

**THE AMBIGUOUS SUPERNATURAL: THE UNCANNY AND *OBJET a* IN TANA
FRENCH'S *IN THE WOODS* AND *BROKEN HARBOUR***

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Wordcount: 5248

Tana French's first novel, *In the Woods*, was a publishing success that established her reputation as – in Lila Shapiro's words – 'a literary novelist who happens to write about murder' (Shapiro 2018). The book soon became known, however, for its ambiguous and open-ended ending, that may or may not be construed as having an element of the supernatural, which became a bone of contention among its readers. This type of ending soon proved to be somewhat of a signature move for French, repeated across her oeuvre – including, arguably, what has been described (Lepucki 2012) as 'her most straightforward novel,' *Broken Harbour*.

In this essay, I will examine French's narrative strategy – what I will refer to as the "ambiguous supernatural" – from the point of view of psychoanalytical theory. More specifically, I will use the Freudian concept of the uncanny (*das Unheimliche*), as well as Lacan's later elaboration of it by means of his concept of *objet a*, to examine the indeterminate, unresolved nature of French's plots and her consistent refusal to satisfy the demands generated in her readers by the mystery. In particular, I will consider not only how this deliberate strategy of non-closure maintains her readers' desire to know, but also reflects larger themes regarding history (both national and personal) and the return of the repressed that underlie her work.

Both *In the Woods* (ItW) and *Broken Harbour* (BH) have first-person narrators: in both cases, they are male police detectives with a traumatic personal history, investigating a crime that brings their past to the fore in unexpected and ultimately devastating ways.

In ItW, Detective Rob Ryan investigates what appear the murder of a child whose body was left in an archaeological dig. So as to be allowed to investigate, Ryan deliberately conceals the fact that the body was found near a housing estate where he himself was involved as a young boy in the unresolved disappearance of two children. When he was twelve, he and two friends of his same age – a boy and a girl – went out playing in the woods surrounding the estate where they lived, and only Ryan returned: when he was finally found, uninjured but in an almost-catatonic state, he was unable to remember what had happened to him and his friends, and his amnesia persisted into adulthood. Ryan and his family then to all purposes crafted a new identity for him, never delving into the events of that day, but rather trying to forget and overwrite them: he was sent to a boarding school in England, where he acquired an English accent, and changed his name from Adam to Rob, so that he would not be connected to the disappearances when he eventually returned to Ireland.

BH's Mick Kennedy is another detective with a harrowing past history that he tries to keep concealed – his mother committed suicide when he was a young man, and, it is ultimately revealed, he blames himself for it, having left her on her own when she asked him to keep her company. In his case, however, the consequences of that traumatic event extend to the present – his younger sister, Dina, is mentally unstable, and her constant, chaotic presence in Kennedy's life prevents him from having any stable relationships of his own. When Kennedy is called upon to investigate the grisly deaths of three of the four Spain family members in a derelict housing estate, his past is brought back to him – the housing estate is located near the beach where his mother once tried to drown herself, taking a very young Dina with her; and where she eventually managed to commit suicide, on a day when, despite her pleas, Kennedy left her mother on her own.

For both detectives, investigating these murders opens the Pandora's box of their own, repressed histories, which wreaks havoc on their present lives (and those of their work and life partners). In Ryan's case, his past identity and connection to the area is revealed, and he is

permanently removed from the Murder Squad. Moreover, at the end of the investigation, Cassie, his detective partner – his closest friend and potential romantic partner – breaks all ties with him after he turns on her when his past identity is found out and he blames her, when she had actually been covering for him all along, placing her own career at risk; and because the self-confessed murderer – with whom Ryan has become infatuated – is found to be a minor (and thus her confession is inadmissible) due to Ryan’s besotted negligence.

In BH, Kennedy leaves the police altogether as a result of a professional and personal crisis of faith when he is forced to plant false evidence after Dina, his disturbed sister, seduces his younger work partner, stealing and deliberately contaminating the existing evidence. In both cases, the collision of the protagonists’ pasts and the murders they investigate results in existential upheaval.

One way in which ItW and BH depart from the traditional police procedural novel is that they both contain a significant element of the uncanny. The definition of ‘uncanny’ given in the Oxford English Dictionary is ‘strange, mysterious.’ Historically, it originates in 16th-century Scots, with the meaning of ‘relating to the occult, malicious’, as the opposite of ‘canny’, which in Northern English and Scots still has the meaning of ‘pleasant, nice.’ In this context, however, I will be using the term more specifically, closer to the definition given by Freud in his paper on this concept.

The German term for ‘uncanny’ is *unheimlich*, which literally translates as ‘un-homely’: that is, something that is not familiar, something that is not what we are ‘at home’ with. Not everything that is strange to us is described as *unheimlich* or uncanny, though. Rather, the uncanny is something that should be familiar but is not: the home, what is the everyday normal to us, suddenly turned alien and threatening. Something that is not in some way previously known to us cannot be uncanny. Thus, Freud argues, the concept of the uncanny requires *repetition*: a place or a person we know as normal is

abruptly perceived, at a different time, as strange and menacing. It is precisely the prior familiar nature of the thing in question that makes it possible for it to become uncanny¹.

But how does something familiar become uncanny? Through the process of repression and distortion, argues Freud: something unacceptable in our ‘normal’ reality is repressed from our consciousness, but the associated affect finds its way out in a distorted form.

We can understand why linguistic usage has extended *das Heimliche* [‘homely’] into its opposite, *das Unheimliche*; for this uncanny is in reality nothing new or alien, but something which is familiar and old-established in the mind and which has become alienated from it only through the process of repression. This reference to the factor of repression enables us, furthermore, to understand [...] the uncanny as something which ought to have remained hidden but has come to light. (Freud 2011, p. 241)

Freud describes the repressed materials in terms of the fear of castration and, ultimately, the fear of death. However, as Jacques Lacan pointed out in his later reformulation of psychoanalytic theory, the notion of castration as intended by Freud should not be taken in a narrowly genital or bodily sense, but rather as more connected to the acceptance of mortality – the knowledge that we are intrinsically limited by the fact that we will eventually die. In the next section, I will give a brief explanation of the ways in which Lacan’s reworking of Freudian theory and his notion of *objet a* cast light on the concept of the uncanny, and, through it, on the plot of French’s novels.

Lacan’s reformulation of psychoanalytical theory inspired by Saussurean linguistics is based on the distinction which he establishes between the three ‘orders’, or modes, through which human beings mentally process their lived experience. Human beings, Lacan argues, are the only species capable of symbolic thought – that is, capable of mental representation that goes beyond the animal level of

¹ Hence, Freud argues, one of the main uncanny tropes, the *doppelgänger*: where it is our own familiar *self-image* that becomes alien and threatening.

merely referential signs. Briefly put, signs are in a one-to-one correspondence relation with their physical referents; by contrast, symbols are detached from the physical world, constituting a universe unto themselves, so that the relation between symbols and reality is fluid, and symbolic thought is also able to refer to things that do not exist. This is what Lacan calls the Symbolic order – the order of language in its broadest sense (verbal, but also visual, musical, mathematical, etc.) It is the realm of signifiers, of the law, of social order, of history, of regulation.

The order of the Imaginary, by contrast, is the order of human experience that emerges from the individual's relationship with their own specular image – be it as perceived in a reflective surface or through others with whom we identify. Identification, in Lacan's view, is the way in which human beings' sense of self is first established – and as such, he argues, it's precarious and illusory, potentially both a source of fascination and a trigger for aggression when the other does not behave as expected and is perceived as a threat. He points out the similarities between this process and the way in which newborn animals will 'imprint' on their first carer (or even the first thing they perceive on a regular basis: like orphaned ducklings following the farmer's bucket.) However, in human beings the imaginary order is always structured by the symbolic, inasmuch as the introduction of symbolic thought means that humans have permanently deviated from the realm of nature. The Imaginary is an essentially visual dimension – the realm of the imagination – often associated with fantasy and art. If not sufficiently tethered to the Symbolic, however, it can run amok, resulting in specular fantasies, in which the other is not understood to be separate from oneself, resulting in the displacement of one's own fears, aggression, infatuation, and other potentially destructive emotions onto the unsuspecting other.

Finally, the Real is the order of that which would seem to escape or overflow the Symbolic, those aspects of reality which the individual's symbolic thought finds itself temporarily unable to contain and structure. Inasmuch as the Real is that which is experienced by the individual as resisting symbolisation – what *cannot be thought* – it is essentially traumatic.

Lacan's theory of the Symbolic, Imaginary, and Real makes it possible to understand his notion of *objet a*. To simplify his theorisation, *a* would be the cause of desire – an object that can

never be attained, because it never existed to begin with. In Lacan's theory, desire is distinct from both biological need and from demand, which is the craving for love, and arises from their articulation: 'Desire begins to take shape in the margin in which demand becomes separated from need.'² Desire, which is symbolic in nature, emerges as the infant moves beyond the purely biological, into the realm of language. Unlike a biological need, like hunger or thirst, that requires a very specific object to be satisfied and can be temporarily sated, desire arises from a *gap*, an emptiness, and thus cannot be fulfilled, but is constant and is only realised by reproducing itself: desire generates more desire. *Objet a* thus stands for an object that is no object, but rather the structural lack or void that was at the origin of the subject's desire.

But how is *objet a* connected to the Freudian uncanny? Freud states that feelings of uncanniness arise as a result of the repression of something intolerable in everyday reality, so that what is known and familiar becomes, in a sudden shift, unexpectedly alien and threatening. Lacan argues that the emergence of the uncanny – which he associates with a feeling of anxiety – is precisely an indicator that *objet a* – the primordial lack that constitutes desire – is no longer an absence, but rather that there is *too much* where there should be a space, an emptiness: that the Symbolic is not functioning as the mediating gap both between the subject and others and between the subject and unsymbolised reality. And thus the subject is both plagued by unleashed imaginary specular fantasies, and overwhelmed by the traumatic Real.

Both in *ItW* and in *BH*, the sense of the uncanny emerges when the main characters return to the scene of their traumatic past. In *ItW*, the uncanniness takes the form of fantasies arising from the fact that the dead girl was found lying on a flat stone (an altar?) in an archaeological dig. The rumours soon start that the child would have been the victim of some ancient ritual or a sacrifice by a satanic cult, and the police investigation is given the name Operation Vestal. Ryan starts seeing strange things that are not there ('something dark and low to the ground, with the sinuous gait of a weasel or a stoat, but much

² Quoted in the entry *Desire* in Evans (1996) (p. 37)

too big for either.’) And as his investigation inevitably brings up the mystery of what happened to him as a child, people describe unexplained sightings of mysterious creatures, connected to ghosts and creatures from Irish folklore:

‘My mammy [...] she always said it was the pooka took them. But she was fierce old-fashioned, God love her.’ This took me by surprise. The pooka is an ancient child-scarer out of legend, a wild mischief-making descendant of Pan and ancestor of Puck. [...] ‘No, they went into the river, or otherwise you people would’ve found the bodies. There’s people say they still haunt the wood, poor wee things. Theresa King from the Lane saw them only last year, when she was bringing in the washing.’ (ItW, p. 302)

‘And then they heard something in the trees, just a few yards away. Sandra says she’s never heard anything like it. Like an enormous bird flapping its wings, she said, only she’s positive it was a voiced sound, a call. [...] It was in the shadows they couldn’t see anything. They were paralysed, totally freaked out, they all just sat there screaming. Finally it stopped and they heard it moving away into the woods – it sounded big, she said, at least the size of a person. They legged it home. And there was a smell, Sandra says, a strong animal smell – like goats or something, or what you get at the zoo.’ (ItW, p. 311)

The descriptions of these sightings are such that they might be in principle have rational explanations. However, French persists in making them ambiguous enough that they cannot be fully explained in either supernatural or non-supernatural terms – they are both too material and too eerie at the same time, neither one nor the other, or both at once, caught in the liminal space of the uncanny. The point is not so much what actually happened, but the imaginary fantasies generated in people by that mystery – including the reader –, which turn mundane, everyday reality (the woods near a housing estate, local wildlife, a ditch in a dig) into something suddenly strange and sinister. In the final chapter, when the wood, the locus of his original trauma, is destroyed to make way for a motorway – in the same way as his professional and personal life has been devastated – Ryan is offered a prehistoric artifact by a local farmer:

The thing was cool in my palm, heavier than you might expect. Narrow grooves, half worn away, formed a pattern on one side. I tilted it to the light: a man, no more than a stick-figure, with the wide, pronged antlers of a stag. (ItW, p. 591)

Just the sort of prehistoric art one might expect to find at a dig? Or evidence of an ancient deity or creature still haunting the land? Ryan refuses to take the artifact, unwilling, it would seem – like many readers – to accept the ambiguity maintained by French’s refusal to satisfy the readers’ demands for closure.

In BH, the uncanny takes two interconnected forms: the ghost estate in which the Spain family lived, and the animal that Pat Spain, the father, kept claiming he could hear in the walls of their house, leading him on an obsessive hunt. (Again, as with the odd sightings in ItW, the mysterious creature is a profoundly ambiguous phenomenon that is described as *too much*, too unwieldy for either a rational or a supernatural explanation.)

The uncanniness of the ghost estate in BH – what was supposed to be an aspirational development for middle-class family on the property ladder, turned into physical and economic ruins as a result of the 2008 financial crisis – has been described as an example of what has been called the ‘Neoliberal Gothic’. The mysterious creature that only Pat Spain is able to hear would be an extension of this uncanniness – even more alarming, in that now the strangeness and hostility of the external world have entered the private sphere of the home: the *Unheimliche* has literally invaded the *Heimliche*.

It is worth noting that, by contrast to ItW, the protagonist of BH, Kennedy, does not become personally infected by the fantasies attendant on the uncanniness that surrounds the murders. Indeed, he is a strong supporter of the economic system that caused happy homes to turn into uncanny ruins in the first place:

I’m a big believer in development – blame the property developers and their tame bankers and politicians for this recession if you want, but the fact is, if it wasn’t for them thinking big,

we'd never have got out of the last one. I'd rather see an apartment block any day, all charged up with people who go out to work every morning and keep this country buzzing and then come home to the nice little places they've earned, than a field doing bugger-all good to anyone except a couple of cows. Places are like people are like sharks: if they stop moving, they die. But everyone has one place that they like to think is never going to change. (BH, pp. 11-12)

The last sentence is no doubt ironic on the author's part – Kennedy can see how the Spains' obsession with their image as the perfect family led to disaster, but does not realise that his own self-image, his certainty about himself and his life (as if they are 'never going to change'), is equally fragile. Kennedy may be (mostly) immune to the uncanny³, but ultimately, his identity and his sense of self are torn to pieces as a result of the forces causing it, just as Rob Ryan's are in *ItW*. Let us take a closer look at this.

Both Rob Ryan in *ItW* and Mick Kennedy are men who experienced a traumatic event in the past that defined their identity, eventually leading them to become detectives. For both men, their profession is at the core of who they are, and are very clear in describing it as a persona, almost a disguise, in terms of their appearance:

When I made the Murder squad, I had already had my new work clothes – beautifully cut suits in materials so fine they felt alive to your fingers, shirts with the subtlest of blue or green pinstripes, rabbit-soft cashmere scarves – hanging in my wardrobe for almost a year. I love the

³ As Emily Johansen has noted: 'Neither the dead children nor the violently bloody remains of the parents — more typical scenes of unimaginable horror—feel uncanny to Mick; instead, it is, in addition to the empty and ruined subdivision, the symptoms (the holes and the cameras) of Pat Spain's obsession with the animal he believed to be in the house, an obsession that develops after he loses his job and spends increasing time at home. There is something quite literally "unhomely" about Pat's transformation of the subdivision house into a site of extensive, excessive surveillance.' (Johansen 2016, p. 40)

unspoken dress code. It was one of the things that first fascinated me about the job – that and the private, functional, elliptical shorthand: latents, trace, Forensic. (ItW, p. 11)

‘If we tool up to the scene in a beat-up ’95 Toyota, it looks disrespectful; like we don’t think the victims deserve our best. That puts people’s backs up. [...] And on top of that, a beat-up old Toyota would make us look like a pair of losers. That matters, my man.’ (BH, p. 11)

[I]n this job everything matters, down to the way you open your car door. [...] I’ve got height, I’ve got a full head of hair and it’s still ninety-nine percent dark brown. I’ve got decent looks if I say so myself, and all those things help [...] (BH, p. 14)

In the case of Ryan, his becoming a policeman was the culmination of the transformation process that started after the mysterious disappearance of his friends: he left Ireland, went to school abroad – shedding his Irish accent for an English one which he still maintains – and took to using his middle name, Rob, rather than his first one, Adam (replacing the name of the first, original man with a name that is homophonous with theft.) To all intents and purposes, he became a different person – arguably, even in terms of nationality – from whom he would have been had the traumatic event not happened.

For Kennedy, however, his detective persona is a way of making sense of what would otherwise be a chaotic universe – his greatest fear:

‘If you want to come out a success, Richie, you cannot go in smelling of failure. Do you get what I’m saying here?’

He touched the knot in his new tie. ‘Dress better. Basically.’

‘Except that it’s not basic, old son. There’s nothing basic about it. The rules are there for a reason. Before you go breaking them, you might want to have a think about what that reason might be.’ (BH, p. 11)

In Lacanian terms, for both detectives, their self-created identities, their self-images, are essentially still imaginary, generated as a response to a traumatic encounter with the Real – not quite a way to fully grasp it symbolically, but rather a distortion that flimsily conceals it. Ryan’s identity is basically camouflage, a way to hide what happened to him by turning into someone else, ‘stealing away’ under the guise of his middle name. For Kennedy, his identity is a way of denying what he fears would be a random, meaningless world in which the fates of his mentally ill mother and sister would make no sense. Both detectives’ identities revolve around an essential void, an enigma – the mystery of what happened to Ryan as a young boy, the mystery of Kennedy’s mother’s suicide and his sister’s madness. This originating emptiness would be, in Lacanian terms, the *objet a* around which their desires revolve (even if they are mainly of an imaginary, precarious nature). And, Lacan would argue, it is when this emptiness is threatened – when the mystery is examined too closely, when there is *too much* where there should be a symbolic gap – that the uncanny arises, and their fragile imaginary identities start to crumble.

This latter point is particularly important, I think – Ryan’s and Kennedy’s imaginary identities are not a response to an emptiness (what Kennedy would say is the horror of a meaningless cosmos, or the dark uncertainty of what happened to Ryan.) Rather, they both *rely* on that emptiness to function: it is the foundation of the lives and selves they have built. Indeed, both Ryan and Kennedy deliberately avoid looking too closely into their respective foundational mysteries, seeking to preserve their *objet a* – the lack *qua* precious object – at all costs. Ultimately, however, they are unable to look away, which leads to disaster – like Oedipus, who, when he looked too closely at the mystery of his own origins, found an incestuous, deadly *too much* there.

Objet a is perceived by the subject as the object that is the *cause* of their desire – even though the object ultimately proves to be a lack, a non-object. It’s interesting that precisely the concept of causation is foregrounded and thematised both in ItW and in BH.

In BH, Kennedy is a fervent believer in linear causation. He believes that there is a cause-effect link between an individual’s conscious actions and what happens to him, ignoring the larger

factors that affect human lives, like the circumstances in which they are born, the society in which they live, and – in the case of 2008 Ireland – the fallout of the economic crisis. On a more personal level, he believes that his sister was made insane by the fact that his mother tried to commit suicide killing her too, when she was a child. When his entire worldview collapses, he remembers that his sister had displayed signs of mental illness before then, which he interprets as further evidence that the world makes no sense – that his sister was mad because of a random genetic glitch, or ‘just because’. He completely overlooks the relatively obvious fact that that a child brought up by a profoundly mentally ill parent will herself most likely display signs of psychological disturbance, which would have only been aggravated (and possibly reached a critical point) by the mother’s attempted murder-suicide.

Kennedy’s simplistic cause-effect view of causality – which underlies the entire neoliberal capitalist system that resulted in the Spains’ destruction – stands in sharp contrast to the Freudian view of causality as *overdetermined*. In Freud’s view, who we are as human beings – including our pathologies – is not determined by one single factor, but by a multiplicity, by a pattern of facts and events that, put together, could not have resulted in a different outcome, but none of which can be individually isolated as *the* root cause. (Which is why seeing *objet a* as an actual, primordial single object that can be recovered is a pure fantasy: in psychoanalytic terms, *there is no prime cause*.)

Yet for Kennedy in BH, this is intolerable: in his view, events ineluctably follow upon each other like dominoes falling. And so, when he is forced to plant faked evidence to prevent a horrible outcome, his entire life as a detective collapses:

Like I told Richie, cause and effect isn’t a luxury. Take it away and we’re left paralyzed, clinging to some tiny raft lurching wild and random on endless black sea. If my mother could go into the water just because, then so could theirs, any night, any minute; so could they.

When we can’t see a pattern, we fit pieces together until one takes shape, because we have to.

[...] *There isn’t any why*. If Dina was right, then the world was unliveable. If she was wrong, if – and this needed to be true – if the world was sane and it was only the strange galaxy inside

her head that was spinning reasonless of any axis, then all of this was because of me. (BH, p. 442)

Kennedy chooses to take the place of the one cause because in his view it's either linear cause-effect or meaninglessness, and he prefers to sacrifice his life as he knows it rather than give up his worldview – he is the one cause of the disaster that ensues, and as such he must pay the price and leave his work, which is the centre of his existence. In a way, he comes to occupy the position of the *objet a* for himself – a void that, by definition, cannot be filled. Ironically, as French herself has suggested in interviews, the collapse of his self-image and his worldview, may be the point at which Kennedy can start to actually grow into a more mature person:

My books are about the cases that force the narrators to come face to face with the damage --- the cases that mean they can't keep it under wraps and try to work around it any more, they have to confront it and either move past it or be defined by it forever. [...] **BROKEN HARBOR** is about the case that breaks down Scorcher's belief in an orderly world governed by reason and the law of cause and effect --- the belief that's been holding him together since childhood. Without that prop, he has to find a new and different way to live. (2012 Author Talk, Bookreporter).

By contrast, Rob Ryan in *ItW* fails to overcome his past trauma, and, albeit disgraced, remains fixed in his imaginary, precarious identity – and French makes it very clear that this is by choice. After finally having sex with her detective partner – the person he is closest to in the world, whom he loves – he rejects her with deliberate cruelty, besotted by the imaginary allure of the teenager that ultimately turns out to be the killer, who has been stringing him along from the start. At one point, he goes into the woods to try and recover his memories of what happened, and is so spooked by them, haunted by hallucinatory fantasies, that he consciously decides never to go there – physically or mentally – again. He opts not to look at what happened and lies about who he is, and, most strikingly, he is fully aware of this fact, warning the reader from the start that he is an unreliable narrator:

The truth is the most desirable woman in the world and we are the most jealous lovers, reflexively denying anyone else the slightest glimpse of her. We betray her routinely, spending hours and days stupor-deep in lies, and then turn back to her holding out the lover's ultimate Möbius strip: But I only did it because I love you so much. [...] What I am telling you, before you begin my story, is this – two things: I crave truth. And I lie. (ItW, pp. 5-6)

As the investigation unfolds, Ryan wants to find the truth about his own history and what has made him who he is: but when he comes too close to this *object a*, he prefers to keep it shrouded in mystery, maintain his self-lie rather than face whatever happened and accept the nature of *object a* as a structural void that cannot be filled. (And in parallel, and not by chance, he chooses a life of brief, shallow relationships rather than face the risk – the vulnerability – of being with a woman who truly knows him.)

Both ItW and BH feature protagonists whose search for the truth leads to personal catastrophe – potentially leading to growth for Kennedy, and making Ryan retrench further, possibly permanently, in his own brittle, barren, imaginary self. They also reflect larger topics of the damage done by the unmoored collective and social imaginary. In ItW, Rob Ryan becomes deracinated to the point of passing for English so as to go unnoticed in an Irish society in which he would be forever marked out, and the investigation is distorted by lurid fantasies connected to a mythic past. In BH, the Irish housing bubble and the neoliberal worldview that underlay it are seen as mass delusions that crystallised in Pat Spain's obsession and his wife's murderous insanity.

Furthermore, central to each novel is a mystery – what happened to Rob Ryan in ItW, what the mysterious creature haunting Pat Spain was in BH – that is left unsolved, to many readers' consternation and even anger. Again, French shows, in the unsatisfied desire generated in her readers by that structuring central void, the power of the unattainable *objet a* to mystify, captivate, and enrage.

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