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Uncanny in the war of the worlds: A Freudian study

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Abstract

In every one or two decades, there always comes one such masterpiece in literature that remains a riveting reading experience and continues to haunt its readers. The Victorian era towards its end witnessed one such enthralling masterpiece in the form of H G Wells' novel *The War of the Worlds*. It is a remarkable science fiction novel that marked its appearance in hardcover in 1898 from publisher William Heinemann of London. Upon its first appearance in hardcover, it terrified the Victorian readers with its account of the gruesome invasion of earth by the deadly creatures from Mars who let loose a reign of terror and annihilated all life in their path. So, it is no big shocker that the novel *The War of the Worlds* is high on fear. But what Wells manages to do with this powerful theme of fear is worth consideration.

Working out on this theme of fear, this study presents a possible Freudian reading of the text, based in particular on the "The Uncanny". Analyzing this brilliant artistic mastery of the novelist in successfully arousing the feelings of dread and creeping horror, the paper sets out to filter all such emotions through Freud's model of the uncanny and examines relevant instances in the novel, where such feelings of uncanny can be traced. By applying the theory of 'The Uncanny' to the novel, the reader not only gains a deeper understanding of Freud's theory, but also an in-depth analysis of thematic elements in the novel.

Keywords: Uncanny, war, of the worlds

Introduction

Theoretical Background

In 1919, Freud came up with his important and renowned paper "Das Unheimlich" or "The Uncanny" to explore the possible psychological roots of the 'terrible' and 'dreadful' or what he called the "uncanny". Freud's essay stems from his attempt to rebut Ernest Jentsch's central claim that uncanny is bound up with 'intellectual uncertainty'. Freud instead maintains that the uncanny is much diversified and offers four definitions of the uncanny in the course of his essay. Firstly, he cites a definition of uncanny by Friedrich Schelling, a German philosopher. Schelling holds that "everything is unheimlich [uncanny] that ought to have remained secret and hidden but has come to light." Some critics take this definition of uncanny by Schelling as Freud's own or something that supports his own understanding of the uncanny. Shortly, after the start of his essay, Freud presents us the first of his original definitions of the uncanny that "the uncanny is that class of the frightening which leads back to what is known of old and long familiar". Thereupon the essay develops and defines what is "old and long familiar" into two classes, so that the final definition of the uncanny becomes: "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". The "surmounted uncanny" as Freud views it, is felt upon the retrieval of long forgotten or discarded beliefs, and to cite an example, it would be felt by a person who does not really believe in ghosts being encountered by what appears to be a ghost. The repressed uncanny, on the other hand, is the return of the repressed to the consciousness, for example, the fears of childhood associated with solitude, silence and darkness, formation of the castration complex, and the common belief of the children in the omnipotence of thoughts. Moreover, Freud also binds the uncanny to the figure of the double and to coincidence and repetition complex.

Literature review

The novel *War of the Worlds* is a highly appreciated work of H G Wells. It is a fascinating

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portrayal of the terrible alien invasion that threatens the very existence of human life. However, in its course, it also raises some important questions about human nature also. Critics have thoroughly evaluated the work and much has been written about the novel and the concern it shares. As the diversity of the novel offers a multitude of perspectives, the novel has been viewed against many theoretical backgrounds. Almost every possible approach has been adopted, but, however, viewing the novel through the psychological perspective offers some scope for further evaluation of the novel. More importantly and significantly, the place where my piece of research would fit in the jigsaw puzzle is evaluating the novel through Freudian model of Uncanny.

The theory of uncanny has been adopted successfully by many critics to evaluate different works. We have, for example, Joseph Moore's interpretation of the novel 'The Dracula' through this model of uncanny. For him, Dracula makes a perfect example to the elements of the uncanny stated by Freud, where repetition complex, silencing and concealing the unfamiliar play an important role in the production of uncanny feelings.

Lars Christensen and Hammer Anderson's project on Horace Walpole's 'The Castle of Otranto' at Aalborg University, Denmark hold that the uncanny feelings associated with animism, death, repetition and castration complex serve an essential purpose in the buildup of the gothic aura of the novel. Similarly, we have Jennet Rae's interpretation of Fyodor Dostoyevsky's novel 'The Double' in one of her essays, where she views Golyadkin's (protagonist of the novel) apparent madness to be caused by the resurfacing of his childhood 'fear of castration'.

Jonathan Soderstorm's analysis of John W Campbell's novel 'Who Goes There' in his dissertation submitted at Karistads University adopts the same Freudian model of uncanny to analyze the pattern of fear in the novel. He argues that "it is the uncanny notion together with the paranoia that the monster and its abilities leaves in the characters' minds that creates the fear and danger, more so than the monster itself".

In analyzing the fear psychosis, as we have seen, the Freudian model of uncanny, perhaps serves the best purpose. HG Wells' novel The War of the Worlds is no doubt high on fear and it is this facet of the novel that this paper would set out to analyze through Freud's theory of uncanny.

Significance of the study

H G Wells is a notable figure in English literature and is mostly known for his science-fiction masterpieces. Many researchers and critics have analyzed his works and in the case of the novel The War of the Worlds, a thorough analysis has been carried out too. The issues of racial prejudice, fate and determinism, imperialism, historical and humanistic issues have been discussed at length regarding the novel, but, however, very little has been written on the aura of dread and fear that dominates the novel. This paper studies this aspect of the novel through the lens of Sigmund Freud's psychoanalytic theory of The Uncanny to help the reader in deciphering the real intentions of the author and in getting the deeper understanding of the thematic elements of the novel.

Observation and Analysis

The War of the Worlds is a powerful novel by H G Wells, packed with eerie and strange; gruesome and horrible. In arousing such feeling of fear and horror, the novel exemplifies Freud's themes of uncanny in several ways. With the help of Sigmund Freud's concept of the uncanny, this paper argues that while the monstrous figures of Martians play an important role throughout the story, the threats created by the paranoia and claustrophobia are equally chilling.

The uncanny can be located at many places in the text. A textbook definition of the uncanny as "the return of the repressed" appears in the novel when the narrator after coming to realize the impending disaster that is to befall the earth in the form of the Martians, is at once gripped by the memory of the crimes perpetuated by humans not only on animals, but on fellow human beings. This uncanny realization occurs in the text as follows:

"The Tasmanians, in spite of their human likeness, were entirely swept out of existence in a war of extermination waged by European immigrants, in the space of fifty years. Are we such apostles of mercy as to complain if the Martians warred in the same spirit". (The War of the Worlds, P. 5).

Freud maintains that many people experience the feeling of uncanny in the highest degree in relation to death and dead bodies. He argues that "since practically all of us think as savages do on this topic, it is no matter for surprise that the primitive fear of the dead is still so strong within us and always ready to come to surface at any opportunity. Most likely our fear still contains the old belief that the deceased becomes the enemy of his survivor and wants to carry him off to share his new life with him." Certainly The War of the Worlds succeeds in arousing such feelings of uncanny relating to death and dead bodies as is evident in the following lines of the text:

"Nothing was changed save for that and a terrible astonishment. The little group of black specks with the flag of white had been swept out of existence, and the stillness of the evening, so it seemed to me, had scarcely been broken.... Suddenly, like a thing falling upon me from without, came-fear." (The War of the Worlds, P. 23)

We see that in the above quoted lines, a sudden chill of terrible fear grips the narrator as the "primitive fear of the dead" or those "surmounted primitive beliefs" seem once more to be confirmed in the wake of the utter destruction and horror that lies in front of him.

In his theory of the uncanny, Freud also maintains that one essential factor in the production of the uncanny effect is when the distinction between the imagination and the reality gets effaced, such as something which we have hitherto regarded as imaginary appears before us in reality. We have a classic example of this kind of uncanny in the novel, when the narrator depicts the scene of the emergence of the first Martian from the pit. It is so lively a scene and full of tremors and fear that it at once fills us with that strange kind of feeling that Freud terms as uncanny. This type of feeling seizes the narrator because it reminds him/us of earlier psychic stages, of aspects of our unconscious life or of the primitive experience of the human species, where the belief in the presence of ghosts and spirits was active. We have narrators experience of this uncanny feeling in the following passage:

“Then something resembling a little grey snake, about the thickness of a walking stick, coiled up out of the writhing middle, and wriggled in the air towards me.... I saw astonishment giving place to horror.... I looked again at the cylinder, and ungovernable terror gripped me. I stood petrified and staring”. (The War of the Worlds, P. 17)

The key thing here is the sense of familiar combined with the idea of the unfamiliar or the repressed. The Martians are the perfect example of this, because they at once spark the uncanny through their association with our ‘surmounted’ belief in presence of ghost-like things.

Another consideration of the theory of uncanny is the part played by the influences of silence, darkness and solitude, notwithstanding that they are also the most frequent accompaniment of the expression of fear in infancy. Such infantile complexes when revived by some impression in the adulthood do result in the kind of uncanny as experienced by the narrator in the following lines:

“The fear I felt was no rational fear, but a panic terror not only of the Martians, but of the dusk and stillness all about me. Such an extraordinary effect in unmaning me it had that I ran weeping silently as a child might do.” (The War of the Worlds, P. 23)

Freud in his essay argues that “nowadays we no longer believe in them; (referring to surmounted beliefs) but we do not feel quite sure of our new set of beliefs, and the old ones still exist within us ready to seize upon any confirmation”. This seizure of Curate’s emotions in the novel happens when after witnessing the havoc wrought by the Martians, the Curate’s old surmounted beliefs receive the confirmation and is at once reminded of the Biblical allusion to the last day of the earth. The feeling that grips him is no short of uncanny as is evident in the following passage:

“This must be the beginning of the end, the end! The great and terrible day of the Lord!”
(The War of the Worlds, P. 68)

When different characteristics of the uncanny are employed and used successfully by a writer, the voice of the novel gets even more dominant, since the characters depicted in the works are actually addressing to the character traits in the reader. The uncanniness of characters reminds the reader that they have the same fears, desires and ideas at the core.

Conclusion

The War of the Worlds sends some strong shock waves of fear across to its readers and by and large serves the writers purpose of making the audience examine their own state of being. All this has been done quite artistically and such is the fluidity of the novel that when we perceive it through Freud’s model of uncanny, the effect of the novel further deepens and the theme of the fear receives a fresh meaning and magnitude.

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