

The Uncanny in *The Castle of Otranto* and its Transformation in *The Man of Feeling*

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Freud's conceptualization of the uncanny, or *unheimlich*, is traditionally associated with the sublime in gothic novels such as *The Castle of Otranto*, but it can also be found in the sentimental as exemplified by social deviants such as the beggar and characters of Bedlam in *The Man of Feeling*. Though the gross treatments of the uncanny in these two novels may seem inexorably juxtaposed, their power is derived from a shared core element, the human fear of the automaton. Thus it is not merely the titanic size of objects that produces the uncanny in *The Castle of Otranto*, and the absence of the gigantic in *The Man of Feeling* does not preclude its presence.

In his discourse on the derivation of the *unheimlich*, Freud quotes Jentsch as saying "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." This definition of the uncanny is easily applied to figures in *The Castle of Otranto* such as the giant image of Alfonso the Good, which took on a shadow of human form, actually spoke to Manfred, Theodore, and Fredrick as a great man might boom orders to others, but then "ascended solemnly to heaven" and precluded itself from being human despite outward appearances and its human voice. Even the less obviously human objects in *The Castle of Otranto* easily fit the definition of the uncanny; for example, the gigantic helmet from the statue of Alfonso is adorned with a plume with such agency as to be able to nod in acknowledgement of Manfred's inevitable fall from power as he is confronted with the return of Fredrick and thus the true bloodline of Alfonso.

The uncanny in *The Man of Feeling* also satisfies Jentsch's description and fits perfectly into Freud's recapitulation of "the uncanny effect of epileptic fits, and of manifestations of insanity, because these excite in the spectator the impression of automatic, mechanical processes at work behind the ordinary appearance of mental activity." The inhabitants of Bedlam in Chapter XX of *The Man of Feeling* are truly manifestations of insanity and the automaton; each individual is inexorably stuck repeating an automatic behavior that was once voluntary, the poor souls having lost the mastery of self that makes one most human. The mathematician eternally delineates circles on the wall, the stock broker endlessly scrawls meaningless figures on a piece of slate, the schoolmaster works on his pronunciation of Greek vowels in perpetuity, the dejected mistress continuously replays and relives the emotions of sadness she felt when her heart was first broken.

Through the character of Harley, the sublime addresses the uneasiness of the uncanny and tackles this worry of whether or not people are truly agents of their own desires or simply cleverly programmed machines. In fact, the idea of the automaton is addressed by Harley's gentleman companion, who posits, "a stranger might imagine that we were a nation of poets; machines at least containing poetry, which the motion of a journey emptied of their contents: it is from the vanity of being thought geniuses, or a mere mechanical imitation of the custom of others, that we are tempted to scrawl rhyme upon such places?" The sentimental puts Harley forth as an embodiment of the answer to this question by virtue of his character's depth of emotion and empathy.

These sentimental traits move Harley from the position of spectator required in Freud's definition of the uncanny and allow him to interact with and comprehend the

full characters of now automatic individuals. Harley chooses to pass his hands through the bars of the uncanny in Bedlam and draws something forth, receiving the mistress's ring, whereas Manfred is doomed to lose everything to the uncanny forces in his world, which he would rather run from than understand. The power of the sentimental is in Harley's ability to fill in voids that make characters and situations uncanny with ampoules of his own humanity through empathy and depth of emotional processing, a process he began when he first left his town, looked back, and saw nothing familiar. Instead of running, Harley took the time to think about, humanize, and investigate this strangeness first seen, turning the *unheimlich* back into its root word by mentally penciling in the familiar outline of his home onto the uncanny veil of clouds he first perceived.

Harley's ability to transform the uncanny is facilitated by a sense of time that is in distinct contrast to that of *The Castle of Otranto*. In that novel, a fast paced, continuous sense of time and an ever growing sense of urgency ensures that spectacular events are taking place too fast for true digestion, investigation, introspection, and empathy to take place. Characters such as Manfred and Isabella are doomed to run fast, act fast, and think later in *The Castle of Otranto*, which inevitably leads to the wounding of Frederick and the death of Matilda through mistaken identity. Where the characters in *The Castle of Otranto* do not even observe one another long enough to determine identity, Harley looks beyond the identification of parson as a beggar by dress and sees the conscious man behind the costume he wears.

These ruminations of character wouldn't be possible were it not for the slow and abundant sense of time in *The Man of Feeling*. This goes hand in hand with Harley's

rejection of traditional worldly values and his embracement of emotional wealth. In *The Castle of Otranto*, Manfred is solely interested in his material pursuits and the perpetuation of his small kingdom. In contrast, Harley doesn't patronize his rich relatives, foregoing inheritance of their wealth. In addition, he travels to the city to receive things and money he is owed but instead focuses on the interesting people of this new environment. Amazingly, the city, which represents the uncanny to Harley at first, ends up being less frightening and unfamiliar to him than Manfred's own castle does by the end of *The Castle of Otranto*.

While the uncanny is obvious in the sublime, it is also continuously present in the sentimental. Differences arise in how the uncanny is dealt with by the actors in the two novels; in the sublime the uncanny only alters the characters by force, whereas in the sentimental the characters are able to interact with the uncanny and, in Harley's case, remove the mysterious veil that gives the uncanny its power. In this way *The Man of Feeling* is a demonstration of the power and value of empathy and inner feelings. The transformation of the unheimlich is more powerful than all the knights of a kingdom, for while both narratives end with a death, one is a death and a fall from power whereas the other is a peaceful ascent. In the latter, the wave of a tree branch above Harley's grave at the end of the novel is not seen as uncanny, but wistful and warm.

I have adhered to the Oberlin College Honor Code in this assignment.

