

# Poetics of the Uncanny: A Post-Phenomenological Critique of D. H. Lawrence and Somerset Maugham's Short Fiction

Umar Shehzad

Assistant Professor of English, University of Chakwal

## Abstract

Taking issue with Sigmund Freud's premise on the subject, this essay seeks alternately to inquire into, challenge, and broaden our understanding of the uncanny. Even though this genius from the field of psychoanalysis is quite right in wreathing the uncanny with the murky aura that it wears to date, his insistence on driving one way traffic from *heimlich* to *das unheimliche* while at the same time refusing to let it out of "the realm of the frightening" gives a kind of staleness and fixity to the subject of the uncanny, which is no less than its undoing, especially when it comes to its artistic representation. Eschewing psychoanalytical debates and focusing rather upon the post-phenomenological discourse, I'll show as to how the homely artistic devices like paradox, reversal, thematic and narrative flux, unswerving matter-of-factness yield an uncanny import in "The Rocking-Horse Winner" and "The Book Bag," the two short stories by Lawrence and Maugham respectively. Insisting upon the essential uncanniness of art, this article proposes that the uncanny hinges on what Martin Seel (2005) describes as art's fundamental "irreality" and Theodor Adorno (1973) calls "appearances". I hypothesize that the uncanny owes its life to a continual movement of the subject matter between openness and closure, between imagination and reality, between the outer world and the inner domain, between what Bhabha (1992) alludes to as the world and the home.

**Key Words:** *Freud, heimlich, unheimlich, irreal*

## I

In his paper titled "The Uncanny," Sigmund Freud (2003) claimed that the uncanny effect is "often and easily produced by effacing the distinction between imagination and reality [...]" (p. 152). However, it can be argued that it is less a matter of effacement than of juxtaposition, less of juxtaposition than of flux. The uncanny is not a fixture; so only arbitrarily it would be hitched to a single vantage point. The specificity with which it is anchored with the triumvirate of secrecy, fear and dread in "the realm of the frightening" fearfully delimits its scope, and stultifies its growth into other genres of art and literature (Freud, 2003, p. 123). Whereas, to borrow from Arnold Hauser (1999), the uncanny is "not a being but a becoming, not a condition but a process," which is bound to outgrow these already very brittle distinctions set by Freud (p. 159).

Psychoanalysis and phenomenology stemmed from a need to rescue the study of being from the state of isolation and abstraction to which it had been relegated to. Whereas psychoanalysis restored temporality to the study of being through its emphasis on the formative influence of past memories, phenomenology brought the question of space to the sharper focus. The two traditions have enriched each other's discourses and trimmed each other's excesses. The present study is yet another attempt to bring the phenomenological canon to bear upon a psychoanalytical trope. It is pertinent to note here that the phenomenological tradition has come a long way after its initial articulation by Edmund Husserl and Martin Heidegger so much so that the modern-day thinkers like Martin Seel, Katherine Withy, Theodor Adorno, and Michel Serres are more aptly described as post-phenomenologists. Where the thought of post-phenomenologists adds nuance to the spatial, relational ontology propounded in the works of Husserl and Heidegger, it can also be employed in the service of psychoanalysis. Freud's theory of uncanniness, which largely informs the conceptual framework of the present study, has been critiqued by using a string of post phenomenological concepts ranging from Martin Seel's idea of "irreality" to Michel Serres' "angelology" to Adorno's "appearances" that are present one moment and absent the very next.

In pursuit of its mimetic ambitions, art goes after the ambivalence inherent in all forms of life. The art of the uncanny adds a new dimension to this ambivalence by its disdain to be pinned – and as T. S. Eliot (1917) says, fixed by a "formulated phrase," and left "wriggling on the wall" (l. 56-58). Therefore, when Katherine Withy (2015) calls the uncanny "perversely doubled," "perversely non-linear" and even "perversely fractal," I would like to add *perversely fluid* to the list of its *perversities* (p. 233).

Explaining the phenomenon, or more precisely to explain it away, Freud tells us that the uncanny inhabits "the realm of the frightening" without monopolizing it (p. 123). It originates from an act of betrayal by compromising "everything that was intended to remain secret, hidden away which has come out into the open," and thus turning the familiar and the "homely" or *heimlich* into the "unhomely", *das unheimliche* (p. 123).

However, coming into the open would kill the uncanny. The uncanny simply cannot afford to come out in the open, for it thrives on murkiness – breeds it too. Secondly, the fatality of "has" kills it; once it *has*, it is already done for. Therefore, I hypothesize that the uncanny owes its life to a continual movement of the subject matter between openness and closure. That is the way it has always been and would always be – in a state of perpetual oscillation between complete disclosure and total enwrapment, shying away from the extremes. It is not to say that everything that moves partakes of the uncanny – though, even that wouldn't be too far-fetched – my thesis is that the vice versa is true: The uncanny is that which moves between the worlds.

The paper has been divided in four sections. While the first section introduces the idea of the uncanny as well as problematizes it, the second one chalks out the theoretical framework required for the analysis. The third section is devoted to the detailed analysis of the selected texts – "The Book Bag" (1951) by W. Somerset Maugham

and “The Rocking-Horse Winner” (1963) D. H. Lawrence – and the last section concludes the findings.

## II

Katherine Withy (2015) explains the elusiveness of the phenomenon of the uncanny in the context of Heidegger’s phenomenology: “[...] *Dasein* seems to have two essential *telo*i: its own essence as seeking and its essence as that which it seeks” (p. 233). Though both are essentially together, enough space is maintained between the seeker and that which is sought to give room to the play of hide and seek, which, in turn, perpetuates the uncanny. This phenomenon, termed as “*Dasein*’s uncanny essence,” gives a clue to the uncanniness of art that shuttles the subject between being and non-being (p. 241). This phenomenological awareness of the uncanny runs counter to the Freudian understanding in two respects: firstly it is not intrinsically bound with “terror” and secondly, it does not necessitate a total recall or the recovery of the repressed.

As Anneleen Masschelein, another post-phenomenologist, puts it, “what is at stake is the temporal scheme that Freud proposes for the uncanny, the return of the repressed or the surmounted, and the idea that, by going to the origin of the uncanny, the artwork can be understood” (2011, p. 163). I argue that “the return of the repressed or the surmounted” kick-starts the momentum of the uncanny, though breaks it too soon for its mono-directionality. The thoughts have to trail back and forth in time in order to sustain the electric current of the uncanny. The mono-directional movement of linear time undoes the phenomenon of the uncanny. For the sustenance of the uncanny, the iron rod of chronology has to be made flexible enough to go round and round in interminable Nietzschean cycles. These cyclic movements are somehow effectuated by the recoiling of the self from itself back to itself. The return is the return of a part of the self that departs as soon as it lands in the present moment. Otherwise, to the detriment of its uncanny bloom, it will be conciliated by the reality of the present. But such is not the reality of the recalcitrant uncanny. Its merry-go-round continues from the past to the present and backwards, with occasional forays into the future as well.

Moreover, recovery of the repressed, the *sine qua non* of psychoanalysis is anathema to the uncanny, as long and as far as it means total recall. A complete excavation would turn the burial ground empty and redundant; the insistence of psychoanalysis upon complete baring of its body may drive the uncanny away. It is hard to find fault with Masschelein (2011) when she critiques the process, “Psychoanalysis disenchants the literature it analyzes” because “when the mystery of the fantastic is solved, it is robbed of its charm” (p. 60). Psychoanalysis unites the terms that are to be kept apart i.e. the origin and the end. Or, it dissects the body which is to be left alone if the spirit is to survive. Sucked-dry by the psychoanalysts, the artwork turns insipid in losing its well-synchronized rhythm of movement and countermovement.

On the other hand, certain amount of obscurity is natural to a work of art. It is part and parcel, even when not of the product, of the process. Processual obscurity

inherent in the creative endeavors must not be confused with “intellectual uncertainty” which Jentsch conceives as “the essential condition for the emergence of a sense of the uncanny” (as cited in Freud, 2003, p. 125). Freud rightfully contends that mere intellectual uncertainty may not be taken as the sole determinant of the uncanny and its mysterious entourage. The ceaseless nebulosity of art owes its existence and perpetuation to the simultaneous emergence from and submersion in the ocean of life. To use Alain Badiou’s terminology (2006), art is an “event” that marks a clear break from the ongoing processes of life, at the same time becoming the very part of them. Dialectics of “truth” and “knowledge” jostle between them to shape life, at the same time, effusing the nebulae of the uncanny. Trying to appropriate Emmanuel Levinas’ thought process, Toumayan apprehends a similar vision of art in his very insightful *Encountering the Other* (2004): “Art derives both from the economy of an obscurity that is prior to the clearing and illumination of the concept as well as from the economy of the shadow that is a function of that very illumination” (p. 123).

However, art is always already involved in its context. Homi K. Bhabha (1992), the veteran postcolonial theorist, chimed in the ongoing debate on the nature of the uncanny declaring: “In the stirrings of the unhomely, another world becomes visible” (p. 141). He claims that colonialism has rendered people homeless in their very home by depriving them of their sense of homeliness. In his characteristic style, he opens up the uncanny possibilities of the uncanny by alluding to its disruptive potential. The line between the world and the home is partly redrawn, partly blurred, and partly exterminated. The homely becomes the unhomely, and the unhomely becomes the homely. The violence of postcolonialism militates against the stable boundary between the world and the home. The resultant fluidity accounts for the tension between the familiar and the unfamiliar. Mimetically oriented art practices a similar kind of violence on the volatile margins between the familiar and the unfamiliar. Quoting Iris Murdoch, Bhabha writes, “A novel must be a house for free people to live in” (p. 142). The fictive home is continually built and rebuilt because of its conjugation as well as antagonism to the unhomely. Bhabha recognizes this processual energy of the unhomely when he avers: “The unhomely is the shock of recognition of the world-in-the-home, the home-in-the-world” (p. 141). However, transfixing the uncanny in the postcolonial context would be reductive understanding of the concept.

The real life experience of the uncanny is often too fleeting. Not only does it replicate, art preserves the uncanny, crystallizes it. As a stabilizer, art makes the volatile phenomenon of the uncanny ever-present. As Masschelein (2011) avers, “[...] art does not just express emotions, it provokes them. It creates ex nihilo” (p. 63). And therefore, in art, the subject of the uncanny does not always need to be imprisoned within the four walls of horror (as Freud suggests in his definition), art may also wreath the innocuous object with an uncanny aura by mustering an extraordinary energy to swing it imperceptibly from the present reality to its past memory.

An extended arena supervised by the uncanny is the one divided along the lines of art versus life, meanings versus meaninglessness, sense versus sensibility, being versus nothingness. Theodor W. Adorno (1973) in his incomplete *Aesthetic Theory*, originally published in 1970, aspires after a “cognitive utopia” where concepts could be

used “to unseal the non-conceptual, without making it their equal” (p. 10). This presents a legitimate order of things because of placement of the non-conceptual on the higher pedestal, though the route may be suspect for the nihilists of any-*thing* systemic. In any case, Adorno’s formula not only re-establishes an unavoidable facticity that in the world of arts there is no complete undoing of the science of semantics; it highlights a key feature of art, the polarity of its structure and the unbridgeable chasm underlying this “miracle of rare device”, to borrow from S. T. Coleridge (l. 35). Inhabiting the border line between reality and unreality, being and nothingness, ethics and aesthetics, artworks are aptly termed by Adorno as “appearances” (Adorno, 1973, p. 10). The point of interest here is not only the “apparential” character of art but also the “uncanniness” that attends such a fluid disposition. Explaining Adorno’s take on works of art, Martin Seel (2005) captures not only their reality or otherwise but also their fundamental *uncanniness*: “They [artworks] relate to the rest of reality as an “apparition”, that is, a religious or hallucinogenic vision in which something is suddenly present and then in the same instant is no longer there” (p. 13).

Martin Seel, another post-phenomenological thinker, foregrounds the fundamental uncanniness of art. Martin Seel (2005) says that art is neither real nor unreal, it is “irreal”: “The object of aesthetic perception is never a mere illusion” (p. 62). His explication goes well beyond the question of aesthetics:

There *is* a thing, there *is* a tone, there *is* a movement, there *is* a scene, which in some aspects appear differently from what they really are, and for that reason, among others, they awaken our interest. It is only in real objects that irreal aspects come to appearance. (p. 62)

One may say replacing *aporia* with *aporia* can lead us nowhere. But do we want to go elsewhere than this rigmarole which life *itself* is. Art does the same. Art *is* the same semi opaque *aporia* which life shows itself to be. And, as Steven Connor (2014) puts it, “Interpretation must thereby in some way always deepen the obscurity it dispels, pile up the impediment it removes, incite the difficulty it resolves, infect with the infirmity it cures” (p. 183). Therefore, the paradox needs to be sustained rather than explored.

Impressionism is yet another *aporia* by which literature thrives. And, as a trope, it enjoys natural affinity with the uncanny for its waywardness and penchant for maneuvering the facts. In *The March of Literature from Confucius to Modern Times*, Ford Madox Ford gives the concept of “artistic collage” that galvanizes the impressionistic writing with juxtaposition as one of its key features (as cited in Bender, 1997, p. 44). The uncanny invigorates this juxtapositional tendency of impressionism by supplying its dynamism to it. Juxtaposition as the salient feature of the uncanny is implicit in Freud’s positing of *heimlich* or “homely” against *das unheimliche* or “the unhomely”. This juxtapositional tendency vis-à-vis the uncanny is evident in Freud elsewhere as well. While deciphering the “uncanny, sinister character” of the smile playing on “the strangely beautiful face” of the Florentine Mona Lisa del Giocondo as captured by Leonardo da Vinci in his famous portrait, Freud resorts to juxtaposition of the opposite and finds “in facial expression of this Florentine beauty, the most perfect reflection of the contrasts that dominate the erotic life of women: reserve and

seduction, devoted tenderness and ruthlessly demanding sensuality, which consumes men as if they were alien beings” (Freud, 2003, p. 81–7). No wonder that the impressionistic techniques have been exploited both by Lawrence and by Maugham in the service of the uncanny. Especially, Lawrence’s is “a sensibility saturated in . . . impressionism” (Stewart, 1999, p. 9).

The present study unfurled out of the compulsion to record the efforts to locate the eerie impressions left by two protagonists of uncanny narratives – a secretive child and a guilt-ridden girl. Two diverse writers of the uncanny, D. H. Lawrence and W. Somerset Maugham, end up employing a similar technique based upon juxtaposition of the mundane with the ethereal. “The Book Bag” (1951) by W. Somerset Maugham recounts the narrative of a girl whose equanimity and grace mask her incestuous relationship with her brother. Lawrence’s soul-bewitching narrative “The Rocking-Horse Winner” (1963) captures the obsessions of a child who tries to master luck in order to satisfy his mother’s insatiable need for money. Both narratives chalk out the meandering course of the uncanny. Here the uncanny is in bed with the badness. Nevertheless, the protagonists of these stories are the Serrean “angels” who regardless if for the moment they be “good or bad, a giver or a stealer, chubby *putty* or devils incarnate” never stay their uncanny discourse (Serres, 1995, p. 29). And, in my view, rather than goodness or badness, this omnipresent medial flow is the true origin of the uncanny.

The proximity between the two stories owes a great deal to the adoption of a more or less similar methodology which involves back and forth median movement between normalcy and horror, between the simplicity of diction and the intricacy of plot, between the real and the surreal aspects of characters and objects, besides the usual movement of the plot that hinges upon the more generic devices like ironic reversals. Moreover, these stories appear to corroborate that the uncanny effect in art is proportional to the level of this flux. The more, the merrier!

### III

As I embark upon my present venture, I do so trusting Maugham’s dictum, fully and unreservedly, when he declares, “books about books are profitless,” while himself qualifying, “but they certainly make very pleasant reading” (Maugham, 1951, p. 113). I don’t know how far it’s going to be a “pleasant reading,” if at all, my objective in attempting a critique of these stories has not been as much to unravel the claustrophobic charm of these stories as to reify the experience of the uncanny. So it is neither a work of criticism proper nor can it be called a creative endeavor; it is at best or at its worst a “production of presence,” as Hans Gumbrecht (2004) would have it, projected to tracing the veers of the uncanny (p. III).

One thing that is particularly striking about these two stories is that though the diction seems, persistently, to be tugging at the unknown, always aiming to capture some liminal perception, at no point does it waver from the concrete. Every word has a shade or shadow attached but once you pause to get your mind around it, you seem to find absolutely nothing. This unsatiated curiosity goes on intensifying the processual

obscurity. Apparently, hunger for meanings receives its first shock from the fact that these narratives aim not as much at the universal as at the deviant. Their abiding charm lies essentially in something very local, dated and individual. Each of these stories is built around heightened consciousness. Every single detail is placed in midday light of commonsense and reason until it reaches the climactic point when the rope is suddenly lost in the scorching glare. For instance, in Lawrence's tale, the reason behind every happening from love lost in once cherished matrimony to the dearth of money is so transparently unraveled that, apparently, little is left to the imagination. But that precisely is the trick. As soon as one starts taking things on their face value, the lucid commonplaceness seems to assume a sinister aspect because of the very abundance of it. The matter-of-fact way adopted to give exposition to the story downplays the element of mystery and through the very process builds it up out of an utterly innocuous material. It seems as if vividness is explicitly developed as a technique to shock and awe the reader subsequently. This quality of heightened consciousness and vividness of description that accompanies it goes like this: "There was a woman who was beautiful, who started with all the advantages, yet she had no luck. She married for love, and the love turned to dust. She had bonny children, yet she felt they had been thrust upon her, and she could not love them" (Lawrence, 1963, p. 1).

The upward drift of the consciousness takes the readers to the edge of the abyss only to peep at the gaping void which fascinates while it repels; almost like a suicidal thought. A simultaneous countermovement is set adrift by shifting the focus of the panopticon from outside to the inside. Juggling the outer details with inner cognitions, the writer creates a surreal aspect of the situation. Effortlessly, the story moves between the inner worlds of the mother and the child which are strongly bonded but severely inhibited, and thus severed. Rarely do the two worlds meet, but when they do a strange transaction takes place:

"Mother," said the boy Paul one day, "why don't we keep a car of our own? Why do we always use uncle's, or else a taxi?"

"Because we are the poor members of the family," said the mother.

"But why *are* we, mother?"

"Well - I suppose," she said slowly and bitterly, "it's because your father has no luck." (p. 3)

The results are deep and far reaching. The conversation anchors the mind of the boy in the mire of unrealistic hopes and aspirations. He goes on to ruminate on the odds and ends of this conversation. The churning motion of his thoughts is so intense that his whole being is funneled down the black hole of his overarching desire. "He went off by himself, vaguely, in a childish way, seeking for the clue to "luck". Absorbed, taking no heed of other people, he went about with a sort of stealth, seeking inwardly for the luck. He wanted luck, he wanted it, he wanted it" (p. 4). Besides encapsulating the heightened consciousness of the boy named Paul, these lines betray lucidity of expression. The narrative flows from the start to the end with the meandering motion of a stream and this fluid movement owes much to the spontaneity and ease of dialogue. Lawrence, here, shows his talent for effortless maneuvering of the common speech. For instance, the repetitive jingle of "he wanted luck, he wanted it, he wanted

it” serves to unfold the intensity with which young Paul’s mind obsesses over the question of luck (p. 4).

However, as the whole is greater than the sum of its parts; it is neither this quality of epiphanous consciousness alone nor just the lit up diction that takes us to the primordial depths of human longings wherefrom Lawrence envisages loneliness of human soul. He creates the cumulative atmosphere of mystery that allows for cosmic complexity by agglomerating disparate elements into a unified whole. Making a child central to a tragedy of such proportion is feat enough; giving representative character to his deviant self has but few parallels in fiction. In effect, Lawrence creates a jinx from the jingle of commonplace speech and action.

Still, it is neither sum nor just agglomeration that flavors it with the uncanny. The mother and the child are a long way from any concept of normal family – though such is a possibility only in principle. The primal duo of mother and child is played out against the neuroticism induced by the fetishisation of money. The transformation of duo from any normal pair of mother and son to the victims of obsessive desire is appalling, but they do not fail to hearken back to their schematic roles momentarily – the mother being carried away with “sudden strange seizures of uneasiness about him” and the child consumed by an intense love that only a child can muster (p. 15). It shows that the link with the origin, the schematic and the generic has not been severed yet. Hence, the mental march to the original and simultaneous return to the contingencies of the present evokes that processual obscurity which passes for the uncanny.

Maugham (1951) is not less dexterous in employing colloquialisms to create a rarefied atmosphere of lucidity in his tragic tale. He explores the ramification of common speech from the bole to the fringe. It is his sheer skill that he develops the darkest tragedy without losing the candor of dialogue and at the same time without compromising on its psycho-philosophical freight:

Mark: “You only believe in love at first sight?”

[The narrator:] “Well, I suppose I do, but with the proviso that people may have met twenty times before seeing one another. “Seeing” has an active side and a passive one. Most people we run across mean so little to us that we never bestir ourselves to look at them. We just suffer the impression they make on us”. (p. 1118)

The question arises as to how, without resorting to Gothicism, these stories keep the mind of the reader suspended in an atmosphere of the unrelieved uncanniness.

One can hardly pretend to guess the answer, much less know it. Yet the sense strives to find if only a semblance of it. Much like the legend of Oedipus Rex, the story incidentally taps at the fundamental desire of knowing beyond the unknown; a desire that makes one transgress the laws of nature in the hope of transcending them. But the effect would have been disastrous rather than uncanny, had Maugham not been discerning enough or even nimble enough to pitch us back into the world of the commonplace in which we remain embedded, with an embeddedness that buffers us

from us. Similarly, when Dr. Samuel Johnson (1832) argues, “Nothing can please many, and please long, but just representation of general nature,” he is not simply promoting inane realism, he is pushing for a case in favor of striking a balance between the singular ghostliness of art and the commonality of life (p. 470). And, Maugham manages it well.

Quite in the similar vein goes Lawrence’s allegory about dead hearts that keep it up merely by force of habit. Nature, however, has but more than one facet to it. And in both of these tales, it is the seamy side of human nature that has caught the attention of the prodigies of the modern period. With the tenacity of a voyeur and temerity of a surgeon, Lawrence unravels the tangled skein of the troubled mother-child relationship – a subject whose ramifications reach far and wide on the horizon of selfhood. It is amazing how his tight-lipped description of the mother variously gives the impression variously of an improvident parent, of an unhappy wife doomed in her dysfunctional relationship, of a disappointed female, more so in her desperation to be free in her affections, of an unsuccessful laborer clogged in an unproductive environment, of a bourgeoisie gripped and devastated by the dreams of sophisticated living and social prestige, and above all, of a frustrated individual, disoriented and apathetic, festering with fundamental dissatisfaction with existence. So despite the seeming oddity of the events and banter-like simplicity of the diction, it is the tension inherent in the primal human nature that forms the crux of the story.

As Cleanth Brooks (1947) opines in his essay *The Language of Paradox*, poetry derives its beauty and worth essentially from the paradoxes upon which it moves. The same goes for fiction as far as these two short narratives are concerned. From images to characters and from characters to situations, the artifices of both these stories are built around paradoxes. Besides traditional contrasts like the one between love and hate, Maugham creates newer ones; “... I don’t know anything that is more contrary to love than affection” (p. 118). The biggest paradox of the story is created in the central figure of Olive Hardy. One can hardly find a character filled with greater exuberance of expansive life than the heart-beguiling Olive. Vivacity is the hallmark of the lady with sophisticated tastes and versatile learning. She has got all the colors of rainbow and, in herself, presents the rounded perfection of womanhood. But as Maugham speculates in the first part of the story, “... human beings are incalculable and he is a fool who tells himself that he knows what a man is capable of,” she turns out to be virtual opposite of what she looks like (p. 116). Therefore, the central interest of the story lodges in the paradox of her character that is curious amalgam of gaily freshness of meadows and festering corruption of poisonous marshes.

Lawrence creates a subtler form of paradox in the person of a frustrated mother who feels that her three children are thrust upon her and, therefore, she can’t bring herself to love them. In her anxiety to cover up her lack of love, she is all the more solicitous but hers is an open secret among them – “they read it in each other’s eyes” (p. 1). From this central dichotomy, already dual life of the family develops to a virtual sham. The mother feels no higher calling than keeping up appearances before the society. Absence of gravitational pull in the familial circle creates an unrealistic dynamism in the life of “the young jockey” – a dynamism which brings him unusual

success at the cost of progressive undoing (p. 5). The bubble of affluence bursts as soon as it is created, ending the rigorous efforts of the precocious child in smoke. And, it is precisely this rigmarole situation that informs the entire narrative.

The import of the rocking-horse has an unmistakably surreal aspect. Ghosting of the homely home is spawned through the nuanced description of the locale. The environment of the house is marked by an economic crunch which betrays itself in hushed, unspoken whispers: "There *must* be more money! There *must* be more money!" (Lawrence, 1963, p. 2) The whispers become all the more loud in the hushed atmosphere of wild speculations and anticipations. Although they remain unspoken, they seem to emanate from all directions:

It came whispering from the springs of the still-swaying rocking-horse, and even the horse, bending his wooden, chomping head, heard it. The big doll, sitting so pink and smirking in her new pram, could hear it quite plainly, and seemed to be smirking all the more self-consciously because of it. The foolish puppy, too, that took the place of the teddy bear, he was looking so extraordinarily foolish for no other reason but that he heard the secret whisper all over the house. (p. 42)

The uncanniness with which Lawrence wreaths all these objects is effected through rubbing the real with the surreal. Deft use of audio-visual imagery coupled with suggestive epithets like "foolish" and "smirking" brings about the tension necessary for mastering the uncanny effect. The silent whisper that rings throughout creates a sort of jumpiness in the narrative and begins to tread it with apprehensive steps.

If Lawrence takes pains to excavate spirit of the house, Maugham, in his typical fashion, gropes after the spirit of the character. "Stark materiality of every circumstance" in Maugham that tires Warren Beach elsewhere is brought to happy relief in this most impressionistic of his tales (Beach, 1987, p. 354). Impressionistic mode of character delineation goes well with Maugham's obsessions and peculiarities of temper. He is never content until he has poured his heart out in an extravagant, though largely fitful frenzy. His knack for describing the covert aspect in human personality shows itself in his surmise of Tim that he makes entirely from the nebulous first impression Tim leaves upon him during their uneventful encounter. Perhaps more important than the engaging description is a general statement about the vocation of an artist:

...if you are a writer, instinct and the habits of years enable you to store up impressions that you are not aware of. Sometimes of course they do not correspond with the facts and a woman for example may remain in your sub consciousness as a dark, massive and ox-eyed creature when she is indeed rather small and of a non-descript coloring. But that is of no consequence. The impression may very well be more exact than the sober truth. (Maugham, 1951, p. 1119)

What is more, Maugham, like Conrad as well as Lawrence, remains alive to the feel of the places. In this story, his focus on the *in* aspect of being is all but evident. He provides a complete package to his readers by making impressionistic study of things, places and characters. The brooding depiction of “the tender and yet strangely sinister aspect of the scene” from the verandah of Featherstone’s residency suffices to prove him an impressionistic genius. Churning this wealth of sensory data to emote “a tremulous and dark significance” of the scene and to shade with it the unpretentious aspect of Mark’s character on the one hand, and foreshadowing the unfolding of the events of story on the other, constitute his real feat:

He knew it under every aspect: at dawn when the mist rising from the river shrouded it with a ghostly pall; in the splendor of the noon; and at last when the shadowy gloaming crept softly out of the jungle, like an army making its way with caution in unknown country, and presently enveloped the green lawns and the great flowering trees and the flaunting cassias in the silent night. I wonder whether, unbeknownst to him, the tender and yet strangely sinister aspect of the scene, acting on his nerves and loneliness, imbued him with some mystical quality so that the life he led . . . on occasion seemed to him not quite real. (p. 1115)

After making rather quaint references to his personal habits and situation, and then threading the events of story with them, Maugham brings us right to the launching pad and prepares us for the tumultuous take-off with this juxtaposition. With a characteristic economy of epithets, the background is catapulted to the foreground. The mystery of the unknown is made to juggle with the commonsensical banality of the day-to-day. Yet, unlike that of Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness*, the foreground manages to survive this menace and reserves the catastrophe for the humans.

Despite their unusual import, both the stories are structured on the classical model of *peripety* and *anagnorisis* – a model which entails uncanny import induced by a sudden discovery and the reversal in fortunes attendant upon such a discovery. In fact, “The Rocking-Horse Winner” may as well be described as a journey in realization. Starting from the tense yet matter of fact exposition of musty, stale and disconsolate family environment, the story shifts to a trot when the precocious Paul moves on to make amends for his father’s lack of any luck, finally touching the breakneck speed with Paul galloping out of life in his surreal quest. The epiphany that marks the climax of the story may as well be described as the *anagnorisis* that is followed by delirium and death. In Maugham’s narrative, these devices are employed with greater lucidity. Olive, like Hedda Gabler, ends the story by shooting herself in the head because she would not have a life maimed by emotional loss as well as public scandal. The flux of the story is given impetus by the affective contradictions within the character of Olive. The story condenses in the moment of unfolding of incest and replayed in the mind of the reader in retrospect under the new light – the end taking us back to the origin.

What accounts for the strangely reassuring effect conveyed by the uncanny? As far as “The Book Bag” is concerned, Christopher Isherwood (1987) opines in his preface to the story that its “strangely reassuring” effect can be ascribed mainly to the

smug life lived by the characters after the incidence of tragedy (p. 295). One wishes to believe the verdict of one of the greatest prose stylist of the post war period stoutly and unquestioningly but the feeling recurs that the reassurance granted by the writers of the tragedy – ancient and modern – is not to come from the seemingly all-important end; instead, it emanates from the sturdy life force that precipitates the tragedy by its sheer excess. Similarly, it is Paul’s unflinching spirit of inquiry that is fascinating as well as cathartic; not simply the melodramatic ending of the story. And, therefore, one may say with some certainty that the cathartic effect afforded by these stories emanates from the fine interplay between horrific and normal, which deepens and is deepened by their consequent uncanniness.

When probed under this light, “The Book Bag” features as a class in its own right. The portrait of the heroine is alluring beyond all bounds. Her character is chiseled out of the finest material. She is regal beauty because her composure is such. The turbulence of familial break-up conjoined with living under an improvident guardianship fails to break her dauntless spirit. Quite contrary to her unique circumstance, she masters serenity of temper and largesse of heart unsuspected as such in one placed under constant moral as well as mental duress. The writer tries the hardest to capture the elusive charm of the protagonist. He strings a range of the choicest traits together to give the *feel* of her character; “You felt she was incapable of meanness...She seemed to have a natural generosity of soul,” and that, “One could be silent with her for an hour at a time and yet feel that one had had a good time”, the result being that we have the finest creature before us, though only to stumble from the Olympian heights down to a bottomless abyss (p. 1124). This exquisite rendering of the pre-fall existence of the heroine, all the while heightening the sense of tragedy, serves to reassure the readers about the possibility, howsoever remote, of a happy life unsullied by bad temper or other faults of habit. And it is precisely because of this juxtaposition of the good with the bad, and the swerve of the sympathy that the cumulative effect of the tragic tale is uncanny as well as reassuring.

However, if someone takes this as a formula, Lawrence’s story seems to reject it, out-right. In contrast with the suave existence of Olive, there is little desirable as far as the life of Lawrence’s “young jockey” is concerned (p. 5). The existence of the whole family pictured in “The Rocking-Horse Winner” is centered upon an absolute dearth of real love and a corresponding yearning for something that could cover that gnawing gap up, once and for all. What one thing there might be that would fill up the massive void left by the absence of love? While for the frustrated mother, it is money; for the precocious child, it is the ability to fetch some. Ultimately, it is the imaginative life of the boy that forms the gravitational center of the drama of the story. His soulful quest for something to fill up the existential void becomes the *tour de force* of the story. Without baulking at his insurmountable task, he grapples with the question of luck, might and mien. As reason has yet to take root in his infant mind, his intuitive side becomes active and hunts the bird of fortune down, though not without having to pay the price. The dying boy not only leaves his mother with plenty of money; he bequeaths her the knowledge of what she missed in her all-consuming passion for money. Whatever lesson can be got from this abracadabra of frustrated motherhood and desperate hankering after the unattainable – be it money, luck or sense of self-worth –

it is not reassuring in any real way. The bulk of the reassurance that there is, is to come from the intensely monochromatic quest of the boy which conjugates the body and the soul before sundering them forever. It is he who betrays a clue about the intelligence of the soul. Yet again, somehow like Faustus's story, the soul searching of the kid and its aftermath intertwine the canny cause and the uncanny effect. The nebulosity that attends the continual motion of the mind between body and soul, reality and imagination, the dream and its fulfillment is strangely reassuring for its implicit trust on the uncanny potential of human mind and its capacity to overflow the limits. Hence, the uncanny, along with catharsis, is not simply a by-product of the final gore; it dwells in every aspect of the lived experience presented here.

#### IV

Succinctly put, both the stories unearth dynamics of a life lived with extravagant keenness and red-hot intensity. Their charm lies in the realistic character portrayals that cling to memory and intrude upon the imagination without behest, without even warning. The haunting prospect wedded with the innocuous façade keeps the mind of the reader eddying back and forth by alternating between hindsight and foresight.

A comparative study of sundry tales, howsoever important, may not be enough to force a conclusion but it is hard to deny that art is quintessentially uncanny, and that this uncanny character of art owes its origin to the perpetual oscillation of the subject matter between the realms of fact and fiction. The uncanny is not incidental to art; it is its *sine qua non*. The uncanny is the process which gives birth to all art by creating contrasted planes of existence, and fluctuating the subject between them. The art of the uncanny or any art, indeed, requires the artist to be expert in the act of balancing things out. Yet it is far less a rope-walking trick singly executed than a dynamic equilibrium between imagination and reality set into motion jointly by creative authorship and perceptive readership.

#### References:

- Adorno, T. W. (1973). *Aesthetic theory*. E. B. Ashton (trans.), London: Routledge.
- Badiou, A. (2006). *Being and event*. O. Feltham (trans.), London: Continuum.
- Bender, T. K. (1997). *Literary impressionism in Jean Rhys, Ford Madox Ford, Joseph Conrad, and Charlotte Brontë*. New York: Garland Pub.
- Bhabha, H. K. (1992). The world and the home. *Social text*, (31/32), 141. doi: 10.2307/466222
- Brooks, C. (1947). *The well-wrought urn: Studies in the structure of poetry*. London: Dobson.
- Cixous, H. (2011). Fiction and its phantom: A reading of Freud's *das unheimliche* (The uncanny). *Volleys of humanity: Essays 1972- 2009*, Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, pp. 16–39.
- Coleridge, S. T. (1984). *Kubla Khan*: Project Gutenberg.

- Connor, S. (2014). Spelling things out. *New Literary History*, vol. 45(2), pp. 183-197. Project MUSE, doi:10.1353/nlh.2014.0019.
- Eliot, T. S. (1917). *Prufrock and other observations*. London: The Egoist Ltd.
- Freud, S. (2003). The uncanny. *The uncanny*. In D. McLintock, and H. Haughton (eds.), New York: Penguin, pp. 121-162.
- . "Leonardo Da Vinci." *The Uncanny*, pp. 43-120.
- Gumbrecht, H. U. (2004). *Production of presence: What meaning cannot convey*. Stanford: CA, Stanford UP.
- Hauser, A. (1999). *The social history of art*. 3rd ed. London: Routledge.
- Isherwood, C. (1987). (Selected by). *Great English short stories*. New York: Dell Publishing Co. Inc.
- Johnson, S. (1832). *The works of Samuel Johnson, LL. D.: With an essay on his life and genius*. In A. Murphy (ed.). New York: G. Dearborn.
- Lawrence, D. H. (1963). *Selected tales*. In I. Serrailier (ed.), London: Heinemann.
- Masschelein, A. (2011). *The unconcept: The Freudian uncanny in late-twentieth-century theory*. Albany: SUNY.
- Maugham, W. S. (1951). *The complete short stories of W. Somerset Maugham*. Vol. 3. London: Heinemann.
- Seel, M. (2005). *Aesthetics of appearing*. Stanford: CA, Stanford UP.
- Serres, M. (1995). *Angels, a modern myth*. Paris: Flammarion.
- Stewart, J. (1999). *The vital art of D.H. Lawrence: Vision and expression*. Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press.
- Toumayan, A. (2004). *Encountering the other: The artwork and the problem of difference in Blanchot and Levinas*. Pittsburgh: PA, Duquesne University Press.
- Warren Beach, J. (1987). Maugham considers mystics. *W Somerset Maugham: The critical heritage*. In A. Curtis and J. Whitehead (eds.), London: Routledge and Kegan Paul.
- Withy, K. (2015). *Heidegger on being uncanny*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.