

Chopping down a Beanstalk? Freud's concept of the (Un-)Uncanniness of the Fairy Tale

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Abstract

This article examines the fairy tale and its relationship to Freud's theory of the uncanny, which, in his essay 'The Uncanny'¹, he defines as everything that should 'have remained secret and hidden but has come to light' and links to infantile complexes (Freud 1997: 200). Regarding fiction, Freud claims that all kinds of fiction can create the uncanny except for fairy tales. Through a close reading of Freud's theoretical essay and by including literary criticism on the fairy tale, the article takes a closer look at the fairy tale and at what Freud thinks is impossible: its potential to create moments of the uncanny.

The discussion of uncanny elements in fiction and the relationship between reality and fiction demonstrates that Freud's essay shows inconsistencies concerning genre. Freud even misuses the term when he is speaking of Hauff's fairy tale 'The Story of the Severed Hand'. The discussion of genre leads to Jack Zipes, who supports a broader definition of the fairy tale and categorises fairy tales as being uncanny, as he considers the reading experience uncanny, and Lucie Armitt, who focuses on the child's reading experience and considers Freud's reading of fairy tale and fantasy literature to be 'blinkerered', amongst others. The article will then show that the concept of the deceiving adult, the adult who is aware of the uncanniness of fairy tales to which he consciously introduces the child, should not be neglected. This is similar to Freud's own idea of the author who betrays the reader and 'deceives us by promising to give us the sober truth, and then after all overstepping it' (Freud 1997: 223). While these critics appear to be partially contradicting Freud's claim that the fairy tale is 'un-uncanny', this is not, in fact, the case: no argument of these critics has the power to invalidate either Freud's argument or that of the others. No critic argues against Freud's concept of the uncanny, they rather add another perspective.

The story 'Jack and the Beanstalk' is offered as an example to prove these points. I argue that the ogre and his wife, whom Jack tries to steal, can be seen as personifications of, respectively, the feared father-figure and the loved mother-figure, both key elements of the oedipal complex discussed by Freud, so that when the adult reader is confronted by the figures, he is reminded of his infantile experiences, hitherto repressed, as he reads or rereads the fairy tale and thus experiences a sense of the uncanny. Including literary criticism on

¹ First published in 1919 under the title 'Das Unheimliche'.

genre and on the author-text-reader communication model, I suggest that ‘chopping down a beanstalk’ might not have anything to do with either an axe or a plant.

Keywords: Freud, psychoanalysis, the uncanny, fairy tale, Jack and the Beanstalk, reading experience.