Miranda

Revue pluridisciplinaire du monde anglophone /
Multidisciplinary peer-reviewed journal on the English-
speaking world

5 | 2011

South and Race / Staging Mobility in the United States

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Electronic version

URL: <http://journals.openedition.org/miranda/2515>

DOI: 10.4000/miranda.2515

ISSN: 2108-6559

Publisher

Université Toulouse - Jean Jaurès

Electronic reference

Jacques Sohier, “Metamorphoses of the Uncanny in the Short-Story “The Landlady” by Roald Dahl”, *Miranda* [Online], 5 | 2011, Online since 29 November 2011, connection on 16 February 2021. URL: <http://journals.openedition.org/miranda/2515> ; DOI: <https://doi.org/10.4000/miranda.2515>

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Metamorphoses of the Uncanny in the Short-Story "The Landlady" by Roald Dahl

Jacques Sohier

- 1 Towards the end of his famous essay on the uncanny, *Das Unheimliche* (1919), Freud admits: "The foregoing remarks clearly do not exhaust the possibilities of authorial licence and the privileges that fiction enjoys in arousing and inhibiting a sense of the uncanny" (Freud 1919, 157). Even the master of a discursive practice that deals with the elusiveness and persistence of desires, acknowledges a form of defeat at the hands of a notion that evades hard and fast definitions and taxonomy. What Freud called *Das Unheimliche* in his native tongue has been translated in English as "the uncanny" and in French as *l'inquiétante étrangeté*, "disquieting strangeness". Each time slight shifts in meaning are lost in translation as in the very depths of semantic associations these words command.
- 2 We will go back to these interesting shifts in the course of commenting on Roald Dahl's short-story, "The Landlady", but first we would like to begin by giving a bird's eye view of such an irretrievably plural concept.¹ Then, we will tackle Roald Dahl's short-story by analyzing the ways the writer sets in motion his uncanny story of the landlady of a Bed and Breakfast of a very special kind. The basic idea will be that for the uncanny to claw at the reader, as it pounces upon a character, there has to be a firm ground of rationality.
- 3 The next step will be to concentrate on "the moment of the uncanny". In the short-story, this moment occurs when the main protagonist—a young man—comes under the spell of an uncanny feeling. He feels somehow compelled to ring the bell of a bed and breakfast that looks to him, in many ways, so like home, and finds out later, when it is too late, that he has just stepped into a demonic house. Lastly, we will focus on humorous details in the story. Whether it is meant in the very texture of the story or brought in cunningly by the reader "the serious uncanny" deserves its underside: what we have called "the humorous uncanny".

The inexhaustibility of the uncanny

- 4 As Freud said, exhausting the possibilities of the uncanny is beyond anyone's power. Nicholas Royle, the author of an interesting book on the subject, was brave enough to call his study, *The Uncanny*. The author defines this notion tentatively:

The uncanny can be a matter of something gruesome or terrible, above all death and corpses, cannibalism, live burial, the return of the dead. But it is also a matter of something strangely beautiful, bordering on ecstasy ('too good to be true'), or eerily reminding us of something, like *déjà vu*. It can involve a feeling of something beautiful but at the same time frightening, as in the figure of the double or telepathy. It comes above all, perhaps, in the uncertainties of silence, solitude and darkness. The uncanny has to do with the sense of a secret encounter: it is perhaps inseparable from an apprehension, however fleeting, of something that should have remained secret and hidden but has come to light (Royle 2).

- 5 In the study of Roald Dahl's short-story, we will not be concerned with the less palatable aspects of the uncanny, namely cannibalism, live burial, the return of the dead, but on the other hand, we will be involved in gruesome deaths and corpses and also with a process which seems to come up as a supplement since it has escaped the attention of the list maker, namely taxidermy.
- 6 This involvement in sinister aspects is inevitable because the uncanny hinges on the central Freudian idea of a death instinct at work in human behaviour. Although the death-drive and life-drive contend with each other, they are not in strict opposition. The death instinct constitutes the drive *par excellence*. It underpins all the other drives that are subsumed under the word "Eros". The mythical description of a constant war between Thanatos and Eros misrepresents the state of things since the death-drive has "always already" won the field. It is only a question of time, detours and delays, before death wins:

The two kinds of instincts seldom—perhaps never—appear in isolation from each other, but are alloyed with each other in varying and very different proportions and so become unrecognisable to our judgement. In sadism, long since known to us as a component instinct of sexuality, we should have before us a particularly strong alloy of this kind between trends of love and the destructive instinct; while its counterpart, masochism, would be a union between destruction directed inwards and sexuality [...] I know that in sadism and masochism we have always seen before us manifestations of the destructive instinct (directed outwards and inwards), strongly alloyed with eroticism; but I can no longer understand how we have overlooked the ubiquity of non-erotic aggressivity and destructiveness and can have failed to give it its due place in our interpretation of life (Freud 1961, 119-120)

- 7 Freud repeatedly uses the word "alloy" to suggest that the death-drive is an elusive, silent, devious component of the life-force. In short, the death-drive is "uncanny" in its very permanence and unobtrusiveness. "The Landlady" could be said to explore the intricacies of the death-wish. Indeed, the owner of a Bed and Breakfast at which a young man calls for the night remains nameless. The fact that she performs taxidermy not only on her pets but also on unwary young men, makes her into an uncanny woman, a figure of death, a representation of the death-drive. The "dame", as she is called in the short-story, impersonates death because she killed and stuffed two young men and is about to proceed with a third one, the hero of the story, Billy Weaver. The landlady is to all appearances in the throes of a compulsion to repeat her crimes. She is

a serial killer, but she exhibits at first, along with her house, all the signs of the familiar, *das Heimliche*. In a very *Unheimlich* fashion, we will further on dissect this character since Roald Dahl makes her through an arresting characterisation, a strange "alloy", to use again Freud's expression, a mix between maternal instincts and truly demonic intentions.

- 8 Before analysing the short-story, we need to highlight certain aspects of the uncanny by referring to Tzvetan Todorov's *Introduction à la littérature fantastique*, which will help us to distinguish between different literary genres. T. Todorov makes helpful distinctions between the uncanny, the marvellous and the fantastic. The fantastic involves a moment of uncertainty, of ambiguity, "the fantastic occupies the moment of this uncertainty" (Todorov 15). In the marvellous, on the other hand, Todorov states that "the laws of reality remain intact" but other laws must be accepted, he says, while in the uncanny, the disquieting event can be explained rationally (Todorov 16). There are cross-over categories of course, since we can come across the "fantastically strange", "the fantastically marvellous" and "the scientifically marvellous", better known as science-fiction. These terms help us to step into a vast territory where "unknown worlds and powers live", as H.P. Lovecraft would term it (Todorov 29, 37).²

Setting the uncanny into motion

- 9 For the uncanny to be set into motion, the world represented in the short-story, the diegesis, must have firm foundations. In "The Landlady", a young man of seventeen is described as being sent on a professional assignment. He is sent from the Head Office in London to Bath and most of the textual space is devoted to his encounter with the strange landlady who welcomes him in her Bed and Breakfast. From the beginning, the hero is depicted as admiring successful businessmen because they are full of purpose and walk briskly:

He walked briskly down the road. He was trying to do everything briskly these days. Briskness, he had decided, was the one common characteristic of all successful businessmen. The big shots at Head Office were absolutely fantastically brisk all the time. They were amazing (144).

- 10 "Absolutely fantastically brisk", "the big shots", "they were amazing", all these statements which are familiar or close to orality give expression to the admiration of the young man who singles out one trait he means to imitate: briskness. Success is closely connected with outward speed. In an uncanny short-cut, success becomes the equivalent of speed, and speed, so goes the logic of youthful ambition, brings success, since the character adopts an exterior attitude, a mere empty outward form.
- 11 So far, desire has nothing uncanny about it. The protagonist identifies with the men that make up his working environment and he caricatures the logic of purposefulness. Billy Weaver might even be said to fit the bill describing him as a "nice boy". He is observant of hierarchy and acts straightaway on his boss's instructions: "Find your own lodgings", he had said, "and go along and report to the Branch Manager as soon as you've got yourself settled" (144). Appearing as they do in direct speech, the instructions are presented as having clearly registered on Billy Weaver's consciousness. Therefore, the world of work figures as a background tapestry that is not at issue in the short-story. "Lodgings", "report", "get yourself settled", these words ironically resonate in unison with what is to come. The hero does get himself settled, he finds

lodgings prior to his being "unsettled", disturbed as his encounter with the familiar becomes strange. Likewise, the word "briskness" contains in a nutshell the program that will be expanded at leisure in the story since briskness masks the word "risk", **briskness**. Risk underpins the whole story. For example, when the landlady offers her host tea: "he turned and saw his landlady sailing into the room with a large silver tea-tray in her hands. She was holding it well out in front of her, and rather high up, as though the tray were a pair of reins on a **frisky** horse" (149). The metaphor is incongruously amusing as it makes the reader see the landlady as a frolicking dame not in complete control of her demeanour.

- 12 In a very writerly way, Roald Dahl inscribes the risks that lie ahead for the character. In a paragraph at the opening of the story, the weather and stylised landscape are presented in a way that combines the misleadingly familiar elements with potentially murderous suggestions: "It was about nine o'clock in the evening and the moon was coming up out of a clear starry sky over the houses opposite the station entrance. But the air was deadly cold and the wind was like a flat blade of ice on his cheeks" (147).
- 13 This could be read as a Poesque "affect-landscape" (to borrow a concept from Gilles Deleuze).³ The innocence of a clear starry sky passively sustains the efflorescence of the moon, a feminine symbol. The very earth, with the air "deadly cold", and the wind "like a flat blade of ice" are inimical and even downright hostile or murderous, suggesting images of death and potential laceration. "The houses opposite the station entrance", usually a world of repose and movement, are not much concerned with the private scene of the uncanny.

The moment of the uncanny

- 14 Interestingly, Roald Dahl's short-story gives much textual space to the moment when the main character experiences the moment of the uncanny. This moment occurs when hesitation is at work and induces a strange response from the character, as if a powerful demonic force had him in its grip. Let's read the following passage at some length:

Suddenly, in a downstairs window that was brilliantly illuminated by a street-lamp not six yards away, Billy caught sight of a printed notice propped against the glass in one of the upper panes. It said BED AND BREAKFAST. There was a vase of pussy-willows, tall and beautiful, standing just underneath the notice.

He stopped walking. He moved a bit closer. Green curtains (some sort of velvety material) were hanging down on either side of the window. The pussy-willows looked wonderful beside them. He went right up and peered through the glass into the room, and the first thing he saw was a bright fire burning in the hearth. On the carpet in front of the fire, a pretty little dachshund was curled up asleep with its nose tucked into its belly. The room itself, so far as he could see in the half darkness, was filled with pleasant furniture. [...]

After dithering about like this in the cold for two or three minutes, Billy decided that he would walk on and take a look at the Bell and Dragon before making up his mind. He turned to go. And now a queer thing happened to him. He was in the act of stepping back and turning away from the window when all at once his eye was caught and held in the most peculiar manner by the small notice that was there. BED AND BREAKFAST, BED AND BREAKFAST, BED AND BREAKFAST. Each word was like a large black eye staring at him through the glass, holding him, compelling him, forcing him to stay where he was and not to walk away from that house, and the next thing he knew, he was actually moving across from the window to the

front door of the house, climbing the steps that led up to it, and reaching for the bell.

He pressed the bell. Far away in a back room he heard it ringing, and then *at once*—it must have been at once because he hadn't even had time to take his finger from the bell-button—the door swung open and a woman was standing there (145-6).

- 15 This is the language of the uncanny, "a queer thing happened to him", he was "held in the most peculiar manner". There is some mystery at work since the context bears all the characteristics of *Das Heimliche*. From the bright fire in the hearth to the living-room filled with pleasant furniture, it all works to write large the signs of the homely. The uncanny is triggered by the moment of hesitation felt by the character. For the time being the signs of the homely remain stable, but the hero's sense of the world becomes uncertain. He means to have a look at the pub called the Bell and Dragon before making up his mind, but the decision is uncannily made for him. Billy Weaver wavers, he dithers, until the decision is taken for him. It is taken in a forceful manner that is underlined by the repetition of near synonyms, "holding him, compelling him, forcing him".
- 16 The protagonist behaves like an automaton. He is mesmerized not by a magician but by the homely words—BED AND BREAKFAST—which produce a weird effect on him. At first sight, it is not clear why the homely sign should have such an uncanny effect on him, but perceived as the unconscious work of desire, it acquires the meaning of a profoundly repressed wish coming true. His gaze fantastically locks onto the sign which suggests all the amenities that come from a secure environment and also all the nurturing necessary to sustain life. This is actually what the landlady proposes to Billy Weaver when she shows him his room with a warm bed ready, asking him whether he wants to eat something before going to bed. The uncanny character of desire "briskly" takes the young man at his word. The experience is weird because the unconscious acts with a momentous and shattering effect. As Freud said in *The Uncanny*, the unconscious can be thought of as a demonic force:

For it is possible to recognize the dominance in the unconscious mind of a 'compulsion to repeat' proceeding from the instinctual impulses and probably inherent in the very nature of the instincts—a compulsion powerful enough to overrule the pleasure principle, lending to certain aspects of the mind their demonic character (Freud 1919, 145).
- 17 This force can be uncanny in its manifestation and so the comparison present in the short story is very apt, "each word was like a large black eye staring at him". It is eery, it is weird and spooky but it nicely conveys the idea of an evil eye that freezes all movement.
- 18 That life and fiction should provide similar experiences of the uncanny is interesting, but fiction is insurmountable, as Freud himself willingly agrees, to suggest dense and ghost-like intensities. Roald Dahl's short-story does just that. It protracts the moment of the uncanny experienced by the character to include the reader in its web. Since Billy Weaver is very slow and naïve before it dawns on him that his landlady is a murderess, the uncanny becomes reader-oriented as we are made to fear that the young man will become the perfect prey in the hands of his executioner. The short-story undergoes a process of intensification of the uncanny as the very signs and objects that were given as stable begin to alter. At first, the parrot and the dachshund perceived by the character as good signs—"animals were usually a good sign in a place like this"—turn into deceptive signs. What at first was perceived as alive is now seen as

dead. The animals are dead, but since they are stuffed they take on the uncanny aspect of sleeping creatures, "And suddenly, he realized that this animal had all the time been just as silent and motionless as the parrot." And uncannily enough, from the point of view of the reader, the character feels neither disgust nor fear:

He put out a hand and touched it gently on the top of its back. The back was hard and cold, and when he pushed the hair to one side with his fingers, he could see the skin underneath, greyish-black and dry and perfectly preserved. 'Good gracious me', he said. 'How absolutely fascinating'. He turned away from the dog and stared with deep admiration at the little woman beside him on the sofa (153).

- 19 Instead of feeling uneasy at the sight of stuffed animals he had first thought to be alive, and in the very presence of the taxidermist herself, the character feels, of all things, admiration for the technical skills involved in stuffing animals.

- 20 This is amusing and frightful at the same time. It is not unlike the moment in the story when the two characters (the landlady and Billy Weaver) seem to hover together over a black hole. The hero has just written his name down in the guest-book and notices two other names, Gregory Temple and Christopher Mulholland. These two names are those of young men killed by the landlady three years before for the former, and two years before for the latter. These names fall down into *Heimlichkeiten*, into a dungeon of oblivion.⁴ Billy Weaver keeps thinking he has already seen those names in the headlines of newspapers and that "somehow" they are connected. The meaning of it all eludes him however and the landlady is not at pains to suggest another possibility, "Oh no, my dear, that can't possibly be right because *my* Mr Mulholland was certainly not an Eton schoolboy when he came to me. He was a Cambridge undergraduate" (151). On the face of it, it is only a question of identity and knowing where to place things and names but, precisely, the uncanny is concerned with identities and the names of objects becoming unstable and uncertain. The whole story becomes rampant with uncanny effects. Billy Weaver's very identity becomes subjected to drifts: "'How time does fly away from us all, doesn't it, Mr Wilkins'. It's Weaver', Billy said. W-e-a-v-e-r'" (150). As J. Derrida puts it: "The fact that a so-called living voice proceeds to space out its constituents in writing is what actually binds up originally this writing with its own death" (Derrida 1967, 59). The uncanny is so pervading and "w(e)avering", so to speak, so meandering in its processes that spacing out the letters is a stop-gap, as much as writing them in upper case; it fails to stop the seeping in of uncertain forces of meaning for ever on the lookout for chances to intervene:

'You did sign the book, didn't you?'

'Oh, yes.'

'That's good. Because later on, if I happen to forget what you were called, then I can always come down here and look it up. I still do that almost every day with Mr Mulholland and Mr... Mr...'

'Temple', Billy said, 'Gregory Temple' (153).

- 21 Writing down names helps the memory of the uncanny woman, but the written names might not be recalled at all as madness and monstrosity gain ground. The insistence on writing, on "signing the book", is pregnant with frightful implications that connect writing with issues of death and life. The landlady plays "pharmakeus", the sorceress, by associating writing and "the law of the land". But this is done in a very uncanny way: "would you be kind enough to step into the sitting-room on the ground floor and sign the book? Everyone has to do that because it's the law of the land, and we don't want to go breaking any laws at *this* stage of the proceedings, do we?" (148). Writing one's name, signing the book, becomes the equivalent of a first step, the first graph,

into the world of death. The signature of a proper name serves as a helpful "pharmakon" for the "pharmakeus" since the names are meant to serve as reminders of a presence that was once alive, but as "the proceedings" get under way the presence that once was will be testified, verified and reiterated. As for the "pharmakos", he is already dead as the scapegoat is depicted as being ahead of himself, desiring against all laws the uterine security of the womb/tomb.

The humorous uncanny

- 22 Towards the end of *The Uncanny*, Freud found the ghost in Oscar Wilde's tale *The Canterville Ghost* "irresistably comic", because it could not be taken seriously (Freud 1919, 158). In the same fashion, there are moments in "The Landlady" that acquire amusing undertones that bring relief to the uncanny atmosphere. For example, when the landlady is described as popping out of her house at the mere ringing of her bell it seems to undercut the intriguing hypnotic effect young Billy Weaver is experiencing:

Normally you ring the bell and you have to wait at least a half-minute's wait before the door opens. But this dame was like a jack-in-the-box. He pressed the bell-and out she popped! It made him jump (146).

- 23 The innocent prey has just rung the bell and here is the executioner diligently introducing the victim into her house. That leaves nothing to be desired for those who admire "briskness".
- 24 In keeping with this principle of connecting different segments of the text to hear the ironic resonance there might be in it, we can make a connection between the monstrous woman and the name of the pub, the Bell and Dragon to which Billy Weaver intended to go. The hero never makes his way to the pub, but the pub's very name undergoes a process of literalization. Billy Weaver rings the bell of the landlady's Bed and Breakfast and gets the "dragon" that was only a quiescent and fixed sign outside the pub.
- 25 This evocation of the romantic dimension of fairy tales makes the protagonist into a knight who sets out on a journey that brings him to a strange place. This place might be defined as the field of in-betweenness, an unstable space where forbidden desires come and meet in uncanny and "funny" ways. At the heart of the in-betweenness is the coming together of the two characters. Each character definitely wants something from the other who might not be the one he/she thinks he/she is. At the beginning of the short-story Billy Weaver is depicted as being desperate for a home fitted with all the qualities suggestive of snugness and pleasantness. He sees and makes an inventory of all the homely signs he can see in the landlady's living-room. Being away from home, he yearns for the familiar place that a mother makes secure. The hero turns his back on the social life of the pub where "there would be beer and darts in the evening and lots of people to talk to" (145). Instead of a social space where different people can communicate, he favours the exclusive space of the homely. This, however, is not done without some resistance: "He had never stayed in any boarding-houses, and, to be perfectly honest, he was a tiny bit frightened of them. The name itself conjured up images of watery cabbage, rapacious landladies, and a powerful smell of kippers in the living-room" (145). Beyond the rationalisation of fear, we can read an incestuous desire for a mother who is not *the* mother. As he enters the Bed and Breakfast, the narrator articulates for the reader what is at stake: "The compulsion or, more accurately, the

desire to follow after her into that house was extraordinarily strong" (146). For the reader, the slyly humorous rises out of the context when a young male character whose forbidden desire for the mother is "extraordinarily strong" meets its perfect match in so unholy and unhomely a mother that she is prepared to embalm the unwary son. We might summarize Billy Weaver's whole trajectory by saying that he runs briskly and eagerly to a mother that is a phantom-like mother. The character is portrayed as running to 'a mum' and gets in effect the full treatment, "a mummification".

- 26 It is not unlike J. Lacan's description of the mother as a potential "crocodile" whose very mouth might snap shut at any moment without forewarning. Or as Lacan puts it : *"Un grand crocodile dans la bouche duquel vous êtes-c'est ça la mère. On ne sait pas ce qui peut lui prendre tout d'un coup de refermer son clapet. C'est ça, le désir de la mère"* (Lacan 1991, 129). The hero of this story gets plenty of warnings, as when he repeatedly smells the drug that will send him to sleep:

Now and again, he caught a whiff of a peculiar smell that seemed to emanate directly from her person. It was not in the least unpleasant, and it reminded him—well, he wasn't quite sure what it reminded him of. Pickled walnuts. New leather? Or was it the corridors of a hospital? (151).

- 27 The hero is so blinded by his extraordinarily strong desire that he has not the imagination to see the unseen, or to make some sense out of the undecidable smells. Yet, he is described as seeing something that is not there in the surroundings of the landlady. He does not see any signs suggesting there might be a man in the house: "There was no other hats or coats in the hall. There were no umbrellas, no walking-sticks—nothing" (150). This could be a formula for the uncanny: what should be present is absent. And what should be absent is present, since there is a surfeit of homely signs.

- 28 The landlady herself is an ambiguous sign that deserves consideration beyond simply and solemnly stating that she is evil, hiding her malicious intentions behind a mask of benevolence. She exemplifies the duplicity of signs and sense making in general. It is in keeping with this rampant ambiguity that she should be characterized by a madness that does not say its name.

- 29 As we have already mentioned, the landlady keeps forgetting the names of her victims. She is becoming spectral to her own self. When Billy Weaver enters her house she expresses relief: "'I'm so glad you appeared', she said, looking earnestly into his face. I was beginning to get worried'" (148). The uncanny is concerned with appearing and appearances, with disappearances and re-appearances. But what if what is said and done amounts to no blurring of the distinction between imagination and reality? Then, perhaps, the uncanny enters the zone of the gothic. There are a few segments in the text that insist to be taken as pure signs of terror and horror. At one moment, the landlady exclaims as Billy Weaver is telling her his age:

'Seventeen', she cried. 'Oh, it's the perfect age! Mr Mulholland was also seventeen. But I think he was a trifle shorter than you are, in fact I'm sure he was, and his teeth weren't *quite* so white. You have the most beautiful teeth, Mr Weaver, did you know that?'

'They're not as good as they look', Billy said. 'They've got simply masses of fillings in them at the back'.

'Mr Temple of course, was a little older,' she said, ignoring his remark. 'He was actually twenty-eight. And yet I never would have guessed it if he hadn't told me, never in my whole life. There wasn't a *blemish* on his body.'

'A what?'

'His skin was just like a baby's' (152).

- 30 What might we not deduce from those desires that are strung together in an unholy saraband? What is expressed is a desire for the perfection of the skin, the fascination of the body, that could be associated with a desire for whiteness, the whiteness of teeth and, in the same breath, with an insistent apprehension of age and ageing, the whole compounded of a desire for a baby. This is an intoxicating narrative beverage for the reader, replete with hints of a castration complex and/or penis-envy that require replay and re-inscription into the ordinariness of things. The landlady, who is forty-five or fifty according to the hero, is indeed the perfect figure of the uncanny that she encrypts. She harbours the frightful fear of death and degradation. Her refusal to acknowledge mortality has made her into the uncertain priestess of afterlife, as this forbidden desire of death makes her a preserver of the dead bodies of young male visitors. Let us not forget that she is an accomplished taxidermist who keeps her dead pets but also embalms the bodies of her visitors. She stuffed her pets which may have died from natural causes, but she is shown as accelerating briskly the life span of her visitors in a mad attempt to suspend life.
- 31 Perhaps we need the help of an exorcist with his double, an analyst, to reclaim the dying, embalmed sense, whether it be forbidden or not, and bring it back to the world of the living. J. Derrida writes:
- No more than castration, dissemination—which entails, entrains, 'inscribes' and relaunched castration—can never become an originary, central, or ultimate signified, the place proper to truth. On the contrary, dissemination represents the affirmation of this non-origin, the remarkable empty locus of a hundred blanks no meaning can be ascribed to, in which mark supplements and substitution games are multiplied *ad infinitum* (Derrida 1972, 137, my translation).
- 32 If this sounds too uncanny an ending, as J. Derrida seems to displace meaning, let us supplement the absence of proper truth with what Freud states at the end of his essay *The Uncanny*: "As for solitude, silence and darkness, all we can say is that these are factors connected with infantile anxiety, something that most of us never wholly overcome" (Freud 1919, 159).

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NOTES

1. All page references will be integrated into the text.
2. My translations.
3. An "affect-landscape" conveys meaning and suggestions without necessarily a character to refer it to. Gilles Deleuze, *L'Abécédaire de Gilles Deleuze*, on DVD.
4. The German word "*Unheimlichkeiten*" has many shades of interesting meaning apart from the one we have mentioned to include "discretion", "whisperings", "secrets". See for example "*L'inquiétante étrangeté*", 170-1.

ABSTRACTS

This study analyzes several metamorphoses of the uncanny that the short-story "The Landlady" by Roald Dahl thematizes. The Freudian notion of the uncanny is connected with the definitions of the fantastic according to Tzvetan Todorov and of the maternal Other by Jacques Lacan. The commentary seeks to define moments in the short-story when the uncanny fractures the diegesis along with the displacements of a death-wish. The image of a demonic mother undermines the becoming-gothic of the short-story in favour of a humorous dimension.

Cette étude se fonde sur l'idée de plusieurs métamorphoses du concept de "l'inquiétante étrangeté" à l'œuvre dans la nouvelle "The Landlady" de Roald Dahl. La notion freudienne de *Das Unheimliche* est complétée par les définitions du fantastique de Tzvetan Todorov ou de l'Autre maternel selon Jacques Lacan. L'analyse porte sur les nœuds thématiques du texte pour explorer la notion freudienne en liaison avec la pulsion de mort. L'auteur considère l'ultime métamorphose quand l'inquiétant prend des tonalités comiques à mesure que le gothique s'avère une issue impossible.

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Mots-clés: folie, comique et l'effrayant (le), métamorphoses, désir de l'autre maternel, désir infantile et angoisse, fantastique, gothique, pharmakon, inquiétante étrangeté, instinct de mort

Keywords: the uncanny, metamorphoses, death instinct, the fantastic, infantile desire and anxiety, maternal desire, madness, pharmakon, the gothic, the comic and the uncanny

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