

**Accepted Science and Rejected Sexuality: The Revealing Nature of the Uncanny  
in Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World***

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Psychology possesses the great and terrible capacity to be used both to benefit and to wholly destabilize us. Psychoanalysis often reveals parts of ourselves that, though necessary, are uncomfortably brought to light. As a result, we become irritated and irrational, and deny what has been uncovered. However, these things, which disturb us so, often have something even further to tell us. This duality, of their unexpected and yet wholly familiar natures, is a phenomenon which Freud has named the “uncanny.”<sup>1</sup> In his words, “It may be true that the uncanny is nothing else than a hidden, familiar thing that has undergone repression and then emerged from it.”<sup>2</sup> What we deem “uncanny” therefore reveals to us both what we hold most familiar, and what we hold, or wish to hold, most alien. Freud further asserts that occurrences of this phenomenon obtain a particular quality when presented in works of fiction.<sup>3</sup> He explains that instances that would be uncanny in real life are far less uncanny in literature, particularly due to our readiness to accept strangeness in works of fiction. It is thus all the more revealing, when a section of prose strikes one as particularly affective and disquieting. Speaking as a reader, Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World* is rife with such instances. While these are individually fascinating examples, they raise further

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<sup>1</sup> Sigmund Freud, *The Uncanny*, trans. Alix Strachey, (London: 1953, 1-21.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid*, 15.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid*, 18.

questions of why they provoke such affective responses. The answer, it would appear, lies in the uncanny itself. Huxley manufactures a world which makes full and abundant use of the nature of the uncanny as the familiar turned unfamiliar. His work, though it would appear to be based in an entirely fictional world, is not so far removed from our current reality. Thus, in reacting to the uncanny in Huxley's novel, we, as the readers, are actually reacting to our own perceptions of reality. The utility of this concept lies in its capacity to reveal to readers our own personal biases about reality. In a work such as Huxley's, this can be used to draw out the parallels between what we subconsciously accept, condone, or ignore about our own societies but react to quite viscerally in works of fiction.

This essay will focus solely on the exposition present in the first three chapters of *Brave New World*. The gradually building nature of the world which Huxley constructs lends itself quite well to dissection by means of the uncanny, as demonstrated by the first instance in which the reader becomes aware of the unnatural nature of Huxley's new civilization. Huxley launches into a description of a factory in which embryonic humans are meticulously raised to become children that are then seamlessly socialized into the new world order.<sup>4</sup> There are detailed descriptions of the rooms of the factory, the conveyor belts for the embryo jars, and the modifications each embryo must undergo in order to accustom it to its future designation. The result of such details is that the entire affair becomes more scientific than human, despite the biologically human nature of the embryos and their future lives. In one passage, Huxley writes:

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<sup>4</sup> Aldous Huxley, *Brave New World*, (1963), accessed November 8, 2014, <http://www.huxley.net/bnw/one.html>.

Their wanderings through the crimson twilight had brought them to the neighborhood of Metre 170 on Rack 9 ... Coolness was wedded to discomfort in the form of hard X-rays. By the time they were decanted the embryos had a horror of cold.<sup>5</sup>

In those few lines alone, there are many details to distract the mind: the embryos are located on tracks labeled by numbers, they are exposed to X-rays, and they must be decanted. Such details accumulate to form a picture of an industrious factory, far removed from images of warmth, of womb, of mother and nurture, in short, all of the usual images one associates with the emergence of new life. Through the suggestion of such an image, Huxley makes use of Freud's theory that instances of the uncanny are often less affective in works of fiction than their physical counterparts would be in reality. Huxley's embryo factory is an ideal demonstration of this phenomenon. To be physically face-to-face with the machinery described would be at the very least eerie and overwhelming. However, Huxley is able to verbally circumvent these anxieties by use of language that tends toward the scientific rather than the emotional. Through the use of numbers such as "Metre 170, Rack 9"<sup>6</sup> and references to technical processes such as X-rays and decanting, Huxley appears to succeed at setting up an entirely new sense of life without raising much alarm from the reader. This feat can be attributed to the nature of the uncanny in fiction. As Freud writes, "In fairy-tales, for instance, the world of reality is left behind from the very start."<sup>7</sup> While Huxley's world is not fantastical in the sense of magic and monsters, it does set up a particular system of belief, namely, that a human

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<sup>5</sup> Ibid, 1.

<sup>6</sup> Aldous Huxley, *Brave New World*, (1963), accessed November 8, 2014, <http://www.huxley.net/bnw/one.html>.

<sup>7</sup> Sigmund Freud. *The Uncanny*, trans. Alix Strachey, (London:1953), 18.

life can be reduced to an accumulation of scientific terminology and processes.

Operating under this system of belief and thought as provided by Huxley, it would thus be irrational to find a factory of embryos the least bit alarming.

In his consideration of the literary uncanny, Freud further asserts that, “The situation is altered as soon as the writer pretends to move in the world of common reality.”<sup>8</sup> Thus, as the system of belief under which the writer operates begins to align more and more with our own, the truly uncanny nature of the work is steadily revealed. In Huxley’s novel, the discussion moves from one of embryology to one of childcare. As the scene shifts upwards from the mechanized factory, elements of reality are introduced. In this section, there is a room full of babies that are wheeled in on a cart laden with infants, echoing their designation as numbers rather than individual lives. However, from this point onwards, Huxley makes a full departure from the aloof technicality of the factory. He describes how the babies are prompted to move towards an assortment of books and flowers which has been set out for them:

The roses flamed up as though with a sudden passion from within; a new and profound significance seemed to suffuse the shining pages of the books. From the ranks of the crawling babies came little squeals of excitement, gurgles and twitterings of pleasure.<sup>9</sup>

All at once, everything is alive, in a manner which is familiarly evocative. The roses represent passion, the books shine with significance, the babies squeal with pleasure. These are all associations with which the reader is previously acquainted. Thus, the world of the text shifts into position alongside our own, a world where roses hold beauty,

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<sup>8</sup> Ibid, 18.

<sup>9</sup> Aldous Huxley, *Brave New World*, (1963), accessed November 8, 2014, <http://www.huxley.net/bnw/one.html>, 2.

books are valued, and babies are adored. This parallel makes Huxley's next move all the more shocking. As the babies rejoice happily over the books, the floor becomes electrified and they receive a shock as a shrieking siren sounds. When the babies are once more offered the books and flowers, they shrink back in terror. Although this scene is understandably disturbing, the depth of the horror lies in its proximity to reality. It is not a juxtaposition of one way of living versus another; it is not a demonstration of that designation of the 'other' with which we frequently comfort ourselves. Rather, it makes use of the same ideas, the same beliefs which our reality does. Try as one might, it is hard to completely compartmentalize Huxley's scenario as discreet from our own lives. The babies in Huxley's factory react as predictably to the shocks and sirens as any real life baby would. They are at turns curious, delighted, playful, and distressed, a range of emotions which coincide with our experiences as readers. Freud would characterize our horror as one built upon the nature of the "double" in instances of the uncanny. As he writes, "There are also all those unfulfilled but possible futures to which we still like to cling to in phantasy... and all of our suppressed acts of volition."<sup>10</sup> While Freud may have been referring to more mystical and metaphorical expressions of the double, the basis of the theory is that instances in which the alternate, parallel, or hidden counterpart is revealed, there is a presiding sense of uncanniness. In Huxley's case, the prospect of conditioning infants to the extent suggested by the novel is the double of our society's conditioning of children in the routine practices of raising them. Underlying both instances is the notion that children are malleable, that it is necessary to condition them in order to protect and socialize them properly. Therefore, the uncanniness of Huxley's scenario comes from the opportunity it presents. Perhaps it wouldn't be so

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<sup>10</sup> Sigmund Freud. *The Uncanny*, trans. Alix Strachey, (London:1953), 10.

preposterous to condition what children like and what they should avoid. Perhaps in reacting to Huxley's story, the reader is actually reacting to a suppressed desire to control and mold young lives to a greater extent than society condones. In this way, Freud's theory of the uncanny can be used to expose the aspects of our own selves with which we may not be entirely comfortable.

A final instance of this phenomenon occurs as Huxley's novel moves upwards one tier further, to the issue of how the children, previously decanted and conditioned, are socialized. Huxley describes a certain sort of "play" between little boys and girls of seven or eight. As the scene develops, this is further categorized as "erotic play"<sup>11</sup>, which occurs in roughly the same manner that adolescent sexual encounters do. The first instinct of the reader, upon discovering this, is to be disgusted. Small children ought not to engage in anything of a sexual nature. Such things are for adults only. However, even in this instance, Freud's theory of the uncanny can be used to dissect that which seems simply disturbing. In this particular case, the utility of the uncanny lies in its ability to draw focus to those things we as readers find especially disquieting. There must be something about the consideration of children as sexual beings that enables it to transcend the accepted absurdity of fiction. It does not coincide particularly strongly with our reality, nor does it seem to obviously express a repressed desire of the reader. It seems terribly repulsive and abhorrent, and indeed it may be. It is not principally for the reader to contemplate the accuracy of such a notion. Rather, it simply draws to our attention that sexuality is something in which we are particularly invested, something which we approach with specific expectations and biases. Perhaps it is necessarily

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<sup>11</sup> Aldous Huxley, *Brave New World*, (1963), accessed November 8, 2014, <http://www.huxley.net/bnw/one.html>, 3.

reserved for those of a certain age, or perhaps this is simply a social construct which has been imposed upon us much as Huxley's world is constructed and imposed upon its citizens. While the answers to such questions are neither forthcoming nor easily gleaned from either text, Freud's "Uncanny" serves the purpose of calling into question our values through juxtaposition with those we so hastily reject.

The question of our repressed societal impulses has become particularly poignant given the high speed technological advances our world seems to be constantly engaged in. The capacity of both texts, Freud's "Uncanny" and Huxley's *Brave New World*, (and the interplay between the two) to uncover the elements of society and of ourselves that we repress through various means of sublimation and ignorance is becoming increasingly essential. Unlike Huxley's society, there is much left to be decided about life and human rights, but our continuing capability to distinguish that which we disdain through our affective responses to their uncanny natures is one which is a simple yet powerful indicator of our true inclinations. When coupled with the psychoanalytical power of Freud's theory, a serious investigation of our proclivities as a society is revealed. It is that which we accept unthinkingly, or react to instinctively, which reveals to us those long-held preconceptions our world is built upon. As demonstrated by Huxley, such notions can be immensely powerful, "that is the secret of happiness and virtue—liking what you've got to do. All conditioning aims at that: making people like their unescapable social destiny."<sup>12</sup> Although Huxley's entire civilization is built upon an unconscious and unwilling acceptance of this idea, the affective responses that we as the readers exhibit upon exposure to the Huxley's uncanny text represents

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<sup>12</sup> Aldous Huxley, *Brave New World*, (1963), accessed November 8, 2014, <http://www.huxley.net/bnw/one.html>, 1.

the capacity for our preconceptions to still be challenged. We are not the babies of Huxley's *New World*, we have not been predestined and conditioned to unthinkingly accept what is presented to us. It is the duty of the readers to make ourselves fully susceptible to the influence of the uncanny, and the myriad of discoveries that can be made should we search beyond our initial discomfort. For all we know, the very structure of our reality depends on it.



## Works Cited

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