



Homeless at Yoknapatawpha: Exploring the Spatial Uncanny in William Faulkner's Short Stories

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Abstract:

Spatial settings in William Faulkner's short stories present a unique challenge to the reader. On the one hand, they are almost banal in their ordinariness. On the other hand, they host strange, unnerving events and characters who alter how the imaginary landscape of Yoknapatawpha is perceived. Navigating both the quotidian and its extraordinary inversion by unexpected events, I bring to bear the category of the 'spatial uncanny' in reading three of Faulkner's short stories: "A Rose for Emily," "That Evening Sun," and "Barn Burning." In doing so, I frame the contrasting qualities places embody through the spatial trope of the threshold—the boundary separating the domestic from the world outside, Jefferson from the surrounding wildernesses of Yoknapatawpha, the commonplace from the strange. Yet, the threshold also bridges these worlds and prepares ground for the uncanny to unfold. Ultimately, it serves as a reminder of the intimate presence the uncanny marks in ordinary spaces and the daily lives of Faulkner's world.

Keywords: uncanny, threshold, domestic space, frontier, Yoknapatawpha, William Faulkner.

Mapping the Uncanny

This essay examines the formative role space and place play in three short stories by William Faulkner—all of them set at Jefferson and its surroundings in the imaginary Yoknapatawpha country. While two of these, “A Rose for Emily” (1930) and “That Evening Sun” (1931), are set within the confines of the town of Jefferson, the story “Barn Burning” (1939) has for its locale both the town and a nearby plantation estate. The townscape of Jefferson within which these stories unfold is a seemingly very commonplace location: a typical southern provincial town of the inland United States in the final years of the nineteenth century. The perceived ordinariness of the region belies the strange events that occur in the stories, but also renders them in a sharper focus. I navigate this contrast through the category of the ‘spatial uncanny’ in reading these stories.

As is widely held, the position on the map for Yoknapatawpha concurs with that of Lafayette County in Mississippi. This state served as one of the major transit routes for the westward migration and was therefore rife with memories of intercultural interactions and the ensuing violence and turf wars (Aiken 11; Doyle 25). The prevalence of a plantation-based economy also played a formative role in defining the nature of these interactions and reworked them time and again. The Yoknapatawpha landscape that Faulkner describes is thus imprinted with vestiges of a thriving yet turbulent movement—signs of which emerge occasionally in the way day-to-day affairs are conducted in Jefferson and its surroundings. This tension is precisely what makes the case for singling out the strangeness of space in these stories so compelling. As Cleanth Brooks points out, Faulkner’s stories often play up these contrasts where “modernity is the more sharply defined by being set off against the concrete particularity of the old order” (368). Quite apart from the clash of eras Brooks suggests, my analysis foregrounds the layers of spatial complexity that seep into the timelines of the stories themselves.

A large part of my engagement with space and place as depicted in these stories concerns the domestic sphere. However as we shall see, the landscape of Jefferson and Yoknapatawpha more generally keeps intruding into these private, interior spaces in most unpredictable ways. In each of these stories, the home, the hearth and the kitchen are set up in stark opposition to the surrounding landscape even as it remains firmly situated in and draws sustenance from it. While in “A Rose for Emily”, the narrative focus shifts from the outside world into a home long out of bounds for the townspeople, the other two stories feature an entrenched yet futile withdrawal into the confines of the home. Regardless of this difference, the common motif that emerges in these three stories is the threshold as the site of the tension between the world outside and the interior. In lying between these two supposedly exclusive spheres, the threshold contains but also bridges them, unsettling their tenuous relationship to mark the climax in each story. It is this experience of the familiar being rendered unfamiliar through the collapse of the threshold that I describe as the ‘spatial uncanny’ in these stories.

The intermingling of the natural, chaotic, and wild environment and the human, inhabited and civilised world is further accentuated by unexpected findings, portents and intrusions within deceptively ordinary settings. While scholars have addressed these themes, their engagement with the uncanny as a specific vector of place in Faulkner’s work remains somewhat limited. As Thomas Hines notes, spatial criticism of Faulkner has concerned itself overwhelmingly with the exploration of the Yoknapatawpha wilderness and the way it moulds the characters and unravels the plot:

Much has been said and written on the ubiquity of nature in Faulkner's work- the woods, the bear, the natural landscape but relatively little has been done on Faulkner's equally great interest in the built environment, the opposite of nature, as symbol and metaphor of larger issues, attitudes, and moods. There is, in fact, throughout Faulkner criticism a puzzling imbalance between the attention given to nature and that given to architecture.

This is unfortunate, since "novelistic architecture," according to critic William Ruzicka, "has much to say about the way that characters view the world they inhabit, the effect of the fictive environment upon those who live within it, the image and significance of a fictive place, and the meaning of dwelling there." (Hines 2)

Even as he recognises how inextricably woven in with the landscape are the characters in Faulkner stories, Hines seems to posit the natural and built environment as a mutually exclusive binary. One of the major premises of this paper, in contrast, is to problematise that divide and focus on an analysis of place and space as a fusion of the natural as well as the man-made environments. It follows in the tradition of architectural critics such as Anthony Vidler to contend that space and place act as vital sites of the uncanny in modernity (4). As opposed to conventional viewpoints of the uncanny as a predominantly psychological phenomenon, I posit the fervent drive to set boundaries between perceived oppositional spaces as a source of the spatial uncanny. The three stories I analyse are anchored around this rigid separation between the indoors and the outdoors, the familiar and the unfamiliar, the hearth and the facade, with the thresholds between them marking zones of uneasy crossovers. The tipping over of the familiar, the intimate and the homely into the unfamiliar, the alien and the hostile and vice-versa, makes the threshold the abiding spatial motif in each of these stories.

To that end, the spatial paradigm for the paper would be centred around the "threshold" as an expression of place and space. The threshold becomes a point of convergence between the seemingly disparate worlds of the interior and the outdoors, and also the past, present and the future. It appears in a more literal sense in stories such as "A Rose for Emily" while bearing a more metaphorical register for stories such as "That Evening Sun" and "Barn Burning." The experience of the threshold is in some sense an all-pervading one in the Yoknapatawpha landscape. Here, each moment in these stories takes us round an

unexpected corner, all the more jarring in an otherwise nondescript place. The threshold, as a symbol of spatial ambiguity in the borders of each such turn, reveals the uncanny in these stories.

Ultimately, the idea of the uncanny is traceable to its etymological roots of being out of home in a manner especially apposite to Faulkner's landscape. Deriving from Sigmund Freud's postulations on *unheimlich*, the German equivalent for the uncanny, this essay maps the concept onto the enigmatic intertwining of familiar and unfamiliar spaces in the stories. Freud begins his essay with a lengthy excursus on the etymological baggage of the terms *heimlich* (literally translatable as homely) and *unheimlich* (literally translatable as unhomely). Proceeding through the glossary definitions, he attracts the attention of his readers at one particular point where the meaning of the two terms, while antithetical, converges:

“Heimlich”? What do you understand by “heimlich”? “Well, . . . they are like a buried spring or a dried-up pond. One cannot walk over it without always having the feeling that water might come up there again.” “Oh, we call it “unheimlich”; you call it “heimlich.” Well, what makes you think that there is something secret and untrustworthy about this family? (Freud 3)

The idea of undesirable presence that the uncanny enshrines presupposes an act of covering up what is not meant to be put on display. At the same time, it is defiantly a presence that cannot be wished away either. In that sense, the uncanny strongly espouses the idea of what is simultaneously secretive and yet most intimate to us. It is at this point that the separation between *heimlich* and *unheimlich* dissolves and the uncanny comes to accrue a dual sense. The act of hiding, or covering up, Freud opines, creates in our minds an illusion of having repressed or surmounted the undesired.

In fact, he makes a clear distinction here between the two mechanisms of suppression and surmounting while attempting to distinguish between suppressed infantile experiences of

the uncanny and those fears we seem to have overcome:

But this last way of putting it no doubt strains the term 'repression' beyond its legitimate meaning. It would be more correct to respect a perceptible psychological difference here and to say that the animistic beliefs of civilized people have been surmounted—more or less. (Freud 17)

It is the unexpected appearance of what we assume has been surmounted or repressed that strikes us as uncanny. The unexpectedness, according to Freud, is what accounts for the uneasy feelings the uncanny inspires in us. This unanticipated re-emergence is what he terms as the “return.” However, an analysis of Faulkner’s stories shows that the uncanny need not always be construed in terms of a “return,” as much as an unwelcome revelation of a presence passing off as absence.

The aim of this essay, in terms of exploring the spatial uncanny in the short stories of William Faulkner, is twofold. At one level, it seeks to identify and understand the uncanny spaces depicted in the stories. The uncanny, as Freud's analysis shows, works through deception. What *appears* ordinary, commonplace, or least like a mysterious object has the capacity to startle us. Freud draws our attention in the latter half of his essay to the unique ability of art to undo the uncanny as per its requirements. According to him, an exposure to a medium of art where the strange appears as the norm neutralises our sensitivity to the phenomenon of “strangeness” within that artwork. Conversely, he identifies works of art where the opposite effect of the uncanny—casting the supposedly mundane in radically different terms—shocks us out of our untroubled, unquestioning acceptance and unsettles our convictions. The stories I analyse achieve just such an effect. At another level, the essay demonstrates how the strange and the unfamiliar places impact us precisely because of the ordinariness of their setting, and how utterly that ordinariness comes undone. Place, as a result, emerges both as the means and the destination where the uncanny comes to fruition in

these stories.

Crossing the Threshold

"A Rose for Emily" opens with a description of the decadence creeping into a once prosperous, aristocratic locality in Jefferson. The surroundings in which Emily's house is situated play a crucial role in the progress and development of the narrative and contribute to the formation of the spatial uncanny. Among the stories discussed, "A Rose for Emily" stands apart in its meticulous description of the interior architecture of Emily's house and the traces of decrepitude time seems to have layered on its decor. At the same time, this narrative of place also carefully plots itself into what transpires in Emily's life and death, leaving a lasting imprint on the townspeople.

The story takes us through Emily's life as a sole surviving heir of an aristocratic family past its heyday. Her life is that of a recluse—withdrawn and distant from the rest of the townsfolk. Her brief courtship with Homer Barron, a construction foreman, triggers a lot of interest and rumour in Jefferson until they get married and he disappears under mysterious circumstances. As years go by, Emily's presence in the town as the last member of a bygone era devolves on her certain privileges such as tax exemption which even the later town councils fail to reverse. We are told that she chooses to confine herself to the house and her old African American servant bears the only sign of life and activity inside the house. The story proceeds by way of a flashback ; towards the end it picks up from its point of departure at the beginning. Learning of Emily's death, the townspeople enter her house and after her body is laid to rest, explore various chambers and halls where no outsider had stepped in for decades. In one such particularly dusty, dingy room upstairs, they discover the body of Emily's longdeparted husband lying on a bed and find a lock of her hair on a pillow beside the body.

In the opening lines of the story, the narrator outlines just how out of place the

specific locality of Emily's house is in the townscape of Jefferson, and the building in particular, as an "eyesore among eyesores" (119). The once grandiose seat of opulence and local power within the limits of Jefferson had been rendered undesirable with the change of fortunes and passage of time. The fact that the presence of Emily's house aggravated the hideous nature of the location bears special significance in the unfolding of the spatial uncanny. Throughout the story, there is an underlying aura of mystery surrounding the house—provoking curiosity while being repulsive at the same time. Classifying her house as an eyesore even amid a rundown locality stems from the threat it poses to a complete disavowal of Emily's presence in the town—the way the town has got used to her absence, her invisibility. The occasional presence of her servant in the market was the only reminder of life in that house and somehow, in the larger scheme of things, appeared incompatible and out of place. His continuing presence in full public view, despite belonging to a house that had shut itself away from the entire town and time, presents him as a sort of metonymic uncanny. He becomes an individual, who like the house, had outstayed his welcome to become a pariah presence and an eyesore.

The narrative structures itself in a spatial parlance around Emily's house. What begins as a description of the locality in which her house is situated, develops into an interest, almost an obsession, with what Emily so jealously hides and guards within the confines of her home. Towards the beginning, the house undergoes an intrusive probe when a neighbour complains of a rising stench allegedly from the unclean cellar. As some overenthusiastic townspeople steal into her yard to have the place sanitised by the dead of night after being refused entry earlier, they become aware of Emily's presence by the window. The description of her motionless presence by the window stands out as one of the most haunting passages in the story:

So the next night, after midnight, four men crossed Miss Emily's lawn and slunk

about the house like burglars, sniffing along the base of the brickwork and at the cellar openings while one of them performed a regular sowing motion with his hand out of a sack slung from his shoulder. They broke open the cellar door and sprinkled lime there, and in all the outbuildings. As they re-crossed the lawn, a window that had been dark was lighted and Miss Emily sat in it, the light behind her, and her upright torso motionless as that of an idol. They crept quietly across the lawn and into the shadow of the locusts that lined the street. After a week or two the smell went away. (Faulkner 123)

In a town increasingly at comfort with Emily's absence in its environs, the sudden revelation of her presence goes strangely unremarked. I argue that the silence here on the reaction of the "four men" in fact delivers home the sheer terror that would have swept over them when meeting Emily's invisible gaze. As readers, we are expected to partake in that emotion, almost viscerally so. Describing it would risk disembodiment of the impact of the image of her standing by the window. If the sordid aloofness of the house was accentuated by Emily's absence from the town's life, her sudden and unexpected presence jolts them into acknowledging her, however unwillingly, as a continuing presence. The visual of her standing by the window seemingly gazing down at the trespassers, tangles together this absence and presence in a web of uncertainty. It is both a warning to let the sleeping demons of the town lie, but also an act of spectral resistance against the invasive tendencies of the locals.

Judith Fetterley's feminist rereading of the story throws light on the unique tints the uncanny takes on when seen spatially. She frames the relationship of the town to her house in terms of a "prurient curiosity," an invasive, communal desire to feast on the house and its inhabitants frozen in time and meaning (36). Each instance of Emily stepping out and around the town becomes an uncomfortable reminder of the defiantly unconventional terms in which

she defines her relationships to men. Seen thus, readers suddenly find themselves grappling with the possibility of Emily's confinement being not merely a self-imposed retreat but the only possible outcome of being in a community that does not allow her an alternative space. As she gazes back out of her window, she simultaneously affirms that confinement, but also returns it to the prying eyes of the town's inhabitants. It is at this zone of exchange that the window becomes the uncanny threshold for the story.

Emily's death seems to undo in one moment all the enigma that surrounds her house. The town crosses her threshold—for the first time. The interiors of the house present a peculiar synthesis of arrested time and its relentless flow against all odds as layers of dust lie accumulated over furniture and decor of years past. Even as the inner chamber of the house gets revealed, a particular room lies unopened, and betrays the impression of being buried in the innermost recesses of the house—as its most well-kept secret. Thus, the townspeople “[a]lready [...] knew that there was one room in that region above stairs which no one had seen in forty years, and which would have to be forced. They waited until Miss Emily was decently in the ground before they opened it” (Faulkner 129).

The subsequent discovery of Homer Barron's body confirms that it was indeed in this room that Emily had given fullest expression to her innermost desires of arresting time—of mitigating its flow. Both the body of her beloved and the lock of hair next to it exude a sense of the uncanny: neither the body not in its rightful place nor does her unnatural response to the death conform with accepted norms of social behaviour. What Emily had evidently not realised was the part she unconsciously played in evoking the uncanny. By arresting time and guarding against its advent, she grew an unwitting enabler of its premature entry into her own life. Even as she made efforts to suppress and surmount death, she engendered the decay and the isolation that had burdened her existence. The body, and with it the time and the space surrounding it, had been held in an abeyance between life and death. Emily's own passing

and the subsequent invasion of her property by the townspeople undoes that threshold, but also for the first time brings it into full view. This vivid rendering of the threshold also opens it up as a space of divergent, and even differing, interpretations. If in Emily's house the threshold is finally breached, "That Evening Sun" recasts it as a boundary charged with multiple meanings of interiority and exteriority.

The Gaping Uncanny

"That Evening Sun" is a story about Nancy, an African American washerwoman in Jefferson who occasionally carries out household chores for a few white families in the area, including that of the narrator's. Like "A Rose for Emily", the story opens with a brief survey of its setting—reflective, this time, of the changing face of Jefferson where "streets are paved now, and the telephone and electric companies are cutting down more and more of the shade trees" (289). While in "A Rose for Emily", the near haunting environs were intended to actually set the stage for the unfolding of the uncanny, here the setting comes across as perfectly commonplace and ordinary, without a hint of the untoward, unexplainable events lying in wait in the crevices of the household. Even as the story shifts indoors, we have a typical image of a comfortable, cosy family kitchen where Nancy is at work on account of the cook's illness. This, interestingly, is where Faulkner starts dropping hints of Nancy's turbulent relationship with her husband Jesus and that sets the tenor for the crisis of the story. Nancy appears to develop a strange fear of Jesus—and more specifically his return. In the end, she grows paranoid about returning home and begs her white employers to let her stay on at their place. Her requests go unheeded, however, and as a last resort she cajoles the children to accompany her. Even though they agree initially, they soon grow tired in Nancy's not-so-welcoming house and leave with their father.

Right from the beginning, the story is rife with an acute spatial consciousness. This

element particularly comes into play when the question of the African American's access to the white man's house is at stake. Interestingly, the first observation in this regard emerges out of a conversation Nancy and her husband Jesus have in the presence of the children in the kitchen:

“I can't hang around white man's kitchen”, Jesus said. "But white man can hang around mine. White man can come in my house, but I can't stop him. When white man want to come in my house, I ain't got no house. I can't stop him, but he can't kick me outen it. He can't do that.” (Faulkner 292)

Jesus makes no secret of his disagreement and anger with the rather skewed balance of power in this context. Nancy tells him on clear terms after some time that Jesus had no business being there and that his presence was particularly undesirable with children around. Eventually however, this threshold as a barrier of security that she so stridently tries to raise betrays her. What transpires as a kind of disgust in Nancy's chiding of Jesus remarkably translates into a distinct sense of fear and helplessness by the end of the story. The narration also leaves unsaid to what extent Nancy's fear stems from a guilt of having to ask her husband out of a space she has unfettered access to. However, the reader cannot help but intuit a distinct sense of discomfort she feels as the emotional barriers in their relationship take on a concrete, spatial form in the white man's kitchen.

At a different level though, it is an undesirable absence that triggers off the crisis in this particular story. Nancy is attacked by her bouts of fear only in the absence of Jesus. His presence only has her relapse into anger, and often, disgust. That way, what sets the narrative going in this particular story would be closer to the notion of the eerie than the uncanny. However, the absence encountered is also loaded with an undesired presence of the absence. The absence engulfs Nancy's life and the apprehension of his return serves to haunt her waking moments. In fact, the night she spends in the house of the white family, she rarely

sleeps. The image of Nancy lying on the floor with open eyes casting a vacant gaze at the ceiling is evidently one of the most potent depictions of uncanny in Faulkner's writings. In particular, the child narrator seems overwhelmed with curiosity by what he clearly regards as a particularly strange occurrence:

We spread the pallet in our room. After the light in mother's room went off, we could see Nancy's eyes again. "Nancy," Caddy whispered, "are you asleep, Nancy?" Nancy whispered something. It was oh or no, I don't know which. Like nobody had made it, like it came from nowhere and went nowhere, until it was like Nancy was not there at all; that I had looked so hard at her eyes on the stair that they had got printed on my eyelids, like the sun does when you have closed your eyes and there is no sun. "Jesus," Nancy whispered. "Jesus." (Faulkner 296)

What immediately plays upon the child's mind is the possibility of Nancy's uncanny gaze surveying, searching for somebody who was not meant to be there in the first place. The reader is left wondering if the question posed arises out of a thoughtful reflection or childlike speculation.

The untoward pattern of sleeping that seems to haunt Nancy during her sleepover might be read as an extension of her being a misfit within the lived space of the house itself. Her employer Mrs. Compson for one was never really impressed by the latter's overtures for staying back. She deemed it highly unsafe to shelter an African American woman in the house for the night. Thus, the boundaries of accessibility that Nancy had set for Jesus earlier in the story return to haunt her within that same threshold and neutralise all her chances of staying another night at the white man's home. She is rendered an undesirable presence within the home space. So much so, that Mrs. Compson thinks she ought to be taken care of by the civic authorities and the police. Nancy, in other words, becomes a law and order problem, to be managed and contained securely at a safe distance away from the domestic

space. That she is also a critical cog in the household machinery by daytime is, of course, of no consideration for Mrs. Compson. After all, relations within the household would often mirror those beyond. As Thadious Davis notes, Faulkner was keenly aware of these divides lurking in the seemingly most innocuous of interactions and how they “constantly provoke tensions, which are intensified by a consciousness of southern history” (4).

Nancy's growing fear about Jesus's return makes her increasingly insecure at her own place as well. The night she manages to persuade the children to accompany her home, Nancy continues ranting about Jesus's return even as it was clear he was not within her visual field. All through her stay at her master's place that evening, she kept insisting that she could “feel” his return in the surroundings (Faulkner 295). The ditch that ran near her home seemed particularly ominous to her. It is both conspicuous, yet a space of concealment, a perfect shelter for someone looking to hide themselves. In that sense, the ditch is a perfect echo of the home it separates from the rest of the world. It marks the boundary that Nancy would not have Jesus cross over, a line of both safety and terror. In that it surrounds her home, the ditch both extends and limits her own shelter. In the very refuge it provides her, lurks the constant remembrance of the terror she has been trying to evade. Quite understandably then, Nancy keeps pointing at the ditch as a possible asylum for Jesus waiting to assassinate her. While her master finds it easy to dismiss her fears elsewhere—in the open road or the winding alley—an air of uncertainty grips Nancy as she realises with dawning helplessness how the fear of the ditch is intimately her own, not legible to anyone else—least of all the narrator's family to whom she had turned for succour. “That Evening Sun” alerts the reader to the starkly different meanings Nancy and the family attach to the same space. For Nancy, their obliviousness to the dangers the ditch holds becomes an inexplicable absence, deepening her sense of the uncanny. This transformation seems to stir up the past in its uncanny primordial form over Yoknapatawpha and prepares the ground for the final unravelling of the threshold

as a stable buffer in 'Barn Burning'.

A Child of the Frontier

The geographical uncanny in fact acquires a whole new dimension in the story "Barn Burning". For one, it happens to be one of the few stories where the dynamics of unhomeliness unfold within a white, migrating family and thus invests, within that paradigm, the idea of "belonging" and "alienation" with entirely new spatial and conceptual registers. While playing out within the relationship dynamics of a single family, the story nevertheless conveys a strong sense of the landscape and environment, built and wild, on the move with the family and moulding, shaping them as they traverse across a vast stretch of land in search of livelihood and a long-promised freedom.

The story opens with the witnessing of a court trial scene by Sarty, a young boy. He appears not really interested in the proceedings but more taken in by the strange, unexplainable, smell of cheese and "hermetic meat" wafting across the room (Faulkner 7). By and by his identity is disclosed and the narration orients itself to his perspective. The accused in the trial is Abner, his father, on charges of burning a neighbour's barn. While never really proved guilty, he is advised to "get out of this country before dark" (Faulkner 5). We are told that the family was used to such short-notice evictions and the father would usually make prior arrangements for their next stop. As they approach their new home the next morning, the boy appears overtaken by a sense of *déjà vu* as he notices the cottage and its surroundings much like the previous ones they had occupied. What really impresses him about the new place, however, is the manor of his father's new employer—somebody who was, in his father's words, "the man that aims to begin tomorrow owning me body and soul for the next eight months" (Faulkner 9).

This span of reverie and adulation of the new surroundings, however, is short-lived.

His headstrong father storms into his employer's residence looking for him and despite repeated warnings from his wife and the butler, smears an expensive rug with the slush and mud his footsteps carry from the swamps outside. Trouble ensues and his new employer fines him twenty bushels over and above his contract. As he tries to put up a resolute stand, the order gets upheld, with some trimmings, by the local judge. All this while, Sarty tries to play the advocate for his father but unwittingly ends up being more of a hindrance—at least according to Abner. The crisis precipitates when later at night, the father attempts to once again burn down the barn and the boy alerts his employer presumably to prevent further trouble for his father. The latter, however, gets shot and succumbs.

At one level, the spatial uncanny in this story may be located in what happens to be one of the more dramatic scenes where the father storms into the house of his employer. The swamp he carries with him is an undesired, despised presence within the prim and proper ambience of a well-kept residence belonging to one of the members of the upper echelons of Yoknapatawpha. The ridiculous amount of fine the judge prepares to extract from the boy's father has its reasons that run deeper than mere economic high-handedness and exploitation. In fact, it finds an echo too in how the family of Abner's new employer strive to preserve the rug from outside slush and mud. All of them betray an obsession with insulating one's lived surroundings well beyond the personal sphere. From whatever little about the mansion and its occupants is described through the boy's bewildered gaze, they appear to stand as among the last vestiges of a bygone era: a combination of the remnants of a strong Protestant ethic that had a foundational role in the birthing of the United States and a strange undertone of Victorian morality. Assuming that most of Faulkner's stories are set around the closing years of the nineteenth century, this was an old-moneyed class. However, for all its wealth and splendour, this class was teetering to a collapse as members of a county that lay on the losing side of the Union-Confederate divide. The grand manors like the one described in this story

dotted the American south and were built upon generations of wealth amassed from the plantations. The contemptuous scorn of the father as they leave the residence after their first visit appears significant, and in stark contrast to his employer's fixation with holding the threshold between the interior and the world outside:

At the gate he stopped again. He stood for a moment, planted stiffly on the stiff foot, looking back at the house. 'Pretty and white, ain't it?' he said. 'That's sweat. Nigger sweat. Maybe it ain't white enough yet to suit him. Maybe he wants to mix some white sweat with it.' (Faulkner 12)

The home space this economic setup spun around itself was built and fostered around a sense of contrasts. The "big courthouse" that the young boy observes so bespectacled served to reinforce a sense of opposition to the surrounding woods. This secure proximity to the surrounding, hostile environment plays a crucial role in fostering a phenomenological sense of the home. This is one of the attributes of "homing in" that Gaston Bachelard illustrates in his *Poetics of Space*. He invokes Baudelaire's description of Thomas Quincey reading Kant in his cottage on a winter evening:

And we feel warm because it is cold out-of-doors [...] Every year they ask the sky to send down as much snow, hail and frost as it can contain. What they really need are Canadian or Russian winters. Their own nests will be all the warmer, all the downier, all the better beloved. (Baudelaire qtd. in Bachelard 39)

The comfort one derives from the natural scenery unfolding outside is precisely because they stay secure within the built environment and can nevertheless be a visual, and therefore, conveniently distantiated participant to the wilderness. The moment any aspect of this wilderness makes its way indoors, it unsettles the carefully crafted demarcation. In the process, it triggers a response steeped in disgust and possibly some measure of terror as evinced by the reactions of the landlord's wife and the butler.

Crossing the threshold incites and instils fear and dislike for not only what gets carried in but also the agent, the stranger: the presence of a persona it announces. In fact, what intrudes the home space becomes inseparable from who intrudes the same. In the story, the boy's father exudes a personality that is in stark contrast to the well settled, easy going, and prosperous life of the American south. The audacity of his intrusion and the contrast he bears to the surroundings—to a home space that was completely alien to his life and manners—makes it difficult to ascertain for sure whether it was him or the slush the residents of the house deemed more unwanted. He was clearly an undesired presence. Haggard-looking yet strong of demeanour, he stood for a way of life that was, like the wilderness surrounding the house, distant, yet not so unfamiliar. Perhaps, he was a reminder of the intimate past that still inhabited the land and the property.

Richard Slotkin's work alerts us to the role the frontier plays as an inaugural trope in the American cultural imagination. Likewise, the frontiersman is not in the margins of this imaginary but at its very heart. As a trope then, the frontier and its inhabitants invert the geography of the centre and the periphery to impart these spaces with unexpected, yet evocative, meanings. The frontier as a cultural space is birthed and consolidated in what Slotkin calls an "aspiring violence"—be it against the earlier inhabitants, the wider ecology, or even within the communities of the settlers themselves (17). As America renews itself in the frontier, it does so through a sharp, abrupt rupture with the past of the land and the people. When Abner storms into the plantation house, he threatens to reenact this foundational violence, but also serves us a stinging reminder to the new lords of the land of their own beginnings. In every sense of the term, Abner's presence in this scene unsettles us by being glaringly out of place. All the more perhaps as we know what appears out of place is in reality the intimate other of the land, and thus oddly familiar in its strangeness.

Sigmund Freud, while making his observations on the nature of the uncanny,

specifically traces the fear it inspires to this feeling of familiar unfamiliarity rendered in the presence of what ought not to have been. The boy's father, as he stands raging at the entrance hall, disturbs the occupants also because he serves as a grim reminder of the other white America—the America more at home in the wilderness and less accustomed to the comfort of the cosy hearth—the America of the frontiersmen. His presence bore the traces of an ethos that was not merely different, but also disenchanted and to an extent contemptuous of plantation life. What in fact rendered his presence unbearable was that he simultaneously stood for what possibly lay buried in the memories of the past for the mansion and its occupants: the long and troubled history of westward migration and its inseparability from the myth of manifest destiny and by implication, all that stood for prosperity and well-being. His attire, outlandish to the environs of the house, nevertheless bore traces of its occupant's past and in a moment of sheer panic, the house, the home space of comfort and stability—fleeting appears as an unknown surrounding and unhinges the stable world of the residents. It then becomes an imperative to have the stranger, and the unknown, removed.

Interestingly, this frontiersman image of the father inspires a strange, almost painful ambivalence in the boy's mind. In fact, he never quite has the chance to get himself used to this image of his father— an image he adores and abhors at the same time. Viewed from this perspective, the fact that all their conversations happen outside their home and never in a very friendly way is significant. The boy tries to help his father without much avail, and all his efforts to win favour fall flat. We see him caught up in a hopeless struggle of reconciling the image he has of his father with the person who moves around. The disappointment that follows is embedded precisely in the visualisation of the man as a father-figure—as somebody the boy ought to become. The fear that grips the child is a fear of the undesired inevitable. The father is somebody whom he would never want to become and yet whose protection and tenderness he desires. As their relationship deteriorates, the boy becomes

uncomfortably aware of the undesired frontiersman buried deep in him that shall return—albeit against his wishes. His struggle against his father is, therefore, a resistance against this patriarchal uncanny.

Implicit perhaps in this resistance is also a recognition of the elemental role that fire played in acts of frontier appropriation. As an instrument for land westward expansion, fire, and by extension any instance of burning is a twisted expression of that claim to spatial power. Rendered helpless and flailing at the margins, Abner resorts to this foundational instrument to give vent to his rage. At the same time, it is this very expression that Sarty finds fascinating and repulsive in equal measure. He can intuit the primal yet historically charged meaning the fire carries in this specific instance. At that moment, the frontiersman's violence reasserts its foundational role in American life, and brings into sharper focus his inability to escape or repudiate it.

Conclusion

The selected short stories of William Faulkner appear to posit, then, a whole new category of the uncanny- the threshold. The fear Nancy expresses regarding Jesus's presence or the misgivings of Sarty regarding Abner in "Barn Burning" or even Emily's obsession with arresting the passage of time cannot exactly be engaged with or explained within the paradigms offered by the Freudian framework of the 'suppressed' and the 'surmounted' operative in the uncanny. In each of these instances what we encounter, instead, is the deceptive manoeuvres of the threshold at work, its duplicity as both inside and outside space giving rise to a disorienting effect. The threshold—in case of Jesus's return, or Emily's courtship of death, or Sarty's losing battle against identifying with his father—is never supposed to be suppressed or surmounted.

In fact, the threshold is never entirely unexpected but merely held in an uneasy

abeyance. Like a daemon, it always lingers on our heels, awaiting projection in the most ordinary, commonplace events that surround our daily lives. Faulkner's stories remind us of the centrality that the threshold, as a zone of perpetual crossovers, occupies in our lives. The principal characters in all the three stories start off with a set of defined expectations around the threshold, and yet, it is the shifting strands of those expectations that chart the unsettling, unpredictable turn the stories take. While the moments of these shifts stand out as exceptional, their ordinariness startles us and the characters in the story alike. The disorienting effect the uncanny registers on us has to do with a very specific play of presence and absence unique to it. Unlike the repressed subconscious, the uncanny is never really contained and forever makes its presence known, as the narrator in "A Rose for Emily", and Nancy or Sarty all come to realise. A close reading of these stories, focused especially on the moments of the threshold's emergence as the uncanny, indicates a spatial valence that goes well beyond the merely metaphorical.

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