

**Spring 2022**

**ENG 397 A: The Uncanny in Literature**

**Dr. Sean J. Kelly**

**MW 3:00-4:15**



In his classic essay “The Uncanny” (1919), Sigmund Freud theorized the psychological implications of those aesthetic effects which disturb us, unsettle us, and creep us out without us quite knowing why. While the uncanny or *das unheimliche* evokes a peculiar form of affect within “the field of the frightening” (123), it is a type of fear quite distinct from (though not entirely unrelated to) that produced by horror and terror. The uncanny, Freud observes, “goes back to what was once known and had long been familiar” (124). In this sense, the uncanny marks a traumatic return of the repressed. While the fear caused by an external threat corresponds specifically to the biological organism, the uncanny relates, more particularly, to what the psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan refers to as the “divided” subject, namely the subject of language and of the unconscious. The uncanny generates anxiety in the subject not because it threatens its biological existence, but rather, because it stages a “missed” encounter with

what Lacan calls the *ex-timate*, “something strange to me, although it is at the heart of me” (*VII* 71).

In this class, our aim will be to: 1. Familiarize ourselves with the aesthetics of the uncanny by examining theoretical accounts not only from Freud and Lacan but also from leading contemporary theorists. Along the way, we will consider the ways in which the uncanny may be viewed as a manifestation of drive structures involving the gaze and the voice as partial objects; 2. Consider not only when but also *how* the uncanny is constructed in literary, visual, and filmic representations; 3. Consider the implications of the uncanny for a theory of the subject as it pertains to broader social issues, such as: freedom, morality, the law, sexuality, and death. Accordingly, we will read passages and excerpts from psychoanalytic theorists, including: Sigmund Freud, Jacques Lacan, Elizabeth Bronfen, Julia Kristeva, Joan Copjec, Mladen Dolar, and others.

**Primary Texts:**

- Charles Brockden Brown, *Wieland* (1798)
- Edgar Allan Poe: “The Raven” (1845), “The Fall of the House of Usher” (1839), “Ligeia” (1838), and “The Black Cat” (1843)
- Nathaniel Hawthorne: “The Birth-mark” (1843), “The Minister’s

Black Veil” (1836), and *The Scarlet Letter* (1850)

- Toni Morrison, *Beloved* (1987)
- Doris Lessing, *The Fifth Child* (1988)
- Sam Shepard, *Buried Child* (1978)
- Yukiko Motoya, “An Exotic Marriage” (2015)
- Silvina Ocampo, selections from *Forgotten Journey* (2019)

- Alejandro Amenábar (director), *The Others* (2001)
- Ben O’Brien and Alan Resnick (directors), *Unedited Footage of a Bear* (film short) (2014)
- Alejandro Amenábar (director), *The Others* (2001)

**Course Requirements and Grading:** All students are expected to complete the required reading and participate in class discussions.

--Attendance/Participation **(15%)**

--Midterm essay exam (5 pages) **(25%)**

--In-class (informal) presentation (3-5 min.) **(5%)**

--Final research essay (18-20 pages) **(40%)**

--Formal conference-style presentation (8-10 pages/15-20 minutes) **(15%)**

Final grades will be calculated by converting letter grades into the 4-point scale.

A 90-100 = 4.0

C+ 75-79 = 2.5

D 60-64 = 1.0

B+ 85-89 = 3.5

C 70-74 = 2.0

F 59 & below = 0.0

B 80-84 = 3.0

D+ 65-69 = 1.5

**Plagiarism:** To knowingly submit someone else’s work as your own is plagiarism. **Plagiarism constitutes academic fraud and intellectual theft.** This includes appropriating work from other students (or having another student do the work for you), professional writers, or instructors—basically from *any* source—without properly acknowledging the author. The proper methods for documenting written and media sources can be found in any writer’s manual.

*Plagiarized papers earn a 0. The university's recommended penalty for repeated plagiarism is failure for the course. If you ever have any questions about this, please see me.*

**Attendance and Participation:** It is vital that students complete the required reading and participate in class discussion. While I will offer mini-lectures a way of positioning texts and framing discussions, I will typically not use a predominately lecture format. Instead, I will pose questions that attempt to promote your engagement with the readings and provoke your responses to the issues being raised by these works. Consequently, you will need to come to class prepared with reading notes, questions, and connections that you are already working on. **Students may miss no more than three (3) unexcused absences. Five (5) or more absences may lead to automatic failure for the course.**

**Midterm Essay Exam:** At midterm, I will ask you to write an essay addressing a specific question that brings together several of the works from the first half of the course. You will be allowed to use notes and handouts for this essay; however, no outside research or collaboration with other students in the preparation of the essay may be used.

**In-class Presentations:** The goal of these informal presentations is to introduce a specific concept or idea in one of the theoretical texts we're reading. These presentations are meant to: 1. Introduce the topic by way of a close examination of the text, and 2. Raise pointed questions about concepts by placing them in conversations with other texts/ideas. We will, in other words, use these presentations to begin building our reading of the theory by addressing areas of difficulty and mapping out lines of productive questioning. In short, you are not expected to be familiar with many of the (psychoanalytic) theoretical concepts for the course, and you will not be evaluated on your expertise during these presentations.

The oral presentation should be roughly 3-5 minutes in length and should be accompanied by a brief (1-page) handout. The handout should be organized so that it introduces your topic in the following manner: 1. Brief overview/summary of the topic/concept that focuses on specific passages from the text; 2. Brief analysis of the relationship between this concept/topic and the broader (philosophical, psychoanalytic, aesthetic) issue of the uncanny; 3. A set of three original questions that generate further discussion. Your grade will be based on the quality of your critical engagement, *not* your apparent mastery of the topic.

**Final Research Essay:** The final essay should constitute a significant research project that explores issues relevant to one or more of the texts we've read this term. Your analysis of one or more primary texts should be extended/supported by critical and theoretical frameworks that broaden the scope and significance of your argument. The final research essay of 18-20 pages will be showcased in a public, conference-style presentation in the Kirby Hall Salon.

**Salon Presentation:** The Salon presentation will constitute a 7-10-page, truncated but coherent version of the final draft that will be delivered before an audience of Wilkes English faculty and students. These presentations will be tentatively scheduled for the last day of class, **May 4**.

## Reading Schedule

### January

#### Synchronous (via Zoom)

Wed. 1/19: Introduction, The uncanny aesthetic evoked as a literary aesthetic (three examples: in Poe's "Ligeia," Poe's "The Fall of the House of Usher," and Hawthorne's "The Minister's Black Veil")

Mon. 1/24: Discuss Sigmund Freud's essay "The Uncanny" (1919). PRESENTATION

1. \_\_\_\_\_

Wed. 1/26: Discuss Nicholas Royle, from *The Uncanny* (2003). Chapter 5 on the death drive.

PRESENTATION 2. \_\_\_\_\_

#### Begin Face-to-Face

Mon. 1/31: View Ben O'Brien and Alan Resnick (directors), "Unedited Footage of a Bear" (2014). Introduce Jacques Lacan. Brief excerpts from: *On the Names-of-the-Father* (62-72); *Ecrit* (the mirror stage); *Seminar X: Anxiety* (60-61, 254); from *Seminar VII: Ethics of Psychoanalysis* (71); *Seminar XI* (196-200). PRESENTATION

3. \_\_\_\_\_ (you can focus on *one* Lacan excerpt for your presentation)

Wed. 2/2: Discuss Mladan Dolar, "'I shall be with you on your wedding night': Lacan and the Uncanny" (1991). Discuss Edgar Allan Poe's "The Raven" (1845). PRESENTATION

4. \_\_\_\_\_

### February

Mon. 2/7: Discuss Edgar Allan Poe's "The Black Cat" (1843).

Wed. 2/9: Discuss Nathaniel Hawthorne's "The Birth-mark" (1843); excerpt from Elizabeth Bronfen's book, *Over Her Dead Body: Death, Femininity, and the Aesthetic* (1992).

PRESENTATION 5. \_\_\_\_\_

Mon. 2/14: Discuss Joan Copjec, from *Read My Desire: Lacan against the Historicists* (1995)

(Chapter 5: “Vampires, Breast-Feeding, and Anxiety”). PRESENTATION

6. \_\_\_\_\_

Wed. 2/16: Discuss Charles Brockden Brown, *Wieland* (1798) (chapters I through VIII)

Mon. 2/21: *Wieland* (chapters IX through XVII)

Wed. 2/23: *Wieland* (chapter XVIII-end)

Mon. 2/28: Discuss Nathaniel Hawthorne’s *The Scarlet Letter* (1850) (“The Custom-House” through chapter VII)

Wed. 3/2: *The Scarlet Letter* (chapters VIII-XVI). **Midterm essay exam due.**

## March

Mon. 3/7: **Spring Recess**

Wed. 3/9: **Spring Recess**

Mon. 3/14: Complete *The Scarlet Letter*

Wed. 3/16: Toni Morrison, *Beloved* (1987)

Mon. 3/21: *Beloved*

Wed. 3/23: *Beloved*

Mon. 3/28: *Beloved*

Wed. 3/30: *Beloved*

## April

Mon. 4/4: Doris Lessing, *The Fifth Child* (1989) (through page 70)

Wed. 4/6: Conclude discussion of *The Fifth Child*.

Mon. 4/11: Yukiko Motoya, from *The Lonesome Bodybuilder* (2015): “An Exotic Marriage”

Wed. 4/13: Silvina Ocampo, from *Forgotten Journey* (2019): “Saint’s Day” and “The Head Pressed against a Window”

Mon. 4/18: Sam Shepard, *Buried Child* (1978)

Wed. 4/20: *Buried Child*

Mon. 4/25: *Buried Child*

Wed. 4/27: Alejandro Amenábar (director), *The Others* (2001)

## **May**

Mon. 5/2: *The Others* (2001)

Wed. 5/4: Salon Presentations