

# **Fictional Realities**

The uncanny, transgressing identities and  
the cyborg in narrative and reality

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## Introduction

The interface between fiction and reality has been a major subject of research within the academic field of comparative literature. This thesis deals with dualisms of various kinds; fiction versus reality being the coordinating opposition.

In the process of reading a number of short stories of Latin American origin, which deal with surreal and distorted images of reality, the topic I wanted to write about started to take shape. I found a connection between the stories *The Youngest Doll* by Rosario Ferré (1976), and *The Daisy Dolls* by Felisberto Hernández (1949) and the theoretical text *The Uncanny* by Sigmund Freud (1919). Freud explains in this text his understanding of the concept of the uncanny and its implications for both reality and literary fiction. In his essay he analyzes E.T.A. Hoffmann's story *The Sandman* (1816), which proved to be of great use for my line of thought as well. The subject of these three stories is women that are made into or revealed as artifacts (dolls or automata).

I have found a strong connection between the concept of the uncanny and the depiction of female bodies in these stories. The next step in my line of thought is the consideration of a connection to reality in the way women are portrayed here. The uncanniness of dolls and their usage as literary subject might tell us something about the manner in which women's bodies and female identity in general are being seen and categorized in real life. In thinking about this, I discovered a striking and perhaps even provocative connection with another theoretical text: Donna Haraway's *A Manifesto for Cyborgs* (1985). For thinking about female identity and the transgression of bodily boundaries, Haraway's theory on the cyborg proved to be enormously important. In addition, the cyborg presents a powerful rethinking of contemporary discourse.

By means of literary analysis and reflecting on the theoretical texts, I will present the line of thought I have created. The research question I will be working with is as follows: "How is female identity connected to the concepts of the uncanny and the categorization of bodies and how does literature reflect on this?"

In contemporary academic debate, there remains much interest for the Freudian concept of the uncanny, and for the topic of female identity. The uncanny remains a popular theory to be used in critical analysis and literary research. Scholars

in the diverging fields of cultural anthropology, sociology, comparative literature, psychology, medicine, philosophy, theology and post-colonialism make connections with Freud's understanding of the uncanny. Articles vary in the way they use the concept of the uncanny, and on which elements of Freud's essay they elaborate. For this thesis, the academic work that has been done on the uncanny related to the body and the post human is highly relevant.

An example is an article by Karl F. MacDorman and Hiroshi Ishiguro (2006). They build on a theory that is developed by Masahiro Mori (1970). MacDorman and Ishiguro research androids – which are robots that are designed to resemble a human being – and the uncanny effect they bring forth. “[...] subtle flaws in appearance and movement can be more apparent and eerie in very humanlike robots. This uncanny phenomenon may be symptomatic of entities that elicit our model of human other but do not measure up to it.” (297). MacDorman and Ishiguro's theory is highly usable for thinking about the uncanniness of dolls and their literary representations. Therefore their article will be referred to several times in this thesis. Another example of a study that shows the contemporary relevance of the concept of the uncanny in relation to the body, from a different angle, is an article by Andrew Warsop (2011). He researches the uncanny effect illness can have. He takes for example the eerie experience of discovering a lump on the body. “The horror of this existential burden may be revealed in the most innocuous of situations when one is reminded of our fundamental uncanniness and rudely disabused of the comforting illusion that our bodies are living tools.” (494).

There is also the question of the connection to Haraway's cyborg theory. Cyborg theory is significant for research on female identity, and there is much work still to be done in this field. Uncanniness, dolls, bodies, women, identity: they remain beloved subjects for various kinds of research, reflections and thought.

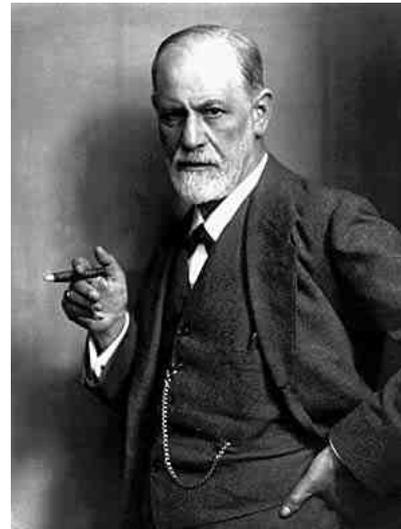
Boundaries blur in the stories I chose to analyze, as they can in material reality. The transgression of boundaries (like the one between fiction and reality) and its implications for identity are subjects that appeal to me, and are highly relevant academic topics and this is my addition to the contemporary debate on them.

## Part 1: The uncanny

### 1.1. Freud and the uncanny

In his essay *The Uncanny*, Freud explores the concept of the uncanny. Freud bases his definition of the uncanny on Ernst Jentsch's<sup>1</sup> definition, but alters it to some extent.<sup>2</sup> “[...] an uncanny effect often arises when the boundary between fantasy and reality is blurred, when we are faced with the reality of something that we have until now considered imaginary, when a symbol takes on the full function and significance of what it symbolizes [...]” (150). MacDorman and Ishiguro write: “Freud believed that the uncanny was not to be associated with the unfamiliar; rather, it is something very familiar, but repressed.” (304). There lies the connection with the unconscious, on which Freud placed a tremendous emphasis in most of his theories.

Freud emphasizes that he distinguishes between the uncanny that one knows from experience (this is related to reality) and the uncanny one only fancies or reads about (this is connected to fantasy, or fiction). (154). The first kind is easier to determine and is defined as “that species of the frightening that goes back to what was once well known and had long been familiar.” (125). Within the second kind he distinguishes between two types of literature. The first type is in his opinion incapable of creating an uncanny effect.<sup>3</sup> The second type is of more interest for this thesis; it is literature that ‘pretends’ to be set in common reality. The writer “tricks us by promising us everyday reality and then going beyond it.” (157). This kind of literature is capable of bringing about a sense of the uncanny as we can undergo in normal experience. “We react to his fictions as if they had been our own experiences.” (157).



Sigmund Freud (1856 – 1939)

<sup>1</sup> Ernst Jentsch was a German psychiatrist who, before Freud, had written an essay on the uncanny. Freud builds on Jentsch's theory in his own essay on the concept.

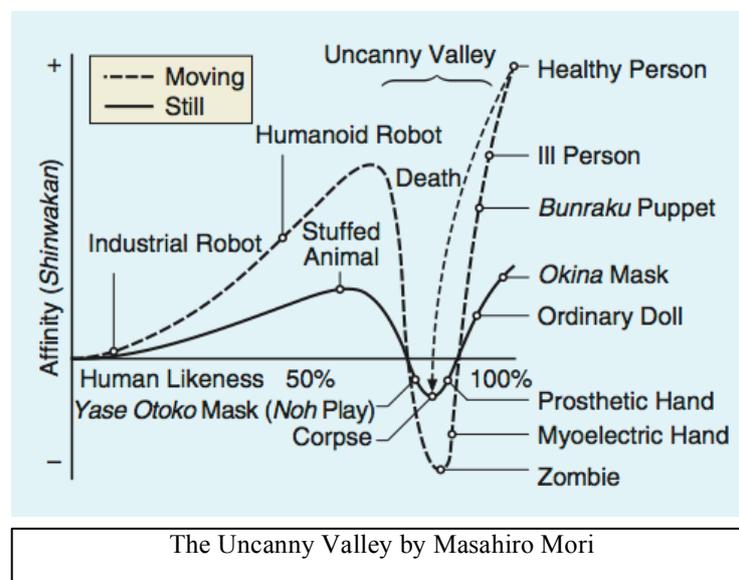
<sup>2</sup> Freud explains: “For him the essential condition for the emergence of a sense of the uncanny is intellectual uncertainty.” (Freud, 125). Freud believes this definition is not exhaustive.

<sup>3</sup> He refers to fairy tales. In Freud's opinion they cannot create an uncanny effect, because we are aware of the unrealistic character of their fictional world. Recently, interesting research on this has been done by Melanie Dilly (2012). She argues that fairy tales do have the potential to create moments of the uncanny.

This binary opposition between reality and fantasy and the different kinds of uncanny that are related to it, are of central importance for this thesis. But first, let us discuss more about the notion of the doll and its relevance for thinking about the uncanny.

### 1.2. The notion of the doll

Following on Jentsch's and Freud's theories, Japanese scientist Masahiro Mori (1970) developed a new hypothesis about the uncanny effect dolls (or more specifically: robots with an eerie human likeness) can bring forth. The uncanny effect dolls – or automata – can have, is connected to the first kind of uncanniness Freud wrote about, which is connected to the experience – material reality. Before I continue with the literary analysis of three stories about uncanny dolls (and therefore go into the second kind of uncanniness), I will briefly focus on Mori's line of thought.



In his essay, Mori explains his theory about objects that resemble (parts of) human beings and their reception by actual people. “I have noticed that, in climbing toward the goal of making robots appear human, our affinity for them increases until we come to a valley [...]

which I call the uncanny valley.” Above is presented the figure that Mori uses to explain how this ‘uncanny valley’ works. The theory is based on affinity and human likeness. When an artifact resembles human form, affinity with it grows (for example the case with stuffed animals and toy dolls). However, when an artifact resembles human form very closely, but not completely, it brings about a sense of the uncanny in us. MacDorman and Ishiguro explain: “the android may be uncanny because it fails to respond as predicted by our model of other people and their behavior.” (303). That is why we lose our affinity for it, and the artifact ‘falls’ into the uncanny valley. Mori believes this could be an integral part of our instinct for self-preservation. Freud’s

theory about the uncanny and Mori's hypothesis about the uncanny valley prove to be of great use for analyzing the following stories, because of the eerie effect dolls (or humanlike artifacts in general) can have.

### 1.3. *The Sandman*

I will first analyze a story by E.T.A. Hoffmann, which Freud also analyzed. Hoffmann was a German Romantic author in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century. Heinrich Heine wrote about him “[...] Hoffmann, with all his bizarre grotesques, [...] always keeps a firm grip on earthly reality.”<sup>4</sup> *The Sandman* is a literary work that brings forth an uncanny effect of Freud's second type. The interaction between reality and fantasy is complex in this story and leaves the reader with a growing sense of uncertainty.



E.T.A. Hoffmann (1776-1822)

The protagonist of *The Sandman* is Nathanael, who in his childhood was terrified by a dark version of the Sandman. In Nathanael's mind, this figure from a nursery tale took human form in Coppelius (his father's advocate). As an adult, Nathanael is engaged to the pragmatic Clara. He runs into the barometer seller Coppola and is again severely unsettled because he suspects Coppola to be the same person as Coppelius/the Sandman. Events take a turn for the worse when he becomes infatuated with Olimpia, who is presented as the daughter of professor Spalazani, but who turns out to be an automaton.

Freud takes *The Sandman* as an example of a story that arouses a sense of the uncanny in us. He juxtaposes his position against Jentsch's, who believes Olimpia is the most uncanny element of the story. Freud believes the story has many uncanny elements, one of which indeed is the motif of the seemingly animate doll Olimpia, but according to him, she is not “the one to which [the uncanny effect] is principally due.” (136). I agree with Freud that Olimpia is not the *only* uncanny element of the story, but I do question his position on what the *central* uncanny element of the story is.

<sup>4</sup> This is written in the introduction of *The Golden Pot – and other tales* by E.T.A. Hoffmann.

Freud accredits the motif of the Sandman, and thus the idea of being robbed of one's eyes, to be the central uncanny element of the tale (136). "Uncertainty as to whether an object is animate or inanimate, which we were bound to acknowledge in the case of the doll Olympia, is quite irrelevant in the case of this more potent example of the uncanny." (139). The Sandman would, aside from the fear of being robbed of one's eyes, represent the concept of the double<sup>5</sup>, and the fear of castration<sup>6</sup> (140, 141). He believes that focusing on the uncertainty about (in)animateness of a doll, is to be ascribing the powerful uncanny effect merely to an infantile fear.

He explains that the author initially creates uncertainty about whether the story is set in the real world or in some fantastic world he has created (139). He believes that in the course of the story, this uncertainty disappears, and it becomes clear that the story is set in a fantasy world. He finds proof for this hypothesis: "[...] the conclusion of the tale makes it clear that the optician Coppola really is the lawyer Coppelius and so also the Sand-Man." (139). I disagree. To me it remains uncertain whether the events are really taking place, or just in Nathanael's conflicted mind. "Although it sounds like a paranoid fantasy, there is considerable though not conclusive evidence that it is really taking place. Its existence and its non-existence are equally incredible." (introduction, xix).

I would argue Olympia plays the central part in creating the uncanny effect of this story. This is not just based on the question of whether an object is inanimate or not. I think that however one interprets this story, the final outcome is that the climax of the story lies in the revealing of Olympia as an automaton. The Sandman might have set Nathanael's paranoia in motion, but in the end, he falls apart because of the element of the automaton. Olympia is the uncanny axis of the narrative, because she creates the truly unsettling effect and sets the culmination of the story in motion.

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<sup>5</sup> Otto Rank has written about the motif of the double. Freud explains: "This work explores the connections that link the double with mirror-images, shadows, guardian spirits, the doctrine of the soul and the fear of death." (142).

<sup>6</sup> Freud believes the uncanny effect of severed limbs or other body parts, is to be traced back to fear of being castrated.

#### 1.4. *The Youngest Doll*

The next story that creates an uncanny effect I am going to analyze, is *The Youngest Doll*<sup>7</sup>, by Puerto Rican feminist author Rosario Ferré. The protagonist of the story is a woman who is simply called ‘the aunt’. As a young woman she has been bitten by a river prawn, who has supposedly nestled himself inside her leg. Because of deliberate bad care from her doctor, her leg does not heal and from then on, she has devoted her life to caring for her nieces. She makes hundreds of dolls for them, which all resemble the girls at various ages. When the youngest niece marries, she takes her last doll with her. The marriage is unhappy and in the end, the husband discovers that his wife is no longer there, but the doll resembling her has taken her place.



Rosario Ferré (1938 – )

In detecting the most uncanny element of this story, one finds a difference with *The Sandman*. In that story there was uncertainty about the fictitious or realistic character of the story world and the implications that has for the figure of Olimpia. In *The Youngest Doll*, there is less uncertainty about the character of the story world. The story is set in a realistic world, but has a fantastic end, which makes it perhaps even a clearer example of Freud’s second type of uncanny literature than *The Sandman* was. The most uncanny element of Ferré’s story is obviously the doll resembling the youngest niece. The doll representing the youngest niece dives into Mori’s uncanny valley, which is being made explicit in the story by the disappearance of her human form. This element of the story is related to the concept of the double, which I mentioned above in relation to the Sandman/Coppelius/Coppola.

The motif of the double, which Freud described as a prominent motif to produce an uncanny effect (142), is overtly present here. Freud writes: “The double was originally an insurance against the extinction of the self [...]” (142). In *The Youngest Doll*, the aunt creates doubles for her nieces, perhaps in an effort to prevent them from the loss or extinction of their ‘selves’. Ksenija Bilbija wrote: “Jean Baudrillard

<sup>7</sup> I have previously written an essay on this story and its possible interpretations for the course Working with Latin American Literature.

introduces [...] "a question of substituting signs of the real for the real itself". The consequence is the replacement of the real by its "operational double" and a deliberate acceptance of a surrogate reality, also called the "hyperreal." (878). The doll is the operational double of the niece, and provides for a surrogate reality in which the doll can take the place of the niece in her unhappy marriage. In doing so, the doll can provide an opportunity for the niece to find a more fortunate fate somewhere else. Within this interpretation, the aunt has played a central part in the escape of her niece. Bilbija: "[...] the aunt transgresses the limits of her own alienated body through the doll that will eventually acquire its proper meaning as a decoration and consequently allow the niece to leave the claustrophobic space of her husband's house." (883). In this way, the creation of the dolls is for the aunt also a way of empowering her own 'self'.

The scene where the husband takes out the eyes of the doll to sell them is striking. It reminds me of Freud's theory about losing one's eyes. Freud: "[...] anxiety about one's eyes, the fear of going blind, is quite often a substitute for the fear of castration." (139). In Freudian terms one could say that the husband is trying to castrate (and thus make powerless) the doll. Or perhaps he is afraid of his own castration by (the resemblance of) his wife and tries, in an attempt to prevent this, to 'emasculate' her.

### 1.5. *The Daisy Dolls*

The next story I analyze is written by Uruguayan author Felisberto Hernández. It is about Horace and Mary, a married couple, whose bourgeois family life is grotesquely depicted. Horace has a rather strange hobby; he has a room in the house where he keeps dolls in glass cases. Every night, a number of people<sup>8</sup> set up a scene with the dolls for him. The introduction to the text says: "The protagonist's frenzied – though in his mind perfectly logical – arrangements, his *son et lumière* pornographic shows so carefully constructed, his sadomasochist tendencies, reveal one of the most bizarre constructions of a subconscious mind on the loose." (165). The object of his obsession is the doll named Daisy, who is a resemblance of his wife Mary. In the course of the story, it become clear that Horace has grown to love this doll more than his wife.

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<sup>8</sup> Caption writers, costume designers, several artists that handle settings and a pianist who provides music to the scenes.



Felisberto Hernández (1902-1964)

The idea of the uncanny created by the double, especially in the case of a doll resembling her original, is evidently applicable to *The Youngest Doll*, but finds expression in *The Daisy Dolls* in a different manner. The double in Ferré's story is focused on prevention of extinction of the identity of the woman. MacDorman and Ishiguro explain that the uncanny effect of the android is based on a violation of human identity (303), in that it "[...] fails to respond as predicted by our model of

other people and their behavior." In the case of *The Youngest Doll*, one could say

that the husband creates a situation in which the identity of his young wife is violated and diminished so that there is no other option for her than let a doll take her place. In that way, the doll is a way of preserving identity.

In *The Daisy Dolls*, the uncanny effect of the doll resembling the wife is of a different kind. The creation of Daisy is selfish and victimizes the real woman she is meant to resemble. This is related to what MacDorman and Ishiguro call the fear of mortality. They believe one of the reasons androids are so uncanny is that they serve as a reminder of our mortality and therefore they elicit an innate fear of death. "Since most androids are copies of actual people, they are Doppelgaenger and may elicit a fear of being replaced, on the job, in a relationship, and so on." (313). In the case of Hernández's story, Mary is indeed – and justly – afraid of being replaced by the Daisy doll. It is however more interesting to revert this hypothesis to the character of Horace. He creates Daisy in the first place because he is afraid of his wife's death. "Mary was not ill and there was no reason to think she was going to die. But for some time now he had been afraid of losing her and dreading what he imagined would be his unhappiness without her. So one day he had decided to have a doll made to resemble her." (171). When he starts to lose touch with reality, he grows more fond of the replica and the surrogate reality he has created. The fear of death creates the downfall of his sanity, his marriage and of the well-being of his wife. Therefore, the

uncanny effect of this particular doll is of a different – more selfish – kind than in the previous stories.

In *The Sandman* the uncanny effect was created by uncertainty about the fictional or realistic character of the story world and the revealing of Olympia as automaton. In *The Youngest Doll*, the author ‘tricked’ the reader by letting him believe he was viewing a realistic story world, but in the conclusion creates severe doubt about this (where is the wife now, has she been taken over by the doll?). It also created an uncanny effect by using dolls that resemble a human original (which is uncanny enough as it is, according to Mori and others). In *The Daisy Dolls*, the double is the central uncanny element as well, but with different implications. The true uncanniness lies in the blurring of the line between reality and fantasy, which is depicted through the psychological decay of Horace, and his selfish fear of death.

## Part 2: Transgressing identities

### 2.1. *The uncanny body*

In the previous section we have considered the concept of the uncanny and the idea of the doll (which is made to resemble an actual woman) as being capable of creating an



The body becomes uncanny

uncanny effect. It is now important to consider their connection to reality. The uncanniness of dolls and their usage as literary subject is significant and tells us something about the perception of female bodies and about female identity in reality. Here we are building a bridge between fiction and reality.

The uncanny in the analyzed stories is a defamiliarizing device. As Hans Bertens (2008) explains in his textbook on literary theory, the Russian Formalist Victor Shklovsky stated that “literature has the ability to make us see the world

anew – to make that which has become familiar, because we have been overexposed to it, strange again.” He called this process defamiliarization. Its result is that “it enables us once again to see the world in its full splendour or, as the case may be, true awfulness.” (25). The uncanny effect in these three stories is created by the defamiliarization of the female body. The familiar is made strange and in this process, it enables us to see the world anew. The structuralists of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, building on the thoughts of the Russian Formalists (like Shklovsky), developed the “idea that literature is concerned with itself, while simultaneously [...] could also refer to the outside world.” (Bertens, 36). The depiction of women as dolls in these stories, has a reference to the outside world: reality.

We have seen in Mori’s line of thought that an uncanny effect can arise when the human body is very closely resembled, in the form of a doll or robot (android). One could argue that in order for a resemblance of the body to become uncanny, there might be a certain aspect of the human body itself that is susceptible for establishing this uncanny effect. Here the emphasis shifts from the artificial body to the actual

body. As Susan James (2000), Reader in Philosophy at the University of London, writes: “[...] key oppositions between body and mind, and between emotion and reason are gendered. While the mind and its capacity to reason are associated with masculinity, the body, together with our emotional sensibilities, are associated with the feminine.” (29). In the stories I analyzed, the female body is being made into an uncanny object. If we agree that the body is symbolically associated with the feminine and with emotional sensibilities, the implication of that could be that the aspect of the body that makes it able to create uncanniness, is femininity.

In a society where emphasis is on reason, the emotional – the erratic – is an uncanny factor. It is interesting to consider what Freud mentions in *The Uncanny* about what Jentsch wrote about “the uncanny effect produced by epileptic fits and the manifestations of insanity, because these arouse in the onlooker vague notions of automatic – mechanical – processes that may lie hidden behind the familiar image of a living person.” (135). Emotion and body are juxtaposed to reason and mind. These juxtapositions are closely related to the opposition between man and woman. The body and the emotions are connected to the automatic, mechanical processes that lie hidden behind our façade of reason. All this must have influence on female identity in general, which stretches further than just the female body.

## 2.2. *Female identity*

James writes that philosophers have “assumed (often unconsciously) that personal identity is male identity [...]” (41). Due to this tradition, female identity on the whole is marginalized. In thinking about this, and the implications of the depiction of women as dolls, one could argue that female identity is traditionally seen as more ‘doll-like’ than male identity. The fundamental characteristic of a doll is its artificial nature; it is an object. It is a commodity, a child’s toy. Commodification and infantilization of women and female identity in general, results from the marginalization and perception of women as doll-like, decorative figures. If a woman is not allowed or even able to have a personal identity, she is degraded to an artifact that can be commodified. For a body to become uncanny, it has to seem unreal, not human, doll-like. Male bodies do not seem to be traditionally depicted as such, which can be explained by the traditional divide between body/female and mind/male and the marginalization of female identity. What is represented in the stories by Hoffmann, Ferré and Hernández has its roots in reality and in the undervaluation of

female identity, which in line of these thoughts is more closely related to the body than male identity is.

Transgression<sup>9</sup> of female identity is central to these stories. Bodies of women are made into uncanny objects. The consequence is that the identities of these women are violated, and transgressive. In *The Youngest Doll* this is made explicit in the idea of sharing body parts. When the youngest niece gets her last doll, on the day she leaves to get married, she is surprised to find that the doll is warm, “[...] and in her half-open and slightly sad smile she recognized her full set of baby teeth.” (5). Bilbija writes about this: “[...] the second stage of the golem production – animation – is in



Photograph by Hans Bellmer (1935). Woman as artifact.

effect. [...] The sharing of body parts (teeth) insinuates the same subjectivity behind two apparently identical images.” (883).

I explained above that in *The Youngest Doll*, the uncanny element lies in the motif of the double. The aunt creates surrogate realities for her nieces to be able to escape their unhappy lives. Bilbija: “The role that the patriarchal society has ascribed to women is passive, and a young

wife is expected to remain on the balcony of the cold, square, cement house. She does not have an intrinsic value but is assigned a value as a carrier of her father's name, as a body upon which the patriarchal sign has been branded.” (884). Ferré creates a metaphor for patriarchal society in which women are deprived of intrinsic value. A woman's role in life is simply to provide her husband with a better social status, to sit still and be pretty. In the story, a solution for this horrible fate is given in the creation of an operational double. This is striking, because it is a ‘solution’ in two ways: the

<sup>9</sup> Transgression is the crossing of boundaries. The online Oxford Dictionary gives the following definition of the term: “an act that goes against a law, rule, or code of conduct; an offence.”

niece can escape, but the husband might get what he really wants as well. He wanted a doll-like wife, now he has a real doll for a wife.

The aunt experiences the same denigration in her life as her niece does. The doctor that is supposed to treat her damaged leg, deliberately fails to make her better. One day, he brings his son, who has just returned from medical school himself, on a visit to the aunt. “The young man released the ruffle and looked fixedly at his father. “You could have cured this from the start,” he told him. “That’s true,” his father answered, “but I just wanted you to come and see the prawn that has been paying for your education for these twenty years.” (4) The aunt seems to reside in her passive fate, but I believe there is more to her behavior than that which is apparent. “She had been very beautiful, but the prawn hidden under the long, gauzy folds of her skirt stripped her of all vanity. She locked herself up in her house, refusing to see any suitors.” (1, 2). The men in her life deny her agency and intrinsic value. Perhaps her resignation to a life with a prawn in her leg, is a way of establishing long-term but karmic revenge. In refusing to get married herself, she is able to take care of her protégées (her nieces) and make changes possible for them. Perhaps this is also a metaphor for society in reality. The aunt depicts the elder generations, in which women had no other choice but to be passive. It is common for parents/care takers to want a better life for their offspring. She does whatever she can to protect her nieces’ identity.

The identity of the female protagonist of *The Daisy Dolls*, is also transgressive. This finds expression in the games Mary plays with Daisy (the doll who resembles her). These are very interesting to consider, because it represents what happens when two subjects are trying to ‘share’ an identity; that identity becomes flickering and unstable.

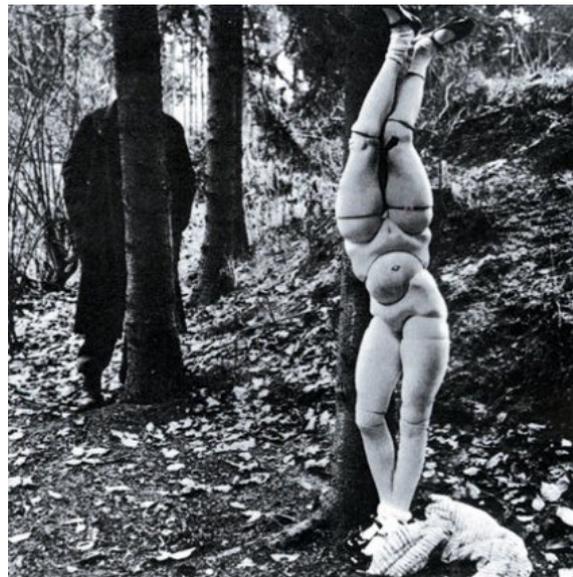
“[...] caught in the door [...] he saw a piece of his wife’s dress. As he tiptoed over to the door, he wondered whether she had been spying on him – or maybe it was one of her jokes. He snatched the door open and her body fell on him. But when he caught it in his arms it seemed very light...and he recognized Daisy [...] Meantime his wife, who was crouching behind an armchair, straightened up and said: “I wanted to give you a surprise, too. I just managed to get her in my dress.” (168)

In the course of the story, Mary makes these kinds of transformative ‘jokes’ with Daisy several times. Although Horace initially seems to think of them as enjoyable, it

becomes clear that Mary is not at all comfortable with the presence of Daisy. She realizes that the doll resembling her is becoming her biggest rival. Eventually, Mary is fed up with her husband's madness, and she destroys the doll: "She had Daisy flat on a table, as if to operate on her, and was in a frenzy, stabbing her all over." (183). After that she leaves her husband. That sets the second part of the story in motion.

After his wife leaves, Horace becomes more and more obsessed and erratic. He buys a new doll, which does not resemble his wife, and has 'an affair' with her. This is striking, because now his obsession for the artificial is becoming truly apparent. I have mentioned before, that Horace initially has the doll resembling his wife made, because he is afraid she is going to die. This could be interpreted as a strange, but loving way of preserving his wife's identity into infinity, but the opposite is happening. The fear of his wife's mortality is not connected to love here, it is related to the need for total control over her. In doing so he violates Mary's identity, by replacing her with Daisy. When she destroys Daisy and leaves him, he loses control over her. James mentions: "[...] loss of power over a woman is associated not just with loss of social identity but with psychological discontinuity." (44). Horace attempts to gain complete mastery over his wife, up to the most fundamental part of her human existence, namely her mortality. Of course this is impossible and when he realizes he will never have that kind of control over Mary, he loses his mind and therefore his own identity. "They saw him cut straight through the flower beds. And when they caught up with him, he was going toward the noise of the machines<sup>10</sup>." (200).

In *The Sandman* the opposition between Clara and Olympia is important for the consideration of depiction of female identity. Here, the opposition between woman/body and man/mind is especially functional. Clara, Nathanael's fiancée, depicts the rational. Nathanael keeps trying to convince her of the existence



Photograph by Hans Bellmer – part of the doll series (1935). Distorted image of the female body, being watched by man.

<sup>10</sup> During the course of the story there are several references to 'the noise of the machines'. This is to be read as a metaphor for Horace's growing insanity.

of the evil Coppélius/The Sandman, but she waves it aside, to Nathanael's great annoyance. "He concluded that such mysteries were inaccessible to cold and insensitive temperaments, without clearly realizing that he considered Clara's temperament to be such [...]" (101). Olimpia represents Clara's counterpart. She depicts the irrational. Just like Horace, and the husband of the niece, Nathanael wants a woman that is purely passive. What they want in women is connected to what is traditionally considered female traits; passiveness and a quiet, decorative disposition. Nathanael can only experience love that surpasses everything else, with a woman that actually is not even human at all.

He sat beside Olimpia, clasping her hand, and spoke of his love in fiery, enthusiastic words [...] she gazed fixedly into his eyes and sighed repeatedly: 'Oh! Oh! Oh!' Whereupon Nathanael said: 'O you splendid, divine woman! You ray shining from the promised afterlife of love! You profound spirit, reflecting my whole existence!' [...] but Olimpia only sighed repeatedly: 'Oh! Oh!'. (109, 110)

It is interesting to consider that Olimpia is merely a body, a mechanical body even. She is connected to the symbolically feminine. Clara is a real woman, but her character is more rational, and thus connected to the symbolically masculine. It is striking that Nathanael prefers the mechanical figure of Olimpia, over a woman of flesh and blood.

So far we have seen how the stories by Ferré, Hernández and Hoffmann play with attitudes towards female identity. In Ferré's story, we saw that women lack intrinsic value in patriarchal society. In Hernández's story we discovered that women need to be controlled in order for male identity to survive. In Hoffmann's story we saw a representation of the dichotomy between the symbolically female and the symbolically male. In these stories issues of marginalization of female identity are grotesquely depicted. Reality is obviously more complex than what is represented in these stories. However, there is much value in these depictions for considering how identity is constructed and perceived in society. Therefore, it is now important to consider a powerful, alternative feminist philosophical rethinking of identity.

### *2.3. The cyborg*

The binary opposition between man and woman, and the nature of identity is questioned and challenged by Donna Haraway, a professor of feminist theory and

science studies at the University of California. In her works, she explores “the various layers through which social identities are materially embodied through processes of racialization, gendering, and sex. Her work is [...] regarding the sex-gender divide in the encounter between modernist and postmodernist notions of the body.” (The Johns Hopkins Guide to Literary Theory and Criticism). For thinking about female identity and the transgression of bodily boundaries, as we have been doing in this thesis, her theory on the cyborg is especially interesting.

In the essay *A Manifesto for Cyborgs* she establishes a connection between



Donna Haraway (1944 – )

three fields: feminism, socialism, and materialism. (JGH). The introduction to her essay in *The Norton Anthology of Theory and Criticism* (2010) explains: “As she attempts to understand the place of technology within a postmodern, socialist feminism, Haraway argues that far from being antithetical to the human organism, technology is a material and symbolic apparatus that is already deeply involved in what it means to be human.” (2187). Haraway believes that the old political strategies are no longer adequate in “the face of a global technoscience that is outpacing the ethical and political mechanisms we have devised for containing in.” (2187).

She proposes a new, mythical creature; the cyborg, which is a hybrid of machine and organism. This theory is based on the idea that personal and collective identities are socially constructed and are contested by modern technoscience. She believes that post-World War II technoscience broke down three crucial boundaries: “those between human and animal, organism and machine, and the physical and non-physical.” (2188). Haraway argues that the cyborg can provide a different way of thinking about identity. The cyborg does not participate in the Western belief that everything can be categorized, and proposes a new discourse on identity. “Because the cyborg is post gender, post-Western, post-Marxist, and post-oedipal, it serves as a viable image for a new partial and heterogeneous subjectivity that re-conceptualizes identity politics.” (2188).

I argue the stories by Hernández, Ferré and Hoffmann present metaphors for this line of thought. The aunt is transgressing the boundaries of organisms, because a prawn is living in her calf. The niece transgresses by sharing her body parts and having a surrogate reality in the form of her doll. Olimpia seems very animate for a machine, which is perhaps the most uncanny example of the crossing of boundaries. Moreover, these stories all contain the element of revenge. These stories are all indictments of the way female identity is marginalized. In reading them with Haraway's line of thought in mind, there is a certain promise in there for a more realistic and liberating view on what identity in general is.

#### 2.4. *Gendered humanity*

The question may arise whether the cyborg is apt for reviewing (gender) categories, or whether it is even desirable. The cyborg is a metaphor, a "mythical creature", as Haraway calls it. I believe her line of thought is very valuable. The idea of letting go of all categorization might be utopic. Changing our way of thinking about identity and creating a different discourse in which gender plays a less defining role is complex and perhaps even impossible, but definitely valuable.

These thoughts have been investigated by others as well, for example in the field of queer theory. Berthold Schoene (2006), Professor of English at Manchester Metropolitan University, writes about the semantic transformation of the word 'queer' from a hurtful insult to homosexuals, to an emblem of positive identification: "To be 'queer' [...] means to be a transgressor, to go against the grain and trespass onto forbidden ground, aiming thereby to expose the fraudulent artifice of mainstream society's most centrally constitutive taboos and prohibitions." (285). He explains that queer politics insists on its essential *anti*-identity, of "being defined not by the struggle to liberate a common, repressed, pre-existing nature but by an ongoing process of self-constitution and self-transformation." (286). The categorical segregation of humanity into man/woman, gay/straight, feminine/masculine etcetera, is confining and does not do justice to what individuals *and* society in general can be. Haraway's cyborg theory proposes a new discourse, as queer theory pleads to "intervene in both gender and sexuality studies by dissolving all traditional sexology's normative categories [...]" (294). Haraway's cyborg presents a way out of suffocating categorization and thinking-inside-of-the-box. The cyborg is a queer transgressor and is a good-humored liberator. As Haraway states in the beginning of her essay: "This

essay is an argument for pleasure in the confusion of boundaries and for responsibility in their construction.” (2191).

The stories by Hernández, Ferré and Hoffmann present a disturbing uncanniness. Aside from the grim nature of the content of the narratives, there is however a link to the good-humored potential for liberation one sees in the notion of the cyborg. For a good explication of this cyborgian good-humored energy one can look at *The Youngest Doll* again. When the doctor’s son attempts to court the youngest niece, she seems optimistically curious but does not seem to expect much from this man. “She made up her mind to marry him because she was intrigued by his drowsy profile, and also because she was deathly curious to find out what dolphin flesh was like.” (Ferré, 5). When she is married to him, she “began to suspect that it wasn’t just her husband’s silhouette that was made of paper, but his soul as well.” (5).

The lack of fear, anger and frustration she seems to feel over her denigrating fate might be interpretable as the result from acquired passiveness, but one could also make sense of her disposition in another way. Perhaps she already foresaw what would happen, because she is the youngest woman in her family. She watched all of her sisters leave the family house to be married and perhaps understood before that the doll resembling her would become a powerful weapon her aunt equipped her with. Therefore the youngest niece is able to remain strikingly good-humored about the situation. When her husband becomes more greedy and mean-spirited, she has funny replies to his demeanor and in the end, she ‘simply’ lets the doll take her place in the marriage. “One night he decided to go into her bedroom, to watch her as she slept. He noticed that her chest wasn’t moving. He gently placed his stethoscope over her heart and heard a distant swish of water. Then the doll lifted up her eyelids, and out of the empty sockets of her eyes came the frenzied antennae of all those prawns.” (Ferré, 6).

The disposition of the youngest niece is an example of cyborgian good-humored energy. She rethinks boundaries in an inventive and cheerful way, like the cyborg does and is herself a transgressor, that exposes “the fraudulent artifice of mainstream society’s most centrally constitutive taboos and prohibitions.” (Schoene, 285). Her character in the story represents what Haraway’s cyborg aims for: a movement towards liberation of suffocating boundaries, an emancipatory act of reclaiming agency and a strong rethinking of contemporary discourse which is based on a gendered humanity.

## Part 3: Connecting the dots

### 3.1. Reflection

In the previous sections I have argued for the connection between two theoretical concepts (the uncanny and the cyborg) that at first sight might seem distant. However, I have found their interrelation strikingly vibrant. Here, I would like to reflect on my argument and connect the so-called dots.

What I have been aiming for in this thesis, is a critical enquiry into the discourse on female identity, its connection to the body and representations of reality in literature. In analyzing the three stories by Hoffmann, Ferré and Hernández, which explicitly deal with representations of the female body as artifacts – and in doing so, create an uncanny effect – I proposed the connection between the uncanny and female identity. The cyborg is the next step in this line of thought: it provides a solution, a plea for a rethinking of contemporary discourse. Cyborg theory is a way of politicalizing (bodily) identity.

The nucleus of both cyborg theory and the concept of the uncanny lie in the concept of the body. It is the most basic connection between the two concepts. Freud defines the uncanny by considering the definition a dictionary gives for the German words *heimlich* and *unheimlich*<sup>11</sup>. He writes: “*Heimlich* thus becomes increasingly ambivalent, until it finally merges with its antonym *unheimlich*. The uncanny (*das Unheimliche*, ‘the unhomely’) is in some way a species of the familiar (*das Heimliche*, ‘the homely’).” (134). What is more familiar and at the same time more foreign than our own body? We know its ‘shell’ – the skin, the features, the curves, but we never see the inside of it. We can display great discipline and treat our bodies well, but in the end we never know what is happening on the inside. Jentsch understood “the uncanny effect produced by epileptic fits and the manifestations of insanity, because these arouse in the onlooker vague notions of automatic – mechanical – processes that may lie hidden behind the familiar image of a living person.” (135). We cannot truly control our bodies. Yet, it is the one thing we always carry with us. In that sense, it is the most familiar element of our existence, while simultaneously the most unfamiliar. We view our bodies as if they are our tools, our carriers, but in the end it is our body that can become our enemy, when it shuts down.

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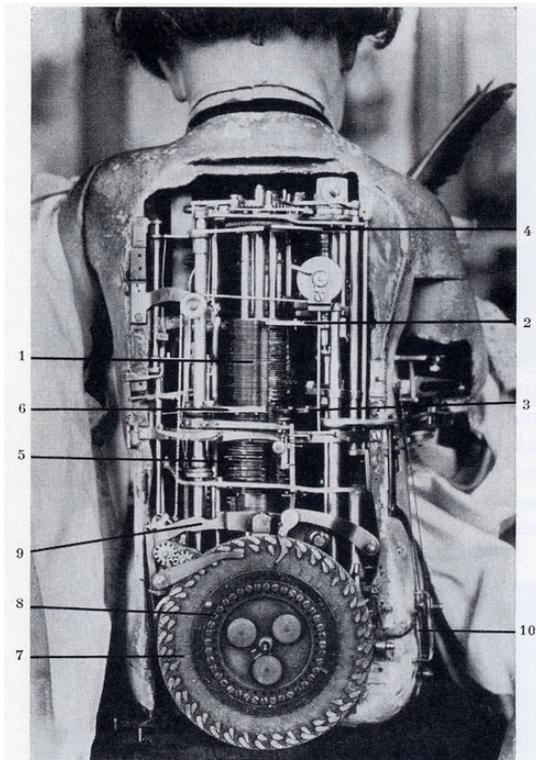
<sup>11</sup> This is the German word for ‘uncanny’.

One could argue that the most uncanny element in life is our own body. The uncanniness of dolls is an understandable concept, because they are bodies without an ‘interior’. They are just ‘shell’, they do not correspond to our model of other people and their behavior and therefore they are threatening to us, like Mori and MacDorman and Ishiguro argue.

Haraway’s cyborg theory is a manifest for a rethinking of identity, but the core of her argument is in the body as well. As I mentioned above in part 2 of this thesis, Haraway signals three crucial boundary breakdowns that make the political fictional analysis she is going to make possible (2192). These breakdowns are found in respectively two fields: the actual, physical body, and the body as seen in broader terms, as the ‘outside’ of a corresponding ‘inside’. The first breakdown is seen in the boundary between human and animal, which is part of the actual body. “The cyborg appears in myth precisely where the boundary between human and animal is transgressed.” (2193). The second breakdown, which is related to the body in a broader sense, is in the boundary between organism and machine, as is for example the case with androids. “Our machines are disturbingly lively, and we ourselves

frightingly inert.” (2193). The third breakdown Haraway sees, is between the physical and the non-physical, which is a subpart of the second breakdown.

Haraway’s argument is based on these bodily (in the literal and the broader sense) boundaries which are breaking down and are transgressive. “So my cyborg myth is about transgressed boundaries, potent fusions, and dangerous possibilities which progressive people might explore as one part of needed political work.” (2195). She proposes that



Bodily boundaries are breaking down.

identity is not fixed but fractured, which has its roots in the breakdown of bodily and identity boundaries which is happening in modern times where technoscience prevails.

### 3.2. *Reality and fiction*

Much emphasis has been placed here on the division between reality and fiction. This thesis researched the question of what these stories tell us about the world surrounding us. In analyzing these stories, I proposed the connection between the two theoretical concepts of the uncanny and the cyborg. As I have pointed out above, both have their roots in the concept of the body and their interrelation has implications for female identity in reality.

Literature creates reflections of reality, which enables us to rethink the rules and practices of society and see the world anew. The stories by Hernández, Ferré and Hoffmann demonstrated how the defamiliarization of (female) bodies and the creation of uncanniness has impact on female identity, which stretches further than the body alone. This has its roots in reality, and the stories reflect on this reality. Kiene Brillenburg Wurth and Ann Rigney (2008) have written about the relationship between literature and the world surrounding us in their introductory manual to literary studies. They write that texts and images are products of their own time and carry traces of that. (295). They sum up the relationship literature from a certain time has to the world of that moment:

1. De literatuur reproduceert de bestaande cultuur en heeft dus een ‘conserverende’ werking. Zij representeert en herhaalt gangbare zienswijzen en legt deze vast.
2. De literatuur draagt juist bij aan het innemen van een kritische afstand ten opzichte van bestaande zienswijzen.
3. De literatuur draagt bij aan het inzichtelijk maken van dingen die moeilijk te begrijpen zijn. (307)

Following this argument, it becomes clear that the stories reproduce the culture of the time in which they were written and repeat the current way of thinking in that culture. They reflect on the reality of their time and the culture from which they originate. Interpreting stories is not a normative practice. Therefore, my analysis of these narratives, should be regarded as *one* way of interpretation. *The Sandman*, *The Youngest Doll* and *The Daisy Dolls* are beautiful, playful and artistic pieces of literature, and are interpretable in various ways. However, I do believe these stories are examples of literary texts that take a critical distance from contemporary positions and discourse and they provide insight into complex structures that deeply underlie human existence in various societies around the globe and distinct times. The stories

were published in different parts of the world and in different times. Yet, following the interpretation that is presented here, they display similar thoughts, which is striking and meaningful.

Cyborg theory is a way of rethinking identity, which is in principle feminist, but in no way to be understood to apply to and be beneficial for women only. Haraway insists that feminism has been too conscious of exclusion. Therefore she makes a political analysis possible that is a holistic approach to redefine identity, which before was defined too much by gender, race and class. "Gender, race, or class consciousness is an achievement forced on us by the terrible historical experience of the contradictory social realities of patriarchy, colonialism and capitalism." (2196). The division between man/woman, mind/body, is confining for both of the sexes, and needs to be revised.

Literature's role in the search for a different discourse is highly significant and cannot be neglected. Defamiliarizing depictions of uncanny dolls can be enormously important critical tools in the emancipatory project of change that the cyborg manifesto heralds. In their reflective attitude towards reality, they provide critical analysis and reveal gendered categories as what they really are: constructed and therefore fictional.

## Afterword

The final step in the process of writing this thesis is to take a moment to critically reflect on the work I have done. I believe the theories I have worked with remain intriguing and highly relevant for research and analytical thinking within the contemporary academic debate on female identity, the cyborg and the uncanny, but also for the broader fields of reality versus fiction and the transgressing of boundaries. Furthermore, even after re-reading the fictions of Felisberto Hernández, Rosario Ferré and E.T.A. Hoffmann countless times, they remain beautiful and enticing stories that have timeless value.

Both the theoretical and the literary texts are immensely complex and can be studied from many different perspectives. Much more research could be done on the topics this thesis dealt with. A suggestion might be a further investigation of how time and place matter in the context of the analyzed stories. I have only been able to mention this briefly, but interesting questions can be asked about possible differences between 19th century Europe and 20th century Latin America in dealing with women and dolls in art and conclusions that can be drawn from that. In addition, more on the subject of the post human could be included in researching the interrelation between the topics this thesis dealt with. An extensive and relevant study has been done on the post human by Katherine Hayles, which could be included in further research.

Much work and thought on the topic of female identity still needs to be done. Literature will doubtlessly remain an important critical tool in this process, because of its intimate relationship with reality, which it conserves and can reflect on.

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## Illustrations

- p.5 [http://www.humanistischecanon.nl/secularisering/sigmund\\_freud/sigmund\\_freud\\_\\_de\\_toekomst\\_van\\_een\\_illusie\\_\\_1924\\_](http://www.humanistischecanon.nl/secularisering/sigmund_freud/sigmund_freud__de_toekomst_van_een_illusie__1924_)
- p.6 <http://spectrum.ieee.org/automaton/robotics/humanoids/the-uncanny-valley>
- p.7 [http://de.wikipedia.org/wiki/E.\\_T.\\_A.\\_Hoffmann](http://de.wikipedia.org/wiki/E._T._A._Hoffmann)
- p.9 [http://humanidades.uprrp.edu/ingles/pubs/sargasso\\_interviews.Htm](http://humanidades.uprrp.edu/ingles/pubs/sargasso_interviews.Htm)
- p.11 <http://www.revistasiamesa.com.ar/2010/09/cuentos-reunidos-de-felisberto.html>
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