

The Traveller's 'Uncanny' Feeling and the Phantom Listeners: Explaining the Traveller's Uncanny Feeling in Walter De La Mare's the Listeners in Terms of Freud's 'Uncanny'

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Abstract

Walter de la Mare's supernatural poem *The Listeners* is considered the quintessence of his poetic genius. The most celebrated uncanny feeling and 'strangeness' has been the pivotal theme of this particular poem. In this context it should be mentioned that the lone traveller who experiences the strangeness in his heart is also baffled by a communication failure and despondency of unfulfilment of a promise as indicated in the poem. Did his regressed emotions of the past incidents, or some guilt of breaking a promise submerged deep in his unconscious due to regression and resulted in an uncanny feeling? Were those thronging phantom listeners external manifestation of the traveller's regressed self? In terms of Freudian concept of 'uncanny' the prefix – 'un' is a token of regression. Depending upon his theory this article is an attempt to vindicate the traveller's uncanny strangeness and the phantom listeners to be the projection of the regressed inner self and unsettled notions of a unified personality.

KEYWORDS: uncanny, repression, unconscious, unheimlich, Heimlich.

INTRODUCTION:

The *listeners*, a narrative poem delineating supernatural ambiance within, is a poem composed by Walter de la Mare, first published in London by Constable and Company in *The Listeners and other poems*, a collection of Walter de la Mare's verses in 1912. The central attraction of the poem is its supernatural element and gothic atmosphere. In addition to it there remains a vivid description of the traveller's psychological reaction upon confronting the strangeness of the place on a moonlit night.

The poem initiates with depiction of a haunted and desolate house where a lone traveller arrives with a predetermined purpose. The entire atmosphere evokes a mysterious sense of horror and strangeness with its brilliant juxtaposition of silence and sound. It is evident from the description that the house is deserted by human and a strange presence of a host of phantom listeners has been depicted by the poet. These listeners are unable to make successful communication. They are at the receiving end. After knocking on the door twice the traveller left dishearted, but he left a message that he kept his promise. The entire effort of communication was on the part of the traveller ending in his assertion of fulfilling his promise. But the promise he mentioned there was never actually maintained. It is the traveller himself who implies the fulfilment in a consolatory tone. This consolation provided by him is the mark of his failure. The nature of this nocturnal visit of the traveller remains unknown matter of conjecture. Apart from that why should he feel so "perplexed"? He left a message – 'tell them I came and no one answered/that I kept my word.' that implicates that he was conscious of the presence of those phantom listeners who were responsible for the uncanny feeling he experienced. Were these phantom listeners projection of his regressed self? As it has been mentioned in Freud's expounded the theory of 'uncanny' that uncanny feeling is a result of repression.

Repression is a defence mechanism to maintain a balanced personality. To put it more specifically it is a conscious process of forgetting unpleasant and undesirable events of life. It is an involuntary and spontaneous exclusion of those memories from the conscious awareness which are disturbing for the individual. Despite trying hard to suppress them they may invade the consciousness in disguised form. In a menacing form those feelings may recur and such recurrence unsettles the person's mind. The traveller's uncanny feelings may result from such regressive actions of past. His predicament reminds Macbeth's encounter with the witches upon the heath in William Shakespeare's *The Tragedy of Macbeth*. Though his associate Banquo witnessed the incident but critics are of the opinion that the witches were external manifestation of Macbeth's own inarticulate desires.

'Uncanny' is a feeling generated for something unfamiliar or incongruous. According to Freud 'uncanny' is familiar yet incongruous, as it often creates cognitive dissonance within the experiencing subject due to the paradoxical nature of being simultaneously attracted to yet repulsed by an object. Freud's revelation enlightened this in his essay on *The Uncanny* (1919) the German word *unheimlich* (uncanny, unfamiliar) and *heimlich* (familiar, homely) are opposite but close in meaning, if not identical, since *heimlich* means apparently belonging to the house also simultaneously juxtaposes the sense of being concealed, hidden, kept from sight. He further relates uncanny first to the survival of the unconscious of a primitive and subsequently repressed animistic mythological and mystic view of the world. Secondly the occurrence of repetition, coincidence and doubles are related to uncanny. He confirms that these are the result of repressed experiences in infancy. Otto Fenichel opines that 'if the disappearance of the original aim from consciousness is called repression, then every sublimation is a repression.' Lacan also stressed the role of signifier in repression- 'the primal repressed is the signifier-examining how the symptom is constituted on the basis of primal repression of the 'unterdrückung of the binary signifier...the necessary fall of the first signifier'. While interpret the traveller's uncanny feeling or unfamiliar experience his repetitive actions testify a great deal as he repeats the question twice, 'Is there anybody there?' He smote on the door twice that leads us to the conclusion of repetitive compulsion on the part of the traveller (Freud's theory foregrounding Jung's notion of synchronicity).

The traveller's assertion of keeping his promise probably made to the dwellers of the house incites mysterious strangeness. Nothing is implied distinctly or in specific terms about the promise like-what was the promise? To whom was it made? Why he came at midnight to see the dwellers of the house? Whatever the answers may be it engenders all encompassing feeling of failure, a failure that also engulfs the traveller's mind. Virtually the uncanny feeling of the traveller may be the reflection of his once repressed experiences or unfulfilled desires. The shock of failed communication, inability to fulfil his promise, such baffled efforts on the part of the traveller might have been experienced by him before and technically repressed into his unconscious. Those repressed memories surged into the surface invading the conscious after encountering the strange milieu of the mansion on a moonlit night. The revival of those feelings caused anxiety which makes him perplexed and still. When repression has rendered it strange and unfamiliar anxiety for uncanny is rediscovered. As Freud justified that certain triggers retrieve childhood memory, conflicts, or primitive beliefs overcome by a person but suddenly seemingly receive renewed affirmation. The atmosphere of the mansion is largely responsible for the resurrection of those

submerged uncanny feelings, regressed fears and suspicions. Recurrence of suppressed experiences generated that uncanny feeling in the perplexed traveller's mind.

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