

This is a graded discussion: 10 points possible

due -

Week 1 Discussion Board Post (Section D)

Hi everyone,

So, this first week we're spending quite a bit of time thinking through some terminology and some ways to theorize this thing called *weird* fiction. I put up three different reading options here for how to think about weirdness. Given that you won't really be able to read all three of them, I'll give some short-ish summaries here:

- 1.) From the thought of H. P. Lovecraft: "weirdness" comes from a focus on "fear," one of the most primordial of emotions. Thinking about the stories we'll read this semester in terms of "fear" will get us focusing on some things rather than others—and as we go through the semester feel free to decide if stories that make you afraid are best classified as "weird." Maybe, maybe not: and why not call fiction that makes you afraid something like "horror" rather than "weird"?
- 2.) From Freud and psychoanalysis: here we have this notion of what Freud calls the "uncanny"—this is a feeling or affect that is strongly connected to repetition and things that repeat (Tyson does a wonderful job of explicating this). Freud gives numerous examples of situations that produce uncanniness. One of his most vivid is of his situation of getting lost in Rome and, while trying to find his bearings, he finds himself again and again and again coming back to the same place in the city. It weirds him out, greatly. Tyson helpfully shows many of the ways in which each of us is a kind of place or site of uncanniness: when people finds themselves repeating the same actions again and again and again (I can't seem to choose life partners that treat me well; I always find myself in the same situation over and over again with every lover/partner I have), this tips us off to the ways in which it is incredibly difficult for us to feel "at home in the world." Focusing on this angle will ask everyone to pay attention to repetition in these stories—how does repetition make certain things produce a feeling of weirdness or strangeness?
- 3.) Lastly, we have Mark Fisher's *The Weird and the Eerie*. This book with its two chapters on the "weird" and the "eerie" give us a nice pair of definitions. For Fisher, the "weird" is produced by the presence of something that shouldn't really be there—weirdness occurs when two things come together that we don't ever really normally think of as going together. (Fisher's favorite example here is that of something like surrealist art, especially the strange ways in which Salvador Dali and so many others would put together all kinds of bizarre things that don't normally go together at all.) Perhaps an example?



I know this image by Rene Magritte from 1928 might seem strange to all of us post-COVID here, but this painting is called *The Lovers*. A pair of lovers kissing with sheets over their faces should no doubt strike as a bit odd, no doubt? When two kiss, we want nothing in between, nothing that closes off one to another. It's bizarre, to say the least. Fisher says paintings like this are *weird*.

Now "the eerie" is different. Fisher argues that "the weird is constituted by a presence—the presence of that which does not belong. In some cases of the weird (those with which Lovecraft was obsessed) the weird is marked by an exorbitant presence, a teeming which exceeds our capacity to represent it. The eerie, by contrast, is constituted by a failure of absence or by a failure of presence. The sensation of the eerie occurs either when there is something present where there should be nothing, or there is [*sic*] nothing present when there should be something" (p. 27) Fisher goes on to give us some examples:

We can grasp these two modes quickly by means of examples. The notion of an "eerie cry" — often cited in dictionary definitions of the eerie — is an example of the first mode of the eerie (the failure of absence). A bird's cry is eerie if there is a feeling that there is something more in (or behind) the cry than a mere animal reflex or biological mechanism — that there is some kind of intent at work, a form of intent that we do not usually associate with a bird. Clearly, there is something in common between this and the feeling of "something which does not belong" that we have said constitutes the weird.

But the eerie necessarily involves forms of speculation and suspense that are not an essential feature of the weird. Is there something anomalous about this bird's cry? What exactly is strange about it? Is, perhaps, the bird possessed — and if it is, by what kind of entity? Such speculations are intrinsic to the eerie, and once the questions and enigmas are resolved, the eerie immediately dissipates. The eerie concerns the unknown; when knowledge is achieved, the eerie disappears. It must be stressed at this point that not all mysteries generate the eerie. There must be also a sense of alterity, a feeling that the enigma might involve forms of knowledge, subjectivity and sensation that lie beyond common experience. (p. 27)

Thus, the weird and the eerie, for Fisher, are not at all the same—and I myself will say that hopefully this distinction will be incredibly useful to all of us as we start making our way through the stories this semester.

In terms of your response for this week, which two options did you take for this week and what did you think? Did my summaries above leave too much out? Is there something from these different readings that you found to be incredibly interesting or thought-provoking or confusing or impossible to understand or so crystal-clear that it wasn't even funny? Feel free to respond however you like and also to have a read through of your fellow students' posts and respond if there was anything you saw that you liked, would like to expand upon, etc. (If you wanted some more long-winded guidelines from me for engaging the Lovecraft and Freud, more specifically, head over [this way \(https://learn.stfrancis.edu/courses/1178870/pages/course-videos-page\)](https://learn.stfrancis.edu/courses/1178870/pages/course-videos-page)...)

Choices of authors here to post about include Moorcock's "Foreweird," the Vandermeers's "Introduction," Lovecraft's "Supernatural Horror" or "Notes on Writing Weird Fiction," Freud's "The Uncanny," Tyson's chapter in *Critical Theory Today*, Fisher's *The Weird and the Eerie*.

If you could, please respond to one of your fellow student's posts here for this week. (You will all no doubt notice a pattern here very soon: every week you will post your thoughts and reading of three stories from the assigned reading for the week (I've put the choices that you could pick for each week too on the prompt too, so you won't have to keep track of that) —and each week's board will also ask you to respond to one of your another post by one of your fellow students. You're in the driver's seat: you decide which three stories to focus on; you decide which of your fellow students' posts you would like to respond to each week.)

Lastly: as a general guide, please feel free to cite the texts you discuss directly—the more often the better, although, use your judgment in how often you want to point us directly to a particular passage or sentence or what have you in the readings.



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