The 'Uncanny' Eye

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ABSTRACT

This paper draws from Sigmund Freud's reference to the Evil Eye in his essay titled 'The "Uncanny"'. The concept is expounded as part of the psycho-cultural space we live in. This paper argues that the eye and its association to, and importance in literature and art is not without purpose. It is entrapped in centuries of belief in the power of the eye as the possible/plausible instrument of change. The purpose of this paper is to suggest reasons for such faith in the powers of the eye and show the variety of imagery the concept of 'sight' allows us in the arts.

Did God give the eyes for nothing? And was it for nothing that He mingled in them a spirit of such might and cunning as to reach a long way off and receive the impression of visible forms, a messenger so swift and faithful? Was it for nothing that He gave the intervening air such efficacy, and made it elastic, so that being, in a manner strained, our vision should traverse it? Was it for nothing that He made Light, without which there were no benefit of any other thing? (Epictetus qtd. in Haddock n.pag.)

Nay, some have been so curious, as to note, that the times when the stroke or percussion of an envious eye doth most hurt, are when the party envied is beheld in glory or triumph; for that sets an edge upon envy: and besides, at such times the spirits of the person envied, do come forth most into the outward parts, and so meet the blow. (Bacon n. pag.)

We can also speak of a living person as uncanny, and we do so when we ascribe evil intentions to him. But that is not all; in addition to this we must feel that his intentions to harm us are going to be carried out with the help of special powers (Freud, PFL 365)

'[The] act of envy had somewhat in it of witchcraft, so there is no other cure of envy, but the cure of witchcraft' (Bacon n. pag.).

There is nothing that is at once capable of showing such a variety in shades of emotion and feeling as the human eye. If something is sinister or comforting about a person, it will show in their eyes. As the organ of vision, the eye is the closest contact we have with the world around us, even more than when there is an element of physical contact. First, because not everything we see can be touched and second because we would only be able to make out forms if it were not for the power of vision. There is something pervasive and incisive about the eye.

It is no wonder then, that the workings of the eye have fascinated man since the earliest times. And it is interesting how, still today, some of the oldest superstitious beliefs tied to the eye and its power

are held in belief. The 'dread' of the Evil Eye, however, is considered to be, '[o]ne of the most uncanny and widespread forms of superstition' (Freud, PFL 362).

The Oxford English Dictionary (OED) suggests that the root of evil is in *up, over* which implies something that exceeds due measure or oversteps proper limits…it does or tends to harm and is hurtful, mischievous and prejudicial. The 'evil will' is the 'depraved intention or purpose…desire for another's harm [or] ill-will'. A look of ill-will is a 'malicious or envious look which, in popular belief, [has] the power of doing material harm; also, the faculty, superstitiously ascribed to certain individuals, of inflicting injury by a look' (348-9). This look of ill will is then what is ascribed to the evil eye or to those who possess the kind of eye that is suggestive of such power or will. More often than not, a feeling of envy precedes the action of the possessor of the eye. And it is this envy that most cultures attempt to guard against, as a means of protection from the evil eye. A feeling that the OED describes as:

> malignant or hostile…[a feeling of] ill will [and] active evil…The feeling of mortification and ill-will occasioned by the contemplation of superior advantages possessed by another [and as the feeling of] displeasure and ill-will at the superiority of (another person) in happiness, success, reputation, or the possession of anything desirable; to regard with discontent another's possession of (some superior advantage which one would like to have for oneself). Also in a less favourable sense: To wish oneself on a level with (another) in happiness or in the possession of something desirable; to wish oneself possessed of (something which another has). (231-2)

Also, the word 'envy' has evolved from the Latin verb *invidere* which means 'to see into' but its 'original shade of meaning was negative and intrusive' (qtd. in Holmes n. pag.). It is interesting how the link between looking and envying is created. Looking becomes the stepping stone to envy, and by its very nature there is something intrusive about giving someone a look. 'Staring is a way

of asserting one's dominance and of expressing interest in another person,' says Winer, 'and it's a short step from casting a glance to casting a spell' (qtd. in Holmes n. pag.). Without looking then, there can be no real sense of envy. It was therefore common for primitive societies, when unable to explain why certain things went wrong or were seemingly unnatural, to superstitiously ascribe such events to an envious look that may have been caste.

The OED defines superstition as the 'unreasoning awe or fear of something unknown, mysterious or imaginary, esp. in connection with religion; religious belief or practise founded upon fear or ignorance' (193). It must therefore have been easy for early peoples to ascribe a sense of ill-will or evil intention to what was perceived to have originated from an envious look.

The concept of the Evil Eye itself has yet to be specifically defined, partially due to the sheer magnitude of people that still believe in the power of the eye, in various forms or degrees. The predominant perception is that the Evil Eye has the power to will something bad or sinister to happen, and further, can do so unintentionally. There is no continent in the world where at least a few groups of people don't believe in the powers of the Evil Eye. It is a

> widespread folk concept of a harmful influence which emanates involuntarily from certain persons [and in certain cultures,] believed to be the result principally of unexpressed sentiments of envy or jealousy…and maybe interpreted as a potentially aggressive or harmful act, since it suggests underlying envy [hence] the possibility of the evil eye. (Seymour-Smith 102)

In literatures across the world and in every genre from spiritual texts to Greek tragedies to fairy tales, and from Shakespeare into the twentieth century, the 'eye' has repeatedly found its way into written word. This is no wonder because the use of the symbol of the eye in literature can imply much deeper meaning, adding to the subtlety and poignancy of the text. For example, the sheer

immediacy of eye contact between characters can insight fear, drawing upon years of superstition and belief.

There is religious belief tied with the working of the evil eye, black magic and sorcery. Major world religions such as, Islam, Christianity, Buddhism and Hinduism believe in the powers of such forces. In fact, one of the sayings of Prophet Muhammad suggests that the evil eye is that one factor which can change the course of Fate and Providence. The mention of the Evil Eye or *ayin ha'ra* in the Bible clearly refers to the role that envy and covetousness play in the development and projection of its ill effects. For instance the Proverbs say, 'Eat thou not the bread of him that hath an evil eye, neither desire thou his dainty meat' (23:6) and likewise, 'He that hasteth to be rich hath an evil eye, and considereth not that poverty shall come upon him' (28:22 qtd. in Yronwode n. pag).

Similarly in Islam, when someone is looking good or wears new clothes, they say *Mashallah* which means 'glory be to God' thus absolving the human will of the capability of inflicting the evil eye. Also, there is the implication that prosperity and adversity are in the control of the Supreme Power. It is thereby a way of asking God for protection against evil, the evil will and the evil doer.

In South Asia, if a person or object is thought to be a potential source of envy or jealousy for people around, they say *Chashm-e-budd-door*, which literally means 'evil eye, stay away', and put a black mark to create an imperfection that may ward off the evil eye. This is reminiscent of R.K. Narayan's short story 'Such Perfection' in his collection 'Malgudi Days' in which a village sculptor makes an idol that seems to have such divine perfection that the villagers want him to deliberately create some from of imperfection. When the sculptor does not yield to their demand, the villagers relent and let him put the idol in the temple. However, God quite doesn't like perfection so there is a heavy storm and lots of destruction but the idol comes out unscathed from the ruins except for a chipped toe and that is enough to ward off the evil eye forever!

Such is thought to be the power of the eye that certain cultures consider it the point of convergence of the will. This may just explain what we have called the incisive glance or the penetrating look:

> The eye as a minister to the soul may be brightened in its gaze by energetic summonsing of consciousness…Emotions of joy, fear, hate, love, desire, aversion, illustrate this deepening influence of energy within. These emotions may be simulated, as on the stage, at the imperious call of Will. If so, one may acquire a keen eye, without the assistance of these feelings, by sheer and persistent resolution. (Haddock n. pag.)

Hoddock then goes on to suggest exercises to converge the powers of the will in the eye, exercises that she believes help sharpening the resoluteness of the will. If this is scientifically explainable, then there is a possibility that evil doers or sorcerers in primitive societies and in certain parts of the world even today, 'will' evil to be done. Also, the fact that some of the theories of evil and evil-will have found their way into scientific explanation has increased the belief in witch-doctors and sorcerers in recent years.

Anthropological studies suggest that eye-contact as a means of sharing experience is unique to humans and that the first signs of language appear because of this need to share that arises out of sight, thereby making it the most potent form of contact (Companion Encyclopaedia of Anthropology 360). Also, anthropologists who have studied the effect of evil eye use terms like 'induced autosuggestion' (Seabrook qtd. in Swartz 665) as explanations for the working of ill-will. When a person believes that an evil eye has been caste on him, he goes into a state of shock. If no evidence turns up to convince him that he is not the victim, the 'continued state of shock can cause serious disruption of his vital body functions and ultimately death' (Swartz 665).

There is a developed belief in some communities that 'envy, in a world where good things are limited, endangers all life…certain

individuals are born with an evil eye; whenever they look with envy on a thing, it withers and dies' (Macfarlane 65). David Rheubottom in his study about the Skopska Crna Gora, a rural area in Yugoslav Macedonia explains the workings of the holders of the evil eye in the area:

> Most holders are well known [and] restrain themselves from commenting favourably on something the first time that they see it and, as a consequence, they do not activate the power for evil within them. A few people, conscious of their power, deliberately use it to harm others. But most with the evil eye, if they do not intend evil, are sufficiently negligent from time to time unwittingly to cause trouble. (87)

Plutarch says that it is particularly true of the eyes, 'which dart out fiery rays, producing a wonderful effect, especially as may be seen in the influence of love [and that they] have the power of easily injuring those susceptible of them'. He also goes on to suggest that the envious look produces the most direful results and 'pierces like poisoned arrows' (qtd. in Elworthy 13-4).

Sir Francis Bacon, in his essay 'On Envy', suggests what he considers one of the causes of envy and thereby the evil eye, '[a]bove all, those are most subject to envy, which carry the greatness of their fortunes, in an insolent and proud manner; being never well, but while they are showing how great they are…' (Bacon n. pag.). In this regard then, what Bacon says jibes well with what Freud says about why the dread of the evil eye may exist in the first place:

> Whoever possesses something that is at once valuable and fragile is afraid of other people's envy, in so far as he projects on to them the envy he would have felt in their place. A feeling like this betrays itself by a look even though it is not put into words; and when a man is prominent owing to noticeable, and particularly owing to unattractive, attributes, other people are ready to believe that his envy is rising to a more than usual degree of intensity

> and that this intensity will convert it into effective action. What is feared is thus a secret intention of doing harm, and certain signs are taken to mean that that intention has the necessary power at its command. (PFL 362)

This 'necessary power' that the eye seems to command, Freud calls the 'omnipotence of thoughts', in 'Animism, Magic, Omnipotence of Thoughts', borrowing the term from one of his patients who coined it to refer to 'all the strange and uncanny events by which he was pursued' (SE 20:86). Freud uses this term to describe the 'immense belief [the primitive man had] in the power of his wishes. The basic reason why what he sets about by magical means comes to pass is, after all, simply that he wills it. To begin with, therefore, the emphasis is only upon his wish' (SE 20:83). What is probably most uncanny or unsettling for the one on whom the evil eye is caste or for the one who thinks he has caste one inadvertently, is the sheer magnitude of evil and as Jung has rightly commented 'it is quite within the bounds of possibility for a man to recognise the relative evil of his nature, but it is a rare and shattering experience for him to gaze into the face of absolute evil' (Jung 10).

Freud suggests that there is a shift in the placement of omnipotence in human evolution from the self in the animistic stage, on gods in the religious stage (even though they still keep the capacity to influence their decisions) and finally to death and necessity in the scientific stage where there is no room for human omnipotence, '[n]one the less some of the primitive belief in omnipotence still survives in men's faith in the power of the human mind, which grapples with the laws of reality' (SE 20:88). The origin of belief in the omnipotence of thoughts is the 'unshakable confidence in the possibility of controlling the world and their inaccessibility to the experiences…which could teach them man's true place in the universe' (Freud, SE 20:89)

It is hereby important to return to the question of the evil eye as suggestive of the uncanny or a sense of the uncanny. In his discussion of the meanings associated with the concept of *the* uncanny, Freud discusses the words' German roots in *heimlich*

('belonging to the house, not strange, familiar, tame, intimate, friendly etc.') and its opposite *unheimlich* ('eerie, weird, arousing gruesome fear') (PFL 342-5). It is interesting to note how these words are used in everyday life as adjectives for any eye or look that makes one feel uncomfortable, and 'remind[s] us of Freud's earlier definition of "the uncanny" as "something one does not know ones way about in"' (qtd. in Royle 5). This is especially true when we see familiar things change their hue and catch us unguarded, unable to react to a new stimulus in the familiar, old environment.

If we take what Jentsch says as the starting point of our discussion regarding the uncanny as a feeling that arises out of 'doubts whether an apparently animate being is really alive; or conversely, whether a lifeless object might not be in fact animate' (qtd in Freud, PFL 347), we can refer it to how the eye may be part of a similar set of 'objects'. Even though Jentsch is talking here with particular reference to automata, we may talk of the eye as a *type* of automata under the influence of the soul and the will. The eye is a living tissue, so to speak, but without the will of the person who possesses the eye it really can't be considered as such. It is living only in that the one who possesses it is living and is thereby commanded. The concept of the evil eye then fits exactly into the description of the uncanny as something that is not frightening alone, but is 'that class of the frightening which leads back to what is known of old and long familiar' (Freud, PFL 340). However, this 'old and long familiar' is something that is repressed and recurs thus making it uncanny as opposed to frightening alone. 'Naturally not everything that is new and unfamiliar is frightening, however; the relation is not capable of inversion' (Freud, PFL 341). Therefore, with the eye, the addition of supposed or expected envy and a will at its command makes the possibility of the strike of the 'evil eye' uncanny. Thus, Schelling's definition of the uncanny as 'something which ought to have remained hidden but has come to light' (qtd. in Freud, PFL 364), is true of the evil eye too. If there is an intent or will of evil in the possessor of the evil eye, then appropriately, it should remain hidden from the one on whom it is caste and from others around him. If it does come to light and works, or is thought

to work, then its effect ought to be uncanny. Also, the evil eye has the potential to efface 'the distinction between imagination and reality…something that we have hitherto regarded as imaginary appears before us in reality' (Freud, PFL 367), and thereby generates the feeling of *uncanniness*.

If Freud is correct in suggesting that 'the omnipotence of thoughts, man's attitude to death, involuntary repetition and the castration complex comprise practically all the factors which turn something frightening into something uncanny' (PFL 365), then the eye embodies within it all factors that are conducive to a suggestion of the uncanny. The belief in the 'omnipotence of thoughts' and thereby will, can be seen in a negative and a positive light. The evil eye is thought to emanate from an incisive stare which seems to have at its disposal supernatural powers capable of causing harm. On the other hand, in connotations of looking and eyeing, when we refer to goals and dreams, we talk about a positive energy that may have potential to change the course of events favourably. Man's attitude towards death can also find a reference to the eye. When we talk about someone having lost the will to live or the death of hope, we invariably refer to something that has transformed, as it were, within the look of the eye. Also, especially with people who are thought to have an evil eye or are *proved* to possess one, the fact of repetition of a similar series of events is thought to be uncanny (i.e. if the same person inflicts similar misery upon various people thought to be potential targets of the evil eye). Last but not least, the connection of the eye with the castration complex is extremely debatable though intricate enough to have been played upon in various texts with references to blinding or gouging.

As Freud says, the uncanny in literature 'is a much more fertile province than the uncanny in real life' (PFL 372). The anxiety of the castration complex and its connection with blinding (Freud, PFL 352) can hardly be exaggerated in literature. ETA Hoffmann's, 'The Sandman', a story based upon a child's (Nathanial's) constant dread of the sandman, a fictional character who throws sand into the eyes of naughty children and makes a meal of them for his children is a good example of the connection between the two fears.

The 'eye motif runs through the story' (Hoffmann xxxi) and as Freud puts it, the eyes are always brought into 'intimate connection with the father's death' and the Sandman is represented as the 'dreaded father at whose hands castration is expected' (PFL 353-4), thereby confirming the psychoanalytical generalization about the connection between the fear of losing sight and being castrated. An explanation can however be conjectured for this much debated generalization. Both organs are the first to experience stimulus for or desire the satiation of a pleasure principle with reference to the Christian concept of the Seven Deadly Sins. Envy, Greed and Gluttony can be regarded as the sins of the eye while Lust, a sin of both. In Islam too, when one asks from protection against sin, it is from sins of the eye, the mind and the body. This religious connection between the two organs may have then formed the almost 'substitutive' relation between the fear of losing sight and the fear of castration.

Throughout literature, some of the most debated though potent tragic acts have been those where the main or one of the main characters has had their eyes gouged. One of the earliest and most familiar is probably Oedipus's gouging out of his eyes using his dead mothers' golden brooch upon discovering the horror of inadvertently fathering his own siblings:

> The King ripped from her gown the golden brooches
> That were her ornament, and raised them and plunged them down
> Straight into his own eyeballs, crying, "No more,
> No more shall you look on the misery about me,
> The horrors of my own doing! Too long you have known
> The faces of those whom I should never have seen,
> Too long been blind to those for whom I was searching!
> From this hour, go in darkness!" And as he spoke,
> He struck his eyes—not once, but many times;
> And the blood spattered his beard,

> Bursting from his ruined sockets like red hail.
> (Sophocles 67)

Freud refers to this 'self-blinding of the mythical criminal' as 'simply a mitigated form of the punishment of castration—the only punishment that was adequate for him by the *lex talionis*' (Freud, PFL 352).

Yet again, we encounter a similar kind of connection in one of William Shakespeare's greatest tragedies, 'King Lear'. The blinding of Gloucester by Cornwall and Reagan too, can be regarded as a similar, 'mitigated form of the punishment of castration'. Gloucester has not only fathered a bastard child, but is also guilty of being blind to the diametrically opposed natures of his two sons. Gloucester acts on his guilty and simplistic assumption that his bastard son, Edgar ought to be the bad one and Edmund, who he has fathered within wedlock the good one. It is only after his eyes have been gouged that he learns that Edgar, not Edmund, was the wronged one always and says, 'O, my follies! Then Edgar was abused./Kind gods forgive me that, and prosper him!' (3.7.89-90). It is only after the punishment for the adultery Gloucester has committed has been executed that he comes out of his figurative blindness.

Other references to the eye and its power have also made their way into literature through the years. Not all of them belong to the same strain of thought and different texts have used the denotative and connotative meanings and implications associated with the eye to multiple effect. Certain texts like Edgar Allan Poe's short-story, 'Tell-Tale Heart', use the eye as an entire character in the development of the plot:

> It is impossible to say how first the idea entered my brain; but once conceived, it haunted me day and night. Object there was none. Passion there was none. I loved the old man. He had never wronged me. He had never given me insult. For his gold I had no desire. I think it was his eye! Yes, it was this! He had the eye of a vulture --a pale blue

eye, with a film over it. Whenever it fell upon me, my blood ran cold; and so by degrees --very gradually --I made up my mind to take the life of the old man, and thus rid myself of the eye forever. (Poe n. pag.)

The entire story is taken hold of by the old man's eye which is the source of the protagonists fear, will and motive. Nothing else than the eye could be thought to exert such nefarious influence upon the soul 'it was not the old man who vexed me, but his Evil Eye' (Poe n. pag.).

In the fairy tale titled 'One Eye, Two Eyes, Three Eyes…', it is no aberration then that the abnormality in the number of eyes is also a reference to something sinister in characters because only Two Eyes, who has the usual pair of eyes is the 'good' one. Their mother who has just a pair of eyes, too, by the sheer virtue of having given birth to One Eye and Three Eyes is also part of the evil in the story.

Shakespeare uses the concept of the destructive power of beholding something dreadful and unexpected in Macbeth. The sight of the murdered King Duncan gets one of the most potent responses from Macduff, 'Approach the chamber, and destroy your sight/With a new Gorgon:' (2.3.70-71). It is interesting how the act of looking is subverted in a sense that instead of the eye exerting the evil influence, the sight of something exerts a nefarious influence upon the power of the eye. This makes the concept of sight and seeing even more poignant being suggestive of the two way movement. The capability to destroy and be destroyed.

However, one of the most heart rending projections of the self in the eyes is that of the fallen Satan in John Milton's 'Paradise Lost':

> Both of lost happiness and lasting pain
> Torments him; round he throws his baleful eyes
> That witness'd huge affliction and dismay
> Mix't with obdurate pride and steadfast hate (1: 55-8)

Just this description of Satan's eyes ensconces within it, at once, the entire misery and the unrelenting power to go on despite the fall.

Tracing the evolution of the concept of the eye, the evil and the power associated with it and the authority it has commanded through the years in sociology, anthropology and literature demonstrates a necessity for detailed study. Its depth as an instrument that has the potential to command power, *will* power and give power warrants further investigation.

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