

## Chopping Down a Beanstalk? The (Un-)Uncanniness of Freud's Concept of the Fairy Tale<sup>1</sup>

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In Western society today, fairy tales are widely perceived as something nice to tell children before they go to bed. The stories with their compulsory happy ending are a good basis for sweet dreams as there is nothing scary about them (Zipes 2000: xxv).<sup>2</sup> One might think they are so distant from our real world that parents and children alike can see the difference and that neither parents nor children experience them as something uncanny.

In his essay 'The Uncanny' (Freud 1997),<sup>3</sup> Sigmund Freud describes what it means when life and literature are 'uncanny' or, in German, *unheimlich*.<sup>4</sup> He clearly shows that there is more to this feeling than just weirdness and fear. He tries to deduce the full meaning of *unheimlich* by first examining its antonym *heimlich*. He discovers that the meanings of *heimlich* fall into two groups, the one, 'belonging to the house, not strange, familiar, tame, intimate, friendly' (Freud 1997: 196) and the other, its opposite, '[c]oncealed, kept from sight [...] withheld from others' (Freud 1997: 198). Freud concludes that *unheimlich* is a subspecies of *heimlich* in this second meaning (Freud 1997: 201) and can thus be defined as everything that should 'have remained secret and hidden but has come to light' (Freud 1997: 200). He further shows that something is uncanny when a reader is confronted with infantile complexes which had been repressed up until then or with surmounted, primitive beliefs (Freud 1997: 226). Some possible forms of these complexes and beliefs are a lack of understanding of the animate or inanimate (Freud 1997: 205, 209), the castration and oedipal complexes (Freud 1997: 206–08), the 'double' and constant recurrence (Freud 1997: 210), the 'dread of the evil eye' (Freud 1997: 216), the 'omnipotence of thoughts' (Freud 1997: 216) and death-related aspects (Freud 1997: 218f). Thus, the uncanny describes something initially familiar which has been estranged from the adult through repression (Freud 1997: 217).

<sup>1</sup> This article is a winner of the Skepsi 2011 Postgraduate Essay Competition (see Foreword).

<sup>2</sup> The fairy tale's 'compulsory happy ending' is a relatively recent phenomenon; this article does not consider its earlier version where this is not the case.

<sup>3</sup> First published as 'Das Unheimliche' in 1919.

<sup>4</sup> This is a problematic term to translate, as Freud himself discusses (Freud 1997: 195). Traditionally, it is translated in the context of Freud's essay as 'uncanny' but dictionary translations include 'uneasy', 'gloomy', 'haunted', 'eerie' and 'sinister', depending on the context.

With regard to animism, Freud stresses ‘that an uncanny effect is often and easily produced when the distinction between imagination and reality is effaced’ (Freud 1997: 221).<sup>5</sup> In the final chapter he extends this aspect to fiction. As long as things happen in accordance with the given ‘poetic reality’, that is, the world that the writer has chosen to represent, there is no uncanniness (Freud 1997: 226). However, the writer may choose a poetic reality that resembles reality (Freud 1997: 227). In this sense, some aspects which would not evoke a sense of the uncanny in fiction would do so in real life (Freud 1997: 226) but at the same time there are more possibilities of creating uncanniness in fiction than there are in reality (Freud 1997: 228). Freud leaves the reader puzzling over this paradox, which I will discuss in detail later. However, Freud declares that no ‘genuine fairy story [...] has anything uncanny about it (Freud 1997: 223); it is, therefore, exceptional in fiction in that it cannot evince a sense of the uncanny, so can be seen as exemplifying ‘un-uncanniness’ in literature.

In the course of examining in detail Freud’s understanding of the fairy tale and its relationship to the uncanny, this article will demonstrate that Freud’s view on the fairy tale, a literary genre which is a topic much discussed by critics, is not the only one and that other perspectives are all equally valid. Literary companions have been published by Zipes (Zipes 2000) and by Davidson and Chaudri (Davidson and Chaudri 2003); Propp (Propp 1994; first published 1927) breaks down the fairy tale into its morphological components. Many critics, among them Armitt (Armitt 1996), Cornwell (Cornwell 1990), Nikolajeva (Nikolajeva 2001), Todorov (Todorov 1975) and Zipes (Zipes 1985; 1991; 2000), try to position the fairy tale within fantasy literature but of these critics only Armitt and Zipes make any attempt to link the fairy tale to Freud’s concept of the uncanny. Furthermore, although his discussion of the fairy tale is an important part of the essay’s third chapter, literary criticism seems to have neglected Freud’s opinion that fairy tales are not uncanny when discussing his essay. Kofman (Kofman 1991) offers only a very short reading; astonishingly, even such an important work on the uncanny as Nicholas Royle’s *The uncanny* (Royle 2003) makes no reference to this passage. The purpose of this article is to pay Freud’s discussion of the fairy tale the attention it deserves by situating it within the wider context of fiction and uncanniness and examining the various perspectives of it offered by literary criticism.

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<sup>5</sup> Freud does not define ‘reality’ or ‘real life’ in his essay. Other terms that he uses without telling the reader how they have to be understood are ‘psychical reality’ and ‘material reality’ (Freud 1997:221). For the purposes of this literary analysis essay it might be sufficient to distinguish between reality as an actual experience and what ‘we merely picture or read about’ (Freud 1997:224).

The first section discusses Freud's arguments in the context of his entire essay as well as the point of view from which Freud looks at fairy tales. In this context Armit's work will be very interesting. Turning to the paradox mentioned earlier, the second section will first explain it, as it is meant by Freud; it will then show what impact an expanded view of the relationship between fiction and reality might have on this paradox and, thus, also on a discussion of the fairy tale. The third section focuses on an important aspect of the fairy tale to which Freud clearly pays insufficient attention in his essay, namely, genre: what is a fairy tale? In this regard, Armit, Nikolajeva and Zipes all manifest differing views on the fairy tale's genre; these might, or might not, support Freud's view that the fairy tale is inherently 'un-uncanny'. In the fourth section, I will use a discussion of the British fairy tale 'Jack and the Beanstalk' to exemplify these different perspectives.

### **1. (Un-)Uncanny Elements in Fiction and Fairy Tales**

In the third chapter of 'The Uncanny', Freud begins his discussion of the relationship between fiction and the uncanny by observing that 'not everything that recalls repressed desires and surmounted modes of thinking' is uncanny (Freud 1997: 222). He observes that certain phenomena which have an uncanny effect in other fiction do not when they are woven into what is clearly a fairy story. In fairy tales, '[w]ish-fulfilments, secret powers, omnipotence of thoughts, animation of inanimate objects [...] can exert no uncanny influence' (Freud 1997: 226). He gives as examples the story of Snow White, who 'opens her eyes again' as if returning from the dead, and the myth of Pygmalion's 'beautiful statue [which] comes to life' (Freud 1997: 222–23). The fairy tale is not uncanny because 'the world of reality is left behind from the very start, and the animistic system of beliefs is frankly adopted' (Freud 1997: 226).

According to Freud, whilst fiction is not necessarily but may well be uncanny, the fairy tale is never uncanny, the reason being that it can never meet the preconditions for uncanniness: it is too distanced from the real world, a fact of which the reader or listener is aware as soon as he hears the keywords 'Once upon a time...' (Tiffin 2009: 16). Freud argues that the reader of or listener to a fairy tale knows that the laws of the real world are suspended: wishes can be promptly fulfilled, inanimate objects can be animate and magic can arbitrarily determine the action, so it is no surprise when a sausage attaches itself to someone's nose, a harp sings and beans sprout up to the sky overnight, and the reader or listener need have no fear of encountering such a situation or objects in real life, because he knows that such things are only to be found in the fictional realm of the fairy tale.

These typical features of the fairy tale are amongst those phenomena which, if encountered in reality, would create a sense of the uncanny, because they appear to confirm the ‘old, discarded beliefs’ of ‘our primitive forefathers’ (Freud 1997: 224); the poetic reality of the fairy tale, Freud argues, is thus grounded in the animistic system of beliefs from the outset. As this poetic reality is accepted by the reader, there is no conflict of judgement as to whether or not these beliefs have been surmounted, so the presence of these phenomena in the fairy tale does not evoke a sense of the uncanny in the reader. But the conflict of judgement is only one of the reasons why a sense of the uncanny is aroused in reality. What about the other phenomena which also have this effect and which Freud instances in his second chapter: the castration and oedipal complexes, the ‘double’, the ‘constant recurrence of the same thing’ or the ‘dread of the evil eye’? Freud only looks for, and finds, those elements of the fairy tale that would evoke a sense of the uncanny in other contexts, he does not look for other elements of the fairy tale that are uncanny within its own context, that is, not only the fairy tale itself but everything that has to do with it. This one-sided perspective has the result that Freud fails to address certain aspects of the uncanny when discussing the fairy tale, in particular, the castration and oedipal complexes, which he regards as important causes of the uncanny in real life (Freud 1997: 206–09).<sup>6</sup>

Bettelheim shows in *The Uses of Enchantment* (Bettelheim 1991) that these aspects can indeed be found in fairy tales. He reads ‘Snow White’, for example, as representing the oedipal complex but with the roles of the parents reversed: the mother, in this case the step-mother queen, is the pubescent child’s competitor and thus the ‘dreaded’ parent, and the hunter, who protects the child by failing to carry out the queen’s orders and tricking her into believing that the child has been killed, is the father-figure (Bettelheim 1991: 204–05).<sup>7</sup> The story about Cinderella, meanwhile, in which each Ugly Sister mutilates herself in her attempt to force her foot into the slipper (itself a symbol for the vagina) serves as an illustration of the castration anxiety (Bettelheim 1991: 268).<sup>8</sup> Bettelheim himself does not address the question that then arises, if we accept that there are elements in fairy tales – such as the oedipal complex in ‘Snow White’ or the castration anxiety in ‘Cinderella’ – which would be uncanny

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<sup>6</sup> For a definition see Freud’s *Introductory Lectures on Psychoanalysis* (1977) and especially pp. 329–38 and 317f.

<sup>7</sup> According to Freud the oedipal complex can present in girls as well as boys, but, in this case the roles of the parents are reversed so that there is ‘an affectionate attachment to her father [and] a need to get rid of her mother as superfluous and to take her place’ (Freud 1977: 333).

<sup>8</sup> For a discussion of the relationship between castration anxiety and the oedipal complex, see further Freud (1977: 317f).

in another context such as real life namely: is it possible that these elements are uncanny in fairy tales, too, or is the fairy tale a place where *nothing* is uncanny?

Freud would appear to say yes, the fairy tale is a place where *nothing* is uncanny but, as has been demonstrated, his opinion is based on an analysis of the fairy tale that is limited to a consideration of only one of its elements. Armitt, who dismisses Freud's discussion of fairy tale and fantasy literature as a 'blinkered reading' (Armitt 1996: 42), maintains that, on the contrary, the fairy tale *is* a place where things can be uncanny. Armitt's work is particularly interesting because she focuses on the child's reading experience rather than the adult's, in contrast to Freud, who seems to have in mind adult readers only. This is significant because, as previously indicated, Freud maintains that 'an uncanny effect is often and easily produced when the distinction between imagination and reality is effaced' (Freud 1997: 221); this implies that his criterion for excluding the fairy tale from the concept of the uncanny depends on an ability on the part of the reader/listener to distinguish between imagination and reality and so, as I have said, appreciate that the laws of reality are suspended in the fairy tale. We cannot be sure that a child, particularly a very young child, *does* distinguish between reality and fiction in quite the same way as an adult does, so we cannot anticipate whether the fairy tale will evoke in the child an uncanny reading experience. Armitt concentrates her attention on the way in which the fairy tale seems to offer the child the comfortingly familiar, when 'the fairy tale's apparent consolations are really "false friends"' (Armitt 1996: 46) and describes the adult from whom the child hears the fairy tale as 'a sinister wolf indeed, luring the child into a truly *unheimlich* [uncanny] sense of false security and misplaced trust' (Armitt 1996: 45), which implies that although the adult is aware of their uncanniness, he/she nonetheless introduces the child to fairy tales. As I shall discuss further in the next section, this concept is similar to Freud's idea of the author who betrays the reader and 'deceives [him] by promising to give [him] the sober truth, and then after all overstepping it' (Freud 1997: 223).

The question is not whether or not a fairy tale is uncanny *per se* but whether or not it evokes an uncanny reading experience, as I shall discuss later; this reading experience is an ongoing process rather than a matter of instant realisation. A child is led into the fairy world where there are always happy endings. It later learns, to its disappointment, that the world of reality cannot compete with the fairy world: there is not always a happy ending, no prince to save the princess from the dungeon. Indeed, far from telling 'the child how he can live with his conflicts [by suggesting] fantasies he could never invent for himself', as Bettelheim

claims (Bettelheim 1991: 111), Armitt's reading of the fairy tale suggests that they do not offer the child a solution but only the illusion of one. The child also realises that it has been deceived by the trusted adult who led it into the fairy world which falsely offers security. All this contributes to the child's uncanny reading experience.

## 2. The Paradox: on the Relationship between Reality and Fiction

Freud's discussion results in a paradox:

The somewhat paradoxical result is that *in the first place a great deal that is not uncanny in fiction would be so if it happened in real life; and in the second place that there are many more means of creating uncanny effects in fiction than there are in real life.*' (Freud 1997: 226; original emphases)

Freud then cites the fairy tale as an illustration of the proposition stated in the first part of the paradox, in that situations are encountered in a fairy tale which are 'un-uncanny' but which would be uncanny if encountered in reality. The reason for this, says Freud, is that fairy tales cannot provoke 'a conflict of judgement as to whether things which have been "surmounted" and are regarded as incredible may not, after all, be possible' (Freud 1997: 227). Although fairy tales cannot provoke this conflict of judgement, however, other types of fiction can; this does not necessarily mean that this conflict is always provoked but it could be, depending on the nature of the fiction and the terms of the 'poetic reality' set by the author; for example, the appearance of a ghost in fiction does not necessarily mean that the works will evoke a sense of the uncanny: the author may have imposed a poetic reality in which the appearance of ghosts or daemonic spirits is 'normal'; apparitions of this nature may be 'gloomy and terrible' as in, for example, Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, but they are not uncanny, as Freud understands the term, so long as they remain consistent with the particular poetic reality of the work (Freud 1997: 227). If the author claims to be moving in the 'world of common reality', anything that in real life would have an uncanny effect will have the same effect in his story. However, the author can 'deceive' the reader by overstepping the norms of his poetic reality, which he has represented as being coterminous with actual reality; in other words, by introducing events which, in reality, could never happen or only very rarely, thus heightening his effect in a way that could not be achieved in reality. In effect, he 'deceives' the reader by not revealing the story's parameters until the last moment.<sup>9</sup>

Freud predicates his paradox on the proposition that the 'realm of phantasy depends for its effect on the fact that its content is not submitted to reality-testing' (Freud 1997: 226), this

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<sup>9</sup> Freud does, however, add that the reader's realisation that he has been tricked can leave him with a sense of dissatisfaction (Freud 1997: 227–28).

being the process by which we become convinced by ‘the material reality’ of a phenomenon in real life that seems to confirm the continued existence of old beliefs and superstitions which we thought had been surmounted (Freud 1997: 224-25). If this is true for literature in general, whether it provokes a sense of the uncanny or not, it must be true of that kind of literature whose poetic reality is far removed from actual reality, in particular, the fairy tale. However, the paradox encourages us to take a closer look at the relationship between fiction and reality.

Brooke-Rose’s and Hutcheon’s discussions of fiction and reality would include not only the fairy tale but also other stories that are seemingly unrelated to reality, and both authorities claim that fantasy and reality are interdependent: there is no fantasy without reality. Cornwell summarises their arguments, when he says:

Brooke-Rose goes on to state (p. 81): ‘Obviously there is a realistic basis in all fantastic narrative, and even a fairy-tale will have some point of anchorage in the real, since the unreal can only seem so as against the real.’ For Hutcheon (1984, p. 77), ‘Fantasy is indeed the “other kind of realism”; and represents historically a parallel and equally valid literary tradition’; at the same time, though, even ‘the most extreme autonomous universes of fantasy are still referential, if they were not the reader could not imagine their existence.’ (Cornwell 1990: 25).

Unless we can compare fantastic elements to the real world, we cannot know that they are fantastic. The reader has to transpose the fictional characters and situations onto a realistic one and reflect on whether this could actually be happening in reality. But the deciding factor is not the answer to this question: what links the story to reality is the process of transferring it to and reflecting on it in a new, realistic setting. The fantastic would thus be defined as ‘less realistic’ rather than ‘not real’

In the light of Brooke-Rose’s and Hutcheon’s observations, Freud’s paradox needs to be re-examined. If, as Brooke-Rose and Hutcheon claim, all fiction is inevitably subjected to a degree of ‘reality testing’ by the reader/listener, the proposition upon which Freud bases his paradox, that the content of works of fiction is *not* subjected to reality testing, disappears; there is, therefore, no paradox. Fiction, by its very nature, will always be able to devise more opportunities for ‘creating uncanny effects [...] than there are in real life’ (Freud 1997: 226). While Freud argues that the question of uncanniness in fairy tales ‘is eliminated from the outset by the postulates of the world of fairy tales’ (Freud 1997: 227), it is precisely through reality-testing, which according to Freud would not even happen, that the presence or absence of the uncanny is discerned. It cannot necessarily be assumed that the further a poetic reality is seen to be removed from actual reality the more likely it is that the effect cannot be considered uncanny.

### 3. A Question of Genre: What is a Fairy Tale?

Freud speaks of the fairy tale as if its concept were clear to everyone. He even speaks of a ‘genuine fairy story’ (Freud 1997: 223) – unfortunately without sharing his understanding of it or why he appears to categorise stories such as ‘Snow White’ and Hebel’s ‘The Three Wishes’ as fairy tales but not E.T.A. Hoffmann’s story ‘The Sand-Man’. Armitt has no difficulty with this lack of a definition, maintaining that everyone knows what a fairy tale is but cannot describe it (Armitt 1996: 21). Maybe this is exactly Freud’s viewpoint: why explain something everyone knows? We grow up with fairy tales; they are often the first literary genre with which we are confronted in our lives. Of course, this raises the question whether there can be anything more familiar, anything better known to us than the fairy tale – but do we, as Armitt maintains is the case, really ‘know/sense/feel/intuit precisely what we mean when we use the term “fairy tale”’ (Armitt 1996: 21)? We can see what Freud means when he categorises ‘Snow White’ and Hebel’s ‘The Three Wishes’ as fairy tales but not E.T.A. Hoffmann’s story ‘The Sand-Man’: the first two depend for their effect on the fact that the reader suspends disbelief as regards their poetic reality and does not, therefore, subject their content to ‘reality testing’; the third one, however, appears to take place in ‘the world of common reality’ (Freud 1997: 226–27).

Certainly, when Nikolajeva distinguishes between the genre of the fairy tale and the genre of fantasy, positioning the fairy tale’s roots in society and myth (Nikolajeva 2000: 151-54), she uses similar criteria. The world of the fairy tale is a ‘magical world, detached from our own in both space and time’ which makes the story ‘mystical rather than realistic’ (Nikolajeva 2000: 152). ‘[R]eaders are not supposed to believe in the story’ as the hero has to do things that might not exist anyway in the real world and are impossible for *the reader to accomplish himself* (Nikolajeva 2000: 153). Nikolajeva thus places the reader or listener to the story in the same position as that of the character in the story; this is demonstrated when she says that the protagonist (and the reader/listener) of a fairy tale experiences ‘no wonder when confronted with magical events or beings’ (Nikolajeva 2000: 154). This not only supports Freud’s distinction between the fairy tale, such as Hebel’s ‘The Three Wishes’, and other fiction which contains the fantastic, such as Hoffmann’s ‘The Sand-Man’, it also supports his view of the ‘un-uncanniness’ of fairy tales as being attributable to the fact that a fairy tale does not give rise to any conflict in the mind of the reader as to whether things which have been ‘surmounted and are regarded as incredible may not, after all, be possible’



(Freud 1997: 227); not only is there no conflict in the mind of the reader, there is clearly none in the mind of the protagonist.

Nikolajeva contrasts fantasy literature with this concept of the fairy tale. Fantasy is, she says, a conscious creation linked to modernity, with which the author pursues a specific aim. The characters found in fantasy literature are frequently, but not always, of the same kind as those found in the fairy tale, and here she makes reference to Vladimir Propp's work *Morphology of the Folktale*, but there is one essential difference between the two genres: the hero might fail (Nikolajeva 2000: 151). This, it is stressed, is the main feature of fantasy which distinguishes it from the fairy tale.

In the light of this, it would seem that Freud incorrectly categorises Hauff's 'The Story of the Severed Hand' as a fairy tale, as he appears to do when he says that that various phenomena encountered in fiction, including 'a hand cut off at the wrist, as in a fairy tale of Hauff's [...] have something peculiarly uncanny about them' and continues that 'this kind of uncanniness springs from its proximity to the castration complex' (Freud 1997: 220). This seems to be at odds with his later statement that he 'cannot think of any *genuine* fairy story which has anything uncanny about it (Freud 1997: 223; added emphasis); is Hauff's tale, then, a fairy story that is 'not genuine'? But why did he need to create an exception to his own categories? Since Hauff's tale is set in reality, there seems to be no reason why it should not be placed in the same category as Hoffman's 'The Sand-Man'. If what distinguishes fantasy from the fairy tale is the link to reality, that is, if everything that happens can be explained *without* the intervention of magic and within the rules of the real world, this is clearly the case in Hauff's tale, as Freud himself provides a rational explanation for the tale's uncanniness. There seems to be no reason for not categorising 'The Story of the Severed Hand' within the genre of fantasy where the 'writer pretends to move in the world of common reality', as is the case with 'The Sand-Man'.

To Nikolajeva's and Freud's views on the fairy tale can be added those of other critics. Zipes, for example, identifies as the fairy tale's main feature the 'wondrous change'; by this he means that the fairy tale contains instances of phenomena described by him as 'supernatural occurrence[s]' which cause wonder or astonishment (Zipes 2000: xviii). Unlike Nikolajeva, who, by describing fantasy as a more modern phenomenon than the fairy tale, restricts the use of the term 'fairy tale' to stories emanating from the distant past, Zipes does not restrict the fairy tale to any particular period in the history of literature, so his criterion can be applied to both 'The Sand-Man' and 'The Story of the Severed Hand', on which basis

both would be fairy tales. If we then accept Freud's dictum that fairy tales are *never* uncanny, both 'The Sand-Man' and 'The Story of the Severed Hand' are thus not uncanny.

As we saw in the first section, Armitz considers the fairy tale to be, contrary to what Freud suggests, a place where things can be uncanny, in the sense that some elements of the tale could evoke a sense of the uncanny, and the child's uncanny reading experience results from its having been lured by a trusted adult into a world which seems to be comfortingly familiar, when it is nothing of the sort. Zipes, too, has developed the idea of the uncanny reading experience:

[T]he very act of reading a fairy tale is an uncanny experience in that it separates the reader from the restrictions of reality from the onset and makes the repressed unfamiliar familiar once again. (Zipes 1985: 259)

[O]nce we begin listening to or reading a fairy tale, there is estrangement and separation from a familiar world including an uncanny feeling which is both *frightening and comforting*. (Zipes 1991: 174; original emphases)

In one sense, the world of the fairy tale cannot be familiar, as the familiar is the world of reality – and the fairy world does not resemble reality; it is another world, unfamiliar and therefore frightening but, at the same time, comforting, as is suggested by the fact that the fairy tale, with its 'happy end', has long been considered suitable bedtime reading matter.<sup>10</sup> This creates the 'conflict of judgement' which, it will be remembered, Freud considers must be present in order for the reader to experience a sense of the uncanny.

Not unlike Nikolajeva, who, as we saw, places the reader of or listener to the story in the same position as that of the character in the story, Zipes stresses that the reader, whom he describes as being 'estrang[ed] and separat[ed] from a familiar world' by the act of reading, identifies with and follows the dislocated protagonist in the latter's 'quest for home' — and Zipes takes pains to draw attention to the etymological connection between 'home' or '*Heimat*' and the terms '*unheimlich*' and '*heimlich*' — a double journey, which takes place, first, in the reader's mind and, secondly, within the narrative itself, as the protagonist experiences the process of socialisation and acquisition of values (Zipes 1991: 174). This 'quest for home' is the setting which enables the reader to experience the uncanny (Zipes 1991: 175).

Zipes prefaces the passage quoted above with reference to Bettelheim's views concerning the 'therapeutic' role of the fairy tale; by being estranged from the real world, the

<sup>10</sup> Zipes neither elaborates on the phrase 'frightening and comforting' nor explains why he emphasises it. He is possibly making an allusion, by the seeming oxymoron of 'an uncanny feeling which is [...] *comforting*' to the opposing definitions of *heimlich* which Freud identified and which I discussed in the Introduction.

child is made able to deal with deep-rooted psychological problems and anxiety-provoking incidents and so achieve autonomy. Zipes queries whether it is true, as Bettelheim appears to suggest, that the fairy tale can actually be therapeutic but does not deny that it can confront the reader or listener with a range of repressed infantile complexes and beliefs, as the next section will show.

#### 4. ‘Jack and the Beanstalk’ – an Example

The British fairy tale ‘Jack and the Beanstalk’ shall serve here as an example to which the various critics’ theories can be applied. As there are many different versions of this one story, I have chosen a more recent one published by Joseph Jacobs in his collection of *English Fairy Tales* (Jacobs 2004) in 1890; this includes the changes to the text which were made during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries with the result that Jack has become symbolic of an ‘earthly Everybody’ and the ogre of the ‘geographically unlocalizable married oaf, reachable only by the magic of a bean’ (Bottingheimer 2000: 267f). In this story Jack is sent off to sell his mother’s cow. Instead of selling it, he trades the animal for three beans, given to him by an old man who claims that they are magical. His mother is angry with him and throws the beans out of the window; Jack is sent to bed without any supper. The beans are indeed magical: when Jack wakes up next morning, he finds that, during the night, the beans have sprouted and a beanstalk has grown up to the sky. When Jack climbs up the beanstalk he finds himself in another realm, which he proceeds to explore. He meets an ogre’s wife, who is kind to him and even hides him in the hearth to save him from her man-eating husband. On his first visit, Jack steals a bag of gold, on the second, a hen that lays golden eggs and on the third and last visit, a singing golden harp. However, the harp wakes up the ogre at the moment it is being stolen. Jack quickly begins climbing down the beanstalk to escape, but the ogre follows Jack down the beanstalk to catch him. As soon as he reaches the ground, Jack calls to his mother to bring him an axe, so that he can chop down the beanstalk while the ogre is still on it and thus kill the ogre; this Jack indeed does. The story concludes by briefly relating that Jack and his mother become rich and Jack marries a great princess.

Freud does not see any link to reality and would, therefore, not consider the story to be in any way uncanny. The typical beginning, ‘There was once upon a time [...]’ (Jacobs 2004: 69), immediately indicates that the reader or listener is dealing with a fairy tale and that everything that follows is detached from reality: there are no magic beans that grow overnight up into the sky, no boy could climb up into the sky and, of course, no ogre family would be living there. As none of this could exist in reality, the man-eating ogre of the story is,

therefore, not an uncanny figure. What complexes does Bettelheim find in this story and how might the theories of Armit and Zipes be applied to it?

Bettelheim finds references to the oedipal complex in this fairy tale, the ogre being the father figure and his wife the oedipal mother (Bettelheim 1991: 187). According to Bettelheim, Jack's own mother does not appreciate his initiative in making a deal that, at least in Jack's eyes, is better, when he barter the cow for the magic beans rather than selling it for cash; she therefore fails to give him the approval that a young boy needs in order to develop from one stage to the next (Bettelheim 1991: 189).<sup>11</sup> As Jack cannot find support from his mother, he looks for a 'surrogate' mother to whom he can turn. Climbing up the beanstalk, he finds the ogre's wife, whose maternal role supplants that of his own mother when she gives him the shelter that Jack's mother has refused him. She, the ogre's wife, hides Jack twice in the hearth, which for Bettelheim is symbolic of her ability to provide a means whereby to gratify the longing Jack has to re-experience a safety like that of a mother's womb (Bettelheim 1991: 193), a longing which is emphasised when, on his third visit, Jack is not hidden by the ogre's wife but himself finds a hiding place in a large boiler. Since the ogre's wife has acquired the role of the mother, the ogre acquires that of the father and so becomes the oedipal father, the 'dreaded father' (Bettelheim 1991: 190), the father 'at whose hands castration is expected' (Freud 1997: 207), in contrast to the positive father figure of the old man who provided Jack with the beans (Bettelheim 1991: 188). The ogre is a man-eater, who threatens Jack's life, because Jack wants to possess the ogre's wife, as is made clear by the three scenes in which Jack steals objects belonging to the ogre: each object is more precious to the ogre than the one before; the most precious object to be stolen would be the ogre's wife. I would even go a step further than Bettelheim and argue that the fear spread by the ogre is actually the castration anxiety. In chopping down the beanstalk, the omnipresent phallus of this story, Jack frees himself from and overcomes his anxieties, most of all, the castration complex. However, Bettelheim does not find anything uncanny in the tale on the basis that the child who reads or listens to the story only understands subconsciously the message of the necessity of overcoming certain phases within one's development.

This leads to Armit's view on fairy tales. As we saw, Armit disagrees with Freud and maintains that the fairy tale is the place where things can be uncanny, a fact of which the adult who is reading this story to a child is aware but he/she nevertheless exposes the child to

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<sup>11</sup> Freud identified five stages in human sexual development: the oral, the sadistic-anal, the phallic, the latency period and, finally, the genital. The oedipal complex is one of the traumas associated with the phallic phase.

it (1996: 45f.); he/she also knows that the fairy world is not as nice as it seems: a world is suggested that reality could never offer. If this concept is developed a little further, Armitt's point can arguably be applied not only to different worlds, such as that of the fairy tale when posited against the real world, but also to the phases through which, according to Bettelheim, the child passes as it develops and matures and the difficulties it has to overcome in the process, a process which is not as easy as the fairy tale encourages the child to believe. As well as magical objects such as beans from which a beanstalk grows up to the sky overnight, a harp that sings and a man-eating ogre, the tale contains familiar figures grounded in reality: the kindly old man with whom Jack makes the deal, the symbol, according to Bettelheim, of the 'good' father, and the ogre's wife who hides Jack in the oven in order to protect him; their counterparts are the ogre, seen by Bettelheim as the 'dreaded father' of the oedipal complex, and Jack's neglectful mother. Armitt, however, would see the tale as not so much about enabling the child to work through the oedipal complex as familiarising it with the figures who, in real life, can be identified as the providers of care and shelter, in this case, the old man and the ogre's wife. But, says Armitt, the child may be disappointed by real life and find itself failed by the familiar figures that it has identified as the providers of care and shelter; it may also find that it cannot expect any help as it tries to overcome the personal problems it encounters, for example, as it negotiates the transition from the oral to phallic phase of development. Armitt argues that, as the parent knows that the real world is much crueller than the world of fairy tale, he/she does not help the child by introducing it to this world, a world which seems, deceptively, to be familiar; this is what makes any fairy tale uncanny. Applying Armitt, 'Jack and the Beanstalk' is uncanny because it familiarises the child with a world in which help is always available, which in the real world is not always the case.

As we saw in the last section, Zipes advocates the concept of the uncanny reading experience, which focuses on the displacement of the reader from reality to a fairy tale world, an act which is in itself uncanny; in 'Jack and the Beanstalk', the phenomena of the gigantic beanstalk and the ogre family estrange us from our familiar and real world and introduce us to one which is new and unfamiliar. However, there is a further reason why, in Zipes' eyes, 'Jack and the Beanstalk' would be an uncanny fairy tale; I refer to his concept that the reader is further 'displaced' as he identifies with the hero, in this case Jack, and follows him on his 'quest for home' (Zipes 1991: 174). Zipes, who accepts Bettelheim's argument that the fairy tale is a vehicle for veiled allusions to diverse infantile complexes, would agree with Bettelheim's reading of this fairy tale in terms of the oedipal complex in which the oedipal

conflict has been transferred to Jack's surrogate ogre parents, whom he 'adopts' after being disappointed by his real mother. If, as Zipes claims, the adult reader identifies with Jack, he/she will also re-experience the oedipal conflict just as Jack experiences it; the reader will identify the ogre 'father' as a personification of his/her own father and the ogre's wife, whom, it is implied, Jack intends to steal, as his own 'loved' mother; therefore, following Freud's argument, a sense of the uncanny will be evoked when the reader re-lives his repressed childhood experiences on reading or re-reading the fairy tale.

## 5. Conclusion

One aim of this article has been to demonstrate where Freud situates the fairy tale in relation to, on the one hand, the uncanny and, on the other, fiction. His position is that, because it has no connection to reality, it is the only genre of fiction that can never have 'anything uncanny about it'; a fairy tale may well contain elements that, in another context, would evoke a sense of the uncanny, but in the fairy tale they do not. Everything in a fairy tale has nothing to do with real life, so anything is possible; the reader accepts this and therefore does not experience a sense of the uncanny as the result of anything he encounters in the fairy tale. The signal to the reader that this is the case is the typical beginning, 'Once upon a time ...'.

But what is a fairy tale? Freud himself does not define the genre and there is little in 'The Uncanny' to suggest that he had given much thought to the question, since he misuses the term by describing 'The Story of the Severed Hand' as 'a fairy tale of Hauff's' (Freud 1997: 222). Of the critics discussed in this article, Zipes is one of the few who offer a definition: in his view an essential element of the fairy tale is that it must contain what he terms a 'wondrous change' and that this 'wondrous change' is what distinguishes the fairy tale from 'other (modern) short literary genres' (Zipes 2000: xviii). This concept has interesting similarities to Ludwig Tieck's concept of the novella's essential element as being the *Wendepunkt*, the specific point on which the plot turns but a detailed discussion would be beyond the scope of this article.

Nevertheless, Freud clearly does make a distinction between the fairy tale and other genres of fiction, a distinction which other critics support. Nikolajeva, for example, who agrees with Freud on the distinction between fairy tales and other fictional texts, might be seen as supporting his argument categorising Hoffmann's 'The Sand-Man' as a genre other than that of the fairy tale. On the other hand, although Zipes' broader definition of the fairy tale would include 'The Sand-Man', he does not share Freud's view that the fairy tale is never uncanny. This is because Zipes adds another dimension to the idea of uncanniness: the

uncanny reading experience. He argues that the reader is displaced from reality and is, while he is reading the story, again confronted with infantile complexes, as, in his mind, the reader goes on the same quest as the protagonist.

However, Freud's supposition that there is no 'genuine fairy story which has anything uncanny about it' appears to be based on a restricted examination: having identified in real life many possible causes for experiencing a sense of the uncanny, he broadly categorises them, in the context of literature, into two classes: those which proceed from 'forms of thought that have been surmounted' and those which proceed 'from repressed [infantile] complexes'. (1997: 228). As has been demonstrated, he only gives examples of phenomena in a fairy tale that could, in real life, be explained in terms of the first category and fails to consider phenomena that proceed from the second. Bettelheim shows that fairy tales can indeed contain elements that allude to such complexes but is not concerned with considering the question whether either such elements are or their presence in the fairy tale makes it uncanny; he sees the fairy tale as, in the main, affecting the young reader by showing him that he has to overcome different phases in his adolescence in order to grow up.

'Jack and the Beanstalk' has been used as an example of a typical fairy tale with which to illustrate the arguments of not only Freud but also the other critics discussed in this article; indeed, I have demonstrated that, as far as Bettelheim's chapter on this particular fairy tale is concerned, it is evident that the tale contains more elements which could evoke a sense of the uncanny than those discussed by Bettelheim. He fails to make any mention of the castration anxiety, yet the ogre who tries to kill and devour Jack is certainly a symbol for the castrating father. While this would not alter Freud's understanding of the uncanny as it is found in fairy tales, it would contribute to that of both Armit and Zipes, who would see this as making our example even more uncanny. However, it would then become necessary to consider at what point a sense of the uncanny becomes one of fear and redefine the uncanny accordingly, in order not to misinterpret the situation. A discussion of this would, however, take us into the field of psychology and psychoanalysis and too far from the aim of this literary analysis.

All these positions might seem to be partially contradictory, but are indeed not: no argument of these critics has the power to invalidate any of the other arguments or even Freud's points. No critic argues against Freud's concept of the uncanny, rather they each add another perspective. Again, the discussion of Freud's short chapter in 'The Uncanny' in which he considers fiction and the uncanny raised the more the more fundamental question of the relationship between fiction and reality, a question which also could not be fully

answered. But finding answers should not be our intention and is not the aim of this article: more important is the need to be constantly reflecting on each perspective, on different points of view.

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