

The Modern Monster: The Uncanny Disabled in Modernist Fiction

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Abstract

The Uncanny, according to Freud, belongs to the realm of an upsetting, and horror that humans were previously familiar with but, due to constant repressing, has now turned into 'unheimlich' (unhomely). This horror is often located on the 'other' human being as impairments mark their bodies. The uncanny aspect of disability is experienced when the abled body, whose subjecthood and identity is emphasised in Modernist literature, is challenged by its confrontation with a 'disabled' human body. This confrontation with the unfamiliar body, away from the perceived 'normal,' leads to the uncanny experience of horror or fear in the 'abled' person. However, this fear has always been present instinctively in all individuals. When they confront that fear being concretized in a physical form in a person with disability, they tend to repress it further or distance themselves by simply converting a disabled body into a non-human entity that is itself problematic (as will be discussed in the paper). In Modernist literature, the presence of a 'disabled' person in the narrative presents an 'absent-otherness' of modern ideas and aesthetics that one attempts to avoid consciously but that nevertheless exists. In such a scheme of things, this paper focuses on analysing this aspect of disability as the uncanny other of the modernist ideas and objectives, through H.P Lovecraft's *The Call of Cthulhu*. It proposes to do so by comparing the figure of the 'damaged' embodiment as opposed to the socially and culturally accepted 'abled' body.

Keywords:

Disability; uncanny; abled body; 'disabled' body; otherness; Lovecraft; Call of Cthulhu, embodiment.

“The oldest and the strongest emotion of mankind is fear, and the oldest and strongest kind of fear is fear of the unknown”

- H.P Lovecraft, *Supernatural Horror in Literature* (1927)

Within the familiar world, where everything is regulated corresponding to the structural order and norms of an objective understanding of reality, what if, all of a sudden, human beings are forced to confront a thing that is unfathomable to their comprehension? The propensity to perceive the inscrutable unfamiliar 'other' as invoking the emotion of fear or dread is time and again witnessed as the paramount trope in the elements of horror fiction and cinema. However, what if the source of this fear or dread is not something unfamiliar and unknown, but instead these feelings are generated by something long-familiar, that had been since then repressed deep down in human consciousness, but has now suddenly returned to the realm of familiarity? This feeling of fear or horror that one experiences when they confront the amalgamation of the familiar with the once-suppressed unfamiliar leads to the feeling of what Sigmund Freud describes in his 1919 essay, 'The Uncanny'.

The uncanny (*unheimlich* in German meaning unhomely), according to Freud, on the one hand indicates something that is NOT of the 'home' and thus, unfamiliar. However, on the other hand, the uncanny is also defined as something that was never meant to come into common knowledge, "that was intended to remain secret, hidden away [but] has come into open" (Freud 10). Somehow, the paradoxical meanings of the words *unheimlich* and *heimlich*, uncanny and canny, familiar and unfamiliar, start to coincide within each other: "Heimlich thus becomes increasingly ambivalent, until it finally merges with its antonym *unheimlich*. The uncanny...is in some way a species of the familiar" (Freud 7). This incorporation of the familiar and the unfamiliar indicates that "the uncanny is that species of frightening that goes back to what was once well known and had long been familiar" (Freud 2), transforming the familiar itself into something monstrous and incomprehensible.

The ramifications of this horror and fear generated by the confrontation with the uncanny are more often than not re-emphasised and positioned on the 'other' human being when impairments mark their bodies. This fear is experienced by the inhabitants of the existing society, possessing fixed positioning of the standards of normativity as manifested in the ideal of being 'abled'. The uncanny aspect of disability is experienced when the abled body confronts the 'disabled' body that is unfamiliar to them. Negating the concrete perception of the self-created 'normal', the nakedness of earlier repressed or "hidden" fear of finding this 'lack' within oneself now gets exposed in bright light in the form of the presence of a person with disability. The confrontation of the familiar body that has suddenly become unfamiliar,

contributes in making the 'abled' world deny the presence of the disabled person and thus, categorise them as the 'other' or 'deviant'.

Furthermore, through this presence of a 'disabled' person in modernist fiction, the aesthetics and objectives of modernism focussing on individualism, improvement, progression, and construction of an independent subject position are brought into the shadow of doubt and uncertainty. Contrary to the familiar 'present-abledness' of modern ideas and perspectives, the paradoxical presence of the unfamiliar 'absent-otherness' within these narratives portrays disability as the uncanny other to the created normativity. Nevertheless, the sudden confrontation of this once negated, absent presence of disability posits to threaten those established norms. Within this theoretical paradigm, how does one perceive a person with disability who is treated as the uncanny other of the 'abled' and 'normal' societal institutions? Does one feel that the 'dis-abled' presence could threaten the illusionary ideals of a unified perfect human body that has been crystallised in their consciousness to exist in the 'normal' world? Would even the thought of acceptance of the disabled persons' existence within the 'normal' societal constructions as simply ordinary (without any fear, horror, or pity) forever remain unfathomable? Or, would the constructed society propel them to conform to the accustomed concept of the 'normal body', defying which they would be treated as an outsider and the 'incomprehensible other'? In such a scheme of things, this paper focuses on analysing these aspects of disability as the uncanny-other of the modernist ideas and objectives through the representation of uncanny in H.P Lovecraft's *The Call of Cthulhu*. It proposes to do so by exposing the repressed fear of 'abled-bodied' to confront disability as being physically manifested into the uncanny fear of waking of the ancient monster created by Lovecraft- the Cthulhu.

Lennard J Davis's *Enforcing Normalcy* and Rosemarie Garland-Thomson's *Extraordinary Bodies* focuses on this notion of the normal or 'normalcy' and the power that this idea inherits. The predominance of the presence of 'able-ness' establishes the construction of the 'normal'. Any happening or phenomenon that meanders from these central connotations of the existing 'normal', are looked down upon consistently, further giving them the status of the 'other' in the homogenised society where there is no scope of accepting 'otherness'. Within this imperishable concrete normativity, disability can be seen as possessing the spirit of 'rebellion' in its state of 'otherness' against the set construction of 'able-ness'. Thus, "if disability was judged to be a state of negative indifference, then the normal was the central mode from which it deviated" (Barker and Stuart 4). The 'normal', thus, is an "illusion

masquerading as fact” (Barker and Stuart 5). However, when confronted with the ‘damaged’ and ‘disabled’ embodiment, this illusion of a utopian land set within defined norms as governing one’s thought processes, actions and emotions shatters down completely making everything unfamiliar. This further drives the ‘abled’ body to witness the presence of the other side of this progressiveness, growth and development, as opposed to the pre-conceived ideal of being superior to the ones who has any ‘lack’. However, when the ‘abled’ bodied encounter the ‘otherness with lack’ coexisting alongside themselves, the feeling is that of unfamiliarity, fear and incomprehensibility.

Furthermore, this feeling of the uncanny is experienced time and again within the ambit of modern fiction. Throughout modern fiction, the focalisation of the fragmented repressed self is revisited repeatedly, further creating the feeling of the unfamiliarity of the familiar. Within modern fiction, the self and the mind constantly emerge as the uncanny spaces of unfamiliarity. Due to the sudden encounter with the disabled human body, the transgression of the boundaries between the self and the other, the unconscious and the conscious results in the creation of an alien or monstrous selfhood, that is too dreadful and repulsive to confront and familiarize, hence is repressed. However, in some circumstances, the threshold between the conscious self (that is, the perception of the abled human body) and the alien or monstrous self (that is the otherness associated with the disabled body) is transgressed when the abled body is suddenly confronted with the otherwise absent ‘dis-abled’ body, questioning the concreteness of the ‘abled-selfhood’ that is accepted as ‘normal’. This concretization of the unfamiliarity associated with the disabled ‘other’, that reminds oneself of their own incapability to be ‘present’ and always remaining, as Thomas Ligotti says, within the paradox of being a- “self-conscious Nothing,” can be seen through the lens of H.P Lovecraft’s monstrous cosmic horror, *The Call of Cthulhu*.

In his works, Lovecraft creates monstrous creatures that are beyond human apprehension. Depicting the decrepitude and meaninglessness of human existence, the "Lovecraftian horror" has its foundations in notions scrutinising identity and the boundaries of the self. Ideas of concrete selfhood, as emphasised by the 'abled-bodied', negates the existence of the repressed "unreal monstrosity" (Ligotti 11). Due to this negation, a sudden destabilisation occurs between the conscious and the unconscious, resulting in gradual fragmentation, incompleteness, and incomprehensibility of the ever absent yet innately present 'other' further leading to the feeling of horror. The horror, thus, appears when these normalised notions of

concretization of self and identity are infringed. Through this infringement, the familiar confront the unfamiliar presence of the otherwise absent ancient monster- the Cthulhu- who, is dead but "in his house at R'lyeh...waits dreaming" (Lovecraft 23). In the figure of the monster Cthulhu, human beings are exposed to the demonic 'other', who is on the one hand "abnormally lifelike" (familiar), but on the other, "subtly fearful because its source was so totally unknown" (Lovecraft 16)- depicting the unfamiliar. Through this coexistence of the familiar and the unfamiliar, Lovecraft questions the limits of 'knowability', thus inducing the feeling of uncanny. The uncanny is further gravely manifested in Lovecraft's *The Call of Cthulu* as it depicts the confrontation between present-human and absent-monster. Perhaps, the depiction of the monster, who is sleeping and dreaming but not 'dead,' indicates that there is a monster inside each individual, specifically 'abled' bodied beings. Within oneself, this monster (the unfamiliar-other) that is made to deliberately fall 'asleep' by the act of repression to remain on a "placid island of ignorance in the midst of black seas of infinity" (Lovecraft 1), is not absent or 'dead' and can wake anytime to conquer the consciousness. Although consciously inhabiting the "island of ignorance," when confronted with the unfamiliar, the reawakening of the repressed-monster takes place, instigating the experience of uncanny. When the abled body confronts a person with disability, the confrontation with the fear that is now physically present in front of them, awakens the once-repressed monstrous fear of the 'lack' unexpectedly. This sudden awakening of the familiarity with the 'lack' inculcates the feeling of unfamiliarity, questioning the unified abled-self itself. Concerning the fragmentation of self and transgressing the concrete boundaries between 'I' and 'not I,' familiar and unfamiliar, the repressed otherness is physicalized revealing the presence of the fearful and monstrous other, existing within an 'abled' body out in the open. Through his characters, which are not a complete presence but an amalgamation of different presences, Lovecraft indicates the coexistence of absence and presences as a whole. For instance, the monster, Cthulhu having the combined traits of an octopus and a dragon, presents the breaking down of the concretised notion of the presence of unified body. While modern aesthetics focus on finding meaning for one's existence or trying to detach meanings from various institutions (such as religion, power, law etc), their last visage of claiming any form of agency, in the form of the perception they have of being without any 'lack', is also shattered with this confrontation of the disabled embodiment. Because of this sudden familiarity with the disabled other, one's concrete Being further fragments into tiny bits, again provoking the sensation of the uncanny. In this world functioning by the pre-established standards of the unified 'abled' beings, the disabled are presumed to be a demonic being of ableism that should

not come to the realm of 'knowability'. This imposed separation between the humanised 'us' and the animalistic/monstrous 'them' as transplanted within the distorted figure leads to becoming a source of fear and dread, thus representing disability as the uncanny other of the abled 'us.'

Conclusion

Therefore, through these various representations of uncanny, the concretized presence and unification of the self are questioned, leading to the co-existence of the familiar and unfamiliar, the conscious and unconscious. One important point to remember is that the exceedingly alien horrors, here described through H.P Lovecraft's short story, do not come from the outside but from within. From the unknown depths of the oceans of one's consciousness, the fear of the 'abled-bodied' is concretized in the physical embodiment of the disabled body. This fear is always there, existing or "dreaming" within one's mind. However, when it crystallizes suddenly, it gives the feeling of the uncanny. Thus, whether they are defined through the presence of the monstrous amalgamations or the violent yet desperate need to unify oneself with the repressed self, the absent-presence of disability will come out of the hidden and that too abruptly.

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Author's bio-note

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