

Jane Edison  
Professor Daly  
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Love in Peculiar Circumstances; An Analysis of Anna's Love in the *Unheimlich*

The term *unheimlich*, popularized by Sigmund Freud in his 1919 essay "The Uncanny," can be defined as "uncanny, or weird", and directly translated to "unhomely". Within gothic literature, this term can describe anything out of the ordinary, or portraying macabre and unnatural themes through gothic motifs. Additionally, it can refer to the unsettling feeling that arises when the familiar suddenly becomes strange or when the boundaries between reality and the supernatural blur. However, it is not just the depiction of motifs that qualifies something as *unheimlich*, but also the interaction between a character and their experiences, particularly when these interactions subvert what is considered "normal," or in this case, "homely." Throughout Elizabeth Gaskell's novella, "The Grey Woman", Anna's, the protagonist's experiences and perceptions of love are convoluted and odd enough to consider her relationship to love and domesticity through home life, marriage, and interactions as *unheimlich*.

Through the concept of the *unheimlich*, an analysis of "The Grey Woman" demonstrates how Gothic literature uses the uncanny to explore deeper psychological and societal issues, challenging readers to confront the strangeness that lies beneath the surface of everyday life. One particularly important instance of this application is in Anna's home life. The concept of home as a safe, familiar space is disputed in the novella. As Anna notes about her new residence and given rooms:

"But when, in the gloom of an autumnal evening, I caught my own face and figure reflected in all the mirrors, which showed only a mysterious background in the dim light of the many candles which failed to illuminate the great proportions of the half-furnished

salon, I clung to M. de la Tourelle, and begged to be taken to the rooms he had occupied before his marriage, he seemed angry with me, although he affected to laugh, and so decidedly put aside the notion of my having any other rooms but these, that I trembled in silence at the fantastic figures and shapes which my imagination called up as peopling the background of those gloomy mirrors” (Gaskell 8).

In this short description, Anna realizes that even her perception, of which she is so familiar with, looks eerie to her. The only difference is where she is and who she has become. Anna's experiences transform her perception of domestic spaces from comforting to threatening or alien. This can be clearly seen through the dramatic shift that she experiences when she marries M. de la Tourelle and has to leave her father and brother. The shift in Anna's perception of home from a place of comfort to one of threat is a classic Gothic trope; as it occurs gradually, mirroring Anna's growing awareness of her situation.

Though they were never kind in the beginning, the once-familiar rooms and corridors of her new home with M. de la Tourelle become maze-like and oppressive, reflecting the advancement of her emotional and psychological state: “Incongruous as the two parts were, they were joined into a whole by means of intricate passages and unexpected doors, the exact positions of which I never fully understood” (Gaskell 8). Where societal norms depict her marital shift as one of great promise and advancement; becoming the mistress of a house and marrying into wealth; Anna's displacement and anguish flip what is expected and can thus qualify her experience as abnormal.

The institution of marriage which is typically associated with love and security, is portrayed as a source of fear, entrapment, or estrangement for Anna. In combination with the

experience of domesticity, Anna's marriage to M. De la Tourelle serves as a pivotal moment, marking the transition from her old life to a new, unsettling reality.

This threshold experience is also common in Gothic literature, where crossing boundaries often leads to encounters with the uncanny. The stark contrast between her expectations of marital bliss and the reality she faces heighten the sense of *unheimlich*. In particular to her husband, M. De la Tourelle's control over the household can be seen as an exaggeration of societal norms, making the familiar concept of male authority in the home feel sinister and oppressive. As he leads her away from her family to their shared house, he states:

“Henceforth, Anna,' said he, 'you will move in a different sphere of life; and though it is possible that you may have the power of showing favour to your relations from time to time, yet much or familiar intercourse will be undesirable, and is what I cannot allow.' I felt almost afraid, after this formal speech, of asking my father and Fritz to come and see me...” (Gaskell 8).

This subversion of Anna's marital expectations contributes to the uncanny atmosphere, as well as the perpetuation of Victorian times' societal roles within a marriage to an extreme extent.

The novella also explores Anna's internal struggles, blurring the lines between her desires, fears, and reality, thus creating an uncanny experience for both the character and the reader. Gaskell employs elements of psychological realism and surrealism to enhance this uncanny experience. Scenes that should feel safe become imbued with menace, and familiar settings take on an eerie quality. This disorientation reflects Anna's fragmented psyche, which contributes to the categorization of Anna's experiences in the *unheimlich*. This narrative structure can contribute to the uncanny feeling of the story.

Additionally, Anna's encounters with other characters particularly related to love and intimacy, are depicted in ways that are simultaneously familiar and deeply unsettling. The first example we receive is her relationship with M. de la Tourelle, whom she marries and grows to both love and fear in intertwined and often dichotomous terms. As Anna details:

“I felt at this time as if I could have been fond of him too, if he would have let me; but I was timid from my childhood, and before long my dread of his displeasure...conquered my humorous inclination to love one who was so handsome, so accomplished, so indulgent and devoted. But if I could not please him when indeed I loved him, you may imagine how often I did wrong when I was so much afraid of him as to quietly avoid his company for fear of his outbursts of passion” (Gaskell 9).

For Anna to both think that she could love her husband, and also know that she fears him oftentimes and in great ways depicts the paradoxical nature of her love and relationship with M. de la Tourelle.

The way Anna's story is told also contributes to the uncanny feeling in the novella through non-linear storytelling, unreliable narration, and the inclusion of nested narratives. Since the story is essentially a tale within another story via the manuscript her life was detailed in, the question of if Anna's experience is truthful, out of order, or even completely made up. This questionable history creates an air of mystery around the event of the novella itself, as well as a sense of underlying horror in all the themes and motifs, thus categorizing her experience detailed in the manuscript to be *unheimlich*. Additionally, the non-linear organization of Anna's manuscript is also significant. The manuscript vaguely details the beginning of Anna and M. de la Tourelle's acquaintance with one another and their relationship, and then quickly shifts into an account of a specific experience that she had with Amante and her husband's band of murderers,

and then again into the summary of the rest of her life post-escape with smaller specificities. This emphasis on the most gruesome and horrific experience that Anna had highlights her life in the *unheimlich*, her relationship in the *unheimlich*, and also the explanation of her title, "The Grey Woman", for which she earned out of fear caused by this unhomeliness and blurring of her life and the supernatural horrors that blend into reality within the *unheimlich*.

These uncanny elements serve to highlight the often hidden or repressed aspects of these institutions of love, marriage, and society, revealing the potential for horror within seemingly normal domestic situations. This approach demonstrates how Gothic literature uses the uncanny not merely for shock value, but as a powerful tool for social commentary and psychological exploration. By making the familiar strange, Gaskell invites readers to reconsider their own assumptions about home, marriage, and women's roles in society, thus extending the impact of the novella beyond its immediate narrative.

Through Anna's journey, Gaskell challenges readers to confront the deeper societal issues that underpin the domestic ideal. The *unheimlich* serves as a lens through which the anxieties of the Victorian era regarding gender roles, autonomy, and the nature of love can be examined. Anna's experiences invite readers to reflect on the complexities of domestic life and the often-unacknowledged fears that accompany it. Ultimately "The Grey Woman" uses the concept of the *unheimlich* not only to highlight Anna's personal struggles but also to critique societal expectations surrounding marriage and domesticity. Gaskell's exploration of the uncanny invites readers to confront the unsettling truths that lie beneath the surface of seemingly ordinary experiences, making the novella a profound commentary on the psychological dimensions of love and identity in a constrained world. (1509 words).

### Works Cited

Gaskell, Elizabeth. "The Grey Woman". Provided by Mitsuharu Matsuoka on 7 June 1997 (8-9)

"Unheimlich; noun, adjective; c-1877". Oxford English Dictionary. First published 1986; not yet revised