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Freud, the Uncanny, and Ellroy: Appropriating the Uncanny to Literature

One unsolved murder, two autobiographies, and a curse that compels to love women: the L.A. born James Ellroy is obsessed by women, most notably his mother. His early work combines crime fiction, *noir*, and L.A. from the 50s and 60s with autobiographical elements. *Noir*, mixed with childhood demons, becomes an ambiguous oeuvre of fact, fabrication and fiction in the hands of Ellroy, as it lays bare the dark side of L.A. and of Ellroy himself. The frightening and gripping aspect of Ellroy's work is more than corrupt cops and the horror of explicitly described corpses; it is the underlying suspicion that "The system isn't corrupt; corruption *is* the system" (qtd. in Kihn 32). Ellroy's explains, "I want to know what's the psychology of the victim? What's the psychology of the victimizer?" (qtd. in Meeks 24). These questions are personally close to Ellroy as his mother was strangled to death when he was a boy of ten. In search of his own psychology and the secrets of his mother, he reinvestigates his mother's murder case as material for an autobiography.

Because of Sigmund Freud, Ellroy is easily labelled as "victim of internal compulsions" caused by a troubled childhood who "[writes] not to express finesses but, it may be, to exorcize horrors" (Ellmann 66). This is portrayed by Ellroy's first two books, *Brown's Requiem* and *Clandestine*, that are largely based on his life. In a later interview Ellroy remarks: "All that hokey autobiographical stuff that mainstream writers dwell on ad infinitum I got rid of in my first two books" (qtd. in Silet 44). However, certain themes refused to stay away from his writing, the most obvious being his mother. His sixth book, *The Black Dahlia*,

is a fictional solution of the Black Dahlia case of 1947 but also a substitute of his mother's unsolved murder. Almost twenty years later, Ellroy starts writing an autobiographical novel, *My Dark Places*, and reinvestigates her murder case. *My Dark Places* signified a new phase in his mourning, because "if *The Black Dahlia* was Ellroy wrestling with his demons once removed, Ellroy is now wrestling directly with her and what her loss meant to his life" (Wieners 38). The wrestling continues, as well as the 'hokey autobiographical stuff', as Jean Hilliker returns in Ellroy's second autobiographical novel: *The Hilliker Curse: My Pursuit of Women*.

Richard Ellmann argues in his essay "Freud and Literary Biography" that psychoanalytic criticism has taken over literature's function of offering insight into the human mind and behaviour. Nowadays, critics such as Frederick Crews point out the flaws in psychoanalytic reasoning and interpretations, and the problem that psychology has become common knowledge so that the unconscious has become quite an open book. Freud in his essay 'The 'Uncanny'' explores the feeling of horror that comes from "what ought to have remained secret and hidden but has come to light" (225). However, Hélène Cixous illustrates in her essay 'Fiction and Its Phantasmas: A Reading of Freud's Das Unheimliche (The 'Uncanny')' that Freud's essay fails to define the uncanny and that literature is important in discourse about the uncanny. Other works that contribute to a better understanding of the uncanny are Dominick LaCapra's essay 'Reflections on Trauma, Absence, and Loss' as the latent quality of the uncanny resembles trauma, and Nicholas Royle's *The Uncanny* that explores the uncanny as a literary phenomenon in an extensive study. While Freud overexposed and unarmed the uncanny for example in his account of E.T.A. Hoffman's 'The Sandman' (c.f. Cixous), Ellroy's work enriches the phenomenon without addressing it directly. This thesis will explore through Ellroy's autobiographical work and a selection of interviews he has given over the course of 1984 to 2010 to what extent the uncanny

contributes to the appropriation of biography, autobiography in specific, from psychoanalysis to literature.

First this paper will discuss the uncanny as a literary phenomenon with a critical reading of Freud's pioneer text 'The 'Uncanny'' and its place among later theories of the uncanny. The following section will explore notions of the home and the mother and their relationship to the uncanny in Ellroy's work. After that the uncanny will be explored in autobiography as a genre and in writing itself. This paper will conclude with a comparison between the productivity of the uncanny in Freud's 'The 'Uncanny'' and Ellroy's two autobiographies.

The Uncanny in Theory

A pioneer in the field of the uncanny, Freud described the *Unheimliche* as something "related to what is frightening" ('The 'Uncanny'' 219). In English, the translation of 'the *Unheimliche*' to 'the uncanny' complicates the meaning of the word. The general perplexity of the *Unheimliche* is perhaps best illustrated by the warning in the *OED* that "This entry has not yet been fully updated (first published 1921)". This means that the influence of Freud's essay on the uncanny has not made its way into the dictionary yet as 'The 'Uncanny'' has been translated into English as late as 1925. The *OED* entry shows a mild definition of the uncanny as it denotes carelessness, danger, and unsafety, but more specific "not quite safe to trust to, or have dealings with, as being associated with supernatural¹ arts or powers" and also "mysterious, weird, uncomfortably strange or unfamiliar". The word is mainly aimed outwardly to others and conveys a sense of suspicion. The sense of eeriness can be found in the Merriam-Webster dictionary as well, but it adds that the uncanny is "strange or unusual in

¹ Todorov distinguished in his theory of the fantastic between the uncanny and the marvellous. The uncanny is produced when the reality principle is violated and the story may be "explained as the products of "the narrator's or protagonist's dream, hallucination, or delusion" as opposed to the marvellous that attributes strange events to the supernatural (*Oxford Dictionary of Literary Terms*). Freud also distinguished between 'exterior' and 'interior' uncanny when he labelled the former as caused by repressed primitive beliefs and the latter as caused by infantile complexes. However, Todorov has introduced the marvellous for the 'exterior' kind of strangeness, confining the uncanny to an 'interior' space.

a way that is surprising or difficult to understand". The uncanny then mixes suspicion and paranoia with incomprehension and the unexpected. The *Unheimliche* is closely connected to '*Heimliche*' which means both that what belongs to the family and that what should be veiled from strangers. As it means both familiar and secret or unfamiliar, the dubious prefix *Un-* places the *Unheimliche* outside of binary oppositions and extends it to the regions of the supernatural and the uneasiness of what lies in between familiarity and secrecy.

At the heart of the uncanny feeling are a general perplexity and the sense of something dauntingly familiar. The ghostly, indefinite character of the uncanny caused Ernst Jentsch, Freud, Royle and Cixous to write different definitions of its nucleus. While Jentsch attributes the uncanny to "intellectual uncertainty," Freud places emphasis on repression and return as the uncanny is "what ought to have remained secret and hidden but has come to light" ('The 'Uncanny'' 221, 225). Furthermore, Freud adds that "an uncanny effect is often and easily produced when the distinction between imagination and reality is effaced" ('The 'Uncanny'' 244). The distant and analytical tone of Jentsch and Freud's definitions is opposed by Cixous dealing with the uncanny as something personal and uncontrollable as "of the *Unheimliche* (and its double, fiction) we can only say that it never completely disappears... that it 'represents' that which in solitude, silence, and darkness will (never) be presented to you" (Cixous 548). Finally, Royle internalises the uncanny completely as "The uncanny [...] has to do with a sense of ourselves as double, split, at odds with ourselves" (Royle 6). The uncanny, in short, is inextricably bound to ambiguity, repression, repetition, fiction and, perhaps predominantly, the self.

A return to Freud's 'The 'Uncanny'' shows the importance of literature in discourse about the uncanny. Although Freud adopted a psychoanalytical approach to the uncanny, it is only with examples from literature that he is able to make claims. Psychoanalysis is under fire as critics such as Frederick Crews and Richard Ellmann comment on its investigative

methods. The criticism on psychoanalysis is twofold; the first is the method of its reasoning and the second the common awareness of repression. Firstly, Crews warns in his essay 'Unconscious Deeps and Empirical Shallows' for the use of psychoanalytic "wild cards" such as the unconscious and repression, but also for the use of interpretation as "raw data," the preference for latent truth over manifest events and symbols, and the circular rhetoric² that prevents any interpretation from being falsified (Crews 21-22). Secondly, nowadays everyone is familiar with the Oedipus-complex, castration-anxiety and phallus-envy, and according to Richard Ellmann it is less likely that people will behave according to these patterns (65).

Despite its flaws, psychoanalysis proves to be productive in Ellroy's case as an extra layer in his personal narrative. Ellroy is easily ascribed an Oedipus-complex and castration-anxiety when he explicitly admits that he desires his mother and fears his father's eyes. Ellroy is well acquainted with the psychoanalytical jargon as he says "I see [writing] as therapeutic – not in the sense that it's something I want to overcome, because I don't think this curiosity, these drives of mine, are neurotically derived" (qtd. in Duncan 90). Although psychoanalysis is unable to reveal anything new about Ellroy in this respect, Ellroy makes good use of it. Asked about his profiting from his mother's death, Ellroy said "To me, it's a classic case of mankind profiting from tragedy. ... It sounds like a definition of literature in a nutshell" (qtd. in Tucker 8). The Oedipus-complex may or may not be true in Ellroy's case; but at least it makes up for a pretty and profitable story.

The importance of literature in the uncanny is illustrated by the literariness of 'The Uncanny' as Hélène Cixous points out in her essay 'Fiction and Its Phantasmas: A Reading of Freud's *Das Unheimliche* (The 'Uncanny')'. Cixous describes Freud's analysis of the uncanny as "a strange theoretical novel" because the text "functions *like* a fiction" (525, 531). One of the privileges of fiction that Freud uses is freedom concerning point of view. In his

² Or, in Cixous's words about 'The Uncanny': "[Freud's] elaboration begins, in reality, from a conclusion which returns the analysis to the still intra-analytical circle" (535).

attempt for scientific analysis, “I” is avoided on strange occasions in which it is clear that Freud speaks about himself. “I” is not merely omitted; it is replaced by a third person reference as if Freud distanced himself from himself. As a result, Freud plays both “analyst and subject of analysis” (Cixous 529), for example when he writes about himself: “It is long since he had experienced or heard of anything which had given him an uncanny impression” (Freud, ‘The ‘Uncanny’ 220). The uncanny sets in truly as the doubling of the “I” results in an emphasis on ‘eyes’ as the visual and the auditory play in the text. The focus on eyes is mostly encountered in Freud’s analysis of E.T.A. Hoffmann’s ‘The Sandman’ which, to Freud, emphasises the uncanniness in the fear of losing one’s eyes. The auditory cannot be seen but this does not mean it is not there: the play of the ‘I’s and the eyes underline the “‘eariness’ of the uncanny” or the strangeness of sounds (Royle 136). Freud’s language continually draws attention to itself as text and keeps the reader away from the haunting voices of his intertextual references. Freud’s essay fails scientifically as, in Cixous’s words, “The text does not want to take off; the argument becomes troubled, hardens, and doubles with thickness” (544). The scientific arguments are used to outline and illustrate the uncanny but the literary nature of the text alone approaches what is uncanny, which is why Freud’s essay shows the importance of literature in a discourse about the uncanny.

The uncanny in literature can be experienced through both form and content. Form is uncanny as the practice of writing is scrutinized, for example the use of intertextuality when phantoms of other text intrude. Another example of the uncanny inherent to writing is when an author promises reality but then deceives the reader, as Freud argues. The uncanny, however, depends more on an uncertainty of reality than a lack of it. This can be found in specific imagery such as animism, insanity, the supernatural, “the omnipotence of thoughts” (Freud, ‘The ‘Uncanny’ 226), dealings with death, “involuntary repetition” and “dismembered limbs ... especially when ... they prove capable of independent activity in

addition” (Freud, ‘The ‘Uncanny’ 244) but also the mother figure³, telepathy and Jesus Christ (Royle). The uncanny then is produced in texts about the body, ghosts, death, the psyche and writing but also on the verge of reality, the double, darkness, solitude and the gruesome: all of these can be found in the return of Ellroy’s dead mother in the dark in his autobiographies.

The (M)other in the Dark

Ellroy is trapped in a compulsion to repeat especially in relation to women. These women, notably the Dahlia and the Mother, come to him in silence and darkness. The one persisting ghost is the mother who haunts the boundary between imagination and reality in El Monte as well as in Ellroy’s mind. Differently from the Dahlia-obsession, “Ellroy’s lifelong obsession with his mother’s death refuses to go away” (Silet 41). While Ellroy tries to pin her down in his memoirs, she escapes any form of framing as she is both ubiquitous en placeless. The return of the ghostly mother is not intolerable in itself; “What is intolerable is that the Ghost erases the limit which exists between two states, neither alive nor dead; passing through, the dead man returns in the manner of the Repressed ” (Cixous 543). The repression that underlies the phantom started in the situation around her death:

My mother had been shitty to me in the weeks preceding her death. My greatest dream during that time was to go live with my father. All of a sudden my mother is dead, all of a sudden my wish had been granted. I experienced a very ambiguous bereavement. I was frightened of my mother; I was frightened of the hold that she had over me. (qtd. in Silet 46)

The impact of the murder is small; it is the fulfilment of Ellroy’s *wish* for her death that is uncanny. Her death is not only tinged with a suspicion of the supernatural through an apparent act of omnipotence of thought; it is also endlessly repeated in Ellroy’s fantasies.

³ The most uncanny feeling of all may be the fear of being buried alive, which is a distorted desire to return to the womb of the mother and thus nothing to fear according to Freud (‘The ‘Uncanny’ 244). This adds the mother figure to the list of uncanny imagery.

Compulsively, Ellroy repeats the desire for his mother in his obsessions with women who look like her. Although Ellroy never literally uses the word ‘uncanny’, it haunts his work latently as he speaks frequently of strange coincidences, a “spooky feeling,” and voices coming to him in the dark (*My Dark Places* 95).

The mother as the axis of the uncanny in Ellroy’s work illustrates the importance of home or homeliness in the German *Unheimliche*. While Freud denied that the desire for the mother could be experienced as the most uncanny of all⁴, Ellroy’s work silently contradicts this. In psychoanalysis, the home is constituted of “The oceanic feeling, correlated with the presymbolic, pre-oedipal imaginary unity (or community) with the mother” (LaCapra 180). This peaceful situation is disrupted as it is “‘lost’ by separation from the (m)other with the intervention of the (name of) the father and the institution of the symbolic under the sway of the phallus” (LaCapra 180). In absence of the mother, little Ellroy created a substitute symbiotic situation in his imagination as he identified himself with the Dahlia: “*She was me*” (*The Hilliker Curse* 72). Meanwhile, he lived with his father, took on his father’s prejudices against his mother and started to repress any thought about Jean Hilliker. The peaceful home situation is lost in the poisonous environment of his parents’ divorce and his mother’s death, but receives the final blow as the image of his father is shattered five years later:

I came home from school ... and found my father sitting in a pool of urine and feces. He was twitching and weeping and babbling and drooling. His taut musculature had gone slack in the course of a day. It was a horrifying sight. I started crying and babbling myself. The old man just looked at me. (*My Dark Places* 119)

Instantly, the father changes from a father to an old man and is reduced to his eyes only, as Ellroy writes “I couldn’t get away from his eyes. I could not fucking negate their power” (*My Dark Places* 120). As his father’s image is broken, Ellroy returns to his dead mother in an

⁴ As explained above, Freud interpreted the most uncanny feeling of being buried alive as a masked desire to return to the womb.

uncanny relationship: “I was an Ellroy then. I’m a Hilliker now. *Our* pride, my bifurcated identity” (*The Hilliker Curse* 14). The name of the father has lost its power and Ellroy recognises in his Dahlia-obsession the phantom umbilical cord with his mother as he refers to Betty Short as “[the] symbiotic stand-in for Geneva Hilliker Ellroy” (*My Dark Places* 103). The bond is even closer as Ellroy soon realises: “I couldn’t separate the her [his mother] from the me” (*My Dark Places* 103, 206).

Ellroy’s involuntary turning to women is something Freud experienced as well. As Freud describes a walk he once made in a dark city, he finds himself thrice in the red light district of the town, until he finally reaches the piazza “without any further voyages of discovery” (‘The ‘Uncanny’ 237). The repeated involuntary encounter with women in a town “which was unknown to [Freud]” is then described as a voyage of *discovery*. The otherness of the women then offers Freud insight into his Self. A similar attitude to women is for example when Ellroy’s fantasies fill in the blanks in the story of the Dahlia-killer:

[Jack Webb⁵] didn’t understand the killer’s intentions or know that his gynaecological tampering defined the crime. He didn’t know that the killer was horribly afraid of women. He didn’t know that he cut the Dahlia open to see what made women different from men. I didn’t know those things then. I did know that I had a story to run to and run from. (*My Dark Places* 102-3)

Of course this excerpt does not equal Ellroy to the killer especially since he “could not endure depictions of violence on women” (*The Hilliker Curse* 19), but it shows his fascination with crime and the otherness of women that grabs his attention and obsession.

Ellroy’s obsession with women is a form of “involuntary repetition” as he feels impelled to cuckold despite his desire for a monogamous relationship (Freud, ‘The ‘Uncanny’ 237). From the moment his mother died, Ellroy believes to be cursed by the

⁵ Jack Webb is the author of *The Badge*, the book through which Ellroy as a boy first encountered the Black Dahlia-case.

'Hilliker Curse' which shows that Ellroy finds himself under the spell of "something fateful and inescapable" (Freud, 'The 'Uncanny'' 23). The uncanny lies then not so much in the compulsion to repeat itself, but more in that what is repeated: in Ellroy's case, inevitably losing the woman he loves (Royle 90). Similarly, it is not in the repetitions of "*Cherchez la femme*" (*The Black Dahlia* 10, *My Dark Places* 255) and "So women will love me" (*The Hilliker Curse* preface, 153, 185, 185) that the uncanny resides. It is in the continual quest for 'Her' and the reminder that the first woman he loved can no longer be protected. As a result, it is a relief to Ellroy when his mother returns to him in the form of a ghost. She is welcome in her nearly messianic significance as "She was no less than [his] salvation" (*My Dark Places* 321). She functions as only way out in Ellroy's "self-inflicted summons to compulsion and predation" that urges him to sit in the dark, search for women, repeat his story, and fantasise endlessly (*The Hilliker Curse* 141).

Despite Jean Hilliker's redeeming qualities, Ellroy is in search for a woman who can relieve him from his trauma. Helen is the first of Ellroy's four attempts at finding 'Her', the ideal woman, and functions as an antidote against the confining qualities of the mother as "Jean Hilliker was the entomber. My mother ghost-danced through dark rooms and encouraged me to scroll faces. Helen cracked the blackout curtains and let me glimpse the light outside" (*The Hilliker Curse* 90). Nevertheless, soon the Hilliker Curse sets in and the relationship collapses. Ellroy meets other amazing women he cannot stay away from and inevitably loses the woman he loves. This scenario repeats itself, but the compulsive character of *The Curse* truly comes to light as it states: "You must protect *all* the women you love" (*The Hilliker Curse* 143). Unable to let go of any woman he loved and unable to remain with the same woman for a longer time, Ellroy's group of women to love and to protect continues to grow. Women and addiction seem close neighbours while latently Ellroy re-enacts losing his mother through newly lost loves.

Imagination plays a major role in Ellroy's addiction to women. Since his childhood, Ellroy possesses an imagination that seems to possess *him* instead: "I did not wilfully conjure the images. They seemed to spring from somewhere beyond my volition" (*My Dark Places* 104). Despite the possessive nature of these "compulsive fantasies," Ellroy shows a preference for his inner world as he writes that "The outside world intruded all too often" and his "two worlds clashed continually" (*My Dark Places* 110). As a child, Ellroy sought for dark places both in his childish conjuring, "The real world has frequently intruded on my spells in the dark" (*The Hilliker Curse* 9) and in his childish prowling, "Those late-night walks were spooky and enticing. Darkness reinforces my claim on the turf and pumped up my imagination" (*My Dark Places* 99). It is in silence and in the dark that "*the presence of what ought to be absent*" (Gordon Bearn qtd. in Royle 88) creates a feeling of the uncanny as Ellroy writes: "I danced with my mother's ghost and walked from room to room in the dark," because the ghost should not be there in the first place (*The Hilliker Curse* 180).

As the Hilliker Curse started with a sense of omnipotence of thoughts, a turning point in Ellroy's life is when he seemed to lose his mind altogether. The following passage is quite uncanny although it seems to contradict 'the presence of what ought to be absent':

I got up from a nap and thought, "I need some cigarettes." My mind went dead then. I couldn't recall or retrieve that one simple thought.

My brain hit blank walls. I couldn't say the thought or visualize it or come up with words to express it. [...]

I couldn't say my own name. I couldn't think my own name.

[...]

I screamed. I put my hands over my ears, shut my eyes and screamed myself hoarse. I kept fighting for that one simple thought. (*My Dark Places* 146)

The utter silence is uncanny because of its likeness to live burial: the “brain hit blank walls” as if it found itself in a coffin. This nightmarish event is relieved the moment “It all came back. I recalled every detail. I started crying. I prayed and begged God to let me keep my mind” (*My Dark Places* 147). This excerpt illustrates the impact of complete silence in all its uncanniness that both Royle and Freud failed to describe, because silence is not only the absence of sound but also the absence of inner dialogue⁶. This experience of utter silence might have contributed greatly to Ellroy’s writing; not only to preserve his voice, but also to spread his story and remain alive through his words on paper.

After publishing his first books, Ellroy soon starts an autobiography that takes on the form of a crime novel like his other works. With the help of a retired detective, Ellroy reinvestigates his mother’s murder case which is according to Derrida an important step in the process of mourning: “[Mourning] consists always in attempting to ontologize remains, to make them present, in the first place by *identifying* the bodily remains and by *localizing* the dead [...]. One has to know ... *who* and *where*, to know whose body it really is and what place it occupies – for it must stay in its place” (qtd. in Royle 279). It is no wonder then, that Jean Hilliker’s investigation is mapped out precisely and pinned down to files and dates: “It was 2:30 a.m., Monday, June 23, 1958. The Jean Ellroy job —Sheriff’s Homicide File #Z-483-362—was now 16 hours old” (*My Dark Places* 17).

Carefully, Ellroy maps out his mother’s death in *My Dark Places*. The body is located, the file is labelled, the dates are fixed black-on-white. Transcripts of police interviews are inserted and the locations are described extensively. The crime scene, El Monte from Ellroy’s youth, is reconstructed as a fictional residence for his mother. It fulfils what Ellroy said in an

⁶ Royle’s chapter on silence and solitude is extremely short:

- Did you say something?
- I heard a voice.
- In your head?
- No, in yours. (107)

This chapter seems thus more about telepathy than about the shattering uncanniness of silence. Freud, on the other hand, does away with silence as he labels it as an “infantile anxiety” in the last paragraph in the essay and point to another essay he wrote (“The ‘Uncanny’” 252).

interview eight years prior to the publishing of *My Dark Places*: “what I wanna do is re-create the Los Angeles of my past, which I am totally obsessed with” (qtd. in Swaim 18). Ellroy’s relation to El Monte resembles his relation to women, as he is unable to remain faithful to his home but is continually drawn to it in obsession. In the end, he is forced to move out, as he says “I have jolts of fear in Los Angeles that I don’t get anywhere else. It’s as if L.A. knows me better than any other place, and thus, I’m vulnerable” (qtd. in Kihn 31). The uncanny emerges, as it is the terrifying aspect of home that drove Ellroy away from Los Angeles. In search of his mother, it is the same terrifying aspect of home that made him return.

When Ellroy first visits El Monte during the reinvestigation of his mother’s murder case, he looks for familiarity: “My mother died in an early-summer heat wave. I was just that hot now” (*My Dark Places* 223). The experience is then almost unreal, as Ellroy writes “My car felt like a fucking time machine” (*My Dark Places* 223). The strange familiarity culminates when he visits the bar where his mother as last scene before her death:

The booths. The low ceiling. The base of the L off to my right. Everything matched my old mental print. Maybe she brought me here. Maybe I saw a picture. Maybe I just walked into a weird psychic matrix. (*My Dark Places* 224)

The return to the crime scene comes to Ellroy like a *déjà vu*, which is according to Royle “the uncanny figure of that which is irreducible to the psychical or the real, an undecidable trembling that phantomizes the possibility of ‘belief’” (178). The sensation of *déjà vu* creates an uncertainty about Ellroy’s memory, but also locates the El Monte-episode in *My Dark Places* on the boundary between imagination and reality.

The unfamiliarity of El Monte causes Ellroy to attribute psychic characteristics to the region, so that the move toward ‘Shitsville, U.S.A’ meant something and the murder might be part of a larger meaning. This can be found in Ellroy’s theories about the region his mother died: “the San Gabriel Valley was this *deus ex machina*. The people who flocked there

flocked there for unconscious reasons that superseded the conscious application of logic and made anything possible” (*My Dark Places* 251). However, Ellroy is disadvantaged by the lapse of time between his mother’s death and the reinvestigation. El Monte of his youth cannot be framed as the witnesses’ memories are overwritten by new ones. Time has an impact on the uncanny as well, as Wittgenstein asked: “The *duration* of such a ‘feeling’. What is it like, e.g., for it to be interrupted?” (qtd. in Royle 320). Before Ellroy comes quite to terms with the place, *My Dark Places* shows that the revelatory feeling wears off, as Ellroy writes “El Monte became dead familiar” (*My Dark Places* 295). El Monte itself escapes any kind of definition or description as it is subject to the absence as well as the presence of Jean Hilliker. It leads to Ellroy’s conclusion that “The only closure is that there is no closure” (qtd. in Silet 43).

The absence of closure allows the ghost to roam about freely. It is unimportant whether the ghost of Jean Hilliker is real or not; more important is the function of the ghost. Ellroy is mostly disturbed by the secrets about his mother and tries to fill “the gap produced in us by the concealment of some part of a loved object’s life” because “what haunts are not the dead, but the gaps left within us by the secrets of others” (Abraham qtd. in Royle 280). The major break-through in *My Dark Places* is then not caused by old interviews and police-files, but started when Ellroy met his family and saw pictures he had never seen and hears stories he has never heard about his mother. This discovery accounts for the change in Ellroy: he is no longer on a quest of “honor and debt to reseal the tomb” (*The Hilliker Curse* 73), but becomes eerily intimate with his dead mother, for example at a backyard party:

I was at my own party with the redhead. She was playful. She was snagging potato chips off my plate. We were sharing our own private jokes. (*My Dark Places* 322)

Slowly the strangely familiar has changed into a ghostly cosiness: Ellroy is still haunted but has come to peace with it.

Uncanny in Ellroy is not merely the haunting, but the strange familiarity and homeliness of sharing crisps at a backyard party. Jean Hilliker continually escapes her murder case and Ellroy “[writes] stories to console her as a phantom” as “She is ubiquitous and never familiar” (*The Hilliker Curse* preface). The unfamiliarity of the mother stays; she is neither contained in *My Dark Places*, nor in *The Black Dahlia*, nor in *Clandestine*, nor in the file at the Sheriff’s Homicide Department. Jean Hilliker will return, because “[A] phantom never dies, it remains always to come and to come-back” (Derrida qtd. in Royle 282). With the Ghost as “the direct figure of the uncanny” and a ghost to die for, Jean Hilliker remains the nucleus of uncanniness in Ellroy’s works (Cixous 542, *The Hilliker Curse* 71). Meanwhile, both the reinvestigation and the memoir writing failed to further Ellroy in his mourning. He even returns to a shared identity with his mother as he starts to mother her. Through writing Ellroy approaches his mother, tries to entomb her, contain her, keep her alive and close-by, as he addresses her: “*Your death defines my life. I want to find the love we never had and explicate it in your name. I want to take your secrets public. I want to burn down the distance between us. I want to give you breath*” (2). Ellroy plays a double part here as he addresses his mother both as abandoned son and as mother: he reaches out to her and keeps her alive.

Demonic Writing

The uncanny is usually found in gothic and horror stories about haunted houses. In Ellroy’s case, architecture is less important. The haunted house is rather the home where his mother roams. As the family situation vanished and Ellroy lived on the street, his mind was his home. Later on, when he nearly lost his mind, he moved his home to his writing. As described above, both homes have their ghosts. *My Dark Places* and *The Hilliker Curse* have a special place, as “It is impossible to think about the uncanny without this involving a sense of what is autobiographical, self-centred, based in one’s own experience. But it is also impossible to conceive of the uncanny without a sense of ghostliness, a sense of strangeness given to

dissolving all assurances about the identity of a self” (Royle 16). The uncanny in Ellroy’s work is a the mirror palace, as not only the Self is doubled, the mother is substituted and repeated, but also the personal narrative is doubled in Ellroy’s need to write two autobiographies.

Autobiography is not only a haunting house but resembles a phantom as it is a narrative imposed on an on-going life, so that “any autobiography or ‘personal history’ must always appear to play, madly, with coming from beyond, after the end of the *bio*- that is its subject” (Royle 314). This is emphasised by the strangeness of Ellroy’s second memoir, in which he starts his story again with his childhood and retells the story all over again from a different perspective. It seems a form of compulsive storytelling, as “The story is passed on, repeated and repeatable, as if endlessly. [T]he uncanny seems to be bound up with a compulsion to tell, a compulsive storytelling” (Royle 12). The compulsive storytelling started before the repetitions set in; especially when he describes his first novel as a “persistent fantasy [...]. It haunted me. It invaded my thoughts at strange times” until he put it on paper (*My Dark Places* 154).

Autobiography further complicates the notion of identity as “the ‘I’ of a narrative fiction cannot simply be talked about as if he or she were the author, and that this ‘I’ is just as much created *by* the narrative as s/he is the creator *of it*” (Royle 257). In case of the autobiography a strange clash arises: Ellroy writes about himself and is simultaneously a character and an author. Both parts of the split Self influence the story and both parts try to define their identity. The power of the author is then diminished, because it is only “always *imagined* that the one who writes should know how to say *I*’. But an identity is never given, received, or attained; only the interminable and indefinitely phantasmatic process of identification endures” (Derrida qtd. Royle 117-8). This results in both Ellroy as an author and Ellroy as a character influencing the course of the narrative. His in-between situation is

sketched as he explains: “I have spent five decades in search of one woman to destroy a myth. That myth was self-created and speciously defined. I imposed a narrative line to ensure my own survival” (*The Hilliker Curse* 185). A myth about his life places him in a subject position, passive and fixed, while narrative empowers him and offers him control over the course of events. However, myth and narrative form the hybrid genre that Ellroy places himself in by writing autobiographies and giving interviews about his life. As an author Ellroy is creating, adjusting and adapting, perhaps appropriating, his own character as if it were a literary character. The autobiography is then a means of empowering him, as he “can set the record straight with this memoir and basically never answer any questions about my past life again, I hope” (qtd. in Duncan 88). All the same, his compulsion to tell urges him to contradict this statement afterwards as he continues to “puncture the myth [he has] created about my work and refine it” not only in interviews following the publication of *My Dark Places*, but also in a second autobiography (qtd. in Hogan 60). Writing is then mostly a means of deferral rather than therapeutic, as writing Jean Hilliker’s story “as fiction and quash[ing] The Curse flat [...] worked dramatically. It further entombed Jean Hilliker and postponed the rush of The Curse” (*The Hilliker Curse* 65). Storytelling is a means to “re-create things” that helps Ellroy to continue his relationship with his mother, which is why Ellroy needs a second memoir to place his mother’s ghost somewhere safe (qtd. in Kihn 33). *The Hilliker Curse* provided Ellroy with the possibility of altering his relationship with his mother, because, in his words, “my mother and I were not a murder story, we were a love story” (qtd. in Peace 218).

Ellroy’s identity is not only that of a character and an author, but more specifically that of a crime novelist. As a writer, he is at home in mysteries, detective fiction, *noir*, and complex novels about paranoia. The compiler of his interviews, Stephen Powell, remarks that that Ellroy’s autobiographic stories mirror the stories he writes as “Just as in every crime

novel there are parallel narratives of discovery which intersect and modify each other – the mystery storyline with the personal, emotional investigation of main protagonist into his own identity” (Powell xi). Ellroy is fully aware of his identity as crime writer as he writes: “My current task was to play detective and frame my mother within book pages” (*The Hilliker Curse* 98). Both *My Dark Places* and *The Hilliker Curse* follow a storyline of clues and recurrent themes with a clearly mapped setting reminding of crime fiction. The investigation into his past in a matter-of-fact style offers Ellroy a possibility to distance himself and place his mother into narrative.

The mind of the crime writer is haunted not only by ghosts, but also by demons. Demons play an important role not only through Ellroy’s self-imposed nickname ‘Demon Dog of American Crime Fiction’, but also through the recurrent reference to his childhood demons and personal demons. The demonic is also found in the connection made with a higher power from dark regions, namely when he summons his mother’s death. Ellroy seems to waver between perceiving the summons as a result of the omnipotence of his thought and a supernatural gift. It is also unclear whether Ellroy sees the summons as a positive or a negative thing, as he writes “My mother’s death was a gift—and I knew I should pay for it” (*My Dark Places* 83). The strong belief in the summons comes from a book Ellroy read in his childhood: “*There’s a world we can’t see. It exists separately and concurrently with the real world. You enter this world by the offering of prayer and incantation. [...] Your interior world will give you what you want and what you need to survive*” (*The Hilliker Curse* 9). Fiction and reality merged, little Ellroy became angry with his mother, “recalled the book, ... issued *The Curse*, [and] summoned her dead. She was murdered three months later. She died at the apex of [his] hatred and equally burning lust” (*The Hilliker Curse* 36). The curse seems a substitution for his inability to control his mother and the traumatic impact of his mother’s

murder is soothed through his perpetuated belief in the omnipotence of his thoughts; as if he himself is responsible for the inexplicable act.

Aside from the demonic that seems to come from another region, the supernatural comes in through the overstepping of boundaries between the self and the other: telepathy. Freud has a problematic relationship with telepathy as in 'Psychoanalysis and Telepathy' he reluctantly admits to the existence of telepathy, and elsewhere "summon[s] it up, only in order to send it away again" (Royle 101). With the help of two, almost three, cases when fortune-telling failed Freud reluctantly attempts to prove the existence of telepathy, as he rather stays away from the occult. Royle places telepathy within literature as "a concept and effect intimately bound up with writing and death, the spectral and unprogrammable. 'Telepathy' calls to be considered perhaps first of all as a *literary phenomenon*, rather than as a psychological problem" (272). Writing, death, the spectral and the unprogrammable form the fabric of Ellroy's life and work and the occult is approached as Ellroy summons his mother's death.

Ellroy's flirting with the occult provides him with several uncanny episodes of a supernatural character. During his trips on the cotton wads in the park, Ellroy seems particularly possessed: "I saw women's faces and heard taunting voices in my head. They accused me of inflicting The Curse and killing my mother" (*The Hilliker Curse* 33-4). The demonic voices did not stop, as Kihn relates in an interview with Ellroy: "He was hearing voices (*Ellroy, you killed your father!*) and seeing fearsome, shapeless monsters" (25). Already in his childhood, Ellroy feared the presence of people entering his mind, as he relates: "I turned up the heat on my heterosexual daydreams—a strategy to thwart the people tuning in to my brainwaves" (*My Dark Places* 113). This childish fear is prolonged into his maturity, when he is paranoid towards his neighbour "He read my lips and deciphered all my dirty sweet nothings. He read my thoughts through the wall that separated us" (*My Dark Places*

141). The sounds and the fear that someone might invade his mind disturbed Ellroy. When it culminated in the numbness and silence when he lost his mind, he is aware of God tuning into his mind as well: “God punished me for mentally fucking my mother. [...] My fantasy was just that transgressive and worthy of divine intervention” (*My Dark Places* 149). Contrary to the images of women floating by in his fantasies, the voices seem to reflect Ellroy’s deepest fears. While the visual images mainly serve Ellroy’s lust and religious quest for ‘Her’, the auditory hauntings illustrate the ‘eariness’ of his mother’s loss.

Although Ellroy wrote autobiographies to gain control over his image and his mother, the uncanny aspect of the genre brings to light Ellroy’s powerlessness and demons. Writing could not possibly cure Ellroy from his haunting mother as “Writing was in its origin the voice of an absent person” (Freud, *Civilization and Its Discontents* 38). Ellroy cannot control his personal narrative, as he is absent the moment the words are on the page. That which draws Ellroy to writing is then not the sense of control, but the sense of homeliness. The fact that Ellroy’s writing is his home is interesting as “the dwelling-house was a substitute for the mother’s womb, the first lodging, for which in all likelihood man still longs, and in which he was safe and felt at ease” (Freud, *Civilization and Its Discontents* 38). Ellroy may be writing about his mother; eventually his writing *is* his mother.

The Hilliker Curse is a return to his mother after he lost his new loves. He returns to the safe place when he notices that the curse extends itself to all the women he loves. He fears his inner demons as his relationship with Helen deteriorates: “I underestimated the reflexive power of suppression and all the crazy shit that lies dormant in your head” (*The Hilliker Curse* 100). He only partly attributes the curse to psychoanalytical terms, and holds his childhood belief responsible: “I always get what I want. It comes slow or fast and always costs a great deal. I have honed the conjurer’s art with an astonishingly single-minded precision” (*The Hilliker Curse* 124). The blanks and gaps inherent to literature allow Ellroy

the writer to hide in it and snuggle safely in the womb. Through writing it might be that Ellroy haunts his mother instead of the other way around.

Freud, Ellroy, and the Uncanny

The uncanny has resided on the intersection between psychoanalysis and literature for almost a century, ever since Freud's 1919 essay paired them together. However, Freud's essay is somehow insufficient: especially when he recounts 'The Sandman' as an uncanny story, "The reader gets the impression that Freud's narrative is not as *Unheimliche* as he claims: is that new element which should have remained hidden doubtless too exposed here?" (Cixous 533). While Freud's essay is subject to questions like Crew's about its scientific value, Ellroy's work enjoys the freedom of literature to play with reality and imagination. When an interviewer asks why Ellroy "write[s] history as a novel, and not as nonfiction," Ellroy answers bluntly with: "Because I want to change things" (qtd. in Peace 217). This is exactly what Freud envies, according to Cixous, when he writes that "[the author] deceives us by promising to give us sober truth, and then after all overstepping it" (Freud, 'The 'Uncanny'' 250). The uncanny resides on the verge of reality, which accounts for "fiction['s] privileged relationship to the *Unheimliche*" (Cixous 546).

The uncanny, in all its 'unhomeliness', is at home in texts that leave enough room for it to haunt about: the gaps and blanks of literature provide such a setting. The uncanny, although first addressed in psychoanalysis, favours literature. The uncanny and literature were both seen as "the objective of psychoanalytical inquiry," but free each other in their productive relationship (Cixous 529). A change has come after what Ellmann in his essay writes about how "in the nineteenth century we looked to literature, especially to the novel, for news of the human mind; now we turn to psychoanalysis for the news behind the news" (Ellmann 59). Psychoanalysis failed to analyse the uncanny and literature is needed to look into the phenomenon. The uncanny needs a different approach as the "*Unheimliche* is in fact a

composite that infiltrates the interstices of the narrative and points to gaps we need to explain” (Cixous 536). The uncanny and literature therefore do not stand in a power relationship of analyst and subject, but rather stand in dialogue to point out uncertainties and powerful imagery in texts.

In conclusion, the uncanny can be roughly outlined as an intellectual uncertainty, what should have remained hidden but has come to light, playing with the boundary between imagination and reality, and awareness of the Self as double. Freud’s analytical approach to the uncanny has proven to be insufficient as it fails to come to a definite conclusion and literature seems a favoured platform for the uncanny to be placed in. In Ellroy’s work, the uncanny is never addressed but always fully present. Ellroy also shows the importance of the mother and the womb in the discourse of the uncanny and its relationship to addiction and trauma. Ellroy’s work shows the productivity of the uncanny in autobiography and crime fiction as they share themes such as the double, vision, the ghostly, and the split Self. Further research may be conducted after the relationship between crime fiction and the uncanny, especially the more recent crime fiction on paranoia and complot theories.

The uncanny creeps in, perhaps not in what ought to have remained hidden from the public, but hidden from the author, the reader, the individual standing in dialogue with the work of literature. The uncanny is the dialogue and horror of looking at oneself and losing control. The only answer to the uncanny may well be what Ellroy lives by, namely that “the only closure is that there is not closure” (qtd. in Silet 43).

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