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**Throwing ourselves down wells: embracing the theory of the Uncanny in contemporary creative writing**

Abstract:

Engaging with literature which uses the motif of a well or submerging, and through this invokes the Uncanny, we find examples of a useful writing device which can create a freedom for readers, characters, and ourselves, as writers, to explore unfamiliar or hidden areas of experience, particularly around questions of identity. This paper draws on theory of the Uncanny to read three texts: Elizabeth Jolley's *The Well*, Mitch Cullin's *Branches* and Margaret Atwood's *Surfacing*. It looks to these texts for examples of how writers might use the Uncanny within their own work to create a space to deal with repressed issues, to engage with a primal sacredness, or to pause narrative in order to muse on possibilities. Key to all of these texts is the theme of submerging or being trapped in a well, a motif for a liminal state of consciousness, an uncertainty, where the Uncanny resides. The effectiveness of the use of the Uncanny in these texts suggests that writers can exploit the uncertainty of the Uncanny to represent 'a rivenness and a haunting' (McCredden 2007) in contemporary Australian identity; it might be useful to create wells and throw ourselves down them.

Biographical note:

Katrina Finlayson is a PhD candidate at Flinders University. Her research interests include contemporary creative writing and Gothic theory, particularly the Uncanny. Katrina mostly writes contemporary realist prose, working with both fiction and non-fiction. Her recent work includes a range of short stories written in response to theory on the Uncanny, and she is currently working on her first novel.

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In her 2007 essay, ‘Haunted Identities and the Possible Futures of “Aust. Lit.”’, Lyn McCredden identifies a rivenness and a haunting in Australian identity. McCredden concludes with the statement that Australian cultural critics need to be asking how these subliminal areas of identity can be ‘represented and negotiated productively for the future of a living, ongoing and multiple national culture’ (McCredden 2007: 24). But suppose I do seek to represent McCredden’s vision of contemporary Australian identity. How can I create such spaces in my writing?

Exploring ideas that lie beneath the surface, ideas that are elusive and complex by nature, is part of the playground of the Uncanny, Nicholas Royle suggests (Royle 2003: 2). The Uncanny might, therefore, offer some assistance to a writer in search of ways to represent fractured and haunted identity. Where writing contains a space for repressed ideas to surface, the Uncanny is present. And where the Uncanny is present, an interesting discussion about identity becomes possible.

The most influential work of theory on the Uncanny is Freud’s 1919 essay *Das Unheimliche*. Freud begins his essay by defining the Uncanny as a matter of aesthetics, and defines the concept of the Uncanny in terms of the German word *heimlich* (familiar, as of the home) and its double, *unheimlich* (roughly translating to unfamiliar, but in the uneasy sense of something which once was familiar but is no longer). Freud looks to literature to define the Uncanny, exploring his ideas through a reading of ETA Hoffman’s short story *The Sandman*. As Freud continues his exploration of the Uncanny, he leads himself and his reader into what Hélène Cixous terms ‘the labyrinthian space’ of the Uncanny (Freud *et al*, 1976: 525), his argument twists and turns back on itself: the Uncanny is a slippery concept and eludes easy definition. However, some ideas relevant to this discussion, which emerge from Freud’s exploration, are:

- The Uncanny causes us to question the identity of ourselves and those around us
- The Uncanny create a space of open discussion, presenting more questions than it answers
- At its core, the Uncanny is concerned with the revelation of that which is hidden, with the surfacing of repressed thoughts
- The Uncanny is inherent to the experience of both reading and writing literature. ‘One tries to keep oneself out, but one cannot. One tries to put oneself in: same result’, Royle remarks (2003: 16). Reading and writing, like the Uncanny, are simultaneously both familiar and strange.

Susan Bernstein suggests that Freud’s failure to provide a neat definition of the Uncanny says something about the nature of the Uncanny, that it is impossible to look at the Uncanny head on (Bernstein 2003: 1111) and this ‘foregrounds the textuality of the Uncanny’, and ‘points to the ways in which the Uncanny functions as a critique of identity’ (1112). Bernstein advises that the Uncanny is best approached not through definition but through a reading of texts where the Uncanny can be experienced (1112). As a writer, looking at examples of existing literary texts that have involved the Uncanny might prove valuable for both the writing process and its product. Of interest are both the results of this search for texts that represent the Uncanny and also this search as an example of how literature and creative writing might

prove perfect partners in a valuable relationship. The theory of the Uncanny and its host literature offer some useful guidance in helping to approach a specific writing concern.

If the Uncanny exists ‘in the uncertainties of silence, solitude and darkness’ (Royle 2003: 2), then down a well seems an ideal place to look for the Uncanny. A well runs between the surface and the underground, it enfolds in arms of earth and rock a between-places space where the Uncanny might be encountered (Royle 2003: 2). To experience the effects of the Uncanny, this paper presents a reading of three texts which use the motif of a well, or submerging, to involve the Uncanny. While all three texts effectively conjure the uncanny into being through a similar motif, the Uncanny visits each of the three texts in a different way.

In Elizabeth Jolley’s *The Well* (1987), an abandoned well in the country functions as a site of the Uncanny. The Uncanny acts as a catalyst for the building tensions in the narrative to rise to the surface. The Uncanny causes Hester to question both her identity and Katherine’s. Further, the Uncanny explodes the narrative to even question the identity of author and reader.

One dark night, on the road home to their cottage in the wheat fields on the outskirts of a remote Australian town, elderly Hester and her young ward Katherine hit a man with the roo bar of their ute. They tip the body down an old well outside their cottage. A few days later, when Hester returns home from a day trip to the local town, Katherine tells Hester that the man down the well is alive, and the two women crouch by the well to listen for signs of life:

The familiar sound, a small rushing of air caught in the cylindrical shaft, came to them. They thought that faintly there was a drip dripping of a thin trickle of water somewhere far down.

But, as before, this could have been imagination, for it was, after all, a well. (Jolley 1987: 114).

Hester and Katherine search for the unfamiliar in the familiar soundscape. The two women have discussed the well sounds in the past without resolving whether they are real or imaginary; they have concluded only that the expectations of the mind might suggest sounds to the ear which do not exist. Uncertainty is introduced into the text, directly linked with the well. Either the man in the well is a persistent ghost or he has been buried alive, either result is an indicator that the Uncanny may be present. And whether the man in the well is alive or dead is never confirmed, despite the fact that Hester attempts to rationalise the voices, for herself and the reader, as a state of hysterical madness in Katherine.

The Uncanny exists in the uncertainty of spaces between life and death, and where the Uncanny exists, so, too, emerges the freedom to question a status quo (Royle 2003: 2). In its ambiguity, the well creates a narrative space within which the relationship between the two women changes significantly; a repressed power struggle surfaces. The disruption that the well events cause to the routine of Hester and Katherine also disturbs Hester’s ability to repress her love (or obsession) for Katherine. As long as the man in the well does not surface, uncertainty and the Uncanny persist and the hidden, the repressed, comes to light. When heavy rains come, the well floods and Hester thinks perhaps she sees the man, expressing the terrifying danger in repressed thoughts surfacing, but for the most part Hester hides in avoidance and uncertainty.

Gerry Turcotte suggests that the uncertainty around the well causes us to eventually doubt most of the story; we are uncertain as to whether there is even a body in the well (Turcotte

1995: 81). Hester, through whose eyes readers see, and who, before this point, has demonstrated a stuffy and sensible logic in contrast to Katherine's youthful whimsy, seems to see a body down there herself, but the uncertainty remains. And, Turcotte points out, 'at the heart of this juggling is an insistence on showing the variability of meaning' (Turcotte 1995: 81). Jolley uses the well to play with boundaries and representations of life and death, sexuality, reality, motherhood, love, desire, and obsession. Turcotte describes the well as 'the site of polyglossia, of multiple discourses; it is both a "masculine" and a "feminine" focus promising and denying freedom' (Turcotte 1995: 83). The Uncanny of *The Well* denies resolution and so enables a space for multiple voices, for questions and for open discussion.

Faced with the Uncanny and its accompanying uncertainty and disruption, Hester tries to regain control and impose simplicity and logic onto the events. But we know Hester is not maintaining control. The sense of displacement and discomfort experienced in the presence of the Uncanny is internalised and expressed through Hester's body; manifesting physically in migraines and a croaky voice (Jolley 1987: 118, 124). Hester is alarmed by the sound of her own voice: the Uncanny causes us to question who we are; even our selves become unfamiliar (Royle 2003: 24). This disruption of identity causes Hester to become helpless in the face of the Uncanny. Her physiological reaction prevents her from maintaining control over the situation. Hester is confronted with a different truth than the narrative she has created.

The Uncanny causes us to question ourselves, and also those around us. Hester has been grooming in Katherine almost a second self. With the dispute over the well, this doubling is separated. Katherine's American accent, amusing and charming to this point, now suggests a well-acted role, and Hester has to face the fact that she has only been looking at her double in Katherine, and perhaps does not really know the girl at all (Jolley 1987: 124).

Once the Uncanny has been unleashed, it creates a space where we question even the identities of writer and reader, opening up both the process and product of writing. Through a break in the narrative perspective, effected by the circular storytelling structure of the book and the author character Hester meets in the local town store, the creative process is made conspicuous, what is more often hidden is brought to light. Sue Gillett explains that

the structure of *The Well* enacts this experience of longing for clarity, for certainty, for the physicalizing and apprehending of the interior world and the frustration of encountering barriers which block access to the hidden meaning (Gillett 1992: 33).

This structural contradiction raises extra-textual identity questions: at what point does literature end and life begin?

Eventually, Hester deals with the situation by boarding up the well, regaining control through force and an insistence on repression, denying her emotions and sealing in the mystery. We are denied an explanation and the narrative remains riven and dual in nature. The well, historically a source of life and plenitude for Hester's family, also symbolises emptiness, death, destruction and avoidance. The uncertainties in the text are never resolved; the Uncanny persists. In Mitch Cullin's verse novel *Branches* (2000), masculine identity and sexuality are explored with the help of a well motif, and, as in Jolley's *The Well*, a space for the Uncanny emerges. But rather than acting as a crisis point catalyst, the well in *Branches* is significant for the form of the novel, as a framing device.

The novel opens with Sherriff Branches having thrown his stepson Danny down a well somewhere in ‘the asshole of West Texas’ (Cullin 2000: 25). The well serves as a pivotal focal point for the text, and Sherriff Branches spends most of the novel sitting next to the well, between the well mouth and the harsh emptiness of the surrounding desert and road. From this space, he contemplates wider issues and then his thoughts return to the well once again; the well and the physical space around it are mirrored by his thoughts. Branches seems to directly acknowledge the internal space of the well, the Uncanny, and his own thoughts, in his own blunt way, saying ‘it seems that the weirdness / and surprise / of life / are pound into my brain here’ (Cullin 2000: 25). With Danny in the well, broken but not dead, Branches reflects on a range of morally difficult issues, about life in a small, isolated town, and about Branches’ idea of ‘Justice’.

By trapping Danny, the well opens a narrative space in the structure of the story. Branches sits by the well for several hours but the effect is almost to pause the story in one present moment. Within this space, the thoughts of Branches rise to the surface, are masticated by the dry old sheriff, and then discarded. This process seems to help Branches come to terms with the events, and it also provides a way for Cullin to slowly reveal the events to the reader.

Branches exposes the significance of the well and describes his encounter with the Uncanny:

Stepdad taking the slow walk  
 with Stepson  
 from the patrol car  
 to the well.  
*Look in there, Danny.*  
*What do you see?*  
*How far is it?*  
*Get yourself over the top some*  
*and stare*  
*at what’s down there.*  
 A black hole  
 in the middle  
 of West Texas,  
 twisting, burbling, invisible.  
 What goes in  
 don’t ever come out.  
 As a child,  
 during my midnight ambles,  
 I spied starlight flickering  
 at the bottom,  
 caught in the still water.  
 Reach for the stars  
 in the well,  
 but it’s too deep  
 for boys and men.  
 And stars ain’t meant  
 to be touched anyway, Danny (Cullin 2000: 183-184).

For Sherriff Branches, the well opens a way to explore difficult issues of sexuality and masculinity ('it's too deep for boys and men'), and to come to terms with killing his stepson in the name of Justice. The motif of the well provides a way to look beneath the surface at deeper issues, within a space that holds death and darkness and the light of stars all within one indescribable, free space.

The well sets boundaries around the problem of Danny, postponing resolution. In the void of the Uncanny, with Danny down the well, Branches has all the time in the world to slowly reveal to the reader a series of brutal events which provide context for the current moment. The opening pages create uncertainty, which soon turns to discomfort. The moral compass of the reader is lead this way and that by Branches, and the most comfortable position is to not try to judge at all, but simply to listen. At the start of the novel, it seems Branches is the monster for throwing his stepson down a well, but by the end of the novel it has been demonstrated to us that morals are more complex and that ultimately real life often denies any satisfying resolution to terrible events.

The narrative closes with Branches walking away from the well. Beyond the well, his musings on his past are silenced. But, in the final stanza of the verse novel, Branches acknowledges the open-ended nature of conversation of the Uncanny, where the dead might not be dead, ghosts might not be silent. Regardless, he has concluded his conversation and will walk away:

This is how I walk away –  
 yank the brim of my hat  
 over my brow,  
 shake the rain  
 from my shoulders.  
 Forward  
 and don't turn around  
 in case something  
 might be crawling  
 past the rim of the well.  
 Something might be moving  
 beneath the scraps  
 of the old place (Cullin 2000: 196).

Branches brusquely faces forward, towards the future, refusing to look, seeking safety in repression, much like Hester in *The Well*.

Where *The Well* and *Branches* both involve someone being thrown down a well, in Margaret Atwood's *Surfacing* (1972), as well as the obvious difference of submerging in a lake rather than a well, the protagonist opts to submerge herself. But similarly, this, too, invokes the Uncanny; through this act, again we experience a space of uncertainty and identity exploration, created within and by the text.

The unnamed protagonist travels to her past family home in the Canadian wilderness in search of her missing father. She discovers a trail of clues leading her to a point in the lake (and in the narrative) where she must dive, in order to see rock paintings of ancient beings. She submerges herself in order to face a deeper, more ancient reality. She describes her

underwater experience with the Uncanny as beautiful and terrifying, the in-between space of life and death, strange yet familiar forms:

Pale green, then darkness, layer after layer, deeper than before, seabottom; the water seemed to have thickened... It was wonderful that I was down so far, I watched the fish, they swam like patterns on closed eyes, my arms and legs were weightless, free-floating; I almost forgot to look for the cliff and the shape.

It was there but it wasn't a painting, it wasn't on the rock. It was below me, drifting towards me from the furthest level where there was no life, a dark oval trailing limbs. It was blurred but it had eyes, they were open, it was something I knew about, it was a dead thing, it was dead (Atwood 1972: 136).

The protagonist has learned to repress her emotions, to avoid talking about certain things with her parents, with her older lover, with her friends. Even the friends she travels with seem disconnected from their past (Christ 1976: 319). By returning to the wilderness, to her past family home, by submerging herself, and so by diving down to a deeper level of consciousness, she un-learns repression. In the cool, underwater space she finds the Uncanny, and with it comes the freedom to bring to light a new personal narrative. Through the conscious act of submerging, the protagonist's memories surface.

She is at first unwilling to let go of the defences she has created around her perception before this point:

It was all real enough, it was enough reality forever, I couldn't accept it, that mutilation, ruin I'd made, I needed a different version. I pieced it together the best way I could, flattening it, scrapbook, collage, pasting over the wrong parts. A faked album, the memories fraudulent as passports; but a paper house was better than none and I could almost live in it, I'd lived in it until now (Atwood 1972: 138).

It is easier to hold on to even false constructions of a unified identity than it is to let go, to submerge, to become restless and questioning and universal. But the Uncanny denies oversimplification, and it is an important and old influence on our existence, despite its initial strangeness.

The protagonist must let go of the restrictive anchors to her identity in order to release herself from her own perception, and this is a painful process. Her identity is signified by her name, and she releases this hold by stating she has no name; words lose their meaning: 'it's too late, I no longer have a name. I tried for all those years to be civilized but I'm not and I'm through pretending' (Atwood 1972: 162). Interestingly, what the protagonist refers to as 'civilised' is her previous existence, a complex and traumatic pretence, a false memory constructed around an abortion in order to protect her married art teacher.

These revelations drive her over the edge and into a profound exploration of her body, her identity, her sanity. From this point in the story, her previous reality unwinds and with it her identity unravels, in an experience similar to a schizophrenic's psychotic break. She remains self-aware enough to know that she is letting go of rational thought, as she tells us 'from any rational point of view I am absurd; but there are no longer any rational points of view' (Atwood, 1972: 163). Admittedly, as readers we take the journey into the 'beyond rational' realm with only the questionable reliability of the protagonist as guide, but nonetheless, the

message of the text is that our own often ill-constructed logic, the ‘reality’ we build around us, sometimes benefits from a fresh point of view.

Atwood does not provide a resolution which results in the protagonist forming a new identity, but, in a fundamental shift, the protagonist realises that by doing nothing she can still cause harm (Christ 1976: 320-321). Whatever the result, however we might judge her relative sanity and might predict an uneasy future, she begins to really live. Submerging, and encountering the Uncanny, has acted as a catalyst for her to find the ability to face her past and discover a different truth.

The Uncanny does not offer an easy ride. But diving beneath the surface to confront difficult questions and perhaps then to receive challenging answers can be a good thing or not, depending on one’s preconceptions. As Julia Kristeva says: ‘to worry or to smile, such is the choice when we are assailed by the strange; our decision depends on how familiar we are with our own ghosts’ (qtd. in Gelder and Jacobs 1995: 30). And if we are not familiar with our ghosts, perhaps we need to take the more worrying path.

Each of these three texts plays with ideas of submerging and surfacing and conjures a space for the Uncanny. From within this space, issues of life, death, memory, trauma, sexuality, and power are explored. But most significantly, in each text the notion of identity is questioned, without resolution. In both *The Well* and *Branches*, the central themes are the questioning and deconstruction of identity that occurs where the Uncanny is present. In *Surfacing*, the protagonist comes to the text with a limited and repressed identity, and the Uncanny helps her to assertively dissolve her self-constructed facade in favour of (at least the possibility of) a more rich and complex identity. In all three texts, the Uncanny performs a transformative role but does not close identity discussions; the Uncanny does not answer the questions its destabilising presence raises.

Lyn McCredden suggests that in current approaches to both critical and creative work, there is ‘an additional seeking out of new ways of speaking and representing identity which go beyond the current stases of guilt, on the one hand, or reactionary closure on the other’ (McCredden 2007: 23). The Uncanny delays closure and promotes a discussion of identity which involves multiple voices and a necessary complexity. The Uncanny is, therefore, relevant to an ongoing discussion of identity and writing in contemporary Australia. Nicholas Royle suggests that when we look at literature as a means of looking at ourselves and the future, the Uncanny is a useful space within which to base our thinking, because ‘the Uncanny can perhaps provide ways of beginning to think in less dogmatic terms about the nature of the world, ourselves, and a politics of the future’ (Royle 2003: 3). To create literary spaces where we might look frankly at our past, including deeper into the darker corners, and to better identify where we are now, we need to be comfortable delaying resolution to questions of identity. If we are to explore new ways of constructing identity moving forward, in order that we might represent a rivenness and haunting in our identity, we need to find practical and immediate ways to open spaces of alterity in our writing. To achieve this in creative writing, we might turn to methods of invoking the Uncanny. And as a starting point, as a basic exercise in writing, we might create some wells and throw our characters, our narratives, and ourselves down them.

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