

The storm, edvard munch's painting presents a visual interpretation on the concep...

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Munch and the Uncanny

It is in the bounds of human nature to dependably battle with the concept of fear; we fear dying, we fear living, we fear knowledge, we fear uncertainty. Sigmund Freud taps into this dependability to fear with his definition of the uncanny, explaining that anything uncanny, and in turn frightening, is uncanny in nature because it recalls things that are known and familiar. With Freud's concept of uncanny, we can make the deduction that our dependability to fear is largely reliant on our fear of knowledge itself. Edvard Munch's painting "The Storm" embodies many of the characteristics that Freud says uncanny fiction is marked by, making it strikingly uncanny in nature.

Freud states that literature can very rarely be uncanny outside of the realm of fiction because uncanny characteristics are best created where the merging of reality and imagination exist. If this is true, painting should only follow the suit of fiction due to increasing emphasis on the imagination of the audience in the beginning of the modern period. Freud's characteristics of fiction that can be applied to the work of Munch are as follows: there is focus on one central figure, we see the external events in the work through the eyes of the central figure, there is a dream-like quality about the work, there is fusion of objective and subjective ideas, and the audience can only see through the perspective of the central character, which makes the perspective one of question.

At first glance, “The Storm” by Edvard Munch immediately draws your eye to a figure clad in white as she stands, clutching at her face. This immediacy with which we are pulled into her radiance is what deems her as the central figure of the work. The starkness with which the white of her dress stands out from the dreary and looming background of the oncoming storm makes the dramatic quality of the uncanny start to appear. How could one figure stand so pristine and untouched by the raging storm? Not only does her striking color draw the eye, our woman in white is placed a considerable distance from a group of darkly robed ladies. Just the distance creates a sense that the woman in white is in her own world and that she is supposed to be a separate entity, making the group of ladies behind her more of an afterthought. Not only is the central figure untouched by the forces of nature, but she is also untouched by other figures in the painting, making her appear as though she is the embodiment of purity.

The purity of our central figure also relates to another concept that Freud applies to uncanny literature: the notion that the audience is only allowed to view the external events of the work through the questionable perspective of the central figure. Addressing the central figure's color, it is again asserted that we see from her perspective because she stands out so blatantly; we can also infer from this a deeper meaning, one that creates our main sense of the uncanny. Although the woman in white is the color of purity, her pose and stance create a sense of inner and outer anxiety. Both anxieties originate from different sources: the outer anxiety can be inferred to be a direct result of the incoming storm, as the flock of women behind the central

figure mirror her pose, seeming to be in a similar state of terror, while the inner anxiety of the woman is more ambiguous to the audience. Why would the faceless, pure individual be so frightened of a storm when she has the comfort of a warm inviting home and the support of other human beings so readily near? This starts to bring into question the storm itself and whether the storm is just a projection of the anxieties of our central figure or if it is a real force of nature. Our uncertainty of this point of view is what creates the uncanny.

There is increasing uncanny attitudes about this awareness of inner vs. outer storms, according to Freud, because there is a mixing of subjective and objective ideals with the growing influence of the imagination. As the modern period starts to form, we see a surge in the use of imagination in literature, film, and art; this is important when considering the emergence of the uncanny because it is what creates our uncanny fears and anxieties. Directly relating to “The Storm”, Munch recreates anxieties of the modern culture with his alienated woman in white and the flexibility of the audience to deem whether or not the storm is raging in the natural world or inside the head of the woman. It can be objectively inferred that the storm is brewing outside of the psyche of the central figure because of the palette of the background, the mirroring of the pose on each of the figures, and the warm and safe light that streams from the house perched in the middle ground. These are all appeals to the emotion of the audience, creating an almost factual insistence that the storm isn't just a manifestation in the woman's mind. But, because the appeals work at the emotions of the audience they, in reality, create an

air of subjectivity rather than one of observable fact, thus, making a contradiction of opinion vs. fact in the minds of the audience and building another layer of the uncanny.

The top layer of the uncanny relays to Freud's obsession with the dreamlike state. Munch imagines his dreamlike state easily, as it more or less follows with the style of the impressionist movement in the modern period. The impressionist movement became known for its tendency to focus less on the subject of the art and more on the imagination of the audience member when viewing the subject. To push past the objective quality of art, artists used a broader palette of colors to help create the mood of their paintings. Munch has developed a hazy and looming quality to "The Storm" with the trademark long brushstroke and wide ranging, blended colors of impressionism. Without these stylistic choices, much of the implied dream state of the central figure would be lost, consequently erasing any uncanny doubts about the paradox of inner and outer storms. The dark palette creates not only a sense of outer anxiety, but also influences the audience to feel unsettled, as darkness is a shared fear of the masses.

Munch's ability to shape the instability of the central figure also influences the uncanny emotional state of the audience and creates a perplexing attitude towards the whole of the painting due to the 'undisputable' nature of individual opinion. Though at first glance, "The Storm" doesn't appear particularly uncanny, through a deepening of thought we come to find our central figure as a somewhat haunting and knowing because she reflects on a basic human fear: facing the fears of the natural and psychological world

alone. Our woman in white's perspective of the scene Munch painted may not be completely accurate, but we connect nonetheless because she stands for all that is pure in our mind while also showing her inner anxieties that we all hide from the rest of the world. This is the basic idea that Freud alludes to when he defines the uncanny as something frightening that recalls things known and familiar. We recognize, and in turn fear, not necessarily the woman in white, but what she represents, all due to her centralized and isolated nature, her psyche of colors that calls to her perspective, the hazy quality of the painting and the objective and subjective ideas that are dragged with it. Without our characteristics of the uncanny, we wouldn't have a definable theme of Munch's work, and thus, we wouldn't have an understanding of our deeper anxieties and fears. Freud revolutionized the way we see ourselves and the way we see the world, thus creating a society that has learned to fear itself.