



The Return of the Repressed: Examining The Uncanny in Tessa Hadley's *The Quiet House*

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ABSTRACT

This paper adopts Sigmund Freud's (1919) psychoanalytical theory on The Uncanny (das Unheimliche) to analyse Tessa Hadley's short story *The Quiet House* (2026). It explores how it is a psychological exploration of aging, memory and repressed emotions and thoughts coming to the surface. The study is based on two questions. Firstly, it looks at the representation of Freud's notion of the uncanny (the repressed) in the protagonist Geraldine through her dream encounters with her long deceased friend Mattie Szymanski. Second, it examines the uncanny effects created by Hadley's narrative strategies – such as the disruption of the time sequences and the structural ambiguity – which destabilize the boundaries between past and present, between life and death and between familiarity and strangeness. The paper uses eight central ideas of Freud's (1919) essay, The Uncanny: the paradox of the familiar and unfamiliar, the return of the repressed, animism and the power of thoughts, involuntary repetition, the return of the dead, the double, the difference between the uncanny in fiction and in reality, and intellectual uncertainty. Research indicates that Mattie represents Geraldine's own suppressed qualities of youth: emotional intensity, intellectual passion, idealized authority and physical vitality. *The Quiet House*, a symbol of order, is the peaceful, ordered life that Geraldine's return to dreams upsets. The paper argues that ageing in the story is a repressive process because the responsibilities of adulthood require the repression of previous impulses and energies. The fragmentation of memory in old age is manifested in Hadley's flexible use of time, the use of free indirect speech and in the lack of resolution. In general, the study demonstrates how the Freudian theory is significant in the interpretation of modern fiction and how older women are a complex character always relating to the past.

1. Introduction

Memory, aging and the coming back of the past are always fertile fields for literature. It is their bizarre nature, up close and personal, however, that makes them interesting. Tessa Hadley is one of these contemporary writers. Her prose is clear and lucid, and she has this amazing talent for uncovering the quiet tragedy in everyday existence: the slowly decaying marriage, the quietly failed career, the wistful emotions that linger for decades, and never get expressed (Penguin Random House, n.d;

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Penguin UK, 2025). In *The Quiet House*, her main character vividly encounters a long-dead friend in a sort of hallucination and that hallucination won't go away. It starts to leak in a secure package.

In this paper I wish to investigate this tale in the context of Freud's essay on Das Unheimliche (The Uncanny) from 1919. At the very heart of Freud's argument is that the uncanny is that category of the terrifying that returns to what is "old and long familiar" (p. 1). It's a simple, if not obvious, thing to say, and a very useful one when trying to determine what Hadley's up to. The desire of a long dead college pal doesn't simply conjure up the person. It eradicates distance, time, memory and reality, living and dead. It's a spooky Fall. It occurs when the familiar becomes strange or when something that has been safely put away refuses to stay put.

There is also a good body of research which supports approaching reading of aging narratives with a psychoanalytic perspective. Older adults are especially susceptible to psychoanalytical analysis, perhaps because they are more interested in their pasts, and more conscious of the limited time than others (Plotkin, 2014, p. 99). With respect to cognition, there's another important addition from Craik and Rose (2012) who opine that ageing does not only decreases memory, it alters the texture of memory. Older people are unlikely to recall specific details of an experience, but they are more likely to recall the emotional aspects of the experience. It is clear that this is echoed in Hadley's story. Geraldine can't remember Mattie, of course, but in any particular, in any factual way. What she can't forget, is the drawing, the sensation he created. It's more of a feel than fact story and as it turns out it's more of the truth in psychology than literature.

Hadley isn't doing all this in a vacuum. She has been compared to other British writers such as George Eliot, Elizabeth Bowen and Virginia Woolf, who were all concerned with the psychological impact of domestic life and haunted by the intrusive presence of the past. That concern is passed on and exacerbated by Hadley (Fiction Writers Review, n.d.). Loss does not vanish in fiction. It resurfaces. In some instances quietly, in other instances much less so (*Tears in the Fence*, 2017).

That resurfacing in *The Quiet House* is in the form of a dream about Mattie Szymanski, a friend from college who passed away years ago. Freud would term this the return of the repressed: not only is the past resurfacing as memory, but it is also something more like this, as a force that rearranges the present in its orbit. This kind of work is even being done by the title of the story. At its very core it is located at the border region of the familiar, the homely, the safe, what Freud calls "heimlich" and the strange, the uncanny, the secretive, the "unheimlich. The silent house is like a haven and a vacuum. That doesn't mean it's a contradiction which Hadley resolves. It's the point.

Freud's theory of the uncanny is also more intricate and complex than it appears on the surface: The intricacy of Freud's theory of the uncanny is also not to be ignored here. In fact, what Freud is working on are two parallel theories, as Windsor (2018) points out. The first one relates to memories of repressed events from one's life. The other issue is the resurgence of old animistic beliefs that rational, modern consciousness believed that it had left behind. Both of them are in action in Hadley's tale. The story's main issues of life and death, death and life are as personal and as unnamed as Mattie's dream, as old as the story itself. In Süner (2019), this is taken one step further as the uncanny is not only the submerged in the unconscious. It's also a question of secrets, one of the tension between what is hidden, and what comes out (pp. 29-35). That's a good fix as it eliminates the need to pretend to have access to anyone's depths. How *The Quiet House* creates uncanny effects on the surface, how it is structured, how it plays with time, how it leaves out some ambiguities, and still has something interesting to say.

Here, the issue of time is of great significance. The time of the narrative is not simply a formal matter, a structural element that can be enjoyed or ignored, argues Ricoeur (1984). It is a representation of how people really live in time (p. 52). Lwin (2011) uses the idea to interpret modern fiction, suggesting that any disruption of the narrative in terms of time can mean "the rupturing of any possibility of strict linear, objective time" and indicate a sensibility that does not rely on neat, single narratives of experience (p. 14). It's very different in a story about aging. The non linearity is no trick. It feels true. It mimics what it's like to be old enough to not always keep the past and present in a different compartment.

There are related issues of fiction about dementia but with different implications. Zimmermann (2022) has commented on the fact that novels that involve memory disorders often have a tendency to do two things: either a formal or narrative experiment and/or to reduce the character that suffers from dementia to a plot device (pp. 55-56). But there are larger points worth keeping in mind. King (2009) states, that literary fiction can get at things that the social sciences can't. It is at the inner, subjective experience of aging that it gets when it isn't reduced to data (p. 295). Even if her subject isn't dementia per se, it is the register that Hadley is working in. She wants to know what it feels like to be burdened by people and past versions of herself that no longer exist, in some ways more challenging to grasp, more universal.

This has a feminist thread going through it as well. According to Gullette (1997), ageing is especially a subject of resistance for contemporary women writers, who have challenged cultural scripts that tend to see ageing as a process of loss and decline, primarily (p. 3). That is significant because Mangum (1999) revealed that older women characters in the earlier British fiction

have been either marginalised or grotesque (p. 59). That's a different way to write, what Hadley is doing. They're providing older women with interior lives that are complex and particular and that deserve to be attended to. Geraldine's complex relationship with her younger self and with a charismatic man that made her feel like she didn't have the smarts to be in his presence fits into that big puzzle of what it's really like to be an aging woman.

The idea of this paper is to tie up these threads in a manner that hasn't quite been done before. Psychoanalytic criticism and literary studies on aging have been well established on their respective sides, and they have not been combined regularly in studies of the short story in the present day, under the umbrella of realism. This analysis aims to fill in that gap. The eight concepts from Freud's essay that are used in the framework are the following: Heimlich/unheimlich paradox, the return of the repressed, animism, involuntary repetition, return of the dead, the double, uncanny fiction vs uncanny experience and intellectual uncertainty. This is not the goal of going through the story and ticking off Freud's boxes. To illustrate how, using psychoanalytic thinking, but with a critical eye and not too much credulity, one can see the formal decisions made by Hadley and the emotional, psychological landscape she's traversing. Why this is important for the ways in which we read ageing in contemporary fiction in general. The study is based on the following research objectives and questions:

1.1. Research Objectives

1. To explore the role of memory and repression in *The Quiet House*, through the use of Freud's concept of uncanny as the return of familiar experiences.
2. To examine the uncanny effects created by Hadley's use of narrative techniques such as temporal ambiguities and structural choices which seem to collapse the distinctions between imagination and reality, past and present, and the animate and inanimate.

1.2. Research Questions

1. To what extent can Freud's concept of the uncanny, especially the return of the repressed, be seen in the dream encounters Geraldine has with Mattie Szymanski in *The Quiet House*?
2. How does Hadley use devices like temporal disruptions and structural ambiguities to create uncanny effects, blurring the boundaries between past and present, life and death, and familiarity and estrangement?

2. Research Methodology

The study carries on the qualitative analysis of Tessa Hadley's *The Quiet House* published in 2026 by using as a theoretical framework Sigmund Freud's *The Uncanny* (1919). The main text was also read and re-read to grasp the idea of the text.

3. Findings and Discussion: Analytical Exploration of The Uncanny in *The Quiet House*

This section will explore the uncanny in Tessa Hadley's *The Quiet House* using the psychoanalytical approach developed in the previous part of the study. For the sake of clarity and logical development of the line of argument, each key element of Freud's theory is explored individually and tied to the narrative's progression of uncanny events. Each point is broken down into subsections using important psychoanalytical concepts so that the analysis can be built upon. This organization assists in understanding the connection between the text and the theory, and provides a logical and systematic approach to reading Hadley's story.

3.1. The Return of the Repressed: Mattie as the Spectral Presence

The story opens with Geraldine waking 'out of busy dreams into the calms and shallows of old age,' (Hadley, 2026) establishing an immediate contrast between the 'absolutely quiet house' of her present and the 'noisy crowds of people, children, movement' of her dream. This opening perfectly captures Freud's concept of the uncanny as something long familiar that has been repressed: 'She'd known in her dream that in reality Mattie was long dead—he'd died in his forties...but she wasn't sure whether he knew it, and this made their encounter especially numinous and poignant.'

Mattie represents precisely what Freud (1919) describes as 'something familiar and old—established in the mind that has been estranged only by the process of repression' (p. 13). Geraldine explicitly acknowledges this: 'I'd forgotten him really, and then suddenly he was back, as if he'd never gone. The dream is a psychoanalytical process in which the repressed can re-emerge. The intensity of Geraldine's response to her return (the feeling of "intoxication" that she has) is a testament to the emotional impact of that return.'

From the story, it is clear that Geraldine and her friend Jane, for some time, perhaps years, did not think about Mattie nor talk about him. Unexpectedly and vividly appearing in a dream is a good reflection of Freud's concept of repression and return, after all this forgetting. What is pushed out of consciousness, does not go away, it returns in some form.

Not only has Mattie been repressed; he represents a complete emotional and intellectual world that they have lost in their life. As a child, Mattie Szymanski was "the center of attention" when he entered a room and the notion of ideas, curiosity and intellectual passion was of great importance and seemingly no question. He comes back in the dream with not only a person, but a way of feeling, thinking and relating to the world that has been forgotten.

3.2. The Dialectic of Heimlich and Unheimlich: Home and Homelessness

The title of the story, '*The Quiet House*', immediately calls to mind Freud's main paradox of language, namely that of heimlich/unheimlich. Geraldine's 'mostly freedom' in the house comes after 'the long years of her marriage' and a house that is 'absolutely quiet'. The house is heimlich in its primary sense that it is her house, her home, familiar, it's hers, but the complete silence has its connotations of the secretive, the hidden, the withdrawn.

This duality is analogous to Freud's (1919) remark that one thing is 'heimlich and at the same time its opposite, unheimlich' (p. 4). The house is home and Nothing is liberty and loneliness. In her dreams Geraldine is 'plunged back into the thick of things' – the true 'heimlich' space (space of belonging and vitality) is not where she is now, but in the repressed past.

The contrast between the 'quiet house' and the 'busy dreams' also evokes what Freud (1919), citing Schelling, identifies as the essence of the uncanny: 'everything that ought to have been kept concealed but which has nevertheless come to light' (p. 13). The dreams reveal what the silent house is hiding: a rich and chaotic past that has been locked away but continues to have its effect.

3.3. The Double and Temporal Splitting: Multiple Matties

Hadley's text presents multiple versions of Mattie Szymanski, creating a complex temporal doubling that corresponds to Freud's discussion of the Doppelgänger. There is the dream where Mattie 'still young, with his curly brown hair and a thick beard' is so distinct from the older Mattie who 'died in his forties, by which time he'd lost most of his hair.' There is also the youthful Mattie who seemed to embody intellectual grandeur, versus the later Mattie who 'fucked up and never did anything,' who worked 'putting out warnings on television about food hygiene and "stranger danger"' in a 'dingy and poky' studio flat.

This multiplication of Matties demonstrates Freud's (1919) point that the double incorporates 'all those unfulfilled but possible futures to which we still like to cling in phantasy, all those strivings of the ego which adverse external circumstances have crushed' (p. 10). The dream Mattie represents the idealized version (the charismatic intellectual) who 'had read everything, knew everything'. In contrast, the other Matties trace the trajectory of disappointed promises.

Jane's resistance to Geraldine's nostalgia, "This is Mattie Szymanski we're talking about? Mattie who fucked up and never did anything?", versus Geraldine's insistence, "But it wasn't the man he became later. It was the one we loved then" stages the uncanny doubling. The dream returns not the actual Mattie but an earlier, idealized version, what Freud (1919) describes as the double, an "energetic denial of the power of death" (p. 9).

4. Death and the Return of the Dead

The story predicts the surreal experience with the dead. Geraldine's dream is structured around her awareness that Mattie is 'long dead' while simultaneously experiencing him as vitally present: "He radiated this heat of life—it was intoxicating." This paradox exemplifies Freud's (1919) observation that 'many people experience the feeling [of the uncanny] in the highest degree in relation to death and dead bodies, to the return of the dead' (p. 13).

The uncertainty about whether Mattie 'knew' he was dead in the dream creates a particularly uncanny effect. This border between knowing and not-knowing, being and non-being, brings to life the experience of numinous power. Freud (1919) argues that 'our unconscious has as little use now as ever for the idea of its own mortality' (p. 13), and Geraldine's dream permits a space where death can be simultaneously acknowledged and denied.

Mattie's death itself is described as 'a stupid accident that could have happened to anyone—falling off a ladder while he was fixing a TV aerial on a roof.' This banal nature of death only adds to its uncanniness. It lacks a dramatic resolution that would offer narrative closure. Instead, Mattie vanished from their lives, died 'up north somewhere.' This postponed knowledge is a duplication of the time arrangement of the uncanny, in which the past does not remain past.

4.1. Involuntary Repetition and Patterns of Return

The narrative is structured around patterns of return and repetition that align with Freud's (1919) concept of the 'repetition-compulsion.' Geraldine and Jane repeatedly cycle through their mutual past: 'They hadn't spoken about Mattie or even thought about him much for a long time, probably not for years.' Now, they find themselves revisiting him. Similarly, they 'drifted apart for a few years after returning from Europe, only to 'bump into each other by chance one afternoon at Paddington station' and restart their companionship as if they had never parted ways.

This pattern of forgetting and remembering, separation and reunion, death and revival creates what Freud (1919) describes as 'that sense of helplessness sometimes experienced in dreams' (p. 10). The characters seem caught in cycles they cannot fully control, as if 'based upon instinctual activity and probably inherent in the very nature of the instincts' (p. 11).

The story's final image reinforces this compulsion: Geraldine remembers Mattie reading aloud to her, though she has 'no idea now what he'd read, or whether it was poetry or prose.' What persists is not the content but the affective charge, the 'high pitch of awareness and longing.' Furthermore, Mattie's words return in memory: 'You could never read everything. It did not matter whether it was completed or mastered. All that counted were those occasions when you picked up a book and opened it and its words attached themselves to that moment and transfigured it, and then the moment passed.' This philosophy of fragments and moments, not totality and completion, is a copy of the form of uncanny repetition itself, the constant recurrence of moments that cannot be incorporated into a unified whole.

4.2. Omnipotence of Thoughts and Wish Fulfillment

Geraldine's dream of Mattie can be considered a manifestation of what Freud (1919) calls 'the omnipotence of thoughts' (p. 15), which is the animistic belief that mental processes can influence reality. Her waking thought, "I was so overwhelmed at being with Mattie again, after all these years," conjures his presence in a dream. The dream fulfills her wish to regain the past, to experience again the supposed love they had long ago.

Freud (1919) states that the uncanny comes about when our primitive forebears once believed in the possibility of these things and were convinced that they really happened. Nowadays we don't believe in them anymore but we are not certain about our new set of beliefs and the old set of beliefs still reside within us waiting for any confirmation (p. 17). This is the liminal space of Geraldine's dream: She rationally knows Mattie is dead, but the dream allows her to return to the animistic belief that Mattie still exists.

The reality of Mattie's novel as "a typed carbon copy on thin paper" adds to this uncanny quality. Geraldine 'was trying to put this novel back into its manila folder but the pages kept slipping and getting out of order.' The narrator notes, 'As far as she knew, in real life Mattie had never written a novel or anything much, apart from his unfinished thesis on Hardy's tragic heroes.' The dream thus creates something that never existed, a phantom text that represents all of Mattie's unfulfilled potential.

4.3. Boundary Between Animate and Inanimate: Objects and Memories

While Freud (1919) discusses the uncanny quality of 'dolls and automatons' (p. 5), i.e., things that seem alive but are not, Hadley inverts this, presenting memories and past experiences that should be 'dead' but continue to animate the present. Mattie is a dead character (a memory, a dream image) that appears to be alive. The dream Mattie 'radiated this heat of life,' possessing more vitality than Geraldine's actual present.

This is also inverted to the form of the narrative. The story proper—Geraldine's waking life—is characterized by stillness, quiet, 'calms and shallows.' The dream life, by contrast, is full of 'movement,' 'talk, pleasure, sociable effort.' The realm of living is not as alive as the realm of supposedly inanimate dreams.

Items in the narrative are of an uncanny quality. Mattie's books, which 'his mother refused to keep for him any longer,' become metonyms for his failed intellectual ambitions. The 'typed carbon copy on thin paper' in the dream and the pages that keep 'slipping and getting out of order,' suggest the fragility and instability of memory itself. Geraldine's attempt to 'put this novel back into its manila folder' resembles the attempt to contain and organize the past, an effort that continually fails.

4.4. The Literary Uncanny: Narrative Technique and Reality Testing

Hadley's narrative technique exemplifies Freud's (1919) observation that in literature, 'there are many more means of creating uncanny effects in fiction than there are in real life' (p. 18). Without clear transitions, the story alternates between various layers of time: Geraldine's present, her dream, memories from the 1970s, and encounters with Mattie in the 1980s or 1990s. This fluctuation in time causes confusion as to what memory is, what a dream is, and what present experience is.

There is also uncertainty in the narrative, as the free indirect discourse technique is used, which provides a mix of Geraldine's consciousness and the narrator's voice. Not all the time can we tell if we are reading Geraldine's thoughts or what actually happened, between what she is saying and what she thinks it means. This ambiguity mirrors Freud's (1919) point about the uncanny in fiction that when 'the writer pretends to move in the world of common reality,' they can 'increase his effect and multiply it far beyond what could happen in reality' (p. 18).

The story's opening, i.e., moving from dream to waking, immediately problematizes the boundary between these states. The 'clouds floating past, slow and stately' seen through skylights could belong to either dream or waking. The clause "the angular under-shape of a gull's flight was printed for a moment, soundless beyond the glass" has an almost hallucinatory quality, as if the boundary between inner and outer, sleep and waking, has not fully solidified.

Jane's tendency to deny shared memories introduces another dimension of the uncanny: the instability of the past itself. Geraldine notes that Jane 'had taken to shamelessly denying things from the past which they both knew were true.' Jane plays 'a game...to entertain herself' by insisting 'Nothing happened at that party with the Persians in the hills above Florence. I don't even remember a party.'

Such denial produces an uncanny effect, questioning the validity of memory and common experience and supposing that Jane can forget or deny as willingly what Geraldine is aware of happening to her, what happens to the past? The past turns real and unreal at the same time, confirmed and denied, heimlich and unheimlich. Jane's 'deadpan stare' and 'blue eyes still large and forthright' give her denials a performative quality, as if she is testing the solidity of their shared history.

This connects to Freud's (1919) point about 'intellectual uncertainty' (p. 2; p. 7) and 'reality testing' (p. 18). By refusing to acknowledge what Geraldine recalls, Jane makes Geraldine doubt herself: Are these things as I recall them? Can memory be trusted? The uncanny arises from this disjuncture between rival versions of the past.

4.5. Old Age and the Uncanny Intersection with the Younger Self

The story frames Geraldine's experience through the lens of old age: she wakes 'into the calms and shallows of old age,' later described as not 'all calms and shallows' but including 'whirlpools and black water.' The dream of young Mattie establishes a weird temporal dislocation, drawing the remote past into a clear proximity and drawing out its irrecoverable distance.

The social gathering at Jane and Felix's house presents 'their old ruined faces around the table, pouchy and sagging and blotched with experience.' These olden-day faces are creepy twins of the youthful faces of the 1970s. The viola player Ivor, 'with his fine black eyes and waxy thin skin, stretched over the bones of his face,' evokes 'some aged genius composer from the nineteenth century,' becoming a kind of doppelgänger for the cultural figures the younger selves once revered.

This connects to Freud's (1919) discussion of the double as both 'an insurance against destruction to the ego' and, later, 'the ghastly harbinger of death' (p. 9). The younger selves one has saved in memory are insurance against death, evidence that one lived and had a purpose. Nevertheless, they also stress the extent of lostness, the distance one has gone since the intensity of youth.

4.6. The Novel That Never Was: Incompletion and the Uncanny

The dream image of Mattie's novel (which never really existed) becomes the very vehicle of the exploration of uncanny in the story. This ghost writing is the realization of mere possibility, what might have been, but wasn't. The inconsistencies in Geraldine's keeping the pages in order imply that there is no way of organizing or mastering the past.

But the last memory of the story is a different sort of incompletion. "You could never read everything. Completion or mastery were beside the point," Mattie said, "the uncanny was a condition to be accepted." The important thing is 'those times when you picked up a book and opened it and its words stuck with you and transfigured the moment and then the moment was gone.'

The same philosophy is for memory and experience. The past, now in the form of dreams and flashbacks, is uncanny, transfigured and even as it passes, the present is transfigured. The novel does not resolve the enigma of the past vs. the present, life vs. death, presence vs. absence. Rather, it dwells in that tension, and finds meaning and intensity in it.

Freud (1919) says that the uncanny is "in reality nothing new or foreign, but something familiar and old established in the mind that has been estranged only by the process of repression" (p. 13). Hadley's story illustrates this concept through the means of age itself to act as a way to repressing. For people to give up their youthful enthusiasm and fervour for adult life. Geraldine's dream of Mattie is more than just a nostalgic moment, it is a time capsule. It's a rendezvous with something which has been "active" in the unconscious, waiting to emerge when the mind relaxes its normal functions.

5. Conclusion

In this paper, the uncanny is discussed with a fresh perspective and Tessa Hadley's *The Quiet House*, which clearly shows that psychoanalytic criticism has a role to play in literary studies and that it is a flexible approach. The return of the repressed no longer needs to be bound to the Gothic excess or the dramatic disruptions that can be associated with modernity, as can be seen in Geraldine's dream. Instead, it is born from forgetfulness, loss, and death and the silent offerings of the elderly. Mattie is a symbol of all the things that Geraldine has been forced to give up over the years; intellectual passion, youthful energy and the sense of possibility that once defined Geraldine's life. It's as if in his drunk reappearance, the process of ageing is a process of repression, and the old selves are slowly replaced by the demands of the adult life.

Meanwhile, Hadley is making no distinction between past and present, dream and reality. This uncertainty adds to the uncanniness of the story. The familiar is back in a different guise, for it has never gone away, but had been suppressed for years. The results also indicate that the narrative structure of Hadley's book is akin to the psychoanalytical process in which repressed memories and feelings return, but never get solved. The story does not lend itself to tidy conclusions and the sense of time is erratic, suggesting critical attitudes, which see fragmentation and incompleteness as the true expression of subjective experience.

The Quiet House does not offer psychological closure, but rather the sense of lingering past and unsettling present. The return of Mattie reinforces the notion that life does not always come to a conclusion and that experiences are not always resolved. As a result, the story proves the uncanny's continued significance in modern fiction and how memory can come back with a vengeance and, even in the stillness of old age, the past can be intensely present.

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