

Deakin University

Libbie Chellew

Uncanny suburbia in Australian fiction

Abstract:

The uncanny is the disquieting appearance of the unfamiliar in the heart of the familiar – uncertainty and fear in the everyday. This paper asserts that suburbia is an unstable concept, making it the ideal everyday setting through which writers can produce uncanny effects in fiction. Sigmund Freud’s foundational text ‘*Das Unheimlich*’ (‘The uncanny’; 1919), an appropriate starting place, is concerned with differentiating the uncanny from fear, and framing the conditions under which the uncanny occurs. Theories from other critics – predominantly Ernst Jentsch, Nicolas Royle and Mladen Dolar – on how the uncanny is produced, influence the relationship I describe between the uncanny and suburbia. Suburbia is a concept that is both homely and unhomely, representing modern Western planning at its most idealistic and at its worst. In this way it embodies modernity. The link between suburbia and the uncanny is developed through a close reading of two short stories: LG Moberly’s (1917) ‘Inexplicable’ and Tim Winton’s (2004) ‘Aquifer’. The conflicting nature of suburbia, and the cultural and literary question of its worth, have created a particularly apt setting for the uncanny to cultivate and arise in contemporary short fiction.

Biographical note:

Libbie is a tutor and PhD candidate at Deakin University where she researches representations of suburbia in fiction. Her own fiction appears in *Antipodes* (in press), *WetInk*, *Voiceworks* and *Going down swinging*. She tweets as @Libbiec.

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This paper explores how suburbia is uncanny, arguing that this makes it a rich narrative setting to both embody the ambiguities of everyday modernity and also to produce uncanny effects. I begin with a theoretical description of the uncanny, followed by an outline of the link I have found between the uncanny and suburbia. In the final section of this paper, I explore my proposal by analysing of two short stories. The first is a story mentioned by Freud (1919, 150–51) in ‘The uncanny’: LG Moberly’s (1917) ‘Inexplicable’. The second enables me to focus on an Australian context: Tim Winton’s (2004) ‘Aquifer’.

Defining the uncanny is difficult – it is a unique kind of fear. Freud’s examination of the uncanny, in his essay ‘*Das Unheimlich*’ (The uncanny; 1919), begins with an assertion that the German words *unheimlich* and *heimlich*, and their uses, better demonstrate how these two opposites actually merge. *Heimlich* is used as an adjective for home and also the secret, the forbidden and the tamed. We lack such an encompassing term in the English language. Freud shows that following the implications of these multiple and somewhat ambiguous uses of the word, the *unheimlich* is actually that which emerges from within the *heimlich* – it is ‘something that should have remained hidden and has come out into the open’ (1919, 148). Mladen Dolar (1991) explains in “‘I shall be with you on your wedding night’, Lacan and the uncanny’, the *unheimlich* is actually ‘directly implied by *heimlich*’ (5). The *unheimlich* depends on its supposed antonym for existence. As Freud explains, ‘*heimlich* thus becomes increasingly ambivalent, until it finally merges with its antonym *unheimlich*’ (1919, 134). It is the unfamiliar emerging from, or as part of, the familiar. It is not foreign and haunts from the powerful position of intimacy. Apart from Freud’s exceptional lexicographical study, the remainder of his essay focuses on the psychoanalytic nature of the uncanny.

Before Freud, in 1906 Ernst Jentsch wrote an article called ‘On the psychology of the uncanny’. Jentsch attributes uncanny effects to intellectual uncertainty, proposing that the uncanny emerges when ‘the brain is reluctant to overcome resistances that oppose the assimilation of the phenomenon in question into its proper place’ (1906, 4). Jentsch states the uncanny is a ‘peculiar emotional state’, and it can be overcome when the strange occurrence is assimilated or explained (1906, 4). Freud is dismissive of Jentsch’s uncanny. He sidesteps Jentsch’s significant propositions by focusing with a psychoanalytic framework, interpreting the uncanny as an arousal of repressed infantile anxieties and desires. However, much contemporary criticism is aligned with Jentsch.

For example, in his book *The uncanny* (2003), Nicolas Royle describes it as a ‘crisis of the natural, touching upon everything that one might have thought was “part of nature”’: one’s own nature, human nature, the nature of reality and the world’ (1). The uncanny both touches upon, and derives from, the uncertainties inherent in modern everyday life. Dolar, like Royle, sees a relationship between the uncanny and modernity, which he explains here:

To put it simply, in premodern societies the dimension of the uncanny was largely covered (and veiled) by the area of the sacred and untouchable. It was assigned to a religiously and socially sanctioned place in the symbolic from which the structure of

power, sovereignty, and a hierarchy of values emanated. With the triumph of the Enlightenment, this privileged and excluded place ... was no more. (1991, 7)

The dimension of the uncanny has been domesticated. Royle describes it creeping slowly ‘into the common light of day’ (2003, 22). Freud’s definition limits the uncanny and in doing so, as Royle argues, ‘does strange violence to its subject, not least in appearing to deny it a history’ (2003, 22–23).

Freud does admit, towards the end of his essay, that ‘we should probably be prepared to assume that other conditions, apart from those we have so far laid down, play an important part in the emergence of a sense of the uncanny’ (1919, 153). This admission shows the limits of Freud’s application of the uncanny. What must not be forgotten, though, is the legacy of Freud’s study – his proposition that the uncanny is fear found in the familiar. The implications of this have now expanded and, as Royle stresses, ‘the uncanny, then, is not merely an “aesthetic” or “psychological” matter (whatever that might mean): its critical elaboration is necessarily bound up in analysing, questioning and even transforming what is called “everyday life”’ (2003, 23).

Uncanny effects are amplified by a more familiar reality. Even Freud argues, although briefly, that fiction is uncanny when a writer ‘tricks us by promising us everyday reality and then going beyond it’ (1919, 157). In the increasingly suburbanised Western world, suburbia is a particularly apt setting in which to represent a familiar everyday.

Suburbia is easy territory for the uncanny to invade. As Andrew McCann argues in *Writing the everyday: Australian literature and the limits of suburbia*, suburbia is the ‘most tangible manifestation of functionalized modernity/or symbolic order’ (1998a, xi). In other words, the conflict within suburbia reflects back onto modernity its own weaknesses and uncertainties. Indeed suburbia, like the uncanny, is a concept that holds within itself various supposed opposing forces. The word ‘suburbia’ signifies utopianism, insulation, predictability, safety and the ideal family, yet it is haunted by claustrophobia as well as isolation, conformity, financial insecurity, materialism and the destruction of the environment. Fiction set in suburbia, then, cannot avoid such disquieting factors. As McCann states, Australian suburbia is a concept based on ‘an extremely *unstable* collection of tropes, representational conventions and stereotypes’ (my emphasis, 1998a, viii). Suburbia both represents and destabilises ‘rational modernity’.

I have found that the appearance of an uncanny suburbia in fiction is often framed as ‘suburban Gothic’ in contemporary criticism. Bernice Murphy, for instance, explores the conflicting markers of suburbia in her book *The suburban Gothic* (2009). Murphy analyses literature that relies on the recurring belief the horrible, supernatural and irrational simply should not happen in safe, homely and rational places. The texts she is concerned with are essentially uncanny because ‘the most dangerous threats come from *within*, not from without’ (2009, 3). Murphy focuses on the American context, looking at novels such as Anne Rivers Siddon’s *The house next door* (2007), and films such as *The invasion of the body snatchers* (1956), *The Stepford wives* (1975) and *American beauty* (1999). These texts reveal the anxieties arising from mass

suburbanisation. Murphy finds a general suspicion that suburbanisation has caused 'irreparable damage... not only to the landscape, but to the psychological state of people' (2009, 2).

In the Australian context, Gerry Turcotte declares that Patrick White 'developed his own brand of Gothic' (1998, 7). White's engagement with suburbia came from a deep discontent with the problematic nature of suburbia's signifiers. Such signifiers embodied a utopianism that White invited the reader to see, according to Andrew McCann, 'as infantile, precisely because of its faith in the ability of highly mediated images to deliver their promise of happiness' (1998b, 57). The uncanny feeds on the putative inauthenticity of modern life, and the fact that satisfaction is linked with destruction. Turcotte's discussion of White concludes that the Gothic mode is no longer formulaic.

Fred Botting (1996) discusses the non-formulaic nature of the modern Gothic in his eponymous book on the subject. He explains the transformation of the Gothic genre, stating: 'twentieth-century Gothic is everywhere and nowhere' (1996, 155). The twentieth century has seen the internalisation of Gothic forms, which now centre 'on the individual, concerned with the nature of reality and society' (1996, 11). There is a pervasive cultural concern that things are not what they seem. The psychologically Gothic terrain McCann (1998b) saw in White's work is similar to what Botting describes as the setting of twentieth-century Gothic – 'desolate, alienating and full of menace' – where ambivalence and uncertainty 'obscure single meaning' (1996, 11). More importantly, he states the Gothic has become 'bound up in the domestication of monstrosity' (1996, 59). This echoes Royle's emphasis on modernity domesticating the uncanny. The modern Gothic may be one way the uncanny can be identified in fiction: it disturbs the domestic, everyday setting.

The reality of the home or suburb is not rational. In fact, looking through the lens of the uncanny, the homeliness of suburbia seems to develop towards ambivalence until finally coinciding with its supposed antonym, unhomeliness. The hostility towards suburbia, especially in Australian cultural and literary history, resonates with Jentsch's argument earlier. Suburbia's signifiers are slippery and do not provide intellectual surety. The ambiguity of suburbia has cultivated a fear within the very place a majority of us live.

A short story briefly discussed in Freud's essay is LG Moberly's (1917) 'Inexplicable'. Freud's inclusion of the story is often overshadowed by his lengthy analysis of Hoffman's (1816) 'The sandman'. Freud introduces 'Inexplicable' towards the end of his essay as a point of general application. As impelled as he feels to include 'Inexplicable', Freud never references the title or author, and later he states it is a 'quite naive story' (1919, 151). Reference to the story is absent from a majority of critical analysis of Freud's essay with the exception of Nicholas Royle (2003), who discusses the story in relation to Freud and popular psychology, and Brian McCusky (2006), who discusses the story as a link between class and the uncanny. This story, however, is a well-suited example to show how suburbia works as a particularly uncanny setting.

The story is narrated by May, who is moving into a suburban house with her husband, Hugh. The uncanny, Freud argues, emerges because of a curiously shaped table. The table has been left in the house May and Hugh decide to rent. It is repeatedly described both as beautiful and sinister for it has intricate carvings of alligators on its top. Freud's reading is as follows: 'in short, one is led to surmise that, owing to the presence of this table, the house is haunted by ghostly crocodiles or that the wooden monsters come to life in the dark, or something of the sort' (1919, 151). Freud's explanation of the uncanny emerging in the story is sparse. He was impelled to include it, describing it as 'extraordinarily uncanny' and yet he is unable to explain why this is (1919, 151).

What Freud does not discuss is the importance May places on setting up a home with Hugh. In the first paragraph May is uneasy. Although she links her unease with the suburban street, she denies it, she says, 'anything less calculated to inspire nervous tremors than that stretch of ordinary road lined by ordinary houses could not be imagined!' (1917, 183). The couple has, in fact, chosen this suburb because it is 'a healthy place' (1917, 183). May talks herself out of her 'unaccountable attack of nerves', saying 'it was simply absurd to be obsessed by a feeling of traps or prison-bars just because the gate had creaked on its hinges' (1917, 183). Then she connects anxiety with the house, again indirectly, feeling 'anxious to impress upon my husband the many charms and conveniences' of the house (1917, 186).

These hesitations and anxieties are dismissed by May because she is determined to set up a home with Hugh, and places hope and significance on the house. This is shown in her narration, 'the more I thought about the house the more sure I was that it would suit us in every particular,' and when she and Hugh returned for a final look, she says 'the sun was shining on our eager plans for the future' (1917, 186).

Here, the story engages with the idea that suburbia represents more than just houses. A particular home represents a place of hope and refuge. The appearance of the shadows and smells, and eventually the alligators, is frightening indeed. But the uncanny nature of the story emerges because these fearful happenings occur in the 'unromantic' and 'ordinary' street, in the 'solidly built' and 'very delightful' house, coming from a table May says is 'perfectly lovely' and which the agent says 'goes with the house... It goes with the house' (1917, 183–85). It is the irrational invading the rational. In this story logical 'eager plans for the future' are being undermined from within. And even the couple knows how absurd the story is, and both are reluctant to admit anything is wrong until the very end.

In the end, Hugh burns the table and this seems to resolve the issue. However, the uncanny effect lingers on the last word, when May addresses the reader, saying 'it was many a long day before I could live down those weird experiences, and even now they are to me quite inexplicable. Does any explanation of it all occur to you?' (1917, 195). The reality established via the realist retrospective first-person narration is reinforced by the shift to an anecdotal second-person question. This reality, though, is undermined by the lingering sense of disquiet caused by the final question's defiance of a resolution. This is similar to the effect of narration in Hoffman's 'The sandman'. Stories that arouse the uncanny use techniques that

reinforce narrator reliability. Analysis of 'Inexplicable' highlights the importance of a modern realist narrative voice, as well as establishing a familiar setting in order to draw forth the uncanny, a setting such as suburbia.

Tim Winton's short story 'Aquifer' reveals the postcolonial overtones that emerge when an uncanny suburbia is represented in Australian fiction. This story has a nameless narrator, and like 'Inexplicable', is in first person and is largely retrospective. 'Aquifer' begins with the narrator recognising his childhood street on the late-night news. Police have discovered human remains in the swampland there. After a sleepless night, he decides to drive five hours inland to return to his childhood suburb. The narrator's admission that he knew 'exactly where it was that this macabre discovery had taken place' (2004, 37), as well as his following sleepless night, imply that he has a connection to the remains. This is reinforced by his continued lack of exposition and his decision to drive there. What follows is a long retrospective section, where he describes the frontier suburb he and his family lived in during the early sixties.

After the long descriptions of sixties' suburbia, his retrospection becomes more specific and the reader learns that he watched a neighbour, a boy his own young age named Alan Mannering, drown in the swamp water at the end of their street. Alan's death is a catalyst for the narrator's coming of age, his suspicion of surface appearances and disillusionment with authority figures he once thought irrefutable, such as the time-announcer he heard if he dialled 1194 from the street's public phone box. The narrator remembers Alan's death, stating, 'When he went down, sliding sideways... He didn't come up. I never even hated him, though I'd never called anyone shit before. After the water settled back and shook itself smooth again like hung washing, there wasn't a movement. No sign. I went home and said nothing' (2004, 46).

The story is particularly effective in bringing suburbia into the realm of the uncanny. Death is not a foreign element entering the narrative; instead death is continually married with icons of suburbia. Winton uses these suburban icons figuratively in the descriptions of Alan's death. As we see in the narration, the 'water shook itself smooth again like hung washing' (2004, 46). Another example of this coupling occurs when the narrator explains that, shortly after watching Alan's death, he imagines the boy 'encased in the black cake-mix of sediment' (2004, 47).

Winton develops this link into a larger trope when the narrator reveals the suburb is built on a water table. The narrator saw 'garden sprinklers and felt uneasy', because he 'thought of Alan Mannering in that mist. He'd have been liquid long ago' (2004, 47). The narrator's suburbia is saturated with death, and he is reminded when he sees the water that feeds the lawns, as well as the fruits and vegetables of the market garden. He gradually comes to understand that his everyday life is built on, and bears life from, an uncontrollable and dark force that lies beneath the calm and ordered surface.

This swamp is part of the life force of suburbia, as well as a reminder of the original state of the land. In his study *Postmodern wetlands* Rodney Giblett states that wetlands are 'connected to the bowels of the earth via the underground aquifer of

which they often are the expression and on which the city is reliant for domestic water supplies' (1996, 136). Interestingly, Giblett is speaking specifically of Perth, which is where Tim Winton grew up. In 'Aquifer' the swamp is also representative of the natural landscape that is being repressed, the resurgence of which disturbs the suburban psyche and acts as a threat to its inhabitancy.

A swamp is antithetical to modernity; it pushes back against engineering and aesthetics. Giblett argues that the swamp is an obstacle to progress, explaining 'modern ways and the marsh are totally and irretrievably inimical to each other. They cannot coexist; the marsh must go to make way for the modern' (1996, 19). Therefore, the reappearance of the swamp haunts the modern and in 'Aquifer' the swamp undermines the authority of the ordered suburb. Alan's death serves as symbolic of the fragility of the suburban landscape.

When discussing the control and colonisation of the land by suburban 'progress', it seems impertinent not to examine whether the control and colonisation of Indigenous Australians by 'progress' is represented in the text. There is an Indigenous family in 'Aquifer'. The Joneses are remembered briefly and then appear again, at the conclusion of the story, when the narrator watches them being evicted. Nathanael O'Reilly states, 'the fact that the Indigenous family has a European name serves as a reminder of their colonization and displacement' (2010, 47). However, this is not the only reference to the colonisation and displacement of the Indigenous in 'Aquifer'. The remains discovered in the swamp at the beginning are said to be 'four femurs and a skull, to be precise' (2004, 37). As the story draws to a close only two femurs and a skull are accounted for. They represent Alan Mannering. There is another spectral victim being referred to in the narrative. This haunting is particularly uncanny, and the effect persists because the unknown remains unknown. In *Uncanny Australia* (1998) Ken Gelder and Jane Jacobs examine the nation as a haunted site. The ghost of the unknown victim in 'Aquifer' works in similar fashion to the ghosts of the stories Gelder and Jacobs examine: haunting 'a nation's sense of its own well-being' (1998, 31). This postcolonial overtone is especially present in the story's conclusion, when the narrator muses:

... I thought of the Joneses being evicted like that. I was right to doubt the 1194 man on the telephone. Time doesn't click on and on at the stroke. It comes and goes in waves and folds like water... the past is in us, and not behind us. Things are never over. (2004, 53)

Winton's choice to use an ambiguous noun, as well as the shift in narration similar to May in 'Inexplicable' – referring to 'us' – makes this a disquieting conclusion. O'Reilly states that 'Aquifer' demonstrates the 'complex environment' that contemporary Australians live in, and such a story calls for readers to recognise the shameful history of Australia's quarter-acre blocks (2010, 47). Certainly, in 'Aquifer' the authority of suburbia is disturbed. Gelder and Jacobs explain that when Australian fiction is haunted, it can give 'expression to a sense of (dis)possession for both Aboriginal people and non-aboriginal people alike' (1998, 42). Indeed, this is the case in 'Aquifer'.

Winton's 'Aquifer', like Moberly's 'Inexplicable', shows how suburbia is an

appropriate setting for arousing unease in fiction. Both short stories demonstrate realist narrative techniques used to establish the authority of the narrator and the story, and ready a text for corruption. Whether conscious or unconsciously, writers are using suburban settings because they can arouse such unease. The nature of the uncanny allows it to permeate modern life and modern life represented in realist fiction. The conflicting nature of suburbia, and the cultural and literary question of its worth, have created a particularly apt setting for the uncanny to cultivate, and arise in contemporary short fiction.

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