When Freud talks about the uncanny in literature, as opposed to real life, he states that it “merits in truth a separate discussion” (950), as it has many more possibilities of expression in the manufactured worlds that writers create. However, the possibilities will vary depending on the source of the uncanny. In order to understand why this is, we have to consider that the two psychological sources of the uncanny that Freud proposes are, though in some cases difficult to set apart, fundamentally different. One possible instance of the uncanny, whose root may be repressed infantile complexes of some kind, can be very abundant in fiction, but extremely rare in real life; while another instance, rooted in a surmounted superstitious belief that comes back as a possible reality, would not arise an uncanny feeling, if the world in which this instance appear, is not close to that possible reality (950). These two situations leave us with the need to discuss the specificity of literature, and how the uncanny works within it.

Writers can create worlds, that is to say, they can choose every element that composes them, every action, every image. This creates an effect on the reader, which is worth taking into consideration when analyzing the uncanny: “But the story-teller has a peculiarly directive power over us; by means of the moods he can put us into, he is able to guide the current of our emotions, to dam it up in one direction and make it flow in another, and he often obtains a great variety of effects from the same material” (Freud 951). This capacity of the writer to direct the emotions of the reader is the most crucial element when talking

about the uncanny in literature. The effect caused by the uncanny is a desired effect that the writer seeks and purposely provokes. This is not to say that the writer knowingly looks for the uncanny, but that they look for a certain kind of feeling that this particular aesthetic arises. From here, we can understand that it is important to state the difference between the two kinds of uncanny, as they work differently within the literary world, and the literary world serves them in a different way.

The kind of uncanny that has its source on repressed infantile complexes, as we have seen, although very rare in real life, can arise much more abundantly in a fictional world. In the mental process through which this feeling arises, “what is involved is an actual repression of some content of thought and a return of this repressed content” (Freud 949). In this case there is not a relationship with the kind of world that is being represented, but with the repressed content that returns and which arises the uncanny feeling. The other type of uncanny, the one that has its root in surmounted primitive beliefs is profoundly related to the world that is being represented, as its effect is based on the occurrence of an event or the appearance of an object or an event that suggests that something surmounted as a belief, “something that we had hitherto regarded as imaginary” (946), is actually real. For this effect to happen, the represented world has to be very close to reality, what is important about this is that in literature, the author “can even increase his effect and multiply it far beyond what could happen in reality” (951). By doing so, and by having complete control over the narration, the author can play with the measure of the reality of

the world, giving way to one of the key uncanny effects that we will be analyzing: the inability to tell what is real from what is not.

The Mind and its Contact with the Uncanny

Bearing in mind the previous aspects, it is also relevant to pinpoint the connection between the uncanny as an aesthetic experience and the human mind. About this, Freud explains that an uncanny effect is often and easily produced when the distinction between imagination and reality is effaced, as when something that we have hitherto regarded as imaginary appears before us in reality. (946) Therefore, when facing an event that raises uncanny feelings, the uncertainty of the mind grows into a hazard and the tension between reality and imagination becomes the source of this uncanniness. Moreover, Nicholas Royle adds that these situations may be caused because of a flickering sense (but not conviction) of something supernatural (Royle 1), There is a lack of certainty inherent in the uncanny experience, which is the responsible of the deranged minds of the narrators that we are going to analyze; the fuzziness regarding what they know that could not be real but that nonetheless they are actually experiencing (such as a woman crawling out of a wallpaper or the doubles in the house of Usher for instance), cannot fit in their conception of reality, which therefore turns out to be a threat to their sanity and an uncanny event at the same time.

Mark Windsor, in his article “What is the Uncanny?” also stresses the relevance that the distinction between reality and imagination holds within an uncanny event. He explains that normally, when something happens in reality that contradicts what we believe, we simply revise that particular worldview (11). This self-revision is encouraged because of the ability of the uncanny to threaten the certainty that the mind holds regarding what is real and what is not, then being the source and at the same time the representation of the uncanny experience.

There are clearly other events which may cause the distortion of the mind through the uncanny, such as “the most remarkable coincidences of wish and fulfilment, the most mysterious repetition of similar experiences in a particular place or on a particular date, the most deceptive, sights and suspicious noises- none will disconcert or raise the kind of fear which can be described as a fear of something uncanny. The whole thing is purely an affair of 'reality-testing', a question of the material reality of the phenomena” (949). This means that, depending on the particular experience of each individual and the certainty that each one has regarding reality, the previous situations may or may not be considered uncanny (and therefore produce that kind of frightening). Moreover, the fear induced by these experiences may be a suggestion of a supernatural influence, but the uncertainty about the actual probability of it faced with the conviction of what is real provokes the uncanny sensation and triggers the distortion of the mind.

Chapter Two: Uncanny Encounters Leading to Madness in “The Yellow Wallpaper”

Despite the gradual shift towards increasing respect from male doctors towards their female patients over time, there has been a strong tendency for paternalistic attitudes towards the latter throughout history, who have been infantilised and deprived of autonomy (Hayes 26). According to Stephanie Craig, in “Ghosts of the Mind: The Supernatural and Madness in Victorian Gothic Literature”, Gilman wrote “The Yellow wallpaper” as “a protest of the popular rest cure that was often recommended for hysterical or depressed women in the nineteenth century” (36). Gilman’s innovative story exposes a marital relationship where the husband, John, is also a physician who is in charge of caring for his wife, the narrator. This relationship is not exempt from presenting—rather, it exhibits and dissects—the paternalistic role of the doctor towards the patient. In this chapter, we will argue that the dynamic in the relationship between husband and wife represents, in addition to an authoritarian and patriarchal hierarchy, an uncanny experience—both for the character and the reader—that occurs by reviving infantile complexes that were repressed in childhood, as discussed in the previous chapter (Freud 950). This complex is illustrated by the narrative of an adult woman being infantilized and deprived of autonomy by her paternalistic husband. By reviving an unresolved complex, the narrator progressively projects her madness onto her own perception of an uncanny wallpaper, which heightens her mental instability. Therefore, what we propose in this chapter is that the narrator's descent into madness is represented and stimulated by the uncanny nature of both her marital relationship and the wallpaper, which compose the

aesthetic element intended to produce a sense of uncanniness in the reader.

An Infantalized Woman in an Unhomely Home

In Gilman's "The Yellow wallpaper", all the events that emerge and unfold throughout the story are made possible by the arrival in a physical space, which the narrator refers to as a "colonial mansion, a hereditary estate" (179). There seems to be a reason for the arrival and subsequent stay in this place, though. Apparently, there is an intention of improving the narrator's mental condition, which her husband declares to be only "temporary nervous depression" (179). However, this intention entails the presence of an uncanny nature in the marital relationship between the narrator and John, driven by patriarchal authority.

The nature of this relationship starts to become evident during the confinement in this mansion and, more importantly, in the room used by the narrator. She, when describing her room, says: "It was nursery first and then playroom and gymnasium, I should judge; for the windows are barred for little children, and there are rings and things in the walls" (181). One thing that immediately strikes us in this description is the fact that the room was a nursery and then a playroom, which is reinforced by the element of the windows with bars for the children. This can produce the reader's first approximation of the uncanny feeling, as the narrator—an adult woman—is supposed to use this room that is

intended for “little children”, which introduces the possible role of the narrator in her marital relationship.

This role is later reinserted, and also reinforces the sense of uncanniness that this room produces, when the narrator mentions that her child is the one who would have been using the room if they (John and her) were not: “There’s one comfort, the baby is well and happy, and does not have to occupy this nursery with the horrid wallpaper. If we had not used it, that blessed child would have! What a fortunate escape! Why, I wouldn't have a child of mine, an impressionable little thing, live in such a room for worlds” (187). This passage represents an uncanny disposition on the basis of two main dimensions. On the one hand, there is the physical representation of a home—a room—that produces a rejection in the narrator that could be related to the etymological origin of uncanny (*unheimlich*) as an unhomey home —an unfamiliar, strange and unfriendly home, but also familiar and old-established in the mind (Freud 931 and 944)—, since she is also able to identify that it was a nursery and playroom before, due to the “ravages” the children had made (Gilman 184). On the other hand, the narrator is directly occupying the place that the child would supposedly use and, according to Carol Davison, the “immediate and most disturbing implication is that she is infantilized in this former nursery” (58). Being infantilised is a key factor in the narrator’s reliving of the childhood complex, which will be discussed in detail later. However, Gilman’s heroine is not being infantilized simply because she uses this room, but because she has been forced to do so.

The narrator is unable to leave this home because her husband, John, prevents her from doing so in his role as a physician. Carol Quarini comments that Gilman “hauntingly depicts domesticity as claustrophobic and a threat to sanity” in this short story (5). Rather than improving the narrator’s condition, the discomfort and fear towards the confined space in which she is placed —by John’s orders— potentially threatens her sanity. Davison also comments on how the authority of this paternalistic husband produces in the narrator “the fear of losing autonomy and identity is represented quite specifically as a lack of voice and, therefore, authority over the self” (56). Although all we hear is the narrator’s voice, there is a representation of the patriarchal character that governs this marital relationship that, at the same time, demonstrates the uncanny nature of portraying the unresolved complex in an adult woman, as she married a husband who plays the paternal role and positions her as an infant who has no influential voice, identity, autonomy or authority over herself. This links back to Hendrika C. Freud comments on the Electra complex —in homology to the basis established by Freud with the Oedipus complex—, where she states that a woman seeks to have a husband successor to one of her parents when she suffers from an unresolved Electra complex (133). Gilman’s narrator constantly depicts this unresolved complex throughout the story by being infantilized and placing her husband in a paternal role.

As well as being represented by her seclusion in the gothic mansion, a sense of uncanniness is potentially being produced in the mind of the narrator—as well as in that of the reader, who has direct access to this aesthetic element through the narrative's focus on the character who suffers it—by John's verbal treatment towards his wife: “What is it, little girl?” he said. “Don't go walking about like that, you'll get cold.” [...] “Bless her little heart!” said he with a big hug, “she shall be as sick as she pleases! But now let's improve the shining hours by going to sleep, and talk about it in the morning!” (188). The use of diminutives such as “little girl” and “little heart”, in addition to the minimisation of the narrator's health condition, end up confirming and eliminating any possible doubts about her infantilization by John. According to Davison, who reviews the interplay between gender and genre in Gilman's *Female Gothic*, “John's consistent patronizing and insistence on her progress despite her protests further establishes the sense of hierarchy in their relationship as does his habit of addressing her with such diminutives” (58). This hierarchy is embodied by two dominant roles: that of the husband in the marriage and that of the patient's doctor. Through both roles, the narrator is infantilized and diminished, which allows the reader not only to have access to the narrator's experience, as has been previously discussed, but also to empathise with her situation.

For the narrator, the complex is fully revived after she attempts to reply to John's mockery of her condition. Having received “such a stern, reproachful look” (Gilman 188) and a speech that re-validates his hierarchical position as a physician, the narrator writes:

“So of course I said no more on that score, and we went to sleep before long. He thought I was asleep first, but I wasn’t, and lay there for hours trying to decide whether that front pattern and the back pattern really did move together or separately” (188). The silence she is forced to keep is representative of an infant being punished by her parents, but also an example of a hierarchical relationship between a married couple. Barbara Suess, in her article “The Writing’s on the Wall: Symbolic Orders in ‘The Yellow Wallpaper’”, comments on how her “Lacanian reading of the story represents patriarchy, or specifically the arrogant abuse of patriarchal authority, as the primary source of the protagonist’s ultimately complete inability to separate fantasy from reality” (81). This view of Gilman’s story can be supported by the effect achieved by John’s abuse of patriarchal authority: the narrator not only remains silent like a punished child, but also lays awake—unbeknownst to her husband, like a rebellious child— watching for hours the patterns on the wallpaper and the movements that only she can perceive in them, thus creating an imaginary world for herself.

The Uncanny Wallpaper: Madness Driven by Patriarchy

Understanding the way in which the uncanny operates in “The Yellow wallpaper”’s representation of its narrator’s descent into madness is impossible if we do not consider the connection between what is seen in the wallpaper and what is lived by the narrator. The wallpaper’s uncanny images have not only a very strong relationship with the

narrator's seclusion, but they constantly point to the underlying but ubiquitous patriarchal violence of her situation. The connection between patriarchy and the wallpaper constitutes the narrator's slow but steady descent into madness.

The first glimpse we have of the underlying patterns of patriarchal violence connecting the narrator's seclusion with the wallpaper is given subtly within the first few pages of the story: "At first he meant to repaper the room, but afterwards he said that ... nothing was worse for a nervous patient than to give way to such fancies" (182). The power difference at work in this very short passage is telling: the decision of what happens with the wallpaper is, John's. With an attitude that will be recurrent throughout the story, John doesn't listen to his wife, and decides to keep the wallpaper. Thus, the story establishes a relationship between his authority and the wallpaper.

Uncanniness comes into play regarding the wallpaper from the very beginning. In the first description of the wallpaper that the narrator gives, she says that its color is "repellant, almost revolting" (181), this is the reason why she wanted to get rid of it in the first place. As we get more information about it, the wallpaper gets more and more unnerving. At one point, the narrator says that the wallpaper looks at her as if it knew the effect it had on her, and describes it as having broken necks and bulbous eyes (183). This

characterisation progresses in the story until it begins to show its two most strange and unnatural features: its movement, and the woman-like shape behind its pattern (187). All of these features amount to a general depiction of the wallpaper as a supernatural object exerting some kind of evil influence. The uncanny effect is given from the narrator's point of view. We are reading her diary, which means that everything that we know about the world of the story is through her perspective. Uncanniness appears in the suggested otherworldliness of the wallpaper, which contrasts with the narrator's, though terrible in its own merits, perfectly plausible situation. As we have seen, one of the possible sources of the uncanny is the apparent confirmation of surmounted primitive beliefs (Freud 950). The possibility of the wallpaper being an evil influence framed within an otherwise realistic world surely fits this characterisation. Now we have two elements to take into account: John's will to keep the wallpaper, and the wallpaper's uncanny nature. We will see that this relationship only deepens as the story progresses.

Madness, in terms of Lacanian psychoanalysis, is called psychosis, and it refers to the inability of an individual to fuse their discreet perceptions into a unified identity, a process through which normally she would enter the patriarchal Symbolic Order (Suess 83). In this sense, Barbara Suess sees the narrator as a Lacanian psychotic, an individual who as a result of her newborn, has been thrown into the "Symbolic Order that paternity represents" (85), and has failed to enter in it, as she has also failed to understand it. Suess'

interpretation puts postpartum depression at the center of the narrator's psychotic state, while our take on the story understands infantilization and forced seclusion as the sources of it, since maternity seems to be more of a spark than the main cause behind her state. Nevertheless, The Lacanian conception of madness enables us to relate psychosis with the inability to both understand the Order of patriarchal domination, and, most importantly, to create a sense of self within it.

The sense of self is particularly important when trying to understand the uncanny images in the wallpaper. At some point, the description of the wallpaper ends up with two main elements, the "outside pattern" (187), and the figure of the woman who shakes it. These two elements alone, although disturbing, cannot be considered uncanny in the absence of context. The narrator, obsessed with the figure, tries to liberate her from the pattern and, towards the end, the text changes, and the perspective shifts: "there are so many of those creeping women, and they creep so fast. I wonder if they all come out of that wallpaper as I did? ... I suppose I shall have to get back behind that pattern when it comes night" (195). It is evident that the narrator has become or, at least, believes she is the woman behind the pattern. Freud talks specifically about the double when naming uncanny objects: "it is marked by the fact that the subject identifies himself with someone else, so that he is in doubt as to which his self is, or substitutes the extraneous self for his own. In other words, there is a doubling, dividing and interchanging of the self" (940). It is particularly relevant that Freud talks about the "doubling, dividing, and interchanging

of the self”, as these terms relate directly with the Lacanian psychotic whose identity cannot be unified within the symbolic Order of patriarchal domination. Hence, we can say that the source of these two phenomenons are the same: self-fragmentation. This is why the double’s presence becomes more tangible to the narrator as the story progresses, the process of fragmentation ends with the total loss of the unity, the incapability to differentiate the double, the fragmentation, from the self.

We can see how, in the story, patriarchal violence is articulated and represented through the uncanny. At first with John and the narrator’s relationship marked by an uncanny dynamic of infantilizing patriarchal domination, and eventually through the wallpaper, whose uncanny supernatural features offer a door to the split identity and fragmented mind of the oppressed narrator. In this way, the maddening feature of patriarchal violence is articulated by an uncanny process set off by the narrator’s forced confinement caused by her infantilizing marital relationship.

Chapter Three: Uncanny Superstitions that Threaten Sanity in “The Fall of the House of Usher”

According to Joseph C. Schöp, “The Fall of the House of Usher” is one of “Poe’s most uncanny pieces because it raises questions whose answers to the very end remain ambiguous and only provoke new questions” (51). For Schöp, these questions arise from the uncanny figure of the double, which haunts the tale and the house from the beginning and, in doing so, threaten the narrator’s sanity (52). Critics who have focused their analysis on the uncanny have predominantly addressed the figure of the double. In this chapter, however, we propose that the narrator’s sanity is threatened by the tension between the natural and the supernatural, making the narrator struggle with superstitious beliefs. This tension, unlike the marital relationship of “The Yellow Wall-paper”, does not predominantly arise from infantile complexes, but responds to the other feature of Freud’s basic notion of the uncanny: “when primitive beliefs which have been surmounted seem once more to be confirmed” (950). These primitive beliefs appear to the narrator as the suggestion of the supernatural pervading the Ushers, the house and, most importantly, the relationship between them. In this sense, uncanniness is used to represent the narrator’s derangement caused by the seemingly supernatural quality of the house and the family.

Unfamiliar Familiarity in a Haunted House

In his essay devoted to the uncanny, Freud discusses the etymology of the word uncanny from its German root *unheimlich* (unhomely) as a counterpart of *heimlich*

(homely), stating that, as mentioned in the first chapter, the frightening uncanny relies in the recognition of what is precisely known and long familiar (930). This is exactly what the narrator from “The Fall of the House of Usher” by Edgar Allan Poe experiences the first time he enters the Usher mansion:

While the objects around me—while the carvings of the ceilings, the sombre tapestries of the walls, the ebon blackness of the floors, and the phantasmagoric armorial trophies which rattled as I strode, were but matters to which, or to such as which, I had been accustomed from my infancy—while I hesitated not to acknowledge how familiar was all this—I still wondered to find how unfamiliar were the fancies which ordinary images were stirring up (119).

As being the same distinction that Freud uses to explain the uncanny, the feeling of “unfamiliarity” that the supposedly familiar objects within the mansion cause in the narrator fit perfectly into this contrast. Moreover, it is worth stressing that the sense of uncanniness of these objects is accompanied by a close description of each one with adjectives not usually associated with a homelike place but commonly related to haunted places. They are described with characteristics that evoke threatening, lugubrious and mysterious sensations in the mansion. Nonetheless, the narrator does identify these items as familiar and known to him from his infancy memories when he spent time in the building, being then the point of uncertainty concerning the origin of his own emotions which turns out to be what really causes the uncanny sensation in him. The uneasiness regarding not knowing why he feels that way when returning to the house of Usher is what he cannot identify, and it is in this uncertainty when the feeling of the uncanny is produced:

I looked upon the scene before me —upon the mere house, and the simple landscape features of the domain— upon the bleak walls—upon the vacant eye-like windows— upon a few rank sedges—and upon a few white trunks of decayed trees— . . . There was an iciness, a sinking, a sickening of the heart . . . What was it—I paused to think—what was it that so unnerved me in the contemplation of the House of Usher? (115-16).

Looking at the exterior of the mansion and the environment surrounding it, the narrator is able to recognize that something, not detectable yet, is disturbing him about the place, and we are tempted to think that it is because of the unknown that was previously known in the contemplation of the house in which he had spent time in his childhood the one that induced this unnervedness, the sickening of his heart. Furthermore, the description of the observation of the place may also suggest the possible presence of supernatural elements through the animistic component of the uncanny discussed by Freud, such as the eye-like windows, or the graveyard-like atmosphere surrounding the mansion: the perception of the iciness, decayed trees and bleak walls contribute to the creation of a dark aura around the building. Therefore, the uncanny feeling of the narrator comes out not only from the unfamiliarity of something that had formerly been familiar to the narrator, but from the ambiguity regarding reality and the potential presence of supernatural elements attached to the house of Usher.

About this, Mark Windsor, points out “the uncanny as a kind of object-directed anxiety” (5), referring to it as an internal emotional response towards specific objects that

may convey the essence of the uncanny as a frightening experience. Therefore, this may be explicative of the uneasiness of the narrator in contemplating the mansion, being this the uncanny object, which causes his anxiety plus the uncertainty of not knowing exactly why the house evokes this feeling on him. However, the author also states that not every feeling of anxiety has its source on the uncanny (7). Thus, the aesthetic uncanny is created with a mixture of ambiguous sensations of the narrator while reflecting on the mansion itself:

I have said that the sole effect of my somewhat childish (look) experiment—that of looking down within the tarn—had been to deepen the first singular impression. There can be no doubt that the consciousness of the rapid increase of my superstition—for why should I not so term it?—served mainly to accelerate the increase itself (117-18).

Here, it can be seen that the narrator starts to relapse into the superstition of a belief that had previously been surmounted. The possible presence of supernatural elements, such as a different, more phantasmagoric reflection of the house in the tarn, knowing that that image should not be possible in the reality but which nonetheless he actually sees, are the representation of one element of the uncanny regarding a primal belief that has been supposedly left behind but come out because, as explained by Windsor, “they create the dubious appearance of the supernatural in the context of one’s experience of reality” (9).

Uncanny Bonds and the Impact on Sanity

Even considering the great importance of the house alone as an uncanny, physical space, Poe's story also presents a strong suggestion of a supernatural bond between the house and its inhabitants as a latent element that, throughout the development of the plot, has repercussions on the narrator's beliefs. This relationship between the house and the Usher family is discussed by the narrator after commenting on the nature of the family's lineage:

The stem of the Usher race ... had put forth, at no period, any enduring branch ... the entire family lay in the direct line of descent, and had always, with very trifling and very temporary variation, so lain ... it was this deficiency, perhaps, of collateral issue, and the consequent undeviating transmission, from sire to son, of the patrimony with the name, which had, at length, so identified the two as to merge the original title of the estate in the quaint and equivocal appellation of the "House of Usher"—an appellation which seemed to include, in the minds of the peasantry who used it, both the family and the family mansion (117).

Just as Gilman uses the woman behind the wallpaper, Poe here includes the theme of the "double" by using the repetition "through several consecutive generations", which produces a "doubling, dividing and interchanging of the self" (Freud 940). The Usher family's strange and absolutely uncanny line of descent is the reason for this shared identity between the house and its inhabitants. Additionally, and regarding the quaint and equivocal appellation of the "House of Usher", Marita Nadal comments that the description provided by the narrator is determined not only by the inclusion of the family

and the house in this appellation used by the peasants, but “especially because it conveys the metaphor of the “architectural” psyche that Freud mentions at the beginning of ‘The Uncanny’ (cf. the progression from *unheimlich* —unhomely— to uncanny, and to haunted)” (186). This interpretation of metaphorical value that Nadal provides of the adjectives used by the narrator —quaint and equivocal— presents, at the culmination of the progression that she mentions from Freud’s essay, the appearance of the term haunted, which suggests the presence of the supernatural. However, Nadal pays little attention to the bond between the Usher family and the family mansion.

The connection arises again when the narrator draws conclusions about Roderick Usher’s condition after their reunion and first conversation. What the narrator describes as “certain superstitious impressions in regard to the dwelling which he tenanted” (122), proposes the idea that the house exerted “an influence which some peculiarities in the mere form and substance of his family mansion had, by dint of long sufferance... obtained over (Roderick’s) spirit” (122), which suggests that the family mansion presents a dominion over Usher, perhaps of a supernatural character.

As readers, we can only wait for confirmation or denial of this uncanny nature that links a physical space like Usher’s house with the human beings who have lived in it. The

expectation is heightened by the suggestions arising from Roderick's reaction to the verses of "The Haunted Palace" and to the extension of the ballad's idea about the sentience of vegetables:

In his disordered fancy, the idea had assumed a more daring character, and trespassed, under certain conditions, upon the kingdom of inorganization ... The belief, however, was connected ... with the gray stones of the home of his forefathers ... —above all, in the long undisturbed endurance of this arrangement (of the house), and in its reduplication in the still waters of the tarn. Its evidence—the evidence of the sentience—was to be seen... in the gradual yet certain condensation of an atmosphere of their own about the waters and the walls. The result was discoverable, he added, in that silent yet importunate and terrible influence which for centuries had moulded the destinies of his family, and which made him what I now saw him—what he was (127).

This sentience, which Usher attributes to the house, once again incorporates the possibility of perceiving the house as a supernatural object, capable of sense. E. Arthur Robinson comments on how, according to Roderick's belief, "the Ushers have become a portion of the organization of their 'house', in all the senses of that term. The issue is that of order, and any malfunctioning of the whole will affect each part, including Roderick himself" (71). What emerges in this view, supported by Roderick Usher's reflection, is the possibility, not only are the family and the house connected, but that their destinies are related in an unnatural and mysterious way.

Certainly, the mansion's influence on Usher has affected his mental and "spiritual" condition, as he commented to his friend. However, the narrator's mind also begins to be threatened by the superstitions that were troubling his friend: "It was no wonder that his condition terrified—that it infected me. I felt creeping upon me, by slow yet certain degrees, the wild influences of his own fantastic yet impressive superstitions" (130). This depicts a further connection between the two parts; just as the house had repercussions on the narrator's mind as he contemplated it and felt its atmosphere, so does Roderick Usher's condition, infecting the narrator's mind with the superstitious possibilities.

Windsor states that the uncanny is "an anxious uncertainty about what is real caused by an apparent impossibility" (10). According to Freud, anxiety only refers to the uncanny when it relates either to that class of frightening arising from an affect that had been repressed and recurs or "to the anxiety belonging to the castration complex of childhood" (939 and 944). The narrator's uncertainty about the nature of the house, and its apparent impossibility of a connection to the family, do seem to be a concern and, perhaps, a discomfort to the narrator, though. This is strengthened and shaped by the denouement of the story. Faced with a possible confirmation of the primitive belief that should have been surmounted —of the house supposedly sharing both a supernatural bond with its inhabitants and the fate of these last descendants—, the sense of uncanniness increases and directly impacts on the narrator's mind:

While I gazed, this fissure rapidly widened—there came a fierce breath of the whirlwind—the entire orb of the satellite burst at once upon my sight—my brain reeled as I saw the mighty walls rushing asunder—there was a long tumultuous shouting sound like the voice of a thousand waters—and the deep and dank tarn at my feet closed sullenly and silently over the fragments of the “House of Usher.” (137)

Dennis R. Perry and Carl H. Sederholm state that “the key moment for the narrator outside of the House of Usher is his uncanny reaction to the distorted image of the house in the tarn, a feeling that heightens his already strong feeling of horror” (Perry and Sederholm 74). This vision refers to both the increase of the superstition felt by the narrator when he saw, at the beginning of the story, the house reflected through the tarn and the oppression caused “by a thousand conflicting sensations, in which wonder and extreme terror were predominant”, which arose out of the extraordinary coincidences — by hearing sounds exactly as those described by Sir Launcelot Canning’s tale, which already represented an uncanny feeling that arises from the omnipotence of thought through coincidences of wish and fulfillment— prior to the collapse of the House of Usher (Poe 132-36; Freud 943 and 949). Upon encountering the image of the pond closing over the fragments of the house, which represents the final uncanny coincidence of being shattered into fragments at the exact moment of the death of the last descendants of the Usher family, the aforementioned feelings in the narrator's mind should, by logic, have increased. However, while Poe's story may leave us —readers— with an uncanny feeling for the use of these aesthetic elements, it does not make explicit the final repercussions suffered by the narrator's mind, which differs from “The Yellow Wallpaper” and the

evident mental breakdown of its narrator. In fact, Poe's "The Fall of the House of Usher" gives the reader the chance to interpret whether what happened was really a product of the supernatural, of coincidence or of the narrator's possible derangement.

As we have seen, the possibility of the supernatural articulates, both through the mysterious connection between the family history and the house, and through its physical space, an uncanny atmosphere to which both the narrator and the reader are exposed. This uncanniness offers a window to the narrator's mind, as it is constantly inducing superstitious beliefs which threaten his sanity by creating an uncertainty on what is real and what is not.

Conclusion

The uncanny, defined as that which was hidden but has come to light, is dissected by Freud and divided into two main possible sources: infantile complexes and the suggested confirmation of primitive beliefs. This psychological phenomenon becomes an aesthetic device when appearing in fiction, where the possibilities of its materialisation are much higher in general. The way in which the uncanny works within fiction and reality is very different as, within literature, the effectiveness of the uncanny is subjected to certain conditions of the literary world. If its source is the confirmation of primitive beliefs, the literary world in which it appears has to be close to the real world, as this kind of uncanny relies on the tension between the natural and the supernatural. This condition is crucial for Poe and Gilman's stories because both works function within a literary world that is close to reality. Furthermore, both stories also share their focus, with a first person narrator whose sanity progressively decays. The uncanny plays a part in both narratives representing and causing something similar (mental derangement), but in different ways. This difference is rooted in the source of the narrator's derangement that each story exhibits.

On the one hand, in "The Yellow Wall-paper" the narrator's conformity and passiveness regarding her imprisonment and her husband's condescending, father-like treatment towards her, configures an uncanny infantilising relationship inside a patriarchal system of domination, which we identify as an unresolved Electra complex. This uncanny

relationship that sets off the story, is what articulates the rest of it and produces the narrator's descent into madness. On the other hand, Poe's "The Fall of the House of Usher" presents a narrator whose derangement is caused by the constant suggestion of the supernatural as a result of his involvement with the Ushers. Throughout the story, the narrator is permanently struggling with his primitive, surmounted beliefs, that are continuously being seemingly confirmed.

Apart from being, within the narrative, the cause of the narrator's derangement, the uncanny serves as a representation of the narrator's sanity being steadily challenged. In this respect, the figure of the house becomes important. In "The Yellow Wall-paper", the narrator is confined inside house, in a room that used to be a nursery, it is within this space that her derangement is expressed through the supernatural features of the wallpaper, which implies not only an animated wallpaper, but the figure of a woman behind its pattern. The mind of the narrator, fragmented by the violence of patriarchal dominance, keeps drifting towards madness until her unified self breaks completely and she becomes another subjectivity, that of the woman behind the wallpaper, her double. In Poe's story, the narrator is inside a once familiar house, whose nature seems to gradually become stranger, more deeply, mysteriously, unnaturally connected to the family who inhabits it. Even though in Poe's story the uncanny source is deeply connected to the house as a physical space, and in Gilman's story the source is clearly separated from the uncanny wallpaper, we can see how both houses imply a seemingly supernatural element. Both

houses are, at least on the surface, haunted houses. Here is where the narrator comes into play again: the first-person narrator gives us as readers, the possibility to enter these haunted houses through the point of view of the character, allowing us to access their distorted minds through the uncanny elements that materialise inside of them.

Broadly speaking, the first chapter provides a solid theoretical foundation for us to explore the uncanny in the dissertation, which provides a clear identification and revision of this concept within the two stories analysed. Additionally, the arguments discussed in the second and third chapters have succeeded in addressing and underpinning the main thesis. These arguments are relevant both for the development of our topic and for a general understanding of Gilman's and Poe's stories, as they present and dissect one of the main sources of their frightening features from an innovative approach. The comparative character between “The Yellow Wallpaper” and “The Fall of the House of Usher”, however, is not fully explicit in the presentation of the chapters, even though a connection between the three chapters was established clearly. This is mainly because the stories were discussed in a separate chapter each and, while there are mentions of Poe's story in Gilman's analysis and vice versa, there were not enough general comparisons explicitly elaborated in these chapters. Moreover, the extension of this dissertation inevitably prevented us from incorporating all the manifestations and elements of the uncanny that we had found, which was especially the case of “The Fall of the House of Usher”. Poe's short story, compared to Gilman's, presents a greater number of instances where this

aesthetic concept can be experienced, so the absence of these instances made the analysis less exhaustive than that of “The Yellow Wallpaper”. Similarly, time constraints and extension did not allow us to explore in depth other theories of the uncanny. Although there are authors that were mentioned and discussed in certain passages of our dissertation, a deeper integration of theories such as Lacan’s could, perhaps, have created an even more interesting dialogue.

As a final comment, it is worth noting the relevance of the haunted house phenomenon as an enhancer of the uncanny experience and the meaningful influence that it has in the deranged mind of both short stories. Our analysis allowed us to verify that, besides being the physical space in which the events occur, the haunted houses are a significant uncanny resource that represents and reinforces the derangement of the mind. Moreover, even though we used similar aspects of the uncanny to analyze Gilman’s and Poe’s short stories, we also noticed the differences regarding the background of each one. That is, both narratives could be examined under the same scope, but the motive of each were substantially different: “The Yellow Wall-Paper” used the uncanny to represent a patriarchal relationship as a frightening source, whereas in “The Fall of the House of Usher”, the fear is induced through the uncanny realm of the reality-testing and the (un)certainty of one’s own primal beliefs.

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