



Photo of Egyptian Mummy. Keith Schengill-Roberts - Wikimedia Commons

FREUD AND THE PHARAOHS

DAVID LEWISTON SHARPE LOOKS AT THE UNCANNY REALITY OF ANCIENT EGYPT

‘Wonderful things!’ was Howard Carter’s exclamation on peering into the shadows of Tutankhamen’s tomb in 1922 and glimpsing its fabulous treasures. So began our modern day wonder at ancient Egypt – with its mystery, magnificence, and mummies. But does our wonder arise from a more fearful fascination, akin to a primordial dread of the dark, of danger, ghosts and gruesome spectacle? One of the dictionary definitions of wonder explains how the word indicates a dumbfounded reaction to the apparently strange and supernatural. Our preoccupation with myths and legends has led, however, to a separation of symbol from story, alighting on a more scientific understanding of the world around us.

But there is something uncanny and slightly scary about all those bandaged bodies, which in many ways are the focus of preoccupations with ancient Egypt. The German philosopher Friedrich Schelling, in his 1835 study *Philosophie der Mythologie*, suggests those phenomena that can be described as uncanny are concerned with hidden things that are revealed when they were

neither expected nor meant to be. Thus any exhumation would be uncanny, and the ancient Egyptian inanimate bodily forms, the clearly humanoid coffins and sarcophagi, are emblems of the uncanny *par excellence*. Fundamentally, we should not gawk at the rotting remains of fellow human beings, nor at the interred paraphernalia of ritual burials. If we follow Schelling, these things

ought – and were indeed intended – to stay hidden from mortal view.

Our instinct is that it’s ‘wrong’ to be scrutinizing a mummified body from the ancient world; like our aversion to bad smells, which makes us impulsively recoil and retreat for fear of succumbing to some devastating pestilence generating the odor.

My awareness of the ancient Egyptian ‘uncanny’, was highlighted on my first visit to Egypt. I went to Edfu which boasts a grand temple from the Ptolemaic period dating from during the last centuries BCE. Approaching the building from the modern mud-brick houses and market places, there is a powerful impression of being met with an unsettling presence – as if the back wall of the temple, with its serried ranks of animal-headed deities, were an intrusion from another place. So little does it seem to connect with our familiar built environment, we are startled – in the arid shimmering heat – by its reality. The strong sunlight adds to the oddity, as the immediacy of such an unfamiliar sight is presented to the eye in sharp relief. It is the same when faced with the appearance of a dead body among the living.

Sigmund Freud, the father of modern psychoanalysis, wrote an article on ‘The Uncanny’ published in 1919, just three years before Howard Carter’s landmark discovery. Freud was fascinated by ancient Egypt, and R.W. Rieber, in his book *Freud on Interpretation: the ancient magical Egyptian and Jewish traditions*, points out that Freud’s library had more books on Egypt than anything else, psychoanalysis aside. He also collected Egyptian statuary. Freud admits that his essay on the

uncanny amounts to an intrusion into unfamiliar territory for a psychoanalyst (perhaps even in an ‘uncanny’ way), by exploring aesthetics and linguistics. Freud quotes another psychologist, Ernst Jentsch, who wrote that feelings of the uncanny can arise when there is ‘doubt as to whether an apparently living being really is animate and, conversely, doubt as to whether a lifeless object may not in fact be animate’. We can include our reaction to mummified bodies.

The Egyptians themselves hoped for a reanimation of the deceased. Whether or not they were aware of the practical failure of the mummification process to preserve the dead intact, the aim was to cheat the everyday reality of death with an act that reached beyond into realms of the mysterious and magical. A canny attempt to moderate the uncanny.

THE PSYCHOLOGY OF WONDER

The uncanny lurks within the broader world of wonder. This much is inferred in a recent article exploring the philosophy of wonder, where Neel Burton locates it in the surprise and unexpected impulse generated by something marvelous – or, literally, a ‘marvel’. In this is the germ for all science, religion, art and anything



Giza Sphinx. Wikimedia Commons

transcendent, says Burton. The word ‘marvel’, he explains, comes from the Latin *mirabilia*, meaning ‘wonderful things’. So we can infer that Carter’s uncanny discovery is not so far from this.

With the light of wonder comes also its dark side of awe, and fear – to which Neel Burton couples terror and indeed horror. Harnessing wonder to aim at wisdom and a philosophical view is the target for using wonder in our favor – but without which we seem unable, at first, to frame the question taking away the fear of something apparently strange, and bring ourselves to a position of understanding.

When we see an ancient Egyptian mummy, our uncanny feelings are awakened because we can’t really accept that what we see is in fact dead. We wonder at its passivity, because a human form is broadly speaking something with which – rather, someone with whom – we can interact on

an equal level. We expect that at any moment, the mummy’s finger will twitch or that it will rise up out of its golden coffin and croak some indistinct greeting or incantation.

Such nightmare scenarios are of course the stuff of movies and the lifeblood of a great many successful film-making enterprises and franchises. What we have in our minds when we visit a museum, for instance, is a memory of Arnold Vosloo (or dear old Boris Karloff) as Imhotep in *The Mummy* and its various sequels or remakes. What these movies bring into common view are the bad dreams or waking visions that otherwise remain hidden in our imagination. These make the whole cinematic exercise itself something of an uncanny phenomenon. Presenting hidden fears, the bogeymen of childhood by another name, these movies compound the uncanniness, relying on our reaction to the ‘wrongness’ of the ancient world’s almost inexplicable preservation. The story they tell is not the uncanny thing: it is uncanny that there is in such instances an outward presentation of an uncanny narrative.

Freud writes about another bogeyman story concerning the Sand-Man. The story originates with E.T.A Hoffmann who relates the narrative of a character called



LEFT: Edfu Temple. Olaf Tausch - Wikimedia Commons RIGHT: Mummy of Merenre I. Juan R. Lazaro - Wikimedia Commons

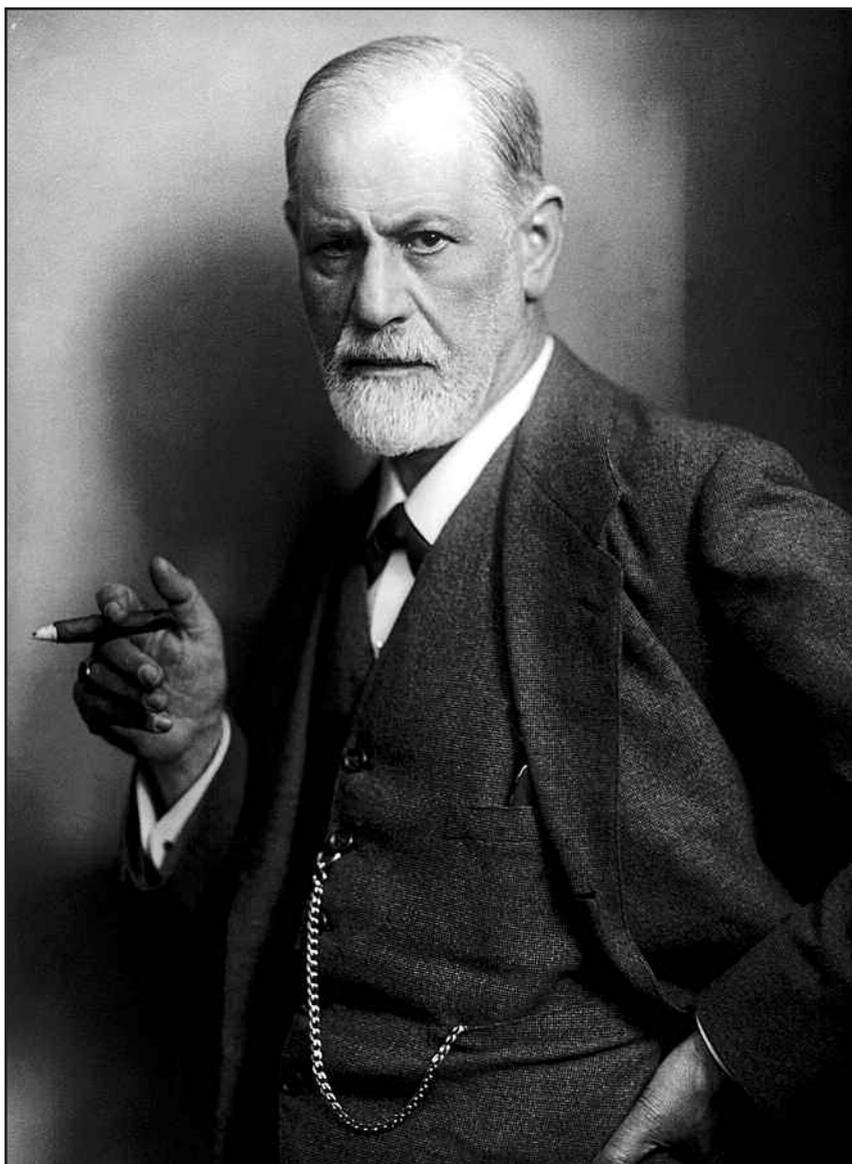


Nathaniel and his father's urging him to go upstairs early, unless he wants the Sand-Man to get him. This 'bogyman' was meant to throw sand in the eyes of naughty children who won't go to bed when they're told.

The haunting figure is not the uncanny part of the story. Memories of the Sand-Man story recalled by the character Nathaniel later in adult life haunt him when he buys a spyglass from an itinerant optician. Nathaniel believes this man to be the visitor his father received (their names nearly identical) whenever he was threatening his son with the apparition of the Sand-Man. With the spyglass he looks through a neighbor's window, at who he believes to be their daughter with whom he falls in love. It is instead a life-like automaton – called Olympia. He encounters the doll close up when he surprises her 'father' and the optician, from whom he bought his spyglass, arguing. The optician had fashioned eyes for the automaton – but in an uncanny twist, though Nathaniel now sees not a woman, but instead a lifeless doll, the eyes are flung to the floor, bleeding.

The story highlights that same oddity we experience when we see a well-preserved Egyptian mummy. It wouldn't surprise us to see it bleed if wounded, or open its eyes, except, of course, the surprise would be displaced by disturbance and horror at the uncanny nature of an encounter with something alive/dead, animate/inanimate (as Jentsch and Freud would have it). Elsewhere for Freud, this concerns the taboo of the dead, or 'the natural horror that the corpse inspires'.

The wonder of an Egyptian mummy is, therefore, the held-breath expectation in perpetual abeyance, similar to wonderful vistas opening up before us on a



Sigmund Freud (1920). *Public domain*



Portrait of E.T.A Hoffmann (1800). *Public domain*

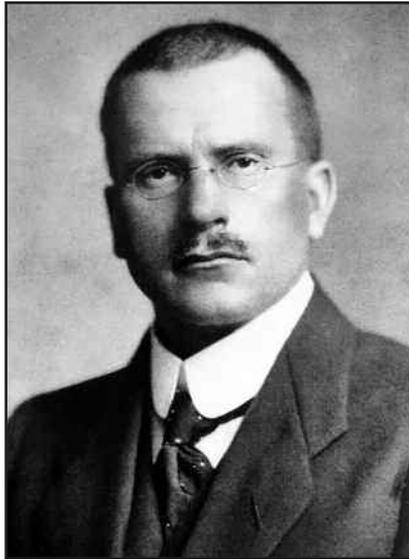
pyramid, or beside a vast temple – intruding on our more mundane experiences.

THE EGYPTIAN KA AND THE UNCANNY 'DOPPELGÄNGER'

Freud mentions the ancient Egyptians' innate need to create stone statue 'doubles' in lasting materials. With their belief system, the 'self' was divided into several components – the *ba*, *ka*, *shu* (or 'shadow'), *akh* (the transfigured life force or transcendent power), and the body. The *ba* was the soul they believed could travel to and from the body, usually depicted as a bird with a human head. They had *ka*



LEFT: Johann Wolfgang von Goethe (1814), by Josef Raabe. Public domain
RIGHT: C.G. Jung Public domain



mode of psychological transformation. Goethe's move and the end of his relationship may have generated a crisis in which part of him 'died'; it is not impossible that in the ancient world such eventualities were source for quasi-religious responses to mental distress ritualized as *ka* statues, mummification, and fragmentation of the psyche ('soul') in place of more rational and scientific insight.

A DISTURBANCE OF MEMORY BY THE NILE

It seems no coincidence that the work of another German author, which appeared the same year as Howard Carter's discovery, Rainer Maria Rilke's *Duino Elegies*, presents a powerful inference of the uncanny. Freud had, in fact, met Rilke in the summer before World War I. In an essay on 'Transience', Freud refers to a conversation with Rilke in which he remarked on his inability to enjoy the 'blossoming summer landscape' through which they were walking, because it would fade with the winter as with everything noble and beautiful that humankind has made.

Rilke's *Duino Elegies* are regarded as a modernist reaction to religious or transcendent views of death. In the words of the back cover blurb to a recent English translation, they are 'godless' poems. Therefore, focus falls on what they tell us about our own inward psychology, intriguing in the context of a heightening of global attention on ancient Egypt through Tutankhamen's tomb, and given the cultural background that includes Sigmund Freud's theories of the unconscious.

Rilke's poems are couched in the physical realities of life, and a falling towards nothing – beyond which he sees just the 'endlessly

statues which stand in place of the body, as a dwelling for the soul should the preserved body end up destroyed. The *ka* itself was the body's insubstantial 'double'.

Such a modern preoccupation as expressed in this 'fairytale' would not have been unrecognizable to the ancient Egyptians. And this may explain the oddity of their separating out of constituent parts to the self into the *ba*, *ka*, etc. In this scenario, the 'false doors' which appear in tombs and temples become a kind of mirror which allow the dead to move backwards and forwards through, from the 'real' world to a carbon copy of it, where the afterlife continues much as consciousness has in this life – but in exaggerated terms. Less a mirror than a lens to intensify experience – much as is expressed in the Book of the Dead where it is suggested the afterlife nature is yet more abundant, but familiar in all its details.

The German poet Goethe described encountering his *doppelgänger* while riding his horse along a footpath. He was about to leave his place of abode, the Alsace, and also the woman with whom he had had a brief love-affair – and he says his apparent

encounter had a strange calming effect in the stressful circumstances in which he found himself. His double was riding in the opposite direction, in attire he didn't recognize, but which (uncannily...) he recalled later, he was wearing when he paid one more visit to his lover eight years after.

Although this has nothing immediately to do with inanimate bodies encountered by animate ones, it indicates for Goethe what Freud's rival Carl Gustav Jung defines as 'ego death' or 'psychic death', when one undergoes a



Rainer Maria Rilke (1900). Public domain

dead' ('unendlich Toten' in the original German). Yet at the very beginning of the first of the ten elegies, the poet records a line which he reports as having heard spoken by a voice calling through the wind on the battlements of a castle: 'Who, if I cried out, would hear me among the ranks of the angels?' If his thoughts had become somehow projected away from him, and directed back as though coming from someone else, what could be a more uncanny experience of poetic inspiration? That which is hidden (at least from others), his own imagination, was made manifest – even if only for his own apparent experience of an auditory hallucination.

In the last elegy, a female personification of 'Lament' leads the poem's protagonist away from all the modern distractions that the poem says deny a true need for authentic grieving in the face of death. She shows him temple columns and ruins of a world – uncannily – not distant in *time* from the more recent and immediate environment of material denial; rather, a longstanding 'regime' in which true grief and rage at mortality were embraced, but now masked, though ever-present. At dusk, they travel to the graves of oracles and soothsayers. By night, they encounter the Sphinx by the Nile, with its 'concealed chamber and its clear countenance'. Instead of the word



Tutankhamun tomb. Wikimedia Commons



Howard Carter at Tut's Tomb.
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for 'face', the German text uses the word 'Antlitz' – a more poetic word inferring 'visage' or 'visible appearance'.

The narrator of the poem expresses how disturbed he is by the way the face of the Sphinx – which is described as being not the real one by the Nile in Egypt, but a 'brother' to it – is staring at the eternal stars. Rilke's choice of word for 'face', in the context of Jentsch's view of the uncanny, is highly suggestive less of a supernatural view and more a psychological stance in relation to the mind, its processing of the world around us, and our emotional response to experiences. The Sphinx has become a simulacrum by means of its duplication, and the residence (in ancient Egyptian terms, a kind of 'ka') for Rilke's notions of expressive truth.

It is an effective borrowing of signs and symbols, at a time when ancient Egyptian culture was once again to the fore, and which achieves new meaning given the background of archaeology and Freudian psychoanalysis.

If wonder ultimately proves to be a complex emotion, as Neel Burton implies, then recognition of the uncanny is simpler. Perhaps it is a reflection of the instinctive response held within us in the face of a sudden appearance of something alien to our environment. In an age before history, we would have lit a fire to ward off attacks by animals. Later, to

protect themselves from animals that might overpower them with the force of their unconscious impulses, the ancient Egyptian gods were given the faces of animals they feared, which they desired to overcome. In ancient times, perhaps in a simpler world (without trying to conjure a utopia or 'golden age' that never truly existed), instinctive responses would have been more readily manifest.

Perhaps for the ancient Egyptians, the world as they understood it was already an uncanny place to begin with. *Em*

FURTHER READING

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