

## THIS SMALL PLACE BY GRAHAM SWIFT: AN EXAMPLE OF SIGMUND FREUD'S UNCANNY

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*Abstract:*The purpose of this paper is to examine Graham Swift's poem "This Small Place" from the perspective of Sigmund Freud's theory of the uncanny. According to Freud, the feeling of something uncanny comes from a subconscious memory of a past experience. The world that is getting smaller in Swift's poem can refer to something which at first is unfamiliar. "The world is big enough" suggests a place where we can easily be frightened and lost and which later, as Freud's theory claims, is restrained, and becomes familiar: "this small place, close to hand". The feeling of uncanniness comes from situations when something is repeated. Swift's poem can be interpreted as claiming that both our perspective on the whole world, and our attitude towards life in general, are shaped by our first years of life and how we have been raised. What happens in our childhood years has later effects on our psychology. How does the use of the uncanny relate to the use of experimentalism and innovation in contemporary poetry?

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The term uncanny refers to the feeling we get when we see something we had long forgotten and no longer recognize. What we experience as unfamiliar, according to Freud, is in fact a memory that has been forgotten and that we preserve in our unconscious:

For Freud, the uncanny is thus precisely a belated revelation of something the mind has kept a secret from itself: the "secret and hidden" (1919a, p. 224) is somehow familiar (we have experienced it before in some form) and so it is *heimlich*; but because it has come to light unexpectedly (and in some deferred way) it also has the quality of the *unheimlich*. (Barnaby 2015: 985)

Thus, we can experience what we no longer recognize in a new form, which we interpret as a fresh experience. This is reminiscent of defamiliarization, which Viktor Shklovsky of the Formalist school describes as an every-day occurrence experienced from a fresh perspective.

In Graham Swift's poem, *This Small Place*, the sudden transformation that is suggested in the first two lines: "The world is big enough,/ Though getting smaller, they say" (Swift 2009) brings to mind Freud's concept of the uncanny. These two lines suggest that our perspective is narrowing, in that we refocus from the large perspective to a specific, detailed point. By doing this, we move from unfamiliar to familiar, from the large world where we feel lost to a familiar ground, where we feel at home in familiar surroundings: "this small place, close to hand" (Swift 2009). This whole process seems in line with Freud's idea that something unfamiliar can, after

careful analysis, prove to be a very familiar situation, if we find it in memory. When he refers to “This place of small talk and whispers and memories/ And small mercies and blessings,/ And small comfort, true enough, sometimes,” Swift (2009) suggests a place that reminds the reader of a warm home: familiar surroundings where anyone might feel at ease. The atmosphere suggested is one of familiarity, not of the unknown, as was the one suggested by the image of the big enough world in the beginning of the poem. Freud also suggests the opposition between unfamiliar and familiar, and the gradual change from the former to the latter through remembrance: “It may be true that the uncanny is nothing else than a hidden, familiar thing that has undergone repression and then emerged from it, and that everything that is uncanny fulfills this condition.” (Freud 1919: 15) The title of Swift’s poem suggests the expression: “What a small world,” which we utter when, after many years of not keeping in touch, we recognize someone we knew long ago. Such situations also bring to mind the uncanny: at first, the respective person is someone we do not know, but when they ask if we remember them, suddenly a memory is sparked and we remember. The small world could be connected with the home, as in the example below of the uncanny in a dream, when something else is associated with a particular place or situation:

*A patient dreamed about the name of an author, Thomas B. Costain, which he believed at first to be a fictitious dream concoction. In fact, all his initial associations dealt with this dream inclusion as if it had no connection to reality. When he later Googled the name, he was surprised to uncannily discover that the “fictitious” name was in fact the real name of a moderately well-known author. His subsequent discovery—that one of the author’s books, The Silver Chalice, “re-minded” him of silver paper chalices that his father used to make for him as a child—jolted him further. This revived repression of not only the author’s name, but also of its significant connection to repressed genetic memories, filled him with a sense of awe, as though he had suddenly been awakened from a hypnotic spell. (Mahon 2012: 713)*

Observing the reflections on the small place of memories, the world that is big enough, we immediately draw a connection with the cosy atmosphere of a home, where what we find is enough for us. We find ourselves in a familiar world, in a familiar universe, where we have everything we need. The parallel creates ambiguity between the world that is big enough and the personal universe of anyone’s home, and functions according to Jentsch’s concept of story telling:

[...] one of the most successful devices for easily creating uncanny effects is to leave the reader in uncertainty whether a particular figure in the story is a human being or an automaton, and to do it in such a way that his attention is not focused directly upon his uncertainty, so that he may not be led to go into the matter and clear it up immediately. (Jentsch 1906: 13).

In a similar way, in this poem, Swift plays with the automatic associations of any reader between world and home, between external reality and personal world, between a large world and a small, private, personal space that is cosy enough to call home. We could think of explorers from the past, for instance of Columbus, and of the colonizers. We could also think of the way any human being grows up and discovers the world, moving from the closed universe of the home, of the

family, towards the larger context, discovering other places or persons which are not always kind-hearted, other situations where they are not treated well.

In *Virginia Woolf and Graham Swift: The Lyrical Novel* (2014), I noted similarities between Virginia Woolf's and Graham Swift's work in their use of moments of vision. In reading the poem *This Small Place* by Graham Swift, we must look at the moments of vision from a different perspective. In these moments of vision both Woolf and Swift refer to elements which bring to mind the uncanny.

In *A Letter to a Young Poet*, Woolf states the following:

[...] let your rhythmical sense wind itself in and out among men and women, omnibuses, sparrows — whatever come along the street — until it has strung them together in one harmonious whole. That perhaps is your task — to find the relation between things that seem incompatible yet have a mysterious affinity, to absorb every experience that comes your way fearlessly and saturate it completely so that your poem is a whole, not a fragment; to re-think human life into poetry and so give us tragedy again and comedy by means of characters not spun out at length in the novelist's way, but condensed and synthesized in the poet's way—that is what we look to you to do now. (Woolf 1942)

In my 2014 book, *Virginia Woolf and Graham Swift: The Lyrical Novel*, I explained that Woolf was referring to moments of vision, judging by her description of how disparate elements may be drawn together into a coherent whole. Re-reading the fragment from the perspective of the theory of the uncanny, the phrase “to find the relation between things that seem incompatible yet have a mysterious affinity” (Woolf 1942), brings to mind the associations triggered by forgotten memory in the experience of something as unfamiliar. The “mysterious affinity” comes from the process of repression. We also often have associations with things we cannot initially remember, as we have seen in the example of the dream presented by Mahon (2012: 713). In my 2014 book, I interpreted the moments of vision as just one of the features which Woolf and Swift adopted from the Romantic poets. The role of the artist is the same as that of the romantic poet: to offer the world a new vision of reality. This role finds its parallel in the experience of the uncanny. We could say that the new vision of reality brought about by poetic experiences is created both through moments of being and through the experience of the uncanny. However, it seems that moments of vision also contain some elements of the uncanny, as suggested by “the mysterious affinity” and the associations “between things that seem incompatible” (Woolf 1942). When moments of being make reality look fresh, and we see it from a new perspective, we could also reflect on the uncanny. Perhaps we find something new in these moments, yet if we search our memories and associations, we might realize that what we see as surprising is, in fact, surprisingly familiar.

Swift also offers us his own moments of vision, which are similar to Woolf's. Graham Swift, like Virginia Woolf in *Moments of Being: Autobiographical Writings*, has a series of autobiographic writings in which he connects his memories to the way he understands writing. Swift explains the way he views novel writing in *Making an Elephant: Writing from Within*, a collection of non-fiction writing and interviews. In *Sketch of the Past*, Woolf remembers moments in her childhood at St Yves. In *Making an Elephant*, Swift remembers the event of an inoculation, which he compares to fiction. Swift claims that “Fiction is also a kind of inoculation, a vaccine, preserving us from such plagues as reality can breed.” (Swift 2009: 11). In *Sketch of the Past*, Woolf talks about moments of being and moments of non-being. Moments of being are

very special for the person experiencing them, while moments of non-being are routine incidents. Woolf believes that there is some pattern hidden behind daily life. Swift also believes that “fiction – storytelling – is a magical thing.” (Swift 2009: 11). Moments of being make a story special. Swift invites us to recall “being under a story’s ‘spell’” (Swift 2009: 12), claiming that “the power of a good story is a primitive, irreducible mystery that answers to some need deep in human nature” (Swift 2009: 12). Like Woolf, Swift suggests that there are special moments in fiction which appeal to readers. Readers may experience certain stories as “magic” or as special. What Woolf calls “moments of being” are experienced intensely. For Swift, stories can express a hidden truth, a revelation:

The real magic (if that expression is legitimate) of fiction goes much deeper than a few sprinklings of hocus-pocus, but we know when it’s there and we feel its tingle in the spine. There can even be something magical about the perfectly judged and timed revelation on the page of an unanswerable truth we already inwardly acknowledge. In good fiction, without any trickery, truth and magic aren’t incompatible at all. (Swift 2009:13)

According to Swift, therefore, stories draw attention to moments of vision. Readers experience moments of vision while reading a novel. Behind the magic of moments of vision in Woolf and Swift there are associations and repressed memories of the uncanny. What we experience as unique could be something familiar which we experience with great intensity since we subconsciously associate it with a forgotten wish. Special and magic moments trouble us since we do not recognize them consciously, but unconsciously there is something we associate with the present incident. What we experience as special and magic is something we have experienced a long time ago in another form. We could draw a parallel with dreams, where what we dream about is a disguised experience. If we wish to interpret the dream, we need to make associations and see what the images in the dream actually stand for.

The line in the poem *This Small Place* “We’ve come back, only half meaning to” (Swift 2009) suggests a process of introspection and of associations. The coming back, by “only half meaning to” suggests the process of repression in the experience of the uncanny. The familiar, disguised as unfamiliar, strikes us as a magical, extraordinary experience. We remember, as we make associations. Perhaps we have not consciously wished to remember something, yet our minds take us there.

It is worth considering Graham Swift’s style of poetry in relation to his prose. In his novels, he combines narrative mode with lyrical mode; he does the same in this poem. The poem sounds like prose, yet it uses the symbols and figurative language associated with poetry. Woolf also combines lyricism with narrative. Similarities with Swift’s poem come from the association of place with lyricism. In Drobot (2014), place is associated with lyricism, and is interpreted as being a pretext for it. Places in Woolf’s novels almost always have lyrical value. In some of her novels, Woolf quotes lines from certain poems as part of the narrative. Such insertions of verse (instances of the lyrical mode) into prose (narrative mode) serve to highlight lyricism. Place is composed not only of the physical location, but also of a certain atmosphere. In *Mrs. Dalloway*, two lines from *Cymbeline* are found in the lyrical monologues of both Clarissa and Septimus: “Fear no more the heat o’ the sun/ Nor the furious winter’s rages.” These lines appear when Clarissa or Septimus thinks about death. Sometimes they are quoted directly, sometimes they are only alluded to. In Swift, there are lyrical scenes which work in parallel with other literary

works, with respect to their lyrical atmosphere. In *Unwin*, the parallels with other literary texts are made explicit. Characters are aware of the parallels and mention them directly in the story's presentation. In this respect, such intertextual references are instances of metafiction. The lyrical atmosphere is created for the reader, who will apply the poetic part of the previous writings and include them in her building of the lyrical atmosphere in Swift's novels. Something else happens in the creating of lyrical atmosphere. Characters must sympathize with other characters in order to identify with them. The reader does the same and also applies the grid offered by texts from past literature to understand the connection between the scenes in previous writings and the atmosphere in Swift. The lyrical atmosphere in the scenes in Swift's writings will become clearer to the reader. Intertextual references, as well as mixture of lyrical and narrative mode, are features associated with Postmodernism. At the same time, the parallels with other texts can be interpreted as associations in the experience of the uncanny. The associative process here is made clearer, however. The parallels between texts are clear, as we have all read Shakespeare. In Swift's poem we can only speculate; yet, we can easily recognize the process followed by memory in the experience of the uncanny.

Graham Swift uses the uncanny as a feature of what we call moments of vision. He uses the process of associations clearly, as we can see in his prose, and less directly in his poem *This Small Place*.

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