ESLJ
THE EDINBURGH STUDENT LITERARY JOURNAL

"Haunt me, then!":

Haunting as Symbolic Survival in the Gothic Literary Consciousness

Olivia Whitelaw

August 2023

"I have a strong faith in ghosts; I have a conviction that they can, and do exist, among us!"

(Brontë, 289)

Of all prospective tropes, perhaps none has proven more enticing to Gothic narratives than the *haunting*. To interpret how this trope figures within Gothic literature, my research will deploy the methodology of Sigmund Freud's 1919 essay *The "Uncanny",* applying its criteria to Emily Brontë's *Wuthering Heights* (1847)*,* Virginia Woolf's *Street Haunting: A London Adventure* (1930)*,* and Daphne du Maurier's *Rebecca* (1938). With assistance from Jacques Derrida's theory of "Hauntology" (1994), I will investigate three distinct ways in which Freud's uncanny aids the interpretation of these Gothic narratives of haunting. Firstly, I will consider the uncanny metamorphic potential of the spectre, resisting extinction by manifesting in that which is typically inanimate. Secondly, I will consider the uncanny doubling of the spectre as a means of self-preservation. And, finally, I will consider the uncanny potential of the imagination to invoke the spectre and facilitate haunting; concluding in affirmation of Ross' statement that "[d]eath is not so decisive that it cannot be escaped. Death is, it turns out, a matter of perspective" (177).

Wuthering Heights facilitates an uncanny topographical haunting. In its limited geographies—the moors, Thrushcross Grange, and Wuthering Heights—the novel advocates that "in human experience, places have a spiritual and emotional component in addition to a physical layout and topography" (Houston, qtd. in Brazzelli, 230). As such, locations harbour a fourth dimension within which the spatiotemporal constraints of realism can be deconstructed through the uncanny evocation of the supernatural. Particularly fruitful to this discussion is Derrida's model of Hauntology, which is configured, "as Derrida says, by individuals speaking to and as ghosts and [...] respecting the world of spectral temporality and subjectivity that constitutes the realm of those non-corporeal entities who [...] represent our world's capacity for fluidity and non-stasis" (Derrida, qtd. in Price, 46). Conjoining the work of Derrida and Freud, Price advocates that "Freudian uncanniness and Derridean spectrality can [...] be regarded as sharing in common the features of haunting" (39). To

consider Derrida's hauntology within the framework of Freud's uncanny, then, Freud proposes that "[m]any people experience the [uncanny] feeling in the highest degree in relation to […] the return of the dead, and to spirits and ghosts" (241). By channelling the deceased through its landscapes—dematerialising a physical presence and rematerializing it in nature—*Wuthering Heights* and *Rebecca* render inextricable from their landscapes the spectral presence of those who have previously inhabited them. Setting the precedent for this theory is Woolf, who writes, "[i]t is always an adventure to enter a new room for the lives and characters of its owners have distilled their atmosphere into it, and directly we enter it we breast some new wave of emotion" (Woolf). It is through this "emotional component" of localities that *Wuthering Heights* facilitates the haunting of Catherine Earnshaw. Lockwood, visited by the spectre of Catherine, recalls her "voice sobbing, 'Let me in—let me in!' […] 'I'm come home, I'd lost my way on the moor!'" (Brontë, 25). As the origin site of Catherine and Heathcliff's eternal bond— "it was one of their chief amusements to run away to the moors" (Brontë, 46)—the moors retrace Catherine's historical footprint, conjuring up her image posthumously in the localities to which her soul is "bound by a sense of attachment to place" (Brazzelli, 241). Consequently, Freud's sense of uncanniness in the 'return of the dead' is embodied. This is the only "physical" sighting of Catherine. As the narrative progresses, Catherine instead comes to personify the moors—reduced not to a direct incarnation of her human body, but a spectral entity, which is intangible but nonetheless present, as "[her] spectre showed a spectre's ordinary caprice; it gave no sign of being; but the snow and wind whirled wildly through, even reaching my station, and blowing out the light" (Brontë, 28-9). By evoking Catherine in the unyielding, naturalistic energy of the moors, *Wuthering Heights* preserves her spirit; facilitating its immortality—her existence as real as the landscape it haunts.

In her essay *Street Haunting*: *A London Adventure*, Woolf explores a similar form of haunting; the uncanny ability of the past to haunt the present. Primarily, Woolf implicates the historical persistence of objects, attesting, "we sit surrounded by objects which perpetually express the oddity of our own temperaments and enforce the memories of our own experience" (Woolf). Objects, thus, carry the potential to invoke the past: to, like *Wuthering Heights'* landscapes, conjure up Freud's uncanny spectre. Such is the case of *Rebecca*, as du Maurier's narrator locates the presence of her predecessor, Rebecca, in every corner of her home, Manderley. Intertwined with Manderley are Woolf's "objects"—diegetic carriers of the past which, in the case of *Rebecca*, arouse the spectre of their owner. When the narrator is gifted with a book of poetry, she finds within its contents that "the name Rebecca stood out black and strong" (du Maurier, 36). Subsequently, she then mistakenly pockets a handkerchief, embroidered on which "there was a monogram [...] A tall sloping R" (du Maurier, 132). Horner and Zlosnik offer the perspective that such occurrences establish "the metonymic representation of [Rebecca's] body through the text, indelibly inscribing her presence" (Horner and Zlosnik, qtd. in Munford, 122-3). In such instances, Freud locates the uncanny in "th[e] factor of involuntary repetition which surrounds what would otherwise be innocent enough with an uncanny atmosphere, and forces upon us the idea of something fateful and inescapable when otherwise we should have spoken only of 'chance'" (237). Through the intermittent reminders of Rebecca, we begin to envision her spectre as the orchestrator of action—placing throughout Manderley clues of her presence which the narrator is destined to find. Rebecca, too, retains a posthumous presence at Manderley through Mrs Danvers, whose input "in the novel is uncanny—she is an "other" who blurs the boundaries between life and death, a ghostly shadowy figure who keeps the memory of the dead Rebecca alive" (Petersen, 59). In her provocations that "I feel [Rebecca] everywhere. You do too don't you?" and "[d]o you think the dead come back and watch the living?" (du

Maurier, 194), Mrs Danvers attempts to open the narrator's mind to the possibility of literal, diegetic haunting; aware that Rebecca only exists insofar as the narrator puts subjective stake in her.

In her attempt, thus, to uninvest in Rebecca, the narrator reinforces the uncanny, which, as Freud attests, comes from "something repressed which *recurs*" (241). Though the narrator makes attempt to stifle the spectral image of Rebecca, willing, "I must not think of [her]. Put [her] away [...] I must never think about [her], never, never, never" (du Maurier, 63), Rebecca nonetheless returns, as the narrator proclaims, "Rebecca, always Rebecca. Wherever I walked in Manderley, wherever I sat, even in my thoughts and in my dreams, I met Rebecca" (du Maurier, 261-2). The inextinguishable presence, thus, of Rebecca, encompasses all aspects of the narrator's world—she is utterly inescapable. To similar ends does Catherine haunt Heathcliff, who remarks, "What does not recall [Catherine]? [...] In every cloud, in every tree—filling the air at night, and caught by glimpses in every object, by day I am surrounded with her image! [...] The entire world is a dreadful collection of memoranda that she did exist" (Brontë, 324). Thusly, Catherine and Rebecca behold uncanny capabilities of metamorphosis—rendering their spectral presence in ways which resist definitive death. Essential to the uncanny, argues Freud, is the "primitive fear of the dead" (242). Such fears, Freud attests, stem from "the strength of our original emotional reaction to death and the insufficiency of our scientific knowledge about it" (242). Our limited understanding, thus, of death, produces a key component of the uncanny, what Freud terms "intellectual uncertainty" (221). In evocation of the spectre, Woolf metaphorizes: "We are in danger of digging deeper than the eye approves; we are impeding our passage down the smooth stream by catching at some branch or root [...] Let us dally a little longer, be content still with surfaces only" (Woolf). Here, Woolf maps the resistance of humankind to the type of uncanny which provokes intellectual uncertainty: we wish for a definitive, classifiable existence. It is this

very provocative uncanny which is deployed in *Wuthering Heights* and *Rebecca*, surrounding the tangibility of the spectre. The uncanny, in these instances, depends upon the spectre's material ambiguity and ability to transcend boundaries of reality.

For Catherine, her ability to withstand definitive death renders her intrinsically uncanny. Within the framework of Freud's 'uncanny double'—whereby "the subject identifies himself with someone else, so that he is in doubt as to which his self is" (Freud, 234)— Catherine and Heathcliff double their identities, forming a singular, preternatural entity which resists death. To achieve this immortality, Catherine implicates the enduring soul-connection of herself and Heathcliff, who is "more myself than I am. Whatever our souls are made of, his and mine are the same" (Brontë, 81). In further assertation that "[i]f all else perished, and he remained, I should still continue to be" (Brontë, 82), Catherine destabilizes "death" as a definitive category. By living posthumously, vicariously through Heathcliff, Catherine enforces Ross' statement that "[d]eath is not so decisive that it cannot be escaped. Death is, it turns out, a matter of perspective" (Ross, 177). The amalgamated entity of Catherine and Heathcliff produces Freud's intellectual uncertainty, undermining faith in a linear afterlife. While "religions continue to dispute the [...] undeniable fact of [...] death and to postulate a life after death" (Freud, 242), Catherine and Heathcliff embody the double as "an energetic denial of the power of death" (Rank, qtd in Freud, 235). Like Brontë, Woolf considers the potential of fragmented consciousnesses, postulating, "[what if] [i]nto each of these lives one could penetrate a little way, far enough to give oneself the illusion that one is not tethered to a single mind, but can put on briefly for a few minutes the bodies and the minds of others[?]" (Woolf). Coinciding with *Wuthering Heights'* double, Woolf experiments with the similar potential of the soul to transmute, and persist, through the bodies of those living. Woolf, here, does not deploy the uncanny strictly in aid of the Gothic. Instead, Woolf advocates haunting as a Romantic uniting of humankind, similar to the ends to which Catherine and Heathcliff

embody the uncanny double; their ambition more Romantic than Gothic. For Catherine and Heathcliff, their inextricable existences are a testament to their enduring love. Somewhat paradoxically, this type of Romantic love depends upon the uncanny to exist. Colvin implicates the grave, for Catherine and Heathcliff, as "the site of transcendence" (388). Upon her marriage to Edgar Linton, Catherine is unable to remain at the Heights; her and Heathcliff's Gothic sanctuary. Finding no realist locality to facilitate her and Heathcliff's connection, Catherine embodies "[a] craving for transcendence, which occupies a liminal space mid-way between traditional dichotomies of life and death" (Brazzelli, 245). Unable to truly "live" among the living, Catherine and Heathcliff turn to "the grave […] not necessarily as a place of separation, but [...] as a sensualised and even yearned-for site of erotic union" (Colvin, 385). *Wuthering Heights*, thus, facilitates the deconstruction of spatiotemporal categories—of "living" and "dead"—establishing a limbo between the two by which the uncanny can be liberated from its realist constraints.

Another such realm is figured in *Rebecca*: the imagination. Castle implicates "the emergence of an altogether different kind of apparition, one that belongs to the inner world of the mind" (Castle, qtd. in Munford, 121) Regarding its narrative, *Rebecca* affords the reader two prospective interpretations: 1) to suspend disbelief and read Rebecca as a "real" ghost; or, 2) to read Rebecca as a spectral manifestation of the narrator's obsessive thoughts. My forthcoming analysis will evidence the latter reading, illuminating the capabilities of limerence—a form of obsessive thinking categorised by its compulsive infatuation with the object of its fascination—to conjure up a palpable spectre. As such limerence in *Rebecca* stems from the desire of the narrator to embody the qualities of Rebecca which she herself lacks, Rebecca is afforded presence as the imaginative manifestation of "all the unfulfilled but possible futures [...] we still like to cling in phantasy, all the strivings of the ego which

adverse external circumstances have crushed" (Freud, 236). To locate exactly which traits of Rebecca's the narrator desires, the following passage is invaluable:

> I got up and went to the looking-glass. A face stared back at me that was not my own. It was very pale, very lovely, framed in a cloud of dark hair [...] The face in the glass stared back at me and laughed. And I saw then that [...] Maxim was brushing [Rebecca's] hair. He held her hair in his hands, and as he brushed it he wound it slowly into a thick rope. It twisted like a snake, and he took hold of it with both hands and smiled at Rebecca and put it round his neck (du Maurier, 426).

In this dream sequence, the narrator evokes the image of Rebecca as her own—making use of "the connections which the 'double' has with reflections in mirrors" (Freud, 235)—and indulging in the possibilities of a subversive, though unattainable, version of womanhood which usurps patriarchal rule. What begins as a vision of domestic bliss—"Maxim was brushing [Rebecca's] hair"—transpires into an uncanny abstraction of domesticity, when Maxim "took hold of [her hair] [...] and put it round his neck" (426). Summoning Rebecca as a figure of empowerment, an emboldened alter-ego, Petersen values the imaginative doubling of the narrator with Rebecca, arguing that "[the] only escape from the basic social necessity of marriage and the domestic horror of confinement is through her imagination" (57). Just as Catherine and Heathcliff are empowered by the "transcendent" grave, so too is du Maurier's narrator empowered by her limerent evocation of Rebecca.

Somewhat problematically, du Maurier's narrator attempts, once more, to repress the spirit of Rebecca, placating Maxim by claiming, "Rebecca is dead. She can't speak, she can't bear witness. She can't harm you any more" (du Maurier, 316). *Rebecca's* denouement, however, disproves this claim. To place this argument in a Hauntological framework, Derrida asserts that the spectre "begins by coming back" (Derrida, qtd. in Munford, 125). Though the narrative concludes with the burning of Manderley, "the ashes blew towards us with the salt

wind from the sea" (du Maurier, 428), the presence of Rebecca resists eradication, afforded immortality through the novel's circular structure, which begins again with the narrator's opening line: "Last night I dreamt I went to Manderley again" (du Maurier, 1). Freud's uncanny 'return of the dead' thus, is facilitated within the very fabric of the novel. By beginning after its end, *Rebecca* keeps the spectre perpetually alive in memory. Just as the narrator "could swear that the house was not an empty shell but lived and breathed as it had lived before" (du Maurier, 3), so too was Rebecca never *really* gone.

To the uncanny potential of the imagination, Freud attributes "the over-accentuation of psychical reality in comparison with material reality" (244). Particularly, what he terms the "omnipotence of thoughts" (Freud, 240); thoughts which, through imaginative obsession, seem to materialise in reality. Forming a limerent fixation on the journals of Catherine, Lockwood attests to "a glare of white letters start[ing] from the dark, as vivid as spectres—the air swarmed with Catherines" (Brontë, 19-20). Putting faith in Freud's omnipotence of thoughts, Lockwood determines that "reading [Catherine's name] often over produced an impression which personified itself when I had no longer my imagination under control" (Brontë, 28). While such potential of omnipotent thoughts is, to Lockwood, frighteningly uncanny, for Heathcliff, it is a welcomed means with which to reconjure the presence of Catherine. In fact, Heathcliff wills the uncanny omnipotence of thoughts, pleading to Catherine, "haunt me, then! [...] Be with me always—take any form—drive me mad!" (Brontë, 169). In Heathcliff's case, his desire transpires, as he "so certainly [...] felt that Cathy was there, not under [him], but on the earth" (Brontë, 290). Here, Freud's omnipotence of thought undermines its own uncanniness; providing Heathcliff with a paradoxical comfort in its ability to invoke the image of his lover. In reference to this example, Ross claims that "this is not Derrida's "hauntology" [...] Catherine is not a spectral remnant of the past who belongs in her grave [...] this is not "mourning," but a living form of

love" (176). Problematising this statement, Ross further claims that "[t]he novel does not make Catherine and Heathcliff's love prescriptive or programmatic: he cannot love her back to life" (178). The contention between Ross' statements perfectly encapsulates the nuanced intangibility of the preternatural realm which the spectre inhabits, within which they are both too living to be dead, and too dead to be living. Arising, thus, is the question of subjectivity which lies at the heart of the uncanny. By collaboration of Freud's omnipotence of thoughts and intellectual uncertainty, the spectre is, ultimately, an indiscernible entity—neither belonging nor unbelonging to the material world, forever chained to the uncanny realm of limbo.

Conclusively, Freud's methodology of the "uncanny" is invaluable to the interpretation of one of Gothic literature's most prevalent tropes: *haunting*. In exploration of the various forms which haunting takes in the narratives of Brontë, Woolf, and du Maurier, my analysis has considered how the uncanny underpins haunting at every level. Most intrinsically, through its entanglement with the (un)dead, or spectre, and on more complex levels, through its criteria of intellectual uncertainty and omnipotence of thoughts, by means of which haunting destabilizes faith in an objective reality. Returning, then, to Ross' initial claim that death "is a matter of perspective" (177), Freud's theory of the uncanny, in all its elusive intangibility, advocates perhaps a futile conclusion: that the spectre is in the eye of the beholder.

Works Cited

Brazzelli, Nicolette. 'Trespassing Boundaries in Wuthering Heights: Geographical and Environmental Perspectives' in *Annali di Ca' Foscari. Serie occidentale*. No. 55, Edizioni Ca Foscari, Venice University Press, 2021, pp. 229-248. DOI: http://doi.org/10.30687/AnnOc/2499-1562/2021/09/005. Accessed 20 April 2022.

Brontë, Emily. *Wuthering Heights*. edited by Pauline Nestor, Penguin Random House UK, 2003.

Colvin, Kathryn. 'Sepulchral Sensuality and Heretical Heavens in Wuthering Heights and Romeo and Juliet' in *Brontë Studies: Journal of the Brontë Society*. Vol. 46, Issue 4, 2021, pp. 382-394. DOI: https://doi-org.ezproxy.is.ed.ac.uk/10.1080/02626667.2021.1952779. Accessed 20 April 2022.

Derrida, Jacques. *Spectres of Marx: The State of the Debt, the Work of Mourning and the New International*. Routledge, 1994.

Du Maurier, Daphne. *Rebecca*. Virago Modern Classics, Great Britain: Virago Press, 2015.

Freud, Sigmund. 'The "Uncanny"' in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*. Translated and edited by James Strachey, et al. Vol. XVII, 1919, London: The Hogarth Press, pp. 217-256

Munford, Rebecca. ‘Spectral Femininity’ in *Women and the Gothic: An Edinburgh Companion*. edited by Avril Horner and Sue Zlosnik, Edinburgh University Press, 2016, pp. 120-134.

Petersen, Teresa. ‘Daphne du Maurier’s Rebecca: The Shadow and the Substance’ in *Journal of the Australasian Universities Language and Literature Association*. Vol. 2009, Issue 112, 2009, pp. 53-66, DOI: https://doi.org/10.1179/000127909804775650. Accessed 20 April 2022.

Price, Graham. ‘Spectres and (Queer) Spectrality in Wuthering Heights and Portia Coughlan’ in *Irish Studies Review*. Vol. 30, Issue 1, 2022, pp. 35-48. DOI: https://doi-org.ezproxy.is.ed.ac.uk/10.1080/09670882.2022.2035871. Accessed 20 April 2022.

Ross, Sarah. ‘Wuthering Heights and the Work of Loving One Dead’ in *Victorians: A Journal of Culture and Literature*. No. 134, Ohio State University Press, 2018, pp. 166-180. *Project MUSE*, doi:10.1353/vct.2018.0016. Accessed 20 April 2022.

Woolf, Virginia. ‘Street Haunting: A London Adventure’ in *The Death of the Moth, and Other Essays*. Project Gutenberg Australia, October 2012, eBook No: 1203811h.html. Available at: https://gutenberg.net.au/ebooks12/1203811h.html#ch-06