

Revisiting Freud's Uncanny in *The Oblong Box* of Poe*

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Abstract

The short stories of Edgar A. Poe elevate fear and tension to the highest level while exploring the dark side of humanity. *The Oblong Box* (1844) is one of Poe's gothic stories. The story is about an unfortunate man who attempts to send his wife's corpse in a pine box to her mother. The text evokes in the reader a sense of ambiguity between life and death as well as a feeling of fear. This fear is a state of uncanny that occurs when things that seem familiar, harmless, and normal become foreign and dangerous in the human consciousness, thus arousing fear. The primary source of the uncanny is the remembrance of unwanted events and feelings, creating a profound sense of unease in the individual. Freud, who developed theories examining human consciousness and neurotic situations, also considers alienation and uncertainty to be important factors in evaluating the stages at which the feeling of the uncanny emerges. Hence, reading the story in light of Freud's theories not only prompts us to reconsider Poe's style but also enables us to reevaluate the common aspects of universal human behavior through the influential use of death, mourning, and fear themes in Gothic literature. From this perspective, although the text appears to be a conventional Gothic story, it also possesses the characteristic of being a suitable narrative for evaluating the relationship between Gothic fiction and psychology. Therefore, this study aims to analyze *The Oblong Box* through the lens of Freud's theory of the uncanny.

Keywords: Edgar A. Poe, *The Oblong Box*, uncanny, Freud, gothic story

1. Introduction

The short story is a genre that relies on the economy of language. Though the thematic content of the short stories in the English and American canons is overtly transparent, E. A. Poe's short stories demonstrate a complex engagement with the layers of the human psyche. Edgar Allan Poe (1809-1849) is renowned for his Gothic stories, which invoke a sense of fear in the reader. He also has a proclivity for creating paradoxical situations that prompt readers to ponder the

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vicissitudes of his characters. His Byzantine stories focus on the evil side of humans, utilizing horror, suspense, and the vicissitudes of his fabula, which are based on fragile relationships and macabre themes. Therefore, his Gothic style frequently unsettles the reader with its loquacious descriptions of despair and madness, unfolding a dark reality in his characters' minds. In this regard, Poe's works often transcend being simple horror stories through the deep psychological explorations of the human condition. In line with his style, Dayan (1993) claims that "Poe's gothic depends upon experiences that trade on unspeakable slippages between men and women, humans and animals, life and death" (p. 10). Poe's style of gothic literature displays a parallelism with Abrams (1999), who notes that "the Gothic genre encompasses fiction that, despite lacking the exotic settings of early romances, evokes a sombre and terrifying atmosphere, often characterized by uncanny or grotesque events and the search for anomalous psychological conditions" (p. 111). Unconventionally, Poe deciphered the appearance of horror, which is the most influential emotion for human beings necessary for survival, and its more effective reflection in his gothic stories such as *Ligea*, *Fall of the House of Usher*, *Haunted Palace*, *The Raven* and *The Cask of Amontillado*. He forces the reader to confront their deepest fears by weaving psychological complexity and emotional tensions into his stories.

Poe, who prefers to portray extraordinary situations with unconventional characters, effectively creates a reminiscent atmosphere through allusive settings, a clear prose style, and rich symbolism that implies the psychology of his characters. These elements contribute to his act of creating suspenseful horror stories that illuminate the intriguing aspects of human psychology. Among the stories that shed light on bizarre situations and characters, "the general indifference and lack of curiosity with which most readers have reacted to *The Oblong Box* seems to defy a natural human impulse to uncover what is concealed" (McMullen, 1995, p. 203). Thus, also among the gothic stories of Poe, *The Oblong Box* has a special place since it provides qualities of horror and abnormality of a character suffering from a loss, which makes it a case study and an insightful story that can be read from the perspective of Sigmund Freud's theories and whose worth will increase even more.

While Poe's masterfully crafted stories of horror and gothic provide a ground to understand the primary reasons for his characters' actions, Freud's theory of the uncanny, which focuses on the nature of the birth of unusual acts of fear, offers a suitable frame for the analysis of the psychological aspects portrayed in the story. However, Freud, who maintained a scientific and critical distance from the psychological problems of his patients, traced the fundamentals of their actions, which stem from the powerful drives existing within individuals. Moreover, "the concept of human consciousness and the unconscious have become more comprehensible through Sigmund Freud's theories that reveal the structure of the subconscious" (Kalecik, 2017, p. 46). His theoretical approaches, structured into stages,

facilitate an understanding of the nature of common constituents and the emotions that drive people's reactions to events encountered in daily life, as well as extraordinary matters. For this reason, reading texts that primarily focus on psychology, particularly in the context of Freud's theory of the Uncanny, provides insights into a deeper understanding of the text and presents ways to bridge the gap between literature and psychology, specifically paving the way to understanding the reasons behind unconventional actions and their representations. Accordingly, this study aims to analyze *The Oblong Box* through the lens of Freud's theory of the uncanny, highlighting how Poe's depiction of fear and psychological tension, combined with suspense, reflects the fundamental aspects of the theory.

2. Revisiting Freud's Uncanny in *The Oblong Box* of Poe

In *The Oblong Box*, Edgar Allan Poe crafts a tale of suspense that centers around a mysterious sea voyage, psychological tension, and horror that evokes Freud's theory of the uncanny. The story begins with the unnamed narrator, who recounts a sea voyage from Charleston, South Carolina, to New York City in a packet ship "Independence" (Poe, 2006, p. 570). The narrator realizes from the list that Cornelius Wyatt, one of his old friends from C---- University, is on the ship with his wife and two sisters (p. 570). Although he has reserved three state-rooms with only two berths, he brings more from his family (p. 570). The narrator initially believes that this state-room is reserved for a servant or extra baggage, but he discovers that his friend has brought an oblong pine box on board: "It was about six feet in length by two and a half in breadth." (p. 572). The oblong box catches the narrator's attention due to its "*peculiar*" shape and the disgusting odor emanating from it (Italics are original) (p. 572). However, he supposes that his friend has bought a copy of "The Last Supper" and put the copy in it (p. 572). The narrator hopes to meet Mr. Wyatt's wife, but he later learns that she is sick and will come at the hour of sailing. After this, the narrator hears from the captain that the voyage will be delayed due to circumstances. When they all set out on the journey, the narrator realizes that Wyatt shares the state-room with the oblong box and his wife, but the two sisters share the second room. On the other hand, the narrator witnesses his friend's unattractive wife leaving the state room every night and entering the third state room (pp. 73-75). When she leaves the room, the narrator believes that he witnesses his friend opening the box and sobbing. When the Independence passes Cape Hatteras, it is caught in a terrible hurricane (p. 575). While the passengers are escaping from the damaged ship via a lifeboat, Wyatt refuses to part with the box, but Captain Hardy rejects his intention to return to the ship. Wyatt decides that he cannot part with the box and jumps into the sea with it (p. 577). Approximately a month after the incident, the narrator meets Captain Hardy, and he explains that Wyatt, in fact, brought the corpse of his wife in the box. He wants to return the body to her mother, but getting a corpse on board may cause panic among the passengers. Captain Hardy allowed him to register the

box as baggage, and his maid also pretended that his wife was present to avoid arousing suspicion among the passengers (p. 578).

Following a concise overview of the story, it is essential to reconsider the fundamentals of Freud's views on the "uncanny" and to evaluate the story in terms of psychoanalytic literary criticism. Masschelein (2002) notes that "Freud introduces the uncanny as a special shade of anxiety, which can be experienced in real life or in literature, caused by the return of the repressed or by the apparent confirmation of surmounted, primitive beliefs" (p. 54). Freud's study on the "uncanny," published in 1919, is divided into two major sections. The first part of the study lays the groundwork for defining the uncanny, drawing on the semantic structure of the conflict between the two German words, "heimlich" and "unheimlich". The second part is an analysis of Hoffman's short story, *The Sandman*, its psychoanalytic background, and its relationship with the concept of the "uncanny." Freud (2025) accepts that the term uncanny is related to something frightening in the first part and he points out that: "It is undoubtedly related to what is frightening — to what arouses dread and horror; equally certainly, too, the word is not always used in a clearly definable sense, so that it tends to coincide with what excites fear in general" (p. 1). He tries to explain the two German words "heimlich" and "unheimlich". However, Freud's definition of "uncanny" (unheimlich) is the class of frightening things that leads us back to what is known and familiar but Freud's intention is to find the reasons for the appearance of it since it is related to horror and displays ambiguity in mind. Therefore, his primary definition of 'Heimlich' is observed as follows:

Heimlich, adj., ... I. [B]elonging to the house, not strange, familiar, tame, intimate, friendly, etc. ... (b) Of animals: tame, companionable to man. ... (c) Intimate, friendly comfortable; the enjoyment of quiet content, etc., arousing a sense of agreeable restfulness and security as in one within the four walls of his house. (Freud, 2025, pp. 2-3)

However, the second definition of "Heimlich" is "what is concealed and kept out of sight, secretive and private" (p. 3). At the end of the first part, Freud concludes that "uncanny" is something unknown and unfamiliar but revealed and uncovered. Namely, the German word "Heimlich" thus has a meaning that collides with its opposite, "unheimlich.". Ultimately, Freud's thesis that the unheimlich/uncanny is a revelation of what is private and concealed, of what is hidden not only from others but also from the self. In the words of Bennet & Royle:

"The uncanny, then, is an experience – even though this may have to do with the unthinkable or unimaginable. It is not a theme that a writer uses or that a text possesses. [...] The uncanny is not so much in the text we are reading; rather, it is like a foreign body within ourselves" (Bennet & Royle, 2023, pp. 59–60).

However, at the end of his study, Freud comes to two conclusions. Firstly, he conceives that every effect which belongs to an emotional impulse turns into anxiety if it is repressed. In addition, these instances include a frightening element, which can be shown to be something repressed that recurs. These frightening things constitute the uncanny. Secondly, the uncanny is not something new or alien; in contrast, it is familiar and old established in the mind, but

has become alienated from it through the process of repression. Repression is a crucial factor that turns the familiar thing into the uncanny. After this explanation about the term “uncanny” with its linguistic ambivalence, it has a psychological ambivalence that “involves the unsettling feeling when childhood fears seem more real than adult rationality” (Malewitz, 2020, para. 12). Therefore, *The Oblong Box* can be examined through a Freudian lens, particularly in terms of the “return of the repressed,” the “ambivalence” in the characters’ actions, and the appearance of the “uncanny,” which pave the way for the solidification of fear blended with suspense in Gothic narratives.

The protagonist of the story is Mr. Cornelius Wyatt, a college friend of the narrator and a young artist. He possibly displays uncanny characteristics because he acts in an unfamiliar way to the narrator, although he has had feelings of warm friendship before. Fisher (2008) argues that “Poe’s creative writings are consequently peopled by characters whose emotions are fragile” (p. 24). It is the first instance of ambivalence in the story because the narrator expects some intimacy from his friend, but he is unable to find it. In the second paragraph of the first page, the narrator presents the qualities of his friend and says: “He had the ordinary temperament of genius, and was a compound of misanthropy, sensibility, and enthusiasm. To these qualities he united the warmest and truest heart which ever beat in a human bosom” (Poe, 2006, p. 570). Following this seemingly favorable judgement about Mr. Wyatt, the narrator brings us into one of the central problems of the story, by which the narrator’s and the reader’s suspicion arises. The narrator may seem over-suspicious, but as he describes it, Mr. Wyatt reserves three state rooms for four people: himself, his wife, and two sisters. The narrator accepts this situation as a dilemma or an enigma because in each state room, there are two beds. The narrator remarks: “It was no business of mine, to be sure, but with none the less pertinacity did I occupy myself in attempts to resolve the enigma.” (p. 570). Although the narrator supposes that this extra room is reserved for their servant, he learns that no servant comes with the party, and the writing “and servant” is underscored in the list (p. 570). Apart from this, the narrator again considers that the extra room is for additional baggage, which Mr. Wyatt may wish not to be put on hold; instead, it should be kept under his own eyes, thereby increasing the tone of curiosity. Besides, Mr. Wyatt bargains with an Italian Jew, Nicolino. Still, although the narrator thinks they are haggling over the price of the picture, they are dealing with another matter. This idea satisfies the narrator for a while, but he does not accept the queer situation as it is when he hears about the delay of the voyage due to the circumstances (p. 570). The narrator finds this delay unreasonable because there is nothing that can hinder the voyage except for a soft breeze. He expects to meet Mr. Wyatt’s wife on the board, but he cannot because Mrs. W is ill. In a moment that contains not just anticipation but disillusionment, the narrator reflects: “I waited on board an hour longer than I had designed, in the hope of being presented to the bride, but then an apology came: “Mrs. W. was a little

indisposed, and would decline coming on board until to-morrow, at the hour of sailing” (Poe, 2006, p. 571). In this sentence, the word “indisposed” is important because if you say that someone is indisposed, it means he/she is not available because of an illness, or for a reason that you do not want to reveal. The narrator insists that there is a secret and uncanny thing around Mr. Wyatt because he is familiar to the narrator, but he has changed. The narrator’s suspicion deepens:

I MUST except, however, Wyatt and his sisters, who behaved stiffly, and, I could not help thinking, uncourtously to the rest of the party. I did not so much regard Wyatt’s conduct. He was gloomy, even beyond his usual habit--in fact he was MOROSE--but in him I was prepared for eccentricity. For the sisters, however, I could make no excuse. They secluded themselves in their staterooms during the greater part of the passage, and absolutely refused, although I repeatedly urged them, to hold communication with any person on board. (Poe, 2006, pp. 572-573)

In this quotation, the words “morose” and “secluded” are important because someone who is morose is miserable, bad-tempered, and unwilling to talk much to other people. Mr. Wyatt’s characteristic is described with these words. Therefore, it is possible to infer that this character, initially *Heimlich* (familiar, known), starts to become an *unheimlich* (unfamiliar, foreign) person in time as the story unfolds. Moreover, Freud asserts that in order to define “uncanny,” repression is necessary, and he says:

We can understand why linguistic usage has extended *das Heimliche* . . . into its opposite, *das Unheimliche*; for this uncanny is in reality nothing new or alien, but something which is familiar and old-established in the mind and which has become alienated from it only through the process of repression” (Freud, 2025, p. 13)

In *The Oblong Box*, Mr. Wyatt’s attitudes gradually take on an uncanny character, and he becomes alienated from himself, a phenomenon related to his unfortunate experiences and the process of repression. As a result, he is estranged from the old-established qualities that comprise his transformed personality due to repression. This repressed event might be related to his guilt or deep grief over his wife, and it transforms into an indispensable aspect of his new self and identity as a widower who cannot overcome the deep agony of losing his beloved wife. Furthermore, it is possible to argue that the uncanny is not limited to a character and his qualities as represented in the story.

The oblong box is an uncanny object that the narrator describes as “*peculiar*” (Poe, 2006, p. 572). On the other hand, the object becomes an uncanny element because it is repeatedly mentioned throughout the story. E. A. Poe employs the word “box” twenty times in the story, and he gives the details about the box, and shows the reader its secretive aspects, and invokes the idea of danger blended with mystery. Both the details of the box and the unfolding events surrounding it evoke a mood of restlessness while also pursuing suspense and fear. As far as the narrator observes, the mysterious box is “six feet in length and two and a half feet in breadth,” and it generates unease and discomfort (p. 572). He does not know what is inside, but he makes some assumptions about it and thinks that a copy of Leonardo’s *Last Supper* is

inside it (p. 572). It appears that bringing a huge box on board the ship raises some suspicions. Although the narrator hopes that it will be placed in the extra state room, he witnesses that Mr. Wyatt keeps it in his own state room, occupying the entire floor of the room. It spreads a disgusting odor and writes on it “*To be handled with care*” (Italics are original) (p. 572). The box may symbolize a big secret not only for the narrator but also for the reader. Given that it seems erratic to bring a large box on board and that Mr. Wyatt places such a high value on it, one could argue that the reader is also put in a contradictory position. Although it should be handled with care, it also spreads a disgusting odor. It is quite paradoxical to describe a beautiful handmade object that smells terrible. Therefore, these questions in the mind trap the reader, but they may be answered with “uncanny” because a box is something the reader is familiar with. However, in this case, it is not so easy to surmise what is inside. Due to its shape and limited nature, the box may symbolize the unconscious mind, which many people fill with and conceal unwanted incidents that are stored unconsciously, much like a combination safe. It may also include something frightening, as the odor is a clue to its presence, but the second clue is the subdued noises and sounds. When the narrator observes Mr. Wyatt’s room, he hears not only the opening sound of the box but also his sobbing.

Poe provides details about the box and reveals its secretive aspects, thereby evoking a sense of fear. Both the physical details of the box and the unfolding events surrounding it intensify the tone of restlessness and anxiety. In the final part of the story, a revelation takes place because Mr. Wyatt refuses to part with the box, but Captain Hardy rejects his intention of returning to the ship. Wyatt decides that he cannot part with the box and jumps into the sea, tying himself to it with a rope. He says:

“The box!” vociferated Mr. Wyatt, still standing--“the box, I say! Captain Hardy, you cannot, you will not refuse me. Its weight will be but a trifle--it is nothing--mere nothing. By the mother who bore you--for the love of Heaven--by your hope of salvation, I implore you to put back for the box!” (Poe, 2006, p. 577)

The uncanny appears when the bond between the regular and the understandable breaks, and when, particularly, a familiar acceptance of normal, which is assumed to be controlled by preconceived rules, is interrupted by illogical forces that challenge not just our understanding of the quotidian but also our fundamental assumptions about what might subsist. Roeger (2016) argues “the sinking of Wyatt and the coffin in *The Oblong Box* signals an epistemological terror as well as the anxiety of premature burial” (p. 237). However, the fear and anxiety, portrayed in this scene, are not limited to an early death; instead, they further imply the uncanniness of the box and Mrs. Wyatt’s uncanny quality, both of which are compounded in this scene as a material object that is ordinarily familiar becomes strange and unfamiliar –alienating not just the reader but also itself- by initially containing a frightening presence, and ultimately revealing its repressed, captivating and secretive nature through Wyatt’s unification with his wife with his strong desire to reach the box. Confronted with the

overwhelming grief of his wife's death, Wyatt forgoes the mourning period. He instead either consciously or unconsciously represses his sorrow, a psychological repression symbolically represented in the story by the oblong box, the coffin of his wife, which later manifests as anxiety and leads to his tragic death. Besides, it becomes a concrete object with Mrs. Wyatt's corpse, which is put into a box with salt. Although Mr. Wyatt does not completely pass his mourning term, he unconsciously feels the obligation of repressing this frightening event and must limit his sexual impulses because though the body of his wife is a familiar sexual object, it turns out to be a corpse preserved with salt, that symbolically reminds that his agony will prevail. In other words, he passes an ambivalent term and becomes indecisive between life and death, body and corpse. His neurosis culminates with his tragic death when he leaps into the sea after tying himself with a rope to the box. Sweeney (2018) states that *The Oblong Box* evokes Wyatt's peals of hysterical laughter as his wife's coffin sinks beneath the waves, an uncanny sound that still haunts the narrator" (p. 200). Therefore, as the final scene proposes, the box, whose shape is more or less known by everyone, is a familiar object used in daily life, evokes fear and restlessness owing to the corpse it contains and changes its meaning and perception with the reader because once represented as an object of minor differences turns out to be a coffin box that destabilizes the reader's sense of reality and create creepy ambivalence.

The Oblong Box dramatizes a profound misrecognition not only of individuals and their motives, but also of repressed grief and the tension between socially imposed decorum and authentic emotional expression. Through the mysterious existence of the rectangular box and the narrator's portrayal of the tragic but scary emotional bond, Poe limns the uncanny, the eerie metamorphosis of the perception of the individual who experiences anxiety by regarding the familiar as alien, with the return of the repressed emotions and knowledge that Freud calls the uncanny. Thus, as seen in the story, with the eerie symbolism embodied in the oblong box, the most horrifying realities, such as death, are those that exist in plain sight, but are attempted to be covered up by denial, rationalization, and emotional repression, returning as befitting Freud's theories.

3. Conclusion

It is obvious that literature and psychology are complementary disciplines which display a symbiotic relationship. Accordingly, Poe, long before Freud, clearly demonstrated in his Gothic stories that fear holds a significant place in human psychology and has deep roots. The dark, oblong box in the story is a crucial symbol of the human psyche, which is unlimited, often filled with fear and sorrow, and ready to be opened with the help of unexpected events. In *The Oblong Box*, instead of analyzing a change in the perception of an ordinary object that later evokes fear- the uncanny, as in Freud's terms- Poe demonstrates that a human being can also

become uncanny and transform into a source of fear, as exemplified by the character of Cornelius Wyatt and his tragic death. *The Oblong Box* explicitly provides an outlook for examining the unveiled aspects of universal human experiences, such as death, mourning, and fear, which are key themes that continue to appear in Gothic fiction. However, Poe's gothic tales of psychology are also an uncanny experience, which, as Freud's theory of the uncanny proposes, appears when the psychological ambivalence to the familiar is experienced, and what Poe creates through his narratives embroidered with suspense and fear and the themes of psychological viciousness, evolves into more insightful psychological texts –as in the case of *The Oblong Box*- when analyzed with the theories of literature and psychology.

Disclosures

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