The Novels
Stephen Dedalus is haunted. He feels the uncanny in every chapter of A Portrait of the Artist, and a ghost stalks him in Ulysses. Freud’s use of uncanny, a dread connected to repressed memories, always involves uncertainty about what is real and what is imagined, what is external and what is internal, what is alive and what is dead, what is new and what is repeated. A person in the grip of the uncanny wants to separate these polarities and cannot, and fears that life is controlled by what is unreal, external, dead, and mechanical.

In using this theory of the uncanny to explain the haunting of Stephen in Portrait, I will try to supplement Freud’s argument by presenting the uncanny as gender oriented. Lacan’s analysis of genders as language systems allows me to link the forces in the unconscious to sexual difference. What frightens Stephen most chillingly is a sense that femininity may be obliterated by masculinity. There is also the fear of woman in the book, but the most uncanny moments, some of which have hardly been examined, seem to confront male threats and to compel a valorization of femininity. The uncanny object is the subject itself rendered as an object, so that object is woman insofar as she acts as mirror for the subject. The way for man to overcome the uncanny in Joyce is to strive to recover contact with woman as a real person, an independent being.

In E. T. A. Hoffmann’s tale “The Sand-Man,” Freud’s main example of the uncanny, the student Nathaniel is haunted by a demonic Sandman from childhood, who reappears as the lawyer Coppelius and the optician Coppola. Freud identifies the sandman, who takes boys’ eyes and kills Nathaniel’s benevolent father, with the castrating aspect of the father: Freud points out that every time the sandman appears, he interferes with Nathaniel’s love
Nathaniel is at first in love with Clara, but after Coppola gives him a spyglass, he uses it to see the exquisite Olympia. He falls obsessively in love with Olympia, but she turns out to be a doll, causing him to have a breakdown. At the end of the story Nathaniel recovers and returns to Clara. He is about to marry her when he looks through the spyglass and sees that Coppelius is back. This causes Nathaniel to go berserk and leap to his death. From a feminist perspective, the spyglass is the specularity of the male gaze that turns woman into a mere reflection.

The story expresses a fear that woman is inactive or even inanimate, that the father alone is real, that the agency of womanhood must disappear behind the inescapable power of masculinity. Olympia, the doll who attracts, is made by father figures, so that the feminine is enclosed by masculine construction. Olympia’s eyes turn out to have been stolen from Nathaniel when he was a child, which suggests not only that his vision of her, through Coppola’s spyglass, was controlled by paternal manipulation, but even that she is only Nathaniel’s alienated feminine side. Coppelius also unscrewed the child Nathaniel’s arms and legs, showing that the boy was a mechanical construction of the paternal isolated from the maternal. Freud concludes that Nathaniel illustrates how a “young man fixated upon his father by his castration complex becomes incapable of loving a woman” (232 n). This fits a view of Stephen that I have been expressing for many years now in a repetitious, if not uncanny way (see my Joyce between 17–83). Stephen keeps encountering male threats in Portrait, and in Ulysses he seems to be working out his problem with the father figure Bloom—or not working it out.

The obliteration of the feminine by the masculine that Stephen fears intensely may be described in linguistic terms through Lacan’s theories. In Lacan femininity is a language system associated with change, the sliding of words into new meanings that Lacan calls the jouissance of the woman “which goes beyond” (145–47). Masculinity for Lacan is a language system involving fixity, words that stick to meanings. The distinction corresponds to Julia Kristeva’s distinction between the semiotic, the feminine, rhythmic aspect of language, and the symbolic, its masculine, referential aspect (Revolution 24–27). The element of recurrence in the uncanny expresses fixity, entrapment in the past, the inability to shift into the feminine modality of change.

The distinction between feminine and masculine systems may also be described as one between feeling and the control of feeling. Freud says in Inhibitions, Symptoms and Anxiety, “There is no doubt that hysteria has a strong affinity with femininity, just as obsessional neurosis has with masculinity” (143). Insofar as this statement suggests that the genders consist of these neurotic configurations, it has the advantage of separating gender personality characteristics from any sense that they could be biologically inherent. Juliet Mitchell accepts Freud’s distinction in Psychoanalysis and Feminism and expands on it: “At least in Western society, obsessionality is closely linked to ex-
cessive rationality, a quality that is valued—the description 'hysterical' is invariably derogatory" (112). Freud in fact describes hysteria as pure feeling: "A hysterical attack may be likened to a freshly constructed individual affect, and a normal affect to the expression of a general hysteria which has become a heritage" (Inhibitions 84). So hysteria is the flow of emotion before it has been made ordinary by symbolic ordering, by being put into comprehensible language. The Freudian theory thus supports Lacan's linkage of the feminine to the sliding of language and the masculine to its fixation and the repetition of compulsion.

Another way to approach the linguistic difference between genders is to say that femininity is excluded from the symbolic, the register of authoritative language that includes masculinity. Slavoj Žižek points out a significant contrast between Antigone and Hamlet's father, both of whom occupy a margin between death and life. Antigone is killed symbolically by being banished before she is killed physically, and the result of her exclusion from the symbolic is to make her sublime. Hamlet senior is killed physically before he is killed symbolically, and this makes him uncanny (Žižek 135). His claims for his name and position make him a pure embodiment of the symbolic, and the vastness of the patriarchal principle he expresses is a big factor in the terror he evokes.

The images that frighten Stephen most in Portrait center on the male authority of God and its exertion of control. The way this figure hangs over him is established in chapter 1 as he undresses, hurrying his trembling fingers because God will send him to hell if he doesn't get to bed before the gas is lowered: he "knelt trembling at his bedside and repeated his prayers quickly, fearing that the gas would go down. He felt his shoulders shaking" (P64 18). Stephen does not realize that he shakes partly because he has a cold: the only cause he knows of for his agitation is the fear of God. It is an interesting reflection on the way gender systems can never really enclose individuals that Stephen seems more hysterical than obsessive here. Perhaps obsession is a way of controlling hysteria that women are not usually enabled to develop.

This scene is soon followed by the ghost of the marshal and other uncanny male images. One pattern established here is that uncanny images are liminal: they occur when Stephen goes to his room or goes to sleep. This not only indicates a fundamental fear of the dark, but it also involves Stephen approaching his feminine side, which calls forth a male threat. In Lacan, as in Freud, everyone includes both masculine and feminine and represses the gender (s)he is not supposed to have. When Stephen is alone he often dreams of his mother, and his thoughts often flow in ways that constitute femininity as a language system. When he goes to sleep, he enters a flux of shifting language, as we see when we follow his mind into sleep in the infirmary. The fire at the start of this passage is an actual fire, but the sea at the end is a dream:
The fire rose and fell on the wall. It was like waves. Someone had put coal on and he heard voices. They were talking. It was the voice of the waves. Or the waves were talking among themselves as they rose and fell.

He saw the sea of waves. . . . (P64 26)

The feminine flow of Stephen's interior corresponds to the novel's consistent references to his soul as female. He describes the creative core of his mind as "the virgin womb of the imagination" (P64 217). His fear of his own femininity, which relates to Kristeva's idea of abjection, brings out the dreaded paternal images of the uncanny.

The next example occurs in chapter 2 after the episode of the school play, which ends with Stephen being disappointed that E----. C----. does not hail his performance. His bitterness about being unable to make contact with her seems to carry through to his depression on the train to Cork on the next page. The dread he feels on this ride may be related to the fact that it begins the only long period that he spends with his father. He falls asleep, and when he wakes next to the sleeping Simon, we are told that "the terror of sleep fascinated his mind," suggesting that what frightens him is a mystery of inwardness. "The neighbourhood of unseen sleepers filled him with strange dread as though they could harm him; and he prayed that the day might come quickly" (P64 87). His prayer, "addressed neither to God nor saint," trails off into "foolish words" that he makes "to fit the insistent rhythm of the train." The paragraph ends, "This furious music allayed his dread and, leaning against the windowledge, he let his eyelids close again" (P64 87). I suspect that the prayer is addressed to his mother, to whom he wrote an imaginary letter to relieve his anxiety in the infirmary in chapter 1. When he becomes religious, it is Mary (which is his mother's name) he prays to. The rhythmic language that relieves him and allows him to return to sleep corresponds to the maternal pulsative aspect of language that Kristeva calls the semiotic. He escapes his dread by projecting a personal version of his mother.

The chapter most dominated by the male language of authority is the third, and the most oppressive thing about Father Arnall's sermons may be not their gore but their logic. An elaborate system of categories subdivides the main division between physical and spiritual pains in hell. The four "last things," the faculties of the body, the phases of experience and memory, the worm of the triple sting, the pains of extension and intensity, and other components of psychology and morality are unfolded methodically to give a feeling that every possibility is accounted for. And all these layers of proof impress on the audience that the obsessive understanding behind this vision cannot be escaped because of its rigorous masculine rationality.

The most uncanny or scariest point in chapter 3 occurs when Stephen halts on the landing before his room and hears demonic voices speaking like bureaucrats:
He waited still at the threshold as at the entrance to some dark cave. Faces were there; eyes: they waited and watched.

—We knew perfectly well of course that although it was bound to come to the light he would find considerable difficulty in endeavouring to try to induce himself to try to endeavour to ascertain the spiritual plenipotentiary and so we knew of course perfectly well—(P64 136)

Evil people can be frightening, ghosts are worse, vampires are worse still, demons are even worse than that, and then there are administrators. This demonic discourse embodies the compulsively methodical logic of the Church, which has just hit Stephen with a mechanical exposition of the awfulness of eternity. Here there are swarms of judgmental latinate phrases such as “perfectly well of course,” “considerable difficulty,” and “to endeavour to ascertain.” The confused repetition corresponds to the dreary repetition of the sermons, implying that this grinding system is really demented. The “it” that “was bound to come to the light” is Stephen’s sexual sin. This was described at the end of chapter 2, not in phallic terms but in terms of being overwhelmed by femininity. Therefore what the demons say is that they knew he would go on seeking feminine release with prostitutes rather than recognizing the phallic power of God, represented by the word plenipotentiary, which means full of potency.

This moment of confrontation with ecclesiastical authority may be the most frightening moment in Portrait. It forces Stephen’s conversion, and is followed by (and perhaps results in) his scatological dream of goatish creatures in a field. On waking, he concludes that these excremental goats were his sins. These sins may have been not only goatish but also excremental, yet the bizarreness of that aspect is somewhat ameliorated by the fact that these sins were extremely mental.

Calling the goats sins explains the obscenity and terror of the dream, veiling it with religious terminology; and I think the reason the uncanny loses its power after this in Portrait is that religion rationalizes it, making it understandable and manageable, a step forward for Stephen’s consciousness. It may be said in defense of religion that it gives people the ability to handle psychic demons that might be there in some form before religion.

Joyce, however, concluded that the authority of the Church, which taught him to regard it as patriarchal, and which decidedly frightened the shit out of him, was so great that it could not be seen as giving much in relation to what it took. Stephen says of a prostitute in Ulysses, “She is a bad merchant. She buys dear and sells cheap” (U-GP 16:738). This not only describes one of the main levels of relation that women have to the Church, but the relation of the soul, which is always feminine (anima), to the divine paternal power to whom the soul belongs or is sold by the Church. The idea that the Church prostitutes the spirit is emphasized in Joyce’s work from “Grace” to “Circe.”

Yet the Church gives Stephen an important level of control over his mind.
Even after he leaves religion, he continues to explain frightening things systematically and intellectually; but now instead of demons, they come to represent the deadening powers of the religion and imperialism, of repression. I see this in the few traces of the uncanny in the fourth chapter: the Jesuit director who offers Stephen priesthood is described as a “spectre” (P64 155), and the boys he sees on the beach remind him “in what dread he stood of the mystery of his own body” (P64 168).

Dread of the mystery or interior of the body seems to be a common factor in all experiences of the uncanny in Portrait. It is associated with undressing, and as the beach scene suggests, the naked bodies that frighten him most on the conscious level are male, not female—perhaps because the attraction they have as bodies is coded as unnatural. There was the bath at Clongowes: “As he passed the door he remembered with a vague fear the warm turfcolored bogwater, the warm moist air, the noise of plunges, the smell of the towels, like medicine” (P64 22). In effect fear of his body is expressed as he rushes to get his trembling form under the covers before God can get it (P64 18). And this fear of the immanent as controlled by the transcendent is reflected in such forms as his terror of the inwardness of sleep (P64 87) and his fear that the pious demons know that his physical desires will come to light (P64 136).

The uncanniest passage in the last chapter may be an inexplicable dream in Stephen’s diary that can be seen as following the lines I’ve developed. On this level, the first part of this dream represents the moribund rulers of tradition, while the second part shows the enslaved populace, which the diary has just referred to as “a race of clodhoppers!” (P64 249).

A long curving gallery... peopled by the images of fabulous kings, set in stone. Their hands are folded upon their knees in token of weariness and their eyes are darkened for the errors of men go up before them for ever as dark vapours.

Strange figures advance from a cave. They are not as tall as men. One does not seem to stand quite apart from another. Their faces are phosphorescent, with darker streaks. They peer at me and their eyes seem to ask me something. They do not speak. (P64 249–50)

Insofar as I can explain this dream by saying that the weary kings are the establishment and the stunted people who are not separated are the oppressed masses, the dream loses its uncanny quality and is less disturbing—and less interesting. But there is always a field behind the margin that can be explained. In this case, the dream reaches back to the ghosts at Clongowes in chapter 1, about whom Stephen thought, “What did they wish to say that their faces were so strange?” (P64 19). The figures in the second part of the dream (or second dream, for the diary entry refers to “dreams”) have phosphorescent faces, suggesting that they are also ghosts, and the fact that “their eyes seem to ask me something” means that he wonders what they wish to say.
Stephen Haunted by His Gender

The inhabitants of Dublin may here be seen as walking dead, an idea developed explicitly in "The Dead." Stephen fears that it may be beyond his ability to save them, that he may end up like the established leaders, wearily gazing at their errors as dark vapors. Thus the dream also reaches forward, in that the mystery of these figures is that of the social world Stephen will encounter and struggle to understand and change.

In this sense the uncanny as the realm of uncertainty is a creative field, the area in which the disturbing unknown appears. All uncertainty includes a touch of fear, and there is virtually no creativity that does not pass through terror, which Stephen defines as the feeling that unites the mind with "the secret cause" of human suffering (P64 204). Such suffering, moreover, usually consists of the sensitive side of humanity, which is to say feminine feeling, subordinated to the brutal side that corresponds to male aggressiveness. Thus the language systems that constitute the genders articulate injustice, and so we return to the unnatural quality of the dominance of the phallic over the feminine.

The strongest version of the subordination of woman to the father in Stephen's life is the death of his mother, which logically follows the grinding oppression of her life, and which in Ulysses makes her a shadow in God's domain. When her ghost speaks in "Circe," it turns out to have no point of view of its own: it mechanically recites the threatening doctrines of the Father: "Beware! God's hand!" This destruction of womanhood corresponds to Stephen's vision in the last chapter of Portrait of the soul of Ireland as a "bat-like" victimized woman with limited awareness of herself and a tendency to depend on the male "stranger" (183). She is the soul of Ireland in that the positioning of woman makes her the repository of sensitivity, so that, as the "Oxen of the Sun" episode suggests, the civilization of a nation may be measured by how much concern it shows for the feelings of its women (U-GP 14, p. 314). And if she is the soul of Ireland, then the pervasive vision of her subjugation will have to be made up for by the final focus on Molly as a woman whose mind is free of masculine control.

All of Joyce's novels move from masculine conflict to feminine release, as each chapter of Portrait ends with Stephen feeling he has freed himself by relating to a maternal image. The movement toward apprehending woman's position leads Stephen to realize on the last full page of Portrait that he was all wrong about E—-. C—-, as Gabriel Conroy realizes he was wrong about Gretta at the end of "The Dead." And Joyce's two main novels end with the unrestrained voices of women. This movement toward the feminine mind is motivated not only by desire but by dread. The male conflict that makes up the bulk of the typical unit of Joycean fiction will lead to abstraction and destruction unless feminine mentality relieves it.

Christine van Boheemen speaks in The Novel as Family Romance of a widespread tendency in Modernism to explore and promote feminine mentality,
and she argues that the presentation of women in the works of male Modernists always serves male purposes (3, 38–42). What she says is true, but the involuntary nature of Joyce’s drive toward contact with feminine subjectivity suggests that the need to dominate may not explain this compulsion adequately. Freud in fact says that one reason the phallus is valued by males is that it represents connection with mother (Inhibitions 139). Within his historic situation, Joyce made contributions to the portrayal and understanding of women, and a contribution that is also important to the development of the feminine side of man. He showed that the constitution of the genders is not natural, but is shaped by culture and driven by anxiety.

NOTE

1. Kristeva says that the abject, which involves confusion of identity with the mother, is “essentially different” from the uncanny, and more violent (Powers 5). But she also says that the abject causes “a massive and sudden emergence of uncanniness” (2). In Freudian terms, a woman’s main conflict will tend to be with her mother, so it is appropriate that Kristeva’s vision of horror centers on the mother’s body. On the other hand, Freud, like Joyce, was preoccupied with father-son conflict.

WORKS CITED


