

Isadora Vogt:
**GLÜCK
FÜR SORGENKINDER**

Among rows of grey houses, a colorful one for the trouble-children. Inside, strained and smiling faces with pink padded cheeks stare through doors left ajar. Wooden train tracks, straight and curved, creep through rooms and afternoons. They are singing “*If you’re happy and you know it, clap your hands.*” Not all sing along. A dark-blond, gap-toothed boy still needs help finding a place in this little collective. He’s temperamental and occasionally aggressive: disrupts games, screams, throws himself to the ground, pushes other children around. Mrs. Lisso knows how to deal with him. “*I calmly take him aside and quietly but firmly point out his misbehaviour and whisper the protocol: ‘If you’re happy and you know it, shout hurray (hurray!)’.* And, little by little they grow ‘heimelig’ with each other.”

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What are they afraid of? “Snakes, pigs, the wolf and the fox...and big children because they throw big stones” (Regula, 4 years old). “Devils on TV, in fairyland, they have red cheeks and disgusting teeth” (Beat, 3). “A dog-woman doing laundry” (Helvetia, 4). “The man who comes at night. I once heard something treading and thumping slowly up the stairs. I knew it must be the Sandman. I asked Mother, she said: “There is no Sandman, my dear child.” Her answer did not satisfy me and in my childish mind there unfolded the idea that she had denied the Sandman’s existence only so I was not afraid of him, for I continued to hear him coming up the stairs every night” (Nathanael, 5).

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Though Freud said “rarely does a psychoanalyst feel impelled to investigate the subject of aesthetics even when aesthetics is understood to mean not merely the theory of beauty, but the theory of the qualities of feeling”, in reality, he often turned to art to develop his theory of the unconscious. It is not surprising, then, that in his essay on one of the most hazy and elusive qualities of feeling, the uncanny (*Das Unheimliche*, 1909), he, like German psychiatrist Ernst Jentsch before him,

drew on E.T.A. Hoffmann’s Dark-Romantic classic *The Sandman* (1816). Unlike the old folktale in which the Sandman appears as a slumber-seed-scattering, dream-fabricating cute little man, Hoffmann’s Sandman follows the myth in which the sandman takes on the role of an eye-tearing demon. In the figment of Hoffmann’s benighted protagonist Nathanael, the Sandman gouges out children’s eyes and carries them to the crescent moon to feed to his own – a fear fanned by Nathanael’s maid who tells him that the Sandman’s brood “have crooked beaks like owls so that they can pick up the eyes of naughty human children.” While Jentsch took the uncanny to be the strange and alien, Freud described it as a form of frightfulness related to the long-known and familiar. Something common to psychic life since time immemorial, but estranged by repression. The familiar turned horrifying.

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The clock had hardly struck nine before she said: “*Now, children, to bed, to bed!*” The lapping waves of tidal currents, as heimlich as a lullaby.

*Good evening, and good night, with roses adorned,
With carnations covered, slip under the covers.
Early tomorrow, God willing, you will wake once more.
God willing, you will wake once more.*

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The root of the German word ‘heimlich’ – trisyllabic in Swiss, i.e.: “the warm room and the hei-me-lig afternoon” or “the sentinel’s horn sounds so hei-me-lig from the tower” – lies at home and in secrets. It describes that which is intimate as well as that which is clandestine, withdrawn, obscure, unconscious. Something hidden, but dangerous. “Heimlich is a word”, Freud deduced, “whose meaning moves towards ambivalence until, finally, it coincides with its opposite.”

A: “What do you mean ‘heimlich’?”

B: “Like a buried spring or a dried-up pond. You can’t walk over it without feeling that the water might resurface.”

A: “Oh, we call it unheimlich, you call it heimlich.”

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In Hoffmann's tale, the uncanny is not only evoked by the figure of the sandman but also by the uncertainty over whether or not an apparently animate being might in fact be a lifeless object. We are left in the dark about the true nature of Nathanael's object of desire, Olympia, until she is revealed to be an artificial doll – an automaton. The uncanny is something which ought to have been kept concealed but which has nevertheless come to light.

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Mushrooms twinkle thrice, the trouble-children lapse into silence, their train sets off.

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written with:

Achim von Arnim und Clemens Brentano. *Des Knaben Wunderhorn*, 1808.

Hans-Georg Brauns. *Glück für Sorgenkinder*, 1989.

Sigmund Freud. *Das Unheimliche*, 1909.

E.T.A. Hoffmann. *Der Sandmann*, 1816.

Ernst Jentsch. *Zur Psychologie des Unheimlichen*, 1906.

The Children of Kindergarten Neue Straße.

by Sophia Roxane Rohwetter