



The Trope of House: A Study of Freudian Uncanny in Guy de Maupassant's "The Horla"

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Abstract

In literature and cultural studies, the idea of the home as a location for the uncanny has frequently appeared. The home as a familiar space can be interpreted as strangely familiar with uncanny manifestation. Familiar rooms suddenly feel foreign, and the line between the inside and outside could become hazy. Home in Guy de Maupassant's "The Horla", acts as an active entity to create horror— initially a space of comfort. Also, the house serves as a symbol of the character's psychological state, and the uncanny elements within the house reflect anxieties. While the Horla (or the out there) is invariably read by scholars as the double, the projection in "The Horla" emphasizes the idea that the home can be both reassuring and unsettling, familiar yet strange. The present paper examines how the house creates the trope of horror, which leads to the narrator's burning down the house and also committing suicide.

Keywords: double in psychoanalysis; trope of house in gothic fiction; Freud's uncanny

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Introduction:

The story of “The Horla” by Guy de Maupassant examines the hazy boundaries between truth and perception in a terrifying story of infatuation and madness. The story's creepiness is immediately apparent when it is discovered that the narrator lives alone in a big mansion located in a desolate location. The feeling of something evil comes from the mansion where the narrator stays, which has Romanesque-inspired architecture, which adds to the phantasmagoria in the scene. In “The Horla”, Guy de Maupassant, to create a gothic feeling, starts the story with one of the commonest literary tropes— a house. It is immediately evident that the author attempts to evoke a gothic feeling in the reader's mind, following literary convention. Many authors have explored the space of a house as a strange space in literature. From Horace Walpole's *The Castle of Otranto* (1764) to the Hollywood horror film, *The Conjuring: The Devil Made Me Do It* (2021), the Gothic has always shown the house as a place where the unspeakable happens, as well as a place that makes it happen— having an agency. Hence, disjointed from the tradition of an eerie experience- essentially felt by a female protagonist, Maupassant gets on creating a male experience within the vast emptiness of the mansion in “The Horla”. The vast space of the mansion feels isolating to the anonymous narrator, who is alone in the company of his thoughts. His thoughts, all through the story, create the universe of his fantasy in the textual space¹ which he jots down in a diary. Apart from the creation of horror realized through the physical space of the mansion, the psychological space of the narrator is also problematic. Conventionally, if a gothic story is one in which the house is strange or unusual in itself, and whoever lives there is drawn into its power and becomes a part of its mysterious history instead of being cursed or possessed by an invisible, extraterrestrial presence, in “The Horla” Maupassant defies the norms by projecting an alien self of the narrator which creates the gothic experience. Rather than depicting an external entity that elicits a creepy atmosphere, the house itself actively contributes to the production of the alien self and generates horror. The vast, empty space— devoid of anyone's presence, insinuates through its captivating emptiness.



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The story of “The Horla” begins with the narrator’s accounts of his day-to-day otherworldly events in an epistolary format. The story commences on March 8, with diary entries from the narrator describing the gorgeous splendour of the surroundings. However, things swiftly turn sour. Both the narrator and the readers experience a sharp contrast as a result of the change in the atmosphere in the room of the narrator. Four days later, on May 12, the narrator feels the start of an unknown illness. He associates this enigmatic disease with a “force” he perceives in his house and is astounded by the scope of the universe’s unexplored potential. Since the readers must rely on the narrator’s version of the story, this becomes challenging for the readers to determine the truth, as the narrator can also be unreliable. The narrator’s perspective cannot be taken for granted by the readers as the “perception and interpretation of what he or she narrates do not correspond or coincide with the perceptions, interpretations, and opinions of the author who is or purports to be the controlling force in the narration” (Cuddon et Habib 460). Here, the narrator himself seems to be abandoned in a dilemma to determine the reality of what he feels, therefore, the narrator’s account cannot be trusted though the authorial intervention is not present. Therefore, many interpretations are possible in Maupassant’s story.

The house becomes a jigsaw puzzle for the narrator, from where the escape appears to be impossible. The escape is quintessential for the narrator to get rid of Horla, as the space of the house is problematic and therefore, we can find the urge to escape:

I managed to escape to-day for two hours, like a prisoner who finds the door of his dungeon accidentally open. I suddenly felt that I was free and that he was far away, and so I gave orders to put the horses in as quickly as possible, and I drove to Rouen. Oh! How delightful to be able to say to a man who obeyed you: “Go to Rouen!” (Maupassant “The Horla,” Par. August 16).

In this passage, it becomes clear to the readers that he is trying to find an escape to get out of the house, and thus, he is expressing his jubilation and sense of emancipation by taking a pause from the customary routine in the house. By utilizing the analogy of a prisoner who has discovered the door of their dungeon ajar, he is unambiguously conveying his yearning and desire for liberty.



The elation and thrill of being able to issue commands and do something impromptu is an indication of how fervently he feels even about a temporary liberation. Then, gradually, he begins to have terrifying sensations at night and exhibits signs of what may be sleep paralysis. He feels that someone is trying to take his life by pounding on his chest, which is another indication of a reaction to intense anxiety. When he leaves the house, he starts to have the feeling that someone is following him, even though he doesn't see anyone. Finally, he decides to take a trip to Saint Michel. But the speech of Saint Michel causes further deterioration in the situation, as the indirect communication² renders a profound effect on the mind. He talks about the power of the unseen:

Can we see the hundred-thousandth part of what exists? Look here; there is the wind which is the strongest force in nature, which knocks men, and blows down buildings, uproots trees, raises the sea into mountains of water, destroys cliffs and casts great ships onto the breakers; the wind which kills, which whistles, which sighs, which roars—have you ever seen it, and can you see it? It exists for all that, however! (Maupassant “The Horla,” August 19).

However, the presence of any mysterious creature does not happen in the story, yet the narrator feels like it when he lives in the house, especially at night. As days advance, the situation deteriorates significantly and becomes unmanageable for the narrator. He becomes increasingly paranoid, ultimately culminating in the destruction of their home through arson, ultimately killing himself by committing suicide to get rid of Horla. It's fascinating that the home was destroyed in order to get rid of Horla; perhaps this will help to solve the mystery of the major theme of horror that has been crafted.

House as a Space of Entrapment and Uncanny:

The literary trope of the home or mansion has been extensively employed to generate an atmosphere of uncanniness, in contrast, the Gothic narratives often feature an inherently ominous space, rather than being accursed or inhabited by an imperceptible being. The peculiarity or anomaly of the house emanates from within, and anyone who resides there becomes part of its



arcane potency. The theme of the gothic house has a captivating effect. The home where one resides takes the shape of a maze, which the narrator has to escape, to regain his sanity. The maze poses challenges to the narrator and gives the driving force to the plot. It is similar to what can be observed in Edgar Allan Poe's "The Black Cat" (1843), where the dead wife and the strange cat are found to have been squelched into the house's wall by the narrator, making the structure appear ostensibly organic³ and seamless. This is like planting seeds within soil:

Having procured mortar, sand, and hair, with every possible precaution, I prepared a plaster which could not be distinguished from the old, and with this I very carefully went over the new brickwork. When I had finished, I felt satisfied that all was right. The wall did not present the slightest appearance of having been disturbed (Poe "The Black Cat").

This seemingly organic implantation makes the wife's agony create a resonance within the perimeter of the house which echoes the crime committed by the narrator, submerged with the anguished cry of the diseased. This echoing despair can be heard within the house, which ultimately leads to the tragedy of the narrator. In "The Fall of the House of Usher," Madeline is briefly entombed under the mansion, since "The disease of the lady Madeline had long baffled the skill of her physicians." that would prompt the physicians to do an autopsy on the dead corpse (Poe "The Fall of the House of Usher"). This burial results in a sinister atmosphere throughout the story as the house becomes one with the dead. Another one of the most popular short fiction of Charlotte Perkins Gilman's "The Yellow Wallpaper" narrates the story in an epistolary format and keeps a log of her progressive madness. From the very beginning of the story, the anonymous narrator "proudly" declares "that there is something queer about" the mansion where she is going to stay with her husband and the maidservant for her "cure" prescribed by her husband, who is a "physician" (Gilman "The Yellow Wallpaper"). In this context, the room serves as a space of detention for the anonymous woman⁴, hindering her ability to think freely. This intellectual castration instils anxiety within her initially. Desperate to break free from the concrete barriers that enclose her, she exerts great effort to persuade her husband to release her. After failing in her attempt to get rid of the home where she has to



survive alone staying away from any kind of intellectual activities, the narrator's attention is drawn to the fading, peeling wallpaper of a sickening yellow tone, which, while restricted to the room, becomes more fascinated with the wallpaper's observed movements and transformations across the wall. The dilapidated state of the room, as well as the narrator's concentration on the wallpaper, contribute to the story's eerie and cryptic aspect. In this particular case also, the narrator does not see any alien creature depicted by the author. Still, she feels a creepy sensation within that particular space which drives her crazy in the end. The pattern of the wallpapers creates a kind of psychedelic effect upon the mind of the narrator; she starts feeling an association with the woman painted on the wall: "The faint figure behind seemed to shake the pattern, just as if she wanted to get out" (Gilman "The Yellow Wallpaper"). If in the case of Poe's short stories, where the implantation of the body of the diseased causes the house to be a haunted one, here in the case of Gilman, the suffering of the woman painted in the wallpaper transferred within the psyche of the narrator which leads to recognizing her own self in captivity in the hands of patriarchy. Ultimately, this drives her frenzied in the end, and she "kept on creeping" over the fainted body of her husband. Eventually, she gets rid of the house which seems to be the motif of this story as the house serves as an apparatus of the patriarchal social structure causing suppression of women. And she utters in complete madness "I've got out at last," (Gilman "The Yellow Wallpaper"). The freedom obtained by the narrator is quite identical to the narrator of Maupassant; if in the case of 'The Horla', the narrator has to burn down the house and commits suicide, in the end, to get rid of Horla, in the case of Gilman's "The Yellow Wallpaper" the narrator has "pulled off most of the paper, so [they]⁵ can't put [her] back!" (Gilman "The Yellow Wallpaper"). We can infer that the procedure of escaping the confines of the house necessitates the destruction of the very structure in which the narrator feels entrapped. Nevertheless, this concept of liberation must be viewed in a complex manner, as it ultimately results in the demise of the narrators, who either commit suicide or losses their sanity.

The Role of the House in "The Horla":

Though the genre of "The Horla" falls under the category of Gothic fiction yet "On the literal, explicit level, Le Horla is the story of a man gone mad, a victim of psychosis."(Abecassis 397).



A person who experiences a break from reality and finds it difficult to tell what is real from what is not is said to be experiencing psychosis. It can include a variety of symptoms, such as delusions, hallucinations, disordered thinking and speech, and abnormal behaviours. The way he is lost mentally, it seems he “must have lost [his] head during the last few days!” and he “must be the plaything of [his] enervated imagination”(Maupassant, “The Horla,” Par. July 12). It can be easily interpreted that the anonymous narrator of the story is suffering from a mental disorder, which can be decoded with the help of psychoanalysis as “Psychosis is the most ineffable experience of mental disorder” (Fusaro-Poli). The narrative allows for more nuance and a psychological atmosphere than the Gothic elements do (Yaniga and Sureau-Hale 207-9). To create an effect of a psychological thriller, only the first-person narrative has been used. This narrative style is ideal for letting the reader wonder whether the narrator is “sane, awake, or simply imagining things” (Yaniga and Sureau-Hale 209) as the readers have no clue from the author. Apart from that, writing about the mental state was an emerging topic in nineteenth-century France. During this time, a “shift from the authority of the sacred to the authority of the scientific, especially in relation to the understanding of the abnormal mental states” occurred (Merkin, 2014, p.2). Interestingly, the psychosis is palpable within the perimeter of the house where the narrator resides, as I have already mentioned in the previous section of this paper. The literary trope of the haunted house is a well-established device within the field of literature, and Maupassant's “The Horla” is no exception. A closer look at this trope raises the question of why the house is used to induce psychosis and how its destruction results in the narrator's ultimate emancipation from Horla as well as his own death simultaneously. To explore the possible reason, I am going to examine the nuances related to the usage of the house or the specific room or the space that the narrator uses for their habitation. As previously observed, the space of the house plays an active role, whereby the concept of freedom is intertwined with the destruction of the house— the most familial space to get shelter unquestionably. Furthermore, the uncanny feeling experienced by the author is not apparent when he is outside the house, and there exists no extraterrestrial or paranormal entity outside the room that could potentially cause disruption.



Interestingly, the familiar space of one's house where one finds solace becomes the site of horror and discomfort. When it comes to familiar things' becoming strange and horrific, Freud's essay "The Uncanny" (1919) can be considered as the most prominent scholarly work that sheds light on the phenomenon of familiar things turning strange and horrific. The way we use the word: familiar is nuanced according to Freud, as familiarity is not a free-floating term that only defines comfort and peace. The essay can be divided into three segments: *i.* "Definition of the uncanny; definitions of the term itself; the semantic field of the opposition of the German words *heimlich* and *unheimlich*", *ii.* "Examination of E.T.A. Hoffmann's (1776-1822) short story "The Sandman" (1817) and *iii.* discussion of the psychoanalytic background and general context required for an understanding of the experience of the uncanny" and "Deliberations on the *effect* of the uncanny, in particular its aesthetic instantiation in literature and fiction" (Gray). To analyse the phenomenon of a house as a place of horror, we need to examine the first part of Freud's essay.

He begins the essay by mentioning the meaning and how we can situate the word *familiar*. This idea of the uncanny seems to be inspired by Ernest Jentsch. The notion put forth by Jentsch that strange or unfamiliar things can cause fear was not categorically rejected by Sigmund Freud. The uncanny feeling, which Freud defined as a class of the terrifying which leads back to something long known to us, once very familiar, can be exacerbated by unfamiliarity, as Freud himself acknowledged (Freud 1). According to Freud, not everything that is "new" and/or "unfamiliar" causes horror, and importantly, the "relation cannot be inverted" (Freud 2) and also the word cannot be taken literally. Freud then argues that the German word *unheimlich* is the opposite of *heimlich* meaning "familiar," "native," or "belonging to the home", and we are tempted to deduce what is "uncanny" is frightening precisely because it is not known and familiar (Freud 2). In general, we are reminded that the word "heimlich" has two meanings that, while not necessarily contradictory, are nevertheless very different from one another: on the one hand, it denotes that which is comfortable and familiar, and on the other, that which is hidden and kept out of sight (Freud 4). So, it becomes evident from Freud's argument that the word familiar can not be used loosely only to define comfort, but there are other



dimensions added to it, such as hidden and unseen. This hidden treasure of memories related to the *familiar* conceals the dark, gloomy secrets that are kept out of sight. Home, being such a *familiar* space, may have a hidden treasure trove. This dark secret can be interpreted as a repressed memory. There are memories, desires, trauma and other events which are so keenly attached to a subject that they may keep that event secret and try to hide it from others in society. The process of hiding is problematic as it causes repression. This repression may act like a barrier when instincts, deep-rooted desires or fetish try to pop up in the consciousness⁶, but repression can not stop them from existing in the unconscious memory (Freud “Papers on Metapsychology” 85). In this process, one may forget a particular incident or a particular memory may be forgotten, but forgetting is not similar to erasing. Thus, the repressed memory always stays with us. The trope of the house similarly acts as the familiar space that hides secrets that are forgotten, and the inner walls— acting like the unconscious part of the mind, store the repressed memory of the past. By interpreting the uncanny as something suppressed that is then unexpectedly recalled, we can say that it is a component of our psyche and unconscious. When it succeeds in breaching the barrier of repression and defeating its insinuating force, which Freud refers to as “resistance”, it leaves us feeling “uneasy and uncanniness” (Freud *Ego and the Id* 5). The latent unconscious first haunts the human mind at night, as it is quite evident with the anonymous narrator in “The Horla” and then also during the day in a latent manner, because “everything that [still] is repressed must remain unconscious” (Freud, *Unconscious* 98) and when the barrier of repression is broken and the repressed memory gets released, the individual becomes mad. Therefore, it can be read that Horla is not a supernatural being but the Horla is a repressed self that gets a channel to come out of the wall of repression within the space of the house, as the house being a familiar space possesses dark secrets or the “infantile complexes” (Freud “The Uncanny” 17).

Conclusion:

To conclude the discussion of this paper it can be said that the last scene adds more evidence to the paper as the house is burnt down by the narrator to kill Horla and ends up realizing the fact that Horla does not have any physicality and can not be destroyed with fire, and he also commits



suicide to kill Horla. The house for the narrator has been so familiar a space that the existence of the narrator is voided with the destruction of the house. And one thing must be remembered, Horla is no more after that the house is burnt down— even before the narrator commits suicide, which is a suggestion of successfully killing Horla, yet he commits suicide as if to imply that he (himself) is the Horla and the double (Horla) is the essential part of the narrator— perhaps so dominant that he himself turns out to be the *other* or the alien self. This alienation may be due to the narrator's staying alone in the house, as he needs the other to identify his own self. To be identified, the other is created. The space of the house being *familiar*, the poet can give birth to secret works of art in utter loneliness. The narrator, while writing the journal “pretended to be writing in order to deceive Him, for He also was watching [him], and suddenly I felt, I was certain, that He was reading over my shoulder, that He was there, almost touching my ear.”(Maupassant “The Horla,” Par. August 20). As if Horla, like a reader, is reading the stories that are being written by the narrator in the journal entry. Amazingly, the Horla is causing the narrator to write a story, and the story is also being read by the Horla- the potential other⁷. This journal entry becomes an organic genesis of the literary work, which suggests giving birth to the story of Horla and the literal projection of the double- Horla as well. This projection of the double can be understood from the Freudian perspective of *double*, as the “invention of doubling” according to him in “The Uncanny” (1919) is “preservation against extinction” (9). The emptiness of the house threatens the existence of the narrator as without the presence of the other, the self is not recognised which is similar to the annihilation of one's self. Logically, “identity” refers to one's social “face”— one's perception of how others perceive them (Hammell 190-91).

We can argue, in other words, that social interaction is the origin of self and identity, which the narrator lacks in the empty room of the mansion. Apart from that, being an author, if one's stories are not read, that may create anxiety similar to what Freud calls anxiety of *castration* in the mind of the author, and therefore Horla is acknowledging to read the story written by the narrator staying on his shoulder. The creative aspect is important here as well, the fear of Horla stimulates the narrator to write the journal, which the readers⁸ read as the artistic result. Again,



Horla is found sitting over the “shoulder” and “touching” his “ear” while the narrator is writing about the horrid experience in the journal. The “double” is the creative and destructive aspect of the narrator. Both provide him with the stimuli to be an author and also the creator of this story, and the destroyer of the self to end the story. Thus the paper examines how Freudian “uncanny” is operated in “The Horla” by using the concept of the most commonly used trope of the house.

Endnotes

¹ A space created within the literary text. The entire story can be read as a meta-fiction. There is a comment on the organic production of a work of art, which I have discussed in detail in section- IV of this paper.

² Indirect communication, according to Kierkegaard, refers to a method of communication similar to Socrates' maieutic approach. This method involves deceiving someone into the truth, rather than simply presenting the truth to them directly. Kierkegaard believed that this approach was necessary for communicating abstract concepts that are not easily observable. (For more details, see:

https://commons.nmu.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?referer=&httpsredir=1&article=1317&context=fa_cwork).

³ Read “organic” as seamless, naturally embedded, deep-rooted etc.

⁴ The woman is anonymous as if it is the story of many women, and also it can be read as her disenfranchisement of agency, which seems like the patriarchy has robbed away.

⁵ “They” refers to the narrator’s husband— John and the maidservant Jane. Jane was there to keep an eye on the narrator so that she does not get out of the house as per the instruction of her

husband. Jane serves as the apparatus of the patriarchy. The names are similar sounding as well (i.e., Jane and John).

⁶ According to Sigmund Freud, the unconscious has several peculiar characteristics. First, it allows contradictory ideas to exist simultaneously. Additionally, unlike conscious ideas, the contents of the unconscious lack degrees of certainty. Finally, unconscious ideas are not arranged in any chronological order. Freud believed that the unconscious plays a significant role in



shaping our behaviour and experiences, despite being outside our conscious awareness. He believed that unconscious thoughts and feelings often influence our behaviour, including our dreams, desires, and motivations. (For more information:

<https://www.freud.org.uk/education/resources/what-is-the-unconscious/>).

⁷ I used the word “potential” with “other” to signify that the other must be someone having the faculty to reciprocate with the self to create the identity. In other words, the other should be one who is potent, and having the authority to substantiate identity formation.

⁸ By the word “readers”, I suggest the readers at the receiving end of the story, “The Horla” when it gets published. Here the readers are important as they are the one to whom the narrator wants to convey what he is going through. His writing in the journal about the horrid feeling is suggestive of his desire to communicate his feelings and angst-ridden condition, as the room is empty; there is none to communicate. On the other hand, the readers give the author recognition and also the selling of the book can generate capital.

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