

# The uncanny and the oedipus complex critical thinking

[Law](#), [Criminal Justice](#)



The uncanny, a concept coined by Freud, postulates that something can be both familiar and foreign to someone - if something is uncanny, it is recognizable, yet alien. " An uncanny effect is often and easily produced by effacing the distinction between imagination and reality, such as when something that we have hitherto regarded as imaginary appears before us in reality, or when a symbol takes over the full function and significance of the thing it symbolizes" (Freud 15). When someone looks at something they find uncanny, they are paradoxically attracted to and drawn away from that thing simultaneously. It is one of the more interesting aspects of cognitive dissonance, and one which is vital to psychoanalysis. This notion is closely tied with the Oedipus Complex, one of Freud's other well-known concepts, in which individuals have a conscious desire to be sexually close to their mothers and show hostility toward their fathers. These two ideas are linked inextricably through the id, our own forbidden impulses which the uncanny reminds us of on a subconscious level - our oedipal guilt is contained within the id, and the Uncanny projects those desires through the creation of images and feelings that do not make sense to us. When we see objects that symbolize our oedipal guilt, we experience an uncanny effect where our imagination and reality start to blur.

The uncanny is used in many instances to create a subtle sense of wrongness, or alienness, in something that is considered to be normal. Freud called the uncanny 'das unheimlich' , defining it something that is uncomfortable, and unfamiliar; at the same time, the uncanny remains hidden and concealed from true knowledge. Heimlich is not unambiguous, but belongs to two sets of ideas which are not mutually contradictory, but

very different from each other - the one relating to what is familiar and comfortable, the other to what is concealed and kept hidden. Unheimlich is the antonym of heimlich only in the latter's first sense (Freud, p. 132). The uncanny leaves the individual enraptured in an object or person due to the inherent disorientation the uncanny effect has on them.

The Oedipus complex is one of Freud's more famous theories - one wherein the patient carries a subconscious desire to love one's mother and kill one's father, seeing them as a rival for the affections of the former. These notions were found in Freud himself, who developed the complex in order to understand his own desires. Freud named the complex, obviously, after the tale of Oedipus Rex, who had unknowingly married his mother and killed his father. Freud noted his own desires to love his mother as well as his jealousy toward his father, determining that these subconscious desires lay within all human beings to some extent. In addition to that, Freud almost certainly saw the Oedipus complex in his analysis of Hamlet in the play of the same name, which has roots in the story of Oedipus Rex.

In himself and his patients, Freud was forced to admit his own dark impulses toward incest and patricide, the worst in himself, taboo thoughts that were absolutely abhorrent. At the same time, it brought him a catharsis, freeing himself from the restriction of not even being able to think these horrible thoughts. In this way, he found his own liberation from his latent feelings toward his parents, and denoted that it could help others.

The connection between the uncanny and the Oedipus complex comes from the complex's role as an example of the uncanny; when we notice something 'off' or 'wrong' about something, it is often representative of castration anxiety, a concept closely connected to Oedipus. " The self-blinding of the mythical criminal, Oedipus, was simply a mitigated form of the punishment of castration — the only punishment that was adequate for him by the lex talionis" (Freud, p. 139). By deviating from the norm in such ways as the desire for incest or patricide, the uncanny rears its head, and we are left disturbed and confused - this stems from the recognition of this same wrongness within ourselves.

One of the other ways in which the uncanny is utilized as a means to manipulate the imagination is through fiction. The uncanny is often used as a tool in fictional works to denote something that is inherently unnatural or not suited to its environment. The uncertainty created by the uncanny in fiction is sly and stealthy; attention is not called towards the uncanny aspect of the figure, but one simply intuits it. By creating this disquiet in the reader, they are suspicious and fascinated by a character without really knowing why. Having things that are lifelike, without being living, is the hallmark of the Uncanny.

Freud discusses the idea of the 'double' in the uncanny - often, repetition of the same thing will lead to that same uncanny effect. Often, when something random happens often enough, it is thought to be more than coincidence, due to its uncanny nature. The uncanny works in this context by reminding the individual of their own dark side, their own repressed impulses. Often,

social taboos are represented in the uncanny; these are things that we want, but are forbidden to show that we want. Therefore, we push these feelings or desires to the background, or do our best to simply express them in secret (Freud, p. 140). The Oedipus complex is an example of this - we suppress our desires to sleep with our mother and kill our father, however small, because they are forbidden and taboo. Our recognition of the uncanny is what brings those repressed feelings to the surface, so that they are at least acknowledged.

In conclusion, the uncanny and the Oedipus complex are two very closely related concepts, as they deal with the cycle of repressed desires and their occasional surfacing. The Oedipus complex dictates that many of us have a subconscious desire to behave in socially unacceptable ways toward our parents; since we cannot express them or acknowledge they exist, they remain in our subconscious. However, the subconscious itself translates some symbols or things that are observed as uncanny due to their triggering of our oedipal guilt. When we see something disturbing, or which reminds us of that subconscious desire, we are brought closer to recognizing our id than ever before; that rejection of oedipal guilt, or refusal to see it, leads to the uncanny effect being experienced.

## **Works Cited**

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Freud, Sigmund. "The Oedipus Complex."