

UNCANNY IDENTITIES IN ELENA FERRANTE AND OSCAR WILDE

A Thesis submitted to the faculty of  
San Francisco State University  
In partial fulfillment of  
the requirements for  
the Degree

AS

36

2017

WLIT

• M56

Master of Arts

In

Comparative Literature

by

Alessia Joanna Mingrone

San Francisco, California

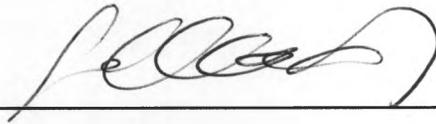
May 2017

Copyright by  
Alessia Joanna Mingrone

2017

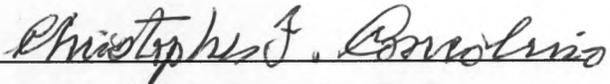
## CERTIFICATION OF APPROVAL

I certify that I have read *Uncanny Identities* in Elena Ferrante and Oscar Wilde by Alessia Joanna Mingrone, and that in my opinion this work meets the criteria for approving a thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirement for the degree Master of Arts in Comparative Literature at San Francisco State University.



---

Shirin A. Khanmohamadi, Ph.D.  
Associate Professor



---

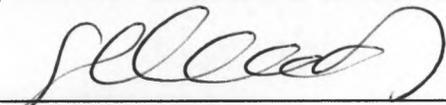
Christopher F. Concolino Ph.D.  
Associate Professor

## UNCANNY IDENTITIES IN ELENA FERRANTE AND OSCAR WILDE

Alessia Joanna Mingrone  
San Francisco, California  
2017

This project studies the implications of the multiplicity and fragmentation of identity as portrayed in Oscar Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1890) and Elena Ferrante's *L'amica geniale (My Brilliant Friend)* (2011). These two texts have yet to be compared side by side, but, as this project intends to demonstrate, their comparison leads to fruitful analysis of literary identity as the catalyst for an uncanny reading experience. This brings us to Freud, the father of psychoanalysis, who is known to have expounded the concept of the uncanny as related to literature and vision. I use his theory to guide my exploration of the paradoxically attractive and repulsive faces of Dorian Gray as well as the complex, mystifying friendship in Ferrante's novel as manifestations of the uncanny. Uncanny feelings are ultimately experienced on two levels in this pair of novels: by the characters themselves as well as by readers. Both Wilde's and Ferrante's text use the uncanny to problematize the concept of a fixed, identifiable personal identity in restrictive societal circumstances. In turn, this literary setting compels readers to face their innate fears and anxieties regarding the concept of identity that derive from paradoxical thoughts and emotions the texts' protagonists may arouse in them.

I certify that the Abstract is a correct representation of the content of this thesis.

  
\_\_\_\_\_  
Chair, Thesis Committee

5-23-17  
\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

A special thank you to my family and to my professors who have supported my intellectual endeavors.

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

Chapter 1: Introduction .....	1
Freud's Uncanny .....	3
The Uncanny in Literature .....	9
Chapter 2: <i>The Picture of Dorian Gray</i> .....	12
Victorian Society Versus the Decadent Aesthetic .....	16
Dorian Gray and the Mirror of the Soul .....	20
Chapter 3: <i>My Brilliant Friend</i> .....	28
Friendship as Alter-Ego .....	32
Dolls and Colors as Leitmotifs .....	35
Mid-1900s Naples: Women and Violence .....	38
<i>Smarginatura</i> / Dissolving Margins .....	47
Chapter 4: Conclusions .....	52
Aging, a Familiar Fear .....	52
Likeability and Uncanniness .....	55
Authorial Identity .....	60
Wilde and Ferrante .....	64
Works Cited .....	68

## Chapter 1: Introduction

*"Most people are other people. Their thoughts are someone else's opinions, their lives a mimicry, their passions a quotation."*

Oscar Wilde

*"Our singularity, our uniqueness, our identity are continually dying. When at the end of a long day we feel shattered, 'in pieces,' there's nothing more literally true."*

Elena Ferrante

What is it about personal identity that makes it such an appealing literary theme? Why do readers become engrossed in formative, coming-of-age novels that feature young and changeable protagonists? One would imagine that, personal identity being fraught with complexity for each of us in real life, readers would avoid mirroring themselves in someone else's search of self. Instead, novels that explore this central question of a fluid identity seem to consistently resonate with and engage readers. Of course, if we take such twenty-first century hits as the *Harry Potter* series or *The Hunger Games*, we can observe how the traditional coming-of-age plot is successfully coupled with action and fantasy. Yet, these ancillary elements seem to be geared toward cinematic adaptations and, by consequence, overshadow the complexity and enigma that lurk beneath the surface of a protagonist's psyche, forming the bulk of his or her personal

identity. There are not many novels that truly zero in on the obscure side of identity, let alone successfully demonstrate its intrusion into characters' everyday lives. By focusing on this unique facet of literature, we are able to explore unsettling and profound questions problematizing the individuality and completeness of literary identity. These types of novels absorb our attention but also make us uncomfortable as we read, leading us to question how it is that we can be simultaneously attracted and repulsed by fiction that appears so real.

This project studies the implications of the multiplicity and fragmentation of identity as portrayed in Oscar Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1890) and Elena Ferrante's *L'amica geniale (My Brilliant Friend)* (2011). These two texts have yet to be compared side by side, but, as this project intends to demonstrate, their comparison leads to fruitful analysis of uncanny literary identity as the catalyst for an uncanny reading experience. This brings us to Freud, the father of psychoanalysis, who is known to have expounded the concept of the uncanny as related to literature and vision. I use his theory to guide my exploration of the paradoxically attractive and repulsive faces of Dorian Gray as well as the complex, mystifying friendship in Ferrante's novel as manifestations of the uncanny.

### Freud's Uncanny

Per Freud's 1919 lecture, "the 'uncanny' is that class of the terrifying which leads back to something long known to us, once very familiar" ("The 'Uncanny'" 2). He criticizes E. Jentsch's original definition of this concept as being limited to its relation with the unfamiliar, the "intellectually uncertain." After consulting multiple dictionaries of the German language including Sanders', Schelling's, and Grimm's for the semantics of the term, Freud arrives at a definition of the uncanny as expressly that which is both familiar and unfamiliar, attractive and repulsive. He does this by studying the words *heimlich* (canny/homey) and *unheimlich* (uncanny/unhomey). Samuel Weber provides a basic definition of the former in "The Sideshow; Or, Remarks on a Canny Moment": "heimlich itself is the repository of ambivalent meanings, signifying on the one hand, the familiar and domestic, on the other and simultaneously the concealed and hidden" (1105). In other words, an individual experiences conflicting emotions toward objects, people, and situations in the world that evoke "uncanniness." The paradoxical nature of this concept brings about cognitive dissonance and mental distress in the experiencing subject.

Freud specifies that this process does not occur in response to any ordinary object, but typically to an idea or entity that reminds the individual of something he or she has experienced during childhood. Thus, "Freud concludes that all instances of uncanny feelings are caused by situations where once

familiar, repressed psychic elements are caused to return; thus, when the repressed becomes un-secret [*unheimlich*], it has the appearance of something frighteningly unfamiliar or un-homely [*unheimlich*]" (Bartnæs 33). In psychoanalysis, most traumatic and formative experiences are believed to occur during childhood, and then reoccur by repetition throughout life. Whenever an event "reoccurs," it is never reproduced in exactly the same manner, but always with some difference. As a result, experiences that have been repressed from childhood become associated with new experiences. Through this repetition-with-difference, the new evokes the old and vice versa, causing the individual to hold conflicting and simultaneous feelings of fear and familiarity.

Freud goes on to explain this concept in light of E.T.A. Hoffman's short story "The Sandman," in which the uncanny consists of the titular figure, essentially a monster from a childhood bedtime story, that robs the protagonist, Nathaniel, of his eyes as an adult. Here, Freud further rejects Jentsch's notion that uncanny sensations are awakened when "intellectual uncertainty" relates to whether an object is alive. In the case of "The Sandman," he refers to the doll Olympia who appears as a living being. In actuality, she is Nathaniel's neighbor's daughter, an automaton, but represents the protagonist's object of desire. Olympia's "uncanniness," however, is overshadowed and rendered insignificant by the angst that the protagonist feels toward the Sandman, claims Freud. The doll's presence in the story remains interesting and worthy of exploration as a

supplement to, rather than the epitome of the uncanny. As I will discuss in Chapter 3, dolls play a liminal role in Ferrante's text as well, symbolically setting the stage for the protagonists who are the true catalysts of the uncanny.

An important feature is noted by Freud through the examination of the literary themes in Hoffman, whom the psychoanalyst refers to as "the unrivalled master of conjuring up the uncanny." This prominent theme is: "the idea of a 'double' in every shape and degree, with persons, therefore, who are to be considered identical by reason of looking alike; Hoffman accentuates this relation by transferring mental processes from the one person to the other . . . in other words, by doubling, dividing, and interchanging the self" (Freud, "The 'Uncanny'" 9). This image of the double is quite specific and evokes the idea of twins or two people who are alike physically and mentally, and might literally be interchanged. In Dorian Gray's case, this proves to be true of himself and his portrait. Ferrante's novel employs the "double" in a less literal way by exemplifying the "doubling, dividing, and interchanging the self" amongst two best friends, each of whose identity becomes enmeshed in the other's. Freud eventually dismisses the notion that every instance of the double is necessarily the mark of the uncanny. More precisely, he indicates that the double dates back to the early mental stage of primary narcissism "in which it wore a more friendly aspect" and gains importance afterward only due to involuntary repetition throughout life. In adulthood, however, duality is no longer a friendly, comforting mechanism, but

rather “has become a vision of terror” (10). Once the self is formed, the double assumes a combative relationship in its regard.

Weber emphasizes the paradoxical nature of this epistemological uncertainty. He claims, “Repetition, duplication, recurrence are inherently ambiguous, even ambivalent processes: they seem to confirm, even to *increase* the ‘original’ identity, and yet even more they *crease* it as its problematical and paradoxical precondition” (1114). First of all, both Freud and Weber’s observations emphasize the idea that the double consists of a splitting of the self, rather than two separate entities that come into contact. Secondly, the sense of divisiveness is ironically amplified due to constant reoccurrence throughout one’s life. In this context, one could posit the existence of an obscure line between the “real” and the imagined parts of one’s identity, which, taken together, produce a dreamlike, intangible quality. In both Wilde and Ferrante’s novels, this quality created by the “double” is extremely prevalent and facilitates the texts’ fruitful comparative interpretation.

Another variation of the double accounted for by Freud, which resonates in both novels, is the role of external societal circumstances in the individual’s recurring perception of free will. The following are the mere two sentences dedicated to this point in his lecture:

But it is not only this [primary] narcissism, . . . which may be incorporated into the idea of a double. There are also all those unfulfilled but possible futures to which we still like to cling in phantasy, all those strivings of the ego which adverse external circumstances have crushed, and all our suppressed acts of volition which nourish in us the illusion of Free Will. (Freud, "The 'Uncanny'" 10)

An apparent benefit of the "double" is that it increases one's agency to "beat" society by accomplishing more than would be possible by just one entity. In Dorian's case, he has success deceiving the public by preserving his youthful, untarnished appearance despite his years and his transgressions; this circumstance affords him the delusion of holding more power over his life and his identity than he actually does. Ferrante's characters constantly speak about feeling oppressed by their environment and social standing and, in their adolescence, aspire to escape these circumstances by becoming successful in the world. For the protagonists, and especially for Lila, this success would consist of writing and publishing a book. However, as obstacles continue to block her path toward pursuit of an education, she transfers her faith in this dream to Elena. It is evident through intermittent subtle hints that Lila still highly values this aspiration, a childhood fantasy, and it is chiefly what keeps her bonded to Elena. Essentially, limitations on free will imposed by society motivate these uncanny

characters to multiply and mirror each other in order to increase their chances at achieving their shared dream of overcoming restrictive social circumstances.

By the end of his lecture, Freud identifies two key findings to clarify his definition of the uncanny. In the first place, he aligns this concept with established psychoanalytic theory, stating: "If . . . every emotional affect, whatever its quality, is transformed by repression into morbid anxiety, then among such cases of anxiety there must be a class in which the anxiety can be shown to come from something repressed which *recurs*." Thus, Freud categorizes the uncanny as an experience of feeling or emotion which causes frightful tension. Secondly, "this uncanny is in reality nothing new or foreign, but something familiar and old—established in the mind that has been estranged only by the process of repression" ("The 'Uncanny'" 13). The link between what has been repressed and what is newly being experienced as uncanny is entirely psychological and affective, summarized in one word as "anxiety." This perpetual angst is a key feature that the protagonists of both texts explored in this paper invariably experience, as will be discussed at length in Chapters 2 and 3. Further to Freud's argument, the uncanny does not apply exclusively to objects, experiences, or feelings. A living person can also be called uncanny, not only "when we ascribe evil motives to him," but also when we "attribute to these intentions capacity to achieve their aim in virtue of certain special powers" (14). In the past, these "special powers" may have been interpreted primarily to mean

madness or demonic possession, but often appear more intangible and ambiguous in modern and contemporary literature. Given a preliminary understanding of Freud's uncanny, the way it applies to fiction becomes particularly relevant for this project.

### **The Uncanny in Literature**

Freud concludes his essay by expounding the differences between the uncanny as lived experience and the uncanny in fiction, deeming the latter a "much more fertile province." Broadly speaking, he contends that events which may not be uncanny in fiction would be so if they occurred in real life; however, there are several creative means for evoking the uncanny in fiction that are not available in real life. For instance, when the writer creates a setting that corresponds to the real world, he or she "deceives us into thinking that he is giving us the sober truth, and then after all oversteps the bounds of possibility" ("The 'Uncanny'" 18). The creation of a realistic frame tricks the reader into accepting uncanny elements without thinking twice about them in fiction, whereas in reality one would immediately recognize them as uncanny. Because of the power that certain skilled authors hold in the realm of literature, they are able to elicit genuine reactions from readers, as if the latter had experienced uncanny fictional events in the real world.

Moreover, a way for writers to successfully deceive their audience is to “cunningly and ingeniously avoid any definite information on the point at all throughout the book” (19). By directing our attention and emotion in given directions, the author has the power to manipulate our reading experience. In a sense, then, the novel becomes a dream text, assuming a dual feature similar to the one Freud developed in dream theory, namely manifest and latent content. Novels’ manifest content consists of their literal subject-matter, plot events, and settings; conversely, latent content refers to the underlying meaning of this matter on a symbolic level. Oftentimes, though, it is not crystal clear to the reader whether certain events are real or imagined, meant to be taken literally or interpreted symbolically. This project will emphasize the quality of a dream text as represented in both novels being compared.

Returning to Freud’s findings, the class of the uncanny which proceeds from repressed complexes is “more irrefragable” and powerful in fiction than that of complexes which have been surmounted (19). He uses the examples of silence, solitude and darkness, which he deems “actually elements in the production of that infantile morbid anxiety from which the majority of human beings have never become quite free” (20). Anxieties which have been repressed from childhood but never altogether eliminated are thus the best tools for eliciting from readers a sense of the uncanny in literature, as will be observed through the analysis of the aforementioned novels.

In the following two chapters, I indicate the ways in which the texts' respective protagonists experience the doubling of their identities and I call attention to the societal, inter- and intra-personal circumstances that lead them to these uncanny encounters. In *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, Dorian is confronted with a double of himself which appears and takes on life in his portrait. Conversely, *My Brilliant Friend* presents the lifelong uncanny encounter between two characters whose identities are so interconnected that they become foils, doubles, opposites and "alter egos" of each other. In the conclusion, upon careful analysis of these literary characters, I resolve to expound the reader's role in interpreting the affect produced by the uncanny in these two novels.

## Chapter 2: *The Picture of Dorian Gray*

Oscar Wilde's only widely-read and critiqued novel, *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, was first published in *Lippincott's Monthly Magazine*, a nineteenth-century literary journal which censored the piece upon publication due to its immoral contents, namely passages alluding to homosexuality and the protagonist's mistresses. Even so, the edited text was generally not well received by the public or the British press at the time. A single-volume edition containing twenty chapters and a preface was subsequently published in 1891. Of course, Wilde himself, in addition to being one of London's most popular playwrights during these years, was a controversial figure. He was later imprisoned on the charge of gross indecency with men, analogous to one of the most contentious themes in his novel, and suffered an early death at forty-six. Despite the text's unfavorable early reception, the novel now exists in numerous print editions and has inspired several television and film adaptations. Moreover, it remains one of the most popular works of the Victorian *fin-de-siècle* by virtue of its modern themes.

Wilde's text, originally written in the English language, features as its protagonist Dorian Gray, a young man of just over 20 years—"wonderfully handsome, with his finely-curved scarlet lips, his frank blue eyes, his crisp golden hair . . . All the candour of youth was there, as well as youth's passionate purity" (Wilde 57). Dorian is unusually good looking, in the prime of his youth, and belongs to London's upper class. In the first chapter, he is at a portrait sitting with

the painter Basil Hallward, who receives a visit from his old Oxford friend, Lord Henry Wotton. Basil describes his comrade as having “a very bad influence over all his friends, with the single exception of myself” (58). In fact, upon their first meeting, Lord Henry implants unconventional ideas into Dorian’s head, mainly concerning beauty and morality. It is by the end of this conversation that Dorian expresses a far-fetched desire: “If it were I who was to be always young, and the picture that was to grow old! . . . I would give my soul for that!” (65-6). Little does Dorian know that, with these words, he has sealed his fate for the remainder of the novel.

Lord Henry’s ideas continue to resonate exponentially with Dorian as a series of drastic events occur. The protagonist falls madly in love with and becomes engaged to an actress, Sibyl Vane; yet his passion quickly dies when she is no longer able to act well on stage. She then commits suicide because Dorian has broken off the engagement. The protagonist refuses any sense of remorse and, after some time, actively stabs Basil to death and hires a scientist to burn the corpse to ashes. One night, as Dorian finds himself walking through a dim archway, his life already in shambles, James Vane, Sibyl’s brother, nearly avenges his sister’s death. It is Dorian’s youthful facade that saves him, creating the illusion that a man of his age could not possibly have been Sibyl’s lover so many years prior. James is eventually killed in other circumstances, but Dorian no longer finds himself at peace. All the while, his portrait has been decaying and

transforming itself into a grotesque image of Dorian in advanced old age. When the protagonist can no longer stand the vision of its horror, he stabs the canvas, bringing his own life to an end along with the portrait's.

Throughout the novel, Wilde refers to the infamous portrait as the mirror of Dorian Gray's soul which, despite being grotesque, is something the protagonist cannot stop looking at. Dorian sees himself in the painting, yet he feels estranged from it, causing him to experience cognitive dissonance. As a result of his physical and psychological duality established by the portrait, the protagonist undergoes a severe identity crisis, a situation that quite clearly emphasizes the instability of the self. This circumstance makes use of the "double," a classic trope of the uncanny in literature. Beyond the obvious, though, Dorian's uncanny experience raises questions regarding which of his identities is more "real" and dominant, and perhaps more importantly, why this has fascinated and attracted readers for over a century. This chapter will illustrate the ways in which societal pressures, youth, vision and duality play a role in the evolution of Dorian's identity crisis and describe how this work of fiction relates to the specific type of human anxiety triggered by mortality precisely because it evokes a sense of the uncanny.

The novel is set during the nineteenth-century *fin-de-siècle* when the Aesthetic and Decadent movements were taking place in Europe. At the opening of his previously discussed speech on the topic, Freud points out that the

uncanny is a province of aesthetics which the latter had generally neglected. Wilde, however, can be seen making use of “a decadent aesthetic devoted to artifice, ugliness, and disease in response to the crisis of moral idealism” (Hampton iv) as a way to evoke the uncanny. Aesthetics takes a turn toward the grotesque in this novel, demonstrating the uncanny double face of physical beauty. In regards to the moral idealism referenced here, I will discuss how strict, repressive ideals of Victorian morality lead to Dorian’s wish to trade places with his image in the portrait—in effect, a desire to substitute artifice for reality. As Freud further states, in adulthood, the double comes into conflict with one’s ego, threatening its very existence. Eventually, “from having been an assurance of immortality, he [the double] becomes the ghastly harbinger of death” (Freud, “The ‘Uncanny’” 9). Ultimately, like a mirror, Dorian’s portrait and Wilde’s text reflect the recurring anxiety over aging, loss of identity, and death. Borrowing Freud’s terms, we might say that these same fears have been covered up long ago by primary narcissism and are brought to light through the text, thus making it uncanny. At the end of the novel, Dorian’s anxiety is confirmed by his death, essentially a suicide. For readers, the experience is equally as jarring as for the protagonist because it arouses the primordial fear of death, which leads to the desire of doubling one’s identity in the first place.

### Victorian Society Versus the Decadent Aesthetic

In *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, societal pressure is featured as an evident and burdensome presence in individuals' daily lives. Throughout the novel, Lord Henry Wotton, who is by far its most libertine character, decries the prohibition imposed by society in the Victorian era: "People are afraid of themselves, nowadays. They have forgotten the highest of all duties, the duty that one owes to oneself . . . The terror of society, which is the basis of morals, the terror of God, which is the secret of religion—these are the two things that govern us" (Wilde 58). Within the rigid framework of nineteenth-century British society—a rigidity replicated in the novel—individuals felt a tremendous amount of pressure to play the part of dutiful citizens and to respect strict moral codes. Lord Henry reprehends the tendency of people to allow society to dictate their behaviors, criticizing the Church, intellectuals, and the masses, among others. He contends (likely exemplifying Wilde's own conviction), that the cohesive façade put on by individuals for the sake of society is really at odds with their fragmented, fearful interior world. In *Civilization and Its Discontents*, Freud brings the conflict between individuals and society, amid other struggles, to the forefront as follows:

We are threatened with suffering from three directions: from our own body, which is doomed to decay and dissolution and which cannot even do without pain and anxiety as warning signals; from the external world,

which may rage against us with overwhelming and merciless forces of destruction; and finally from our relations to other men.

The existential human struggle portrayed by the decadent protagonist is set up here: he experiences distress within his own body, out in the natural world, and among others in society. The anxiety that arises as a result of physical decay is akin to the specific manifestation of the uncanny in this novel. It is essential to note, however, that Dorian's primary struggle with his body and appearance does not stand alone, but instead is deeply interconnected with his inability to escape society's pressures.

At the outset of the novel, Dorian is a naïve adolescent who lacks exposure to sensory pleasures and can only imagine adhering to society's conventions. Once he makes the acquaintance of Lord Henry, he learns about the Decadent Aesthetic, whose modern ideals clash with the authoritarian system imposed by Victorian England. The two characters meet for the first time on a hot day in June at Basil Hallward's home. Upon their initial conversation, Lord Henry imparts his wisdom by overtly criticizing society's standards. One of his principles, which sticks in Dorian's mind, is the following: "The only way to get rid of a temptation is to yield to it. Resist it, and your soul grows sick with longing for the things it has forbidden to itself, with desire for what its monstrous laws have made monstrous and unlawful" (Wilde 59). Lord Henry's words are said to have touched a secret chord of Dorian's mind, broadening his view of a new way of life

that does not require one to abide by society's laws. Then, in the garden scene, amidst varieties of flowers and plants, Dorian is indefinitely tempted by Lord Henry's philosophy of life. Because he had no previous outlet for satisfying his senses, Dorian cannot resist "burying his face in the great cool lilac-blossoms, feverishly drinking in their perfume as if it had been wine" (61). Lord Henry encourages Dorian in this behavior by stating that nothing can cure the soul but the senses, a principle aligned with aesthetics.

Furthermore, decadence is emphasized when Lord Henry remarks at length on the importance of seizing one's youth, and warns of its brevity. As Glenn Clifton remarks in "Aging and Periodicity in *The Picture of Dorian Gray* and *The Ambassadors: An Aesthetic Adulthood*": "In this account, youth is almost a precondition to any experience worth mentioning; 'the world belongs to you for a season,' Lord Henry proclaims" (285). The central idea promoted by this philosophy is that only what is fresh and beautiful should be considered valuable and, as the years pass, these qualities will inevitably deteriorate. Thus, one must seize the day before it is gone. In other words, "According to *Dorian Gray*, to be not of one's age and to be made of moods is to be a flower of decadence" (Wenaus 59). The phrase "to be made of moods" implies a rejection of firm values and commitments in favor of a changeable, volatile existence. Likewise, flowers are prominent in the garden scene as symbols of the decadent aesthetic. The scent of roses lingers throughout the exchange, even when the two return

inside with Basil for the portrait sitting in this second chapter. As a leitmotif, the “flower of decadence” represents the protagonist during his fragile and fleeting years of youth, which he seeks desperately to preserve.

Dorian describes himself, and philosophizes man in general, as being composed of fleeting and unstable poses. The rupture of the ego is key to understanding the decadent aesthetic that the text gives prominence to. Dorian begins to “wonder at the shallow psychology of those who conceive the Ego in man as a thing simple, permanent, reliable, and of one essence. To him, man was a being with myriad lives and myriad sensations, a complex multiform creature that bore within itself strange legacies of thought and passion” (Wilde 175). At this point in the novel, Dorian feels liberated by this new realization, without truly comprehending its implications. His ability to be and to feel so many different affects at once is directly opposed to society's ideal; the apparent novelty and awareness of sensory experience leaves him awestruck. In a short time, however, Dorian goes from appreciating the sense of freedom afforded by his fragmented ego to discovering an uncanny duality within himself. The emerging sense of a double-identity is illustrated both in a thematic sense as well as concretely by the portrait and its increased prominence through the duration of the text. As the novel progresses, it becomes more difficult for both the protagonist and the reader to differentiate appearance from reality, since Dorian's body physically trades places with the ageless image. Hence, because his true

age is apparent only in his portrait, he hides it and becomes paranoid that it will be discovered, while his actual body reveals to society only a flawless appearance.

### **Dorian Gray and the Mirror of the Soul**

The double as it pertains to unstable human subjectivity is a foremost symbol in this novel, throughout which Wilde refers to the portrait as the mirror of Dorian's soul: "This portrait would become to him the most magical of mirrors. As it had revealed to him his own body, so it would reveal to him his own soul . . . When the blood crept from its face, and left behind a pallid mask of chalk with leaden eyes, he would keep the glamour of boyhood" (Wilde 141). When first created, the portrait reflects the image of Dorian's beauty, youth and wholeness. Once the role reversal takes place and Dorian sacrifices his soul, however, the picture becomes a physical and psychological threat to his apparently flawless identity. Finally, it acts as the very marker of his mortality and the cause of his death.

One might hastily compare Dorian Gray and his double to the ancient Greek myth of Narcissus, in which a youth falls in love with his own reflection in a pool of water, failing to realize it is simply an image; this mishap is caused by the obsession with his own physical appearance and beauty. Lord Henry, in fact, compares Dorian's portrayal in the portrait to this mythological figure upon first

sight (Wilde 45). It turns out, however, that, though he does claim to be in love with the portrait (67), Dorian's circumstance is psychologically a bit more complex, as Andrew Wenaus posits in his examination of the uncanny narrative context of the novel in correlation with "narcissism." Here, the term is not intended to mean vanity, but rather Marshall McLuhan's notion "that the gazer is transferred into the realm of the reflection, while the physical body is left without sensation. Thus, the gazer occupies a paradoxical conflation of two locales: the originary physical level as well as the level of the reflection." This process creates both a severance from and an overlapping of the dual perceptions that Dorian assumes toward himself, causing his locus to double. Wenaus continues by claiming that "narcissism itself is an uncanny experience as it is an example of irreconcilables which entangle in unsettling ways" (58). One cannot simultaneously be both an object to admire as well as the spectator of oneself, but in narcissism, this is precisely what occurs.

In his seminal discussion of the uncanny, Freud also alludes to a link between the former and narcissism. One of his explanations of "heimlich" likens the idea to "a buried spring or a dried-up pond. One cannot walk over it without always having the feeling that water might come up there again" ("The 'Uncanny'" 3). This dried-up pond suggests a re-reading of the archetypal myth of Narcissus, only here the anxiety of repression is enough to elicit an uncanny perception of the water, even when it is not actually present. Similarly, narcissism is redefined

in Wilde's novel such that one's gaze upon the self contributes to the cognitive dissonance and duality of the uncanny. After all, the narcissistic gaze brought about by the sense of sight is most prominent in Dorian's story and acts as the key marker of his uncanny experience.

Images work together to symbolize the anxiety of perception that individuals experience. Sight is arguably the most relied upon sense; at the same time, it is not perfect. As much as we wish to accurately understand the world around us, the images produced in our minds are inevitably filtered through our eyes, but are not exact representations of reality. In our constant attempts to see, our bodies, and particularly our eyes, become simultaneously familiar, unsettling, and most of all uncanny. One of Freud's most prominent successors in psychoanalysis, who contributed to the understanding of the fragmented self, was none other than Jacques Lacan. He introduced the idea of the mirror stage, during which the ego is formed by a process of objectification. Like Freud, Lacan believes the ego to be a site of conflict. In this case, the conflict occurs between one's perceived visual appearance and the unconscious, resulting in alienation and fragmentation. The mirror stage also develops the "Ideal-I," which:

Situates the agency of the ego, before its social determination, in a fictional direction, which will always remain irreducible for the individual alone, or rather, which will only rejoin the coming-into-being (*le devenir*) of the subject asymptotically, whatever the success of the dialectical

syntheses by which he must resolve as / his discordance with his own reality. (Lacan 406)

The term asymptotic here refers to a line that curves toward but never quite reaches the limit, indicating infinity, and therefore the impossibility of realizing the object of desire. This object is in fact the whole mirror image of him-/herself that the child wishes to preserve. Even before the individual consciously acknowledges society's norms, his or her ego is dependent upon the external force of vision, which is imperfect. The results of this inherent reliance on the sense of sight are a lifelong alienation from the self and a constant desire for identification. The mirror stage describes the disparity between desire and reality, and demonstrates how one's self-perception of wholeness becomes dismantled early on in life due to an optical illusion that penetrates deep into the psyche.

Taking Lacan's theory into consideration, the mirror as it pertains to unstable human subjectivity is also analogous to the function of the protagonist's portrait in *The Picture of Dorian Gray*. At first, the portrait was the image of Dorian's beauty and wholeness—which is in line with Lacan's theory that the mirror reveals to the individual an idyllic form of his or her own body—but because Dorian's portrait (i.e. his mirror) is located in the external world, it inevitably produces a reflection that he cannot reconcile with his interior self. The first physical change to the portrait occurs after Dorian abuses and insults Sybil Vane, his love interest up until that point, following her atrocious theater

performance. Back at home, he glances at his portrait and notices “the lines of a cruelty round the mouth as clearly as if he had been looking into a mirror after he had done some dreadful thing” (Wilde 127). As Dorian’s moral degradation intensifies, so too do the changes to his portrait. Shortly before murdering Basil, Dorian tells him: “Each of us has Heaven and Hell in him” further emphasizing the sense of duality that has overtaken his life. He goes so far as to revel in the thrill of getting away with murder, admitting to himself that he “felt keenly the terrible pleasure of a double life” (205).

The alienation of the apparently familiar self is achieved on a symbolic level by the portrait’s power of reflection. Sadeq Rahimi explains in “The Ego, the Ocular, and the Uncanny: Why are Metaphors of Vision Central in Accounts of the Uncanny?": “the specular image in the mirror offers the comfort of an identity but, again, for that very same reason it is an illusion, it is simultaneously ‘the origin of’ and ‘the double of’ the ego, and thus a potential source of terror, alienation and paranoia as a vision in whose very being it hides the uncanny specter of not-being” (465). Anything that problematizes the illusion of wholeness produces fear, anxiety, and horror “because it threatens to unveil the original ‘lie’ that we have told ourselves regarding the ‘sameness’ of that image and the I” (466). In this case, the catalyst is nothing more than an individual’s depiction in a painting, yet the uncanny is produced directly by Dorian’s own perception of this object. This process posits the external world as filtered through the protagonist’s

very eyes; hence, the spectral and the optical are complicit in producing uncanny emotions within the self. Weber expounds: "The uncanny is thus bound up with a *crisis* of perception and of phenomenality, but concomitantly with a mortal danger to the subject, to the 'integrity' of its body and thus to its very identity, which . . . is based upon this body-image as its model" (1131). In regards to the novel, Lord Henry is quite right when he states: "The true mystery of the world is in the visible, not the invisible" (Wilde 62). The "uncanny ghost" is in fact the mirror image of Dorian, his portrait, whose deadly changes are revealed to him through his very eyes; this is uncanny in part because he refuses to confront his close connection to the portrait, his double, preferring instead to stash it away in the old dusty schoolroom above his house. In the final chapter, when Dorian comes to terms with his dependency upon the portrait and decides to rid himself of the object once and for all, it is ultimately too late to save his "real" self.

Moments before taking his own life, Dorian picks up an old carved mirror gifted to him by Lord Henry years before, admires his reflection, and flings it onto the floor, crushing the glass into small pieces. The act of shattering this mirror represents his awareness of and his attempt to rid himself of the mask he has been wearing to fool society, as well as himself, into believing that he will never age and that his appearance will never decay. He realizes that "his beauty had been to him but a mask, his youth but a mockery" (Wilde 248). When he finds himself unable to shed his mask, he decides to destroy the portrait, indicating

that he accepts his mortal fate and, in doing so, Dorian ultimately takes his own life by stabbing the picture.

The protagonist's death reveals the inextricable and paradoxical interdependence between an original model and its double. As Wenaus puts it, "indeed, the novel presents two *doppelgangers*: Dorian and the painting, like mirrors, reflecting one another, multiplying to infinity" (71). The question of the original, concerning which of Dorian's identities is more "real," is brought up early in the novel, as soon as Basil has completed his work of art. When Dorian accepts Lord Henry's offer to go to the theater in celebration, the painter refuses, affirming: "I shall stay with the real Dorian [the portrait]." His comment elicits the following response: "'Is it the real Dorian?' cried the original of the portrait, strolling across to him. 'Am I really like that?'" (Wilde 69). Dorian is the first to question the "reality" of his representation in the inanimate portrait, even before the role reversal has begun to manifest itself. This casual comment encapsulates the foremost paradox of the novel, namely the separation between the self and the image of the self. This interconnectedness between the original and the double symbolizes the irrepressible lifelong anxiety over aging and human mortality. In "Men, Monsters and Morality: Shaping Ethics through the Sublime and Uncanny," Danielle Weedman offers the following comment: "Doubling displays an individual who somehow cannot *be* an individual, one who functions as two simultaneous beings (or else two aspects of the same being), or one

whose reintegration into a whole is frequently figured in terms of a fatal encounter" (6).

Both the protagonist's physical body and the painting are integral parts of the individual known as Dorian Gray; the former is the image that he presents to others in the outside world while the latter, as the protagonist himself states at the outset, exposes his soul. This split in his identity occurs precisely as a fulfillment of his own wish to always remain as youthful and beautiful as he sees himself in the portrait. The combination of Dorian's refusal to accept his mortality and the physical aging it entails, along with the Decadent Aesthetic imparted to him by Lord Henry, lead his own eyes to deceive him. By presenting to society merely a reflection of his physical self, Dorian comes to believe that he cannot age and therefore, implicitly, that he is immortal. Though he resolves to be a better person by the end of the novel, he never truly accepts his mortality. Indeed, his refusal leads to the uncanny fatal encounter between his physical self and the portrait, and it is the consequence of the fact that his true self inhabits both of these entities. The lack of acceptance that aging and mortality constitute an immutable portion of human identity and cannot be split off from the rest of it is the foremost universal anxiety depicted through this novel.

### Chapter 3: *My Brilliant Friend*

While the uncanny is experienced from a male point of view in Wilde's novel, the concept is both modernized and strongly associated with women in *My Brilliant Friend*, the first of the four in Ferrante's series. Her novels have been widely read for several years in Italy and recently gained popularity in the US as well, ranking on the *New York Times* Best Sellers list. Being that the (pseudonym) Ferrante "fad" has newly erupted, in combination with international curiosity and speculation about the author's identity, a substantial body of academic scholarship on this series is withal lacking. The novels have been widely reviewed, however, in popular magazines and newspapers, in addition to Ferrante having released interviews to publications such as *Vanity Fair*, *The New Yorker*, and *The Paris Review*, among others. Nevertheless, the exigency of serious scholarship analyzing her socially conscious fiction and profound themes can no longer be ignored. What sets Ferrante's works apart from the slew of popular clichéd romance novels is precisely her meticulous and overwhelmingly honest depiction of the development of an uncanny female identity within a violent, patriarchal world. Furthermore, her storytelling style keeps readers on their toes at every turn.

Elena Greco narrates the story of an archetypal friendship between herself and her best friend, whose identities are inseparable from one another during their adolescence growing up in 1950s Naples, and, in later installments,

throughout their adult lives. This first volume of the *Neapolitan Novels*, as they have come to be known in the US, traces the lives of Elena and Raffaella (Lila) Cerullo from childhood to adolescence. The following three sequels narrate the remainder of their lives through Lila's mysterious disappearance in their sixties. As children, the two best friends appear to be exact foils of each other, both physically and socially. Elena is blonde, cheerful, innocent, and well-liked, while Lila is brunette, wickedly intelligent, determined and perceived as a threat by other children. The common thread that joins them from an early age is their excellence in school; in fact, they are consistently regarded as the two best students in their class, with Lila being the clear frontrunner. Upon their completion of elementary school, Elena has the rare privilege of going on to middle school, while Lila's family does not allow her as much. Nevertheless, Elena continues to consider Lila an authority when it comes to academics and is impressed each time her friend proves to autodidactically outdo her in learning the Italian, Latin and Greek languages.

While Elena, who is notably the narrator of the novels, continues to pursue her studies, Lila is forced to direct her life toward a different path. For a number of years, she contributes to her family's cobblery business and ends up producing an original and extraordinary model of men's shoes. Her design is later exploited by the collusion of her brother, father and husband with the Solara brothers, the resident "camorristi" (Neapolitan mafia men). In order to truly secure

her family's economic welfare, however, at sixteen years old, she goes further and marries Stefano Carracci, the wealthy neighborhood grocer and businessman. The novel ends with Lila and Stefano's wedding, to which Marcello Solara, whose marriage proposal she had previously rejected, shows up uninvited wearing the shoes Lila had designed. This cliffhanger ending posits Lila's betrayal, courtesy of her new husband, who has essentially sold not only her handiwork but Lila herself as a person for the sake of a business deal. The other overarching matter concerns which of the two female protagonists is in fact the "brilliant friend" that the novel's title refers to. Just before the wedding, Lila uses those exact words in praise of Elena, urging her to continue pursuing her studies. However, the events of the novel lead one to wonder what Lila might have achieved with her distinctive powers of intelligence had she only been afforded the same academic opportunities as her friend.

In the prologue to the first book, when she finds out her friend Lila has gone missing, Elena dedicates herself, at the age of sixty-six and now an author, to writing this series of novels in an attempt to retrace their friendship. More importantly, though, she must retrace her own identity, of which a large part has disappeared along with her friend. Since childhood, Elena's identity has been both shaped and constantly threatened by her best friend's; the loss of one would mean the loss of the other. Rather than demonstrating the fragmented identity of one individual as Wilde does, Ferrante creates two protagonists, neither of whom

would have a story without the other; she fuses their identities together, essentially merging them into one. I argue that Ferrante purposefully intended for Elena, the apparently more conventional, passive character, to act as narrator, representing the facade that women felt pressured to put forth to society. On the other hand, because she is not narrating, Lila remains mysterious, both to her friend and to the reader. Her portrayal is entirely dependent on Elena's projections, which may or may not be reliable. Ultimately, it is to uncover the mysteries of Lila's convoluted psyche and her motivations that one so easily becomes engrossed in the novels, with Elena acting as the only gateway between her friend and the reader. The central question around the source and motivations of Lila's uncanny behavior as narrated by Elena, and the ways it affects other characters in the novel, must be explored. Lila, as she is portrayed in the novel, represents the captivatingly complex, dark, and uncanny side of human nature that we all relate to, yet we often try to hide. These two protagonists, more than foils to each other both physically and psychologically, possess identities that frequently overlap, clash and coalesce. This chapter will explore the various points of contact and divergence between the two best friends as they navigate a violent landscape of poverty, sexism and unequal opportunity.

### Friendship as Alter-Ego

First of all, the word “friend” should be clarified insomuch as it plays a key role in defining the protagonists’ relationships toward one another and their overlapping identities. Giorgio Agamben, a contemporary Italian philosopher, examines historical uses of the term in his brief essay entitled “Friendship.” One of the principle definitions he borrows from Aristotle is that of the friend as essentially another self, an “alter ego.” The etymology of this expression is as follows:

Greek, like Latin, has two terms to express otherness: *allos* (Lat. *alius*) is a generic otherness, while *heteros* (Lat. *alter*) is otherness as an opposition between two, as heterogeneity. Furthermore, the Latin ego does not exactly translate *autos*, which signifies ‘oneself’. The friend is not another I, but an otherness immanent in self-ness, a becoming other of the self. (6)

Agamben points out the nature of one’s identity as being constantly shaped by a close friend and vice versa. This is exactly the symbiosis Elena and Lila have growing up, where interactions with each other affect and mold them internally and reciprocally. Just as the uncanny is composed in equal parts of familiarity and otherness, so too is the concept of an alter ego. By applying this understanding of friendship as a gateway to analyzing Elena’s and Lila’s, it

becomes clear that their identities may not only be affected by one another, but that each largely depends upon the other.

Physically, Elena and Lila could not be more different, a situation in contrast with the original idea of the double as two entities that are physically alike. Elena describes herself at a young age as a happy and likeable girl with light features: “Ero una bambina con i boccoli biondi, bellina, felice di esibirmi ma non sfrontata, e comunicavo un’impressione di delicatezza che inteneriva” (Ferrante, *Infanzia* 8)<sup>1</sup> [“I was a pretty little girl with blond curls, happy to show off but not aggressive, and I gave an impression of delicacy that was touching”].<sup>2</sup> She is sweet, innocent, well-liked by her peers and successful in school, though always second to her best friend. On the other hand, “Diverso era il caso di Lila . . . era troppo per chiunque. . . . La sua prontezza mentale sapeva di sibilo, di guizzo, di morso letale” [“In Lila’s case it was different . . . [she] was too much for anyone. . . . Her quickness of mind was like a hiss, a dart, a lethal bite”]. Due to her superior intelligence and exceptional abilities in school, Lila is far less likable as a child, particularly during their elementary school competitions. Twice yearly, the principal would hold a contest between classes to allow the brightest students

---

<sup>1</sup> The original Italian text is from Ferrante, Elena. *L’amica geniale*. Kindle ed., Edizioni e/o, 2011.

<sup>2</sup> All translations are from Goldstein, Ann, translator. *My Brilliant Friend*. By Elena Ferrante. Kindle ed., Europa Editions, 2012.

to display their talents. During these instances, in which she unfailingly outwitted her classmates, Lila's eyes are described as a distinguishing feature of her appearance: "Gli occhi grandi e vivissimi sapevano diventare fessure dietro cui, prima di ogni risposta brillante, c'era uno sguardo che pareva non solo poco infantile, ma forse non umano" ["Her large, bright eyes could become cracks behind which, before every brilliant response, there was a gaze that appeared not very childlike and perhaps not even human"]. Elena's portrayal of her friend as uncanny begins very early in the novel, particularly with this description of her extraordinary mental abilities paired with her lack of concern for the approval of others. While Elena revels in being well-liked by her teacher and peers, Lila does not display any desire to fit in. In a review, Martha Witt depicts Ferrante's novel as a "riveting narrative, which derives its tension from language and emotion rather than plot" (177). In fact, from the very beginning, Elena's narration is fraught with emotionally charged and pointedly descriptive language, particularly in regards to her friend. The choice of words such as "lethal" and "not even human" add a threatening aspect to Lila's distinctive power of intelligence. Elsewhere in the chapter, she is described as "terribile e sfolgorante" (Ferrante, *Infanzia* 8) ["terrible, dazzling"]. Through her narration, Elena portrays Lila as the uncanny "alter" to her own "ego."

### Dolls and Colors as Leitmotifs

Given that the novel begins when both girls are about ten years old, we can imagine their dolls as essentially the “doubles” they grew up with, the insurance of their immortality, as Freud would put it, or the symbols of their primary narcissism. In addition to acting as leitmotifs throughout the entire series of novels, in this first one, the dolls, which mirror each of them respectively, mark an important paradigm of Elena’s and Lila’s relationship. It is not by chance that the girls’ dolls resemble their portrayals at the outset of the novel. As Elena recalls, her doll, named Tina, “Indossava un vestitino blu che le aveva cucito mia madre in un raro momento felice, ed era bellissima” [“She wore a blue dress that my mother had made for her in a rare moment of happiness, and she was beautiful”], while Nu, Lila’s doll, “aveva un corpo di pezza gialliccia pieno di segatura, mi pareva brutta e lercia” (Ferrante, *Infanzia 2*) [“had a cloth body of a yellowish color, filled with sawdust, and she seemed to me ugly and grimy.”] The contrast between the protagonists’ appearances is further emphasized through their dolls—Elena’s being angelic while Lila’s is dark, deeply impoverished and far less pleasing to the eye.

One day, before they have begun speaking to each other and are simply playing in the courtyard, Lila throws Elena’s doll out the window and down into a dark, dirty, and frightening cellar adjacent to don Achille’s house, the monster of their childhood. Elena feels an incredible amount of pain, as she states, “Per me

la bambola era viva... Ero come strozzata da due sofferenze, una già in atto, la perdita della bambola, e una possibile, la perdita di Lila” [“For me the doll was alive. . . . I was as strangled between two agonies, one already happening, the loss of the doll, and one possible, the loss of Lila”]. In one of their very first interactions, Elena’s childhood identity already feels threatened by the thought of losing Lila, and she hence foregoes her own feelings to mimic the action by throwing Lila’s doll as well—“Quello che fai tu, faccio io” (Infanzia 10) [“What you do, I do”]. Lila evidently has an otherworldly power that gives her control over Elena and, though she is generally not well received by others, as the novel progresses, it becomes evident that those closest to her often succumb to her will both out of fear and awe, thus making her the epitome of the uncanny.

Another character worthy of mention in this scene, who is reminiscent of the Sandman in Hoffman’s story, consists of don Achille. Elena describes him through the eyes of her ten-year-old self as “l’orco delle favole . . . Era un essere fatto di non so quale materiale, ferro, vetro, ortica, ma vivo, vivo col respiro caldissimo che gli usciva dal naso e dalla bocca . . . Se poi avessi fatto la pazzia di avvicinarmi alla porta di casa sua mi avrebbe uccisa” [“the ogre of fairy tales . . . He was a being created out of some unidentifiable material, iron, glass, nettles, but alive, alive, the hot breath streaming from his nose and mouth . . . if I was mad enough to approach the door of his house he would kill me”]. Aside from inspiring mortal fear in children, don Achille commands unease from every family

in the neighborhood, as they all accept the myth of his nefarious influence. Now, if the novel were to place the focus of the uncanny on this monster, as "The Sandman" does, don Achille might eventually come to life and torment Elena, bringing her worst childhood fears to life. Instead, his role in the story pales in comparison to that of Lila, who evokes the uncanny in a much more subtle, constant and paradoxical way. As the two girls, per Lila's initiative, make their way up the steps to knock on don Achille's door to ask for their dolls back, Elena remarks: "Per seguirla dovevo lasciare l'azzurrognolo del cortile ed entrare nel nero del portone" (Infanzia 1) ["To follow Lila I had to leave the bluish light of the courtyard and enter the black of the doorway"]. In order to establish their friendship, Elena literally turns away from the bluish light, which in the original more accurately translates to light blue, the safe and familiar color that has been thus far associated with her, to follow Lila into the darkness. The interplay between light and darkness is of poignant interest throughout the novels for its distinction becomes less clear-cut than it appears here in the beginning. Nevertheless, the significance of Elena following Lila into the darkness in this initial scene, which she signals as the beginning of their friendship, is symbolic for a few reasons. For one thing, it associates Lila with don Achille, moving her closer to the realm of someone who is threatening and certainly uncanny. It also establishes the precedent for their friendship, where Lila leads and Elena feels compelled to follow.

### Mid-1900s Naples: Women and Violence

The backdrop of poverty, misogyny, and violence against which the girls are accustomed to living in this novel is a setting that undoubtedly fosters the uncanny. Generally in literature, the uncanny has been most closely and frequently associated with the genre of gothic novels, as is discussed at length by Susan Linville in *History Films, Women, and Freud's Uncanny*. This is particularly true when the concept applies to women, for they are often haunted by uncanny monsters in their own homes. Linville also expounds Modleski's theory, based on film and literature studies, that these gothic novels appeal to women by evoking the separation anxiety that daughters experience toward their mothers when they are taken away to live with their husbands. Though *My Brilliant Friend* is certainly not a gothic novel, its setting in this particular Neapolitan neighborhood is just as bleak and daunting as a haunted house, and Elena's relationship with her mother is constantly strained, causing her to experience feelings of anxiety. Another commonality shared by the gothic novel and Ferrante's is that they primarily take place during the protagonists' adolescence. In "Feminine Adolescence as Uncanny: Masculinity, Haunting and Self-Estrangement," Deborah Martin quotes from Jackson, Coats and McGillis' 2008 novel on the gothic in children's literature: "the uncanny emerges in [ . . . ] adolescent novels [ . . . ] to both highlight change and trigger it. It becomes a complex metaphor for the transition the characters undergo with respect to their

place in their families and their family history” (137). Adolescence, a highly formative portion of a girl’s life, reveals itself as an ideal breeding ground for paradoxical feelings and identity formation, due in large part to familial and societal influences. This is particularly apparent in *My Brilliant Friend* as the two young women’s identities develop amidst their struggle to cope with and adapt to their unstable surroundings.

Violence, physical and emotional pain become universally accepted by women as a part of daily life in their neighborhood. Though she asserts that “Far male era una malattia” [“To cause pain was a disease”] growing up, Elena feels nostalgia for her childhood as she reflects upon it in her novel. This is surprising, considering that one of the episodes she remembers witnessing is Lila’s father hurling his daughter out the window of their apartment onto the asphalt, and then proceeding to heave insults at her from above (Ferrante, *Infanzia* 17). For someone who has not grown up in the neighborhood, the story sounds jarring, as does Lila’s nonchalant reaction when she assures her friend that she is not hurt while bleeding profusely with a broken arm. Martha Witt rightly remarks, “In fact, *My Brilliant Friend* is very much a book about identity and the particularly female struggle to protect and nurture a self robust enough to hold out against the barrage of forces that threaten to eclipse it” (177). The family is not portrayed as a safe haven for a young girl in this novel, but rather as the earliest space in which she must learn to grow a thick skin and become resilient to life’s physical

and emotional suffering. Due to instances of frequent abuse such as the one carried out by Lila's father, politeness and good manners are not expected of girls, who learn from an early age to defend themselves not only from the attacks of men, but also from each other.

Despite describing various acts of violence executed by men throughout the course of the novel, Elena observes evil as a notably female disease. For instance, she recounts women fighting, pulling each other's hair, rolling down the stairs over a man; and in regards to the disease, she believes that women "Erano contaminate più degli uomini, perché i maschi diventavano furiosi di continuo ma alla fine si calmavano, mentre le femmine, che erano all'apparenza silenziose, accomodanti, quando si arrabbiavano andavano fino in fondo alle loro furie senza fermarsi più" (Ferrante, *Infanzia* 5) ["They were more severely infected than the men, because while men were always getting furious, they calmed down in the end; women, who appeared to be silent, acquiescent, when they were angry flew into a rage that had no end"]. Women were clearly frustrated by their powerless position in life and the poverty of their neighborhood, thus resorting to petty rivalries and competition among each other. Since it was considered less socially acceptable for them to become enraged, they had to hold in all their emotion until they eventually exploded. When they did, the result would reflect the uncanny nature of women—"domestic" on one hand and "hidden" on the other, borrowing the terms juxtaposed by Weber. For instance, while Elena

criticizes and even resents Lila for her fiery personality, she secretly relates to that level of anger and pain, which she herself more often represses.

Consequently, the protagonists' struggle to maintain their relationship without posing a threat to one another's identity arises. By the same token, female friendship is key to their endurance and ability to persevere in a life that is bounded both by the rules of men and by economic limitations. Along these lines, Witt remarks: "Elena's deep and abiding friendship with Lila is often fraught with envy and pain intertwined with admiration. But any alliance is crucial to the physical and mental survival of these two girls, trapped in a world infested by a rage that--in their town--manifests as a particularly female disease" (177). This childhood perception of the female sex as being even more diseased than that of men is powerful and conveys an understanding of how difficult it was for women to think highly of themselves and of each other. Here, it is essential to note that the anger and desperation that would explode from behind the façade of enforced socially-acceptable feminine behavior is described as a disease, while men are not stigmatized for their outbursts. Elena's narration reflects her implicit acceptance of women's repression in society, and this notion exposes the fundamental difference between the two friends and the chief source of Lila's uncanny attraction, in opposition to other characters. While, as Elena states, most women were accustomed to holding in their anger until they exploded, Lila represses and expresses her rage in equal measures. Therefore, only she

epitomizes the uncanny in this novel by manifesting domesticity, the familiar side of women, and also rage, their hidden aspect, which she reveals depending on her situation.

While Elena portrays herself as a more passive and conventional female figure as opposed to Lila, they each challenge expected societal roles in different moments, with Lila ultimately emerging as the stronger and more powerful character in this novel. As Martin delves deeper into her analysis, she notes: "The uncanny, which ensues from a sense of self-estrangement, bears a strong connection to the sense of divided self produced by the social and cultural imposition of femininity-passivity on the desiring or active self associated with the pre-adolescent girl" (137). The uncanny double manifests itself remarkably in the girls' struggle to adapt to accepted standards of femininity while at the same time attempting to gain agency. Given that both protagonists' female identities are challenged by society to remain passive and submissive toward men, they each experiment with subverting conventions in their early adolescence. Ferrante herself admits to *The Paris Review*: "I enjoy breaking through my character's armor of good education and good manners. I enjoy upsetting her self-image, her will, and revealing another, rougher soul underneath, someone raucous, maybe even crude." As we learn more about each of the two friends with the progression of the novel, they each display rough spots, flaws and defects that are brought to

light in the matter-of-fact narration. Elena is the more “good mannered” of the two, and yet even she has a rough side to her.

Whenever Elena takes a risk by doing something she would normally be afraid to do, she not only channels Lila’s fiery personality, but implicates her in the act. For instance, when Elena begins middle school without her friend, she feels insecure, as though she might no longer be one of the best in her class and perhaps lose her passion for learning. During this time, she enters adolescence as she begins to menstruate, long before Lila does, experiences changes in her body, and puts on weight. One morning after school, Gino, the pharmacist’s son, tells her he has bet against his classmates that her breasts are real, while everyone else believes she stuffs her shirt with cotton batting. He offers her ten lire if she proves him right by showing that she uses no padding. At first, Elena feels intimidated, but resorts immediately to Lila’s “bold tone” and demands the money before showing him and another boy her breasts. She recalls: “Quell’episodio mi è rimasto impresso nella memoria: sperimentai per la prima volta la forza di calamita che il mio corpo esercitava sui maschi, ma soprattutto mi resi conto che Lila agiva non solo su Carmela ma anche su di me come un fantasma esigente” [“That episode remained stamped in my memory: I felt for the first time the magnetic force that my body exercised over men, but above all I realized that Lila acted not only on Carmela but also on me like a demanding ghost”]. The only way for Elena to muster up enough courage to be assertive with

a male is by channeling Lila's mannerisms: "in sua assenza, dopo una breve esitazione mi ero messa al posto suo. O meglio, le avevo fatto posto in me" (Ferrante, *Adolescenza* 3) ["in her absence, after a slight hesitation I put myself in her place. Or, rather, I had made a place for her in me"]. Elena transcends the passivity expected of her and takes control of the situation, but it is only because she borrows a piece of Lila's identity, the uncanny "ghost," as her own.

In later chapters, Elena engages in frequent "giochi sessuali" (*Adolescenza* 50) ["sexual games"] with her boyfriend Antonio, emboldened by her belief that Lila is enacting the same behavior with Stefano, Lila's fiancée. However, she is somewhat disappointed when she comes to learn from Lila that the couple have done no more than kiss since they are not yet married. Essentially, Elena has constructed a love triangle with Lila having sex in Elena's imagination during relations with her boyfriend. Once again, she has fused her own identity with that of her friend so that they are inseparable in both body and mind. These instances of Elena's unconventional behavior, among others, beg the question of which character is actually the more conventional female figure in the novel. Furthermore, they lead one to recognize the motivations behind Elena's actions as compulsively driven by the desire to keep up with Lila and to share every experience with her, along with misguided perceptions of her friend.

Lila's motivations for behaving unconventionally, rather, appear to be more authentic to her personality and driven by a sense of pride and self-

preservation. She explicitly challenges patriarchy by standing up to the men who try to abuse or court her, whether it be physically or verbally. One Sunday afternoon, as the two girls stroll through the gardens when Elena is wearing a light blue dress and looking her best, the Solara brothers pull up in their Fiat 1100 car. Because Elena makes the mistake of acknowledging their presence, Marcello grabs her wrist, causing her mother's bracelet to fall on the ground. Swiftly, "Lila, la metà di lui, lo spinse contro l'automobile e gli cacciò il trincetto sotto la gola . . . M'è rimasta in testa l'assoluta certezza di allora: non avrebbe esitato a tagliargli la gola. Se ne accorse anche Michele" (Adolescenza 13) ["Lila, half the size of him, pushed him against the car and whipped the shoemaker's knife under his throat . . . In my mind there remains the absolute certainty I had then: she wouldn't have hesitated to cut his throat. Michele also realized it"]. Lila proves to possess several qualities in this circumstance: intelligence because she is prepared with a weapon, loyalty because she stands up for her friend, and courage because she confronts the neighborhood bullies with no fear.

Furthermore, Lila breaks conventions in a refusal to submit her physical and mental identity to men. As Ferrante herself states in an interview with *The Paris Review*:

I think all women know it. Whenever a part of you emerges that's not consistent with some feminine ideal, it makes everyone nervous, and you're supposed to get rid of it in a hurry. Or if you have a combative

nature, like Amalia, like Lila, if you refuse to be subjugated, violence enters in. Violence has, at least in Italian, a meaningful language of its own—smash your face, bash your face in. You see? These are expressions that refer to the forced manipulation of identity, to its cancellation. Either you'll be the way I say, or I'll change you by beating you till I kill you.

Lila does not hesitate to adopt the same measures men do in society to suppress women, including violence. In later chapters, she goes on to refuse Marcello Solara's advances and various attempts at courting, namely visiting her family for supper and bringing expensive gifts, such as a tv, which was a real privilege at the time. Nevertheless, Marcello "senza che lei lo avesse mai accettato, si sentiva sempre più fidanzato, anzi padrone, e tendeva a passare dalla devozione muta a tentativi di baci, a domande sospettose su dove andava durante il giorno, chi vedeva, se aveva avuto altri fidanzati, se l'aveva anche solo sfiorata qualcuno" (Ferrante, *Adolescenza* 34) [although she hadn't accepted him, [he] felt increasingly that he was her fiancé, in fact her master, and tended to pass from silent devotion to attempts to kiss her, to suspicious questions about where she went during the day, whom she saw, if she had had other boyfriends, if she had even just touched anyone"]. His paranoid obsessive behavior is a demonstration of the sexual power men begin to attribute to her during adolescence. Despite Marcello's possessiveness and the misogynistic society in

which they live, Lila upholds her value as a human being and makes the point: “a me non mi compra nessuno” (Adolescenza 37) [“no one is going to buy me”]. This character resists the erasure of her identity and independence, posing a threat to the male characters in the novel, while also holding power over them. Lila thus becomes an uncanny entity not only in the eyes of her friend, but also for the opposite sex, the one in power.

### ***Smarginatura / Dissolving Margins***

In the struggle to protect and define her identity amid violent surroundings, Lila further reveals herself as otherworldly through her exclusive ability to view objects, people and herself as losing their clear-cut margins and bleeding out into the world. Elena offers a glimpse into these unique episodes of a sensation Lila would later term “smarginatura” [“dissolving margins”] at various points in her story. This initially occurs on December 31<sup>st</sup> of 1958 at a New Year’s Eve party on the terrace of one of the apartment buildings in the neighborhood. After the fact, Lila recounts to Elena her sudden onset of sweat, nausea, elevated heart rate, and perception of her older brother Rino as disgusting. She would broadly define the term as an instance of people and things losing their physical margins and boundaries. Lila admits something similar had happened before, “Ma quella notte di Capodanno le era accaduto per la prima volta di avvertire entità sconosciute che spezzavano il profilo del mondo e ne mostravano la natura spaventosa. Questo l’aveva sconvolta” (Ferrante, *Adolescenza* 1) [“But that New

Year's Eve she had perceived for the first time unknown entities that broke down the outline of the world and demonstrated its terrifying nature. This had deeply shaken her"]. This phenomenon, which repeats throughout Lila's life, is a terrible, frightening and uncanny experience, which is entirely unique to this character. The specific nomenclature Lila comes up with provides an anchor to which many similar experiences and statements of hers may be connected. For instance, in a letter she sends to Elena in Ischia, Lila closes by expressing her general frustration with life: "una cosa dietro l'altra, si rompe tutto, tutto, tutto" (Adolescenza 34) ["everything, one thing after another, will break, everything, everything"]. She is preoccupied with boundaries of objects and identities of people, including herself, regarding their potential to unravel at any moment.

Elena appears equally as concerned about her friend's lack of boundaries and often finds herself speculating, as readers do, about Lila's mental process along with wondering what her next move might be. Soon after Elena returns from her work trip in Ischia, she learns that her best friend is to be married at sixteen to Stefano Carracci, the son of Don Achille, and owner of his family's profitable grocery store. Elena feels left behind by this new turn of events, but, knowing her friend so well, she muses, "Sapevo—forse speravo—che nessuna forma avrebbe mai potuto contenere Lila e che presto o tardi avrebbe spaccato tutto un'altra volta" (Adolescenza 44) ["I knew—perhaps I hoped—that no form could ever contain Lila, and that sooner or later she would break everything

again”]. Not only is this an instance that foreshadows future installments in the series, but, more importantly, it emphasizes Elena’s perspective on Lila’s mysterious and unforeseen actions, which constantly keep Elena, as both character and writer, along with the entire neighborhood—and ultimately us readers—on our toes.

Because she is the most unpredictable and arguably the most interesting character in the novel, Lila’s relentless search for identity is also conveyed through her struggle to gain control of her ever-changing life. As the wedding approaches, Elena is called upon by her friend to become very involved in the preparations alongside Pinuccia and Maria Carracci, Stefano’s sister and mother. Due to constant conflicts between the future in-laws, this portion of the novel ironically affords Elena much agency in her friend’s nuptials: she is the one who ends up choosing the wedding venue, the restaurant, the photographer, and so on. Elena questions Lila’s lack of attention to these details, reflecting: “Ebbi l’impressione, da come mi usava, da come manipolava Stefano, che si dibattesse per trovare, dall’interno della gabbia in cui si era chiusa, un modo d’essere tutto suo che però le restava oscuro” (*Adolescenza* 53) [“I had the impression, from the way she used me, from the way she handled Stefano, that she was struggling to find, from inside the cage in which she was enclosed, a way of being, all her own, that was still obscure to her”]. Lila’s determined search for her own identity is palpable to her best friend, as it is to any reader of the

novel by this point. Like many other girls who grew up in her same circumstance, Lila has chosen marriage as a way of securing economic stability for herself and her family and, though she seems to truly love Stefano, she loves her independence more. It is difficult for Elena, as it is for us readers, to truly believe Lila will allow herself to become a submissive housewife. Because she generally evinces uncanniness, her thoughts seem both familiar and unfamiliar to us, making it difficult for one to predict just how she will escape the life she has now chosen for herself.

The concept of living without clear boundaries both out in the world and within herself is emblematic of Lila as an uncanny presence. Due to a conflation of her age, socio-economic standing, unconventional personality, desire for self-expression, and persistent search of self, Lila appears to be the least clearly defined character in the novel. She is unpredictable and enigmatic, despite much of the novel being focused on analyzing her mental processes. Martin clearly articulates this character's primary struggle: "Speaking in the mode of masquerade and double, it [feminine adolescence] is haunted by its constitutive repressions. Like the uncanny, it is 'an experience of being *after oneself*, perpetually on the border between the once inhabited self, and the erasure of that self' (141).

Lila's development is much like the uncanny in that the way she negotiates her identity constantly alternates between the assertion of herself as

she currently is, and the erasure of that self in order to create a new version, or a double. This back-and-forth is largely due to the helplessness of her social position, as a young woman from a poor family, and causes her to appear at once familiar and unfamiliar—uncanny—to her best friend, family, and acquaintances, as to us readers. We notice something otherworldly, great, and threatening in her, while at the same time recognizing her as a young girl who is doing her best to cope with the cards in life she has been dealt. And while Elena's narration is partially responsible for constructing her friend's uncanny image, Lila's character has a unique quality that allows her to remarkably embody the uncanny. Her actions fluctuate so frequently not only because she is trapped socially, but also because she is honest, independent and brave. Lila refuses to acquiesce to men in every instance, doing so only when it serves the interest of her own self-preservation. In fact, she stands up for herself far more than any of the other female characters in the novel and, in doing so, epitomizes the uncanny by flawlessly using to her advantage both sides of a woman's persona: the familiar and domestic aspect along with the (un)hidden, fiery one.

## Chapter 4: Conclusions

*"It is the spectator, and not life, that art really mirrors."*

Oscar Wilde

Uncanny feelings are ultimately experienced on two levels in this pair of novels: by the characters themselves as well as by readers. Both Wilde's and Ferrante's text use the uncanny to problematize the concept of a fixed, identifiable personal identity in restrictive societal circumstances. In turn, this literary setting compels readers to face their innate fears and anxieties regarding the concept of identity that derive from paradoxical thoughts and emotions the texts' protagonists may arouse in them. Based on thorough analyses of the novels in Chapters 2 and 3, the affect produced by the uncanny and the emotions it ultimately evokes in readers will be explored here. Conclusions will be drawn regarding the role of the reader in processing and interpreting this affect.

### **Aging, a Familiar Fear**

The premise of *The Picture of Dorian Gray* posits that the protagonist sacrifice his soul, essentially making a deal with the devil, in order to achieve ageless but temporary beauty and youth. This proposition is uncanny because readers can easily recognize the fictional element of Dorian's persona after it

takes on a double life in his portrait and drives him to his downfall. Considering Freud's discussion of the uncanny in literature, as one reads this novel, he or she is drawn into the realistic frame and tricked into accepting these uncanny elements. The preeminent reason for the reader's attraction to this story has to do precisely with the sense of anxiety induced by the uncanny double of Dorian in his portrait. The narrative unearths the primary narcissism and repressed wish for immortality that is intrinsic to human nature. This uncanny feeling is introduced at the outset and increases in tension throughout the text. In chapter two, admiring his freshly painted beautiful, youthful portrait, Dorian thinks to himself: "Yes, there would be a day when his face would be wrinkled and wizen, his eyes dim and colourless, the grace of his figure broken and deformed . . . As he thought of it, a sharp pang of pain struck through him like a knife, and made each delicate fibre of his nature quiver." He then expresses his anguish aloud in a relatable way to Basil and Lord Henry, crying "How sad it is! I shall grow old, and horrible, and dreadful" (Wilde 65). Though the portrait is continually described in more grotesque ways than realistically plausible, this fear of aging is, in essence, not too far-fetched for readers to identify with.

While the theme of aging is set up for readers from the outset, Dorian's angst truly begins at the midpoint of the novel. Up until this moment, he has been basking in his youth and indulging all his desires. In the wake of Sybil Vane's death, however, he notices the first signs of decay around the depiction of his

mouth in the portrait. When Basil, the painter, unexpectedly visits him, Dorian realizes he must hide the portrait and does so in the attic. He tells himself that none of his visitors nor he will witness the deterioration of his image if it is hidden up there and proceeds to lock the room with a key. Of course, he is now haunted by the uncanny double he sees in the portrait and cannot restrain his paranoia: "the hideousness of age was in store for it [the painting]. The cheeks would become hollow or flaccid. Yellow crow's feet would creep around the fading eyes and make them horrible. The hair would lose its brightness, the mouth would gape or droop . . . There would be the wrinkled throat, the cold, blue-veined hands, the twisted body" (156). Dorian's description makes use of familiar images associated with aging that are premature at his age, but inevitable for every human being who grows old. The protagonist's strong, graphic and dramatic language makes an uncanny impression on the reader, who cannot help but recognize a similar fear deep within his or her own psyche.

During a conversation with Basil on the occasion of the painter's aforementioned visit, Dorian makes a statement that epitomizes the novel's effect for readers. In the context of expressing his acceptance of Sybil Vane's death, Dorian claims: "To become the spectator of one's own life, as Harry says, is to escape the suffering of life" (145). Clearly, this is a paradox in regards to the double, which allows Dorian to both live out his decadent life and observe it at the same time by witnessing the portrait's transformation. Though he wishes to

retreat to the role of spectator, he cannot separate himself from the entity in the portrait, and therefore is unable to escape the suffering of life, or rather he is able to do so only upon his death. Ironically, we as readers of Dorian's story should consider the unique opportunity it affords us to escape our own suffering and anxiety over growing old. The text offers an outlet for readers to acknowledge their repressed fears of aging and mortality by identifying with the protagonist, who is uncanny in that he is a fictional character, yet his experience of aging is relatable to the primitive constraints faced by every human being.

### **Likeability and Uncanniness**

In continuing to analyze the effects of both novels on the level of innate human feelings, we note that one of the foremost questions arising from Ferrante's *My Brilliant Friend* concerns readers' perceptions of Lila's nature and likeability. I argue that it is precisely the uncanny, the strangely familiar, both attractive and repulsive, which constitutes her appeal for readers and constructs her as the most intriguing character in the novel. She certainly emerges as the more complex of the two best friends, with Elena retreating into the background despite being the narrator of the story and a successful writer in her lifetime. Still, this dynamic between the two and their overlapping identities allow Lila to appear not only unconventional and interesting, but ultimately uncanny.

I preface this argument with a few examples from novels in different literary traditions which demonstrate a similar hierarchy between two female protagonists. In “Elena Ferrante and the Force of Female Friendships,” Molly Fischer attributes great importance to childhood friendships seen from a female perspective, which she describes as “the primordial soup of human relationships, messy and unformed but with the raw parts to make anything that might come after.” She goes on to discuss the question of “likeability” in regards to literary characters and she critiques definitions of the term that:

. . . involve conflating ‘likable’ and ‘conventional’—a formula that conveniently makes a high-minded rebel of anyone who adopts it, and ignores the many readers who have always preferred Scarlett O’Hara to Melanie Hamilton. It doesn’t quite hold up. . . . But, if the book we’re reading [Ferrante’s] confirms anything, it’s that what we like isn’t necessarily ‘likable’ at all, and that our relationships with books and friends aren’t so very different.

Fischer cites the example of readers’ preference for Scarlett O’Hara over Melanie Hamilton, the two female protagonists of Margaret Mitchell’s 1936 novel, *Gone with the Wind*, which later became an epic blockbuster film. Another example to consider is the greater appeal of Elizabeth Bennet versus her sister Jane from Jane Austen’s *Pride and Prejudice*, one of the most popular novels in English literature, published in 1813. Scarlett, Elizabeth, and Lila inevitably become the

focal female characters of their respective novels, despite being more disagreeable, crude, and misanthropic than their counterparts. This leads us to pose the question: why do we gravitate toward unconventional female characters climbing the social ladder instead of the more traditionally likeable ones? The reason seems to be that each of these characters stands out compared to her closest friend who, while being more traditionally likeable, also appears less complex and intriguing. Readers relate more to unique, astute and unconventional protagonists, particularly when they are females.

In Ferrante's novel, however, Lila is not only unconventional, but she has a profoundly intertwined relationship with Elena that evokes uncanny qualities, namely a captivating complexity and an innate intimacy. Apparently, they are foils to each other: one is brunette and the other is blonde, one is cruel and the other is sweet—yet somewhere between Elena's narration and Lila's enigmatic behavior, their identities become deeply entangled. This collapse of epistemological boundaries, as expounded by Weber, brings about the uncanny for readers, who are left feeling unsettled and unable to clearly decipher Lila's position in the friendship.

Throughout the text, both protagonists are conscious of the perception of others, particularly with regards to Elena's likeability versus Lila's lack thereof. At the ponds one evening, Elena reveals to her boyfriend, Antonio, "È stato sempre così, fin da quando eravamo piccole: tutti credono che lei sia cattiva e io buona"

(Ferrante, *Adolescenza* 50) ["It's always been like that, since we were little: everyone thinks she's bad and I'm good"]. Antonio agrees with the statement, which makes Elena feel touched and apparently proud of her own likeability at the expense of her friend's. The irony of this scene is that while Elena is transgressing sexual boundaries with Antonio at the ponds, we subsequently learn that Lila refrains from premarital sex with her affianced. Later, in a conversation between the two girls, Lila observes: "Volevo dire solo che sei brava a farti voler bene. La differenza tra me e te, da sempre, è che di me la gente ha paura e di te no" ["I meant only that you are good at making yourself liked. The difference between you and me, always, has been that people are afraid of me and not of you"]. Lila is also aware of the unease that she raises in others as opposed to the noncombatant image of her friend. Increasingly angered by Lila's comments, Elena retorts: "Forse perché tu sei cattiva" (*Adolescenza* 52) ["Maybe because you're mean"]. As sixteen-year-olds at this point, the girls are translating a very complex situation into simple terms. Nevertheless, they are touching on an essential element of the novel that contributes to its uncanny perception, especially with Lila's mention of evoking fear in others. Do we truly believe that Elena is nice and that Lila is mean—that they're opposites? Upon even a brief reflection, it is apparent that the circumstance cannot be this simple, or else the novel would not be a bestseller that many readers are unable to set down. The puzzle is that we are unsure of

Lila's intentions throughout most of the novel, and the bulk of the insight we tend to receive comes from Elena, our narrator, who is biased in her own way and is writing the novel retrospectively many years after these events have occurred. This predicament leads us to puzzle over Lila's complex personality and her true nature.

At an earlier point of their adolescence, Lila herself questions the motivations of her actions: "Ho qualcosa di malato?" . . . 'Faccio fare alle persone cose sbagliate'" (Adolescenza 25) ["Is there something wrong with me?" . . . 'I make people do the wrong thing'"] and Elena states that her friend often repeated this idea, especially when discussing her brother's bad behavior. Here, we glimpse a moment of vulnerability and weakness in this typically headstrong protagonist. Not only do points like this one in the text complicate Lila's character, but they hint at the uncontrollable uncanny force that inhabits her. Even she does not necessarily understand her intentions, which makes her all the more enigmatic to her best friend and to readers. This quality of Lila's is exceptionally engaging as one reads the novel, and it constitutes the main intrigue of the story. We experience uncanny emotions toward her because, on the one hand, and partly as a result of Elena's narration, we recognize that her actions are often abrupt, ruthless, and perhaps a bit evil; on the other, we cannot help but respect her resilience in the face of the many hardships she has endured and her moments of generosity toward her family and her best friend. As

Abigail Deutsch affirms in "Fiction in Review: Elena Ferrante" in *The Yale Review*, it is precisely here where the reader finds "the rub, and the source of so much angst for Elena (and fascination for us): Lila's brilliance can elevate as well as eviscerate, and the highs are high indeed" (160). The foremost way in which we see Lila's brilliance elevate others in this novel is through her production of art, namely writing, which in turn elevates Elena's performance in school.

### **Authorial Identity**

*My Brilliant Friend* is a complex play on perspectives and authorship.

Though Elena is the narrator of the retrospective story and the author of the text she is writing within our novel, she consistently credits Lila for her own writing style. Growing up, Elena aspired to imitate her best friend's manner of writing for the purpose of adopting it as her own. In fact, Lila is the first of the two to author her own text. While the girls are still in elementary school, "She [Lila] produces a striking if brief novel—a clutch of handwritten pages called 'The Blue Fairy.' The title is no accident: there's something fantastical, otherworldly, about Lila's protean ability. Something threatening, too" (Deutsch 159-60). Lila is completely unaware of her genius, lacks encouragement, and even goes so far as to deprecate her own work when her teacher shows no appreciation for the text. Though we are never shown the contents of the novel, Elena appears deeply moved and influenced by her friend's writing. Ferrante plainly states in *The Paris Review*: "We'll never know if Lila's few texts really have the power that Elena

attributes to them. What we do know is, rather, how they generate a sort of model that Elena tries to follow all her life. She tells us something about that model, but that's not what matters. What matters is that, without Lila, Elena wouldn't exist as a writer." The reader is kept on her toes when it comes to investigating authorship and is led to ponder several questions, such as: how much of her own narration—and so of the novel itself— can Elena take credit for? How reliable is she, especially in regards to her portrayal of Lila?

Metatextuality plays a large role in this text, particularly because Lila is the first of the two friends to independently write her own story and to affirm the goal of both girls to one day escape poverty by becoming famous writers. Elena is ultimately the one who brings the task to fruition, recounting their entire story in her retrospective novel, but it is essentially a dual effort. Each of the friends plays a key role in the act of writing the novel that we receive as readers. Nevertheless, one might also argue, bolstered by the prologue's revelation of her disappearance, that Lila herself stands as a projection of Elena's psyche along with everything else in the text. This would lead us to question the extent to which our reading experience is skewed by Elena's point of view as narrator, particularly concerning her construction of Lila as uncanny. The complexity that arises around authorial identity and mimicry is a key contributor to the "uncanniness of repetition" perceived by readers in this novel. Lila's recursive quality as both subject and object leads to questions such as: Who is truly driving

the narrative? Does Elena merely act as the spectator of Lila's life? And even then, to what degree is her narration influenced by Lila's writing style?

A pillar of the symbiosis between the best friends is the theme of education that takes place in primary school and persists through Elena's lifelong studies. Though Lila presents herself as the frontrunner of her class until fifth grade, she is prohibited by her father from continuing on to middle school. Elena, on the other hand, is granted the opportunity to pursue her studies, though she is not as strikingly brilliant as her friend. Once she has reached sixth grade, she is now at the top of her class, yet still feels inferior to Lila—"Andai a casa covando il dolore di essere la prima senza essere veramente la prima" (Ferrante, *Adolescenza* 9) ["I went home with the pain of being first without really being first"]. Elena is never free of Lila's brilliance, which stalks and threatens her at every turn. Ironically, as a reader, one also cannot help but feel that Lila is the true genius behind this story, as opposed to Elena who is actually responsible for writing the book. On the day of her wedding, Lila urges Elena to continue studying no matter what happens, and even offers to financially support her throughout her schooling. Then, in a touching moment, Lila tells her friend: ". . . tu sei la mia amica geniale, devi diventare la più brava di tutti, maschi e femmine" (*Adolescenza* 57) [". . . you're my brilliant friend, you have to be the best of all, boys and girls"]. Here, Lila opens up an entirely new outlook on the title: has Elena been the brilliant friend all along from Lila's perspective? If so,

this would indicate that the reader does not know much about Lila's thoughts, exposing the narrator's skewed perspective. In a way, by making this statement at such an important turning point of her life, Lila is handing over to Elena the power to tell their story and entrusting her with that responsibility. She wants Elena's success for the both of them, implying that a part of herself resides in her friend and that it is impossible to distinguish one's accomplishments from the other's.

Paradoxically, though, by giving over the power of authorship to Elena, Lila ensures that she is very much alive and dominant in their story. As Deutsch rightly affirms, "The girls are 'one in two, two in one,' as Elena notes two books later, and that merging brings with it an attendant horror: the threat of self-erasure" (160). In terms of these two best friends as uncanny doubles, Elena is familiar to the reader, while Lila governs the unfamiliar sphere, which is attractive but threatening to readers. Elena, therefore, is more at risk of self-erasure, a fear that is not difficult for us to relate to. Abigail Deutsch has observed in this context:

As extraordinary as this friendship is, it is also intimately, even threateningly, familiar. . . . In the real world as in Ferrante's, we risk absorbing other people so thoroughly that we lose ourselves; we risk living at the mercy of their whims; and we risk their departures, which would also mean the disappearances of parts of ourselves. These facts of our relationships are all the scarier for how little we acknowledge them, and

Ferrante's disturbing genius lies in staring at them directly—and forcing us to stare, too. (161)

The prologue to this novel posits this conflict flawlessly because Elena is angry upon learning of Lila's mysterious disappearance and feels compelled to write: "Ho acceso il computer e ho cominciato a scrivere ogni dettaglio della nostra storia, tutto ciò che mi è rimasto in mente" (Ferrante, Prologo 3) ["I turned on the computer and began to write—all the details of our story, everything that still remained in my memory"]. The only way for Elena to alleviate the gaping loss of identity and purpose that Lila's disappearance has caused is for her to live once again vicariously through her friend by retelling their story. Along with the reader, Elena questions, manipulates, and grapples with Lila's uncanny character. The novel, in turn, leads us to investigate our own identities and the way they are shaped in uncanny ways by others, particularly those closest to us, our "alter egos."

### **Wilde and Ferrante**

The analysis of Oscar Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray* and Elena Ferrante's *L'amica geniale (My Brilliant Friend)* has illuminated the potential of the uncanny to shatter the façade of characters' literary identity and expose their innermost anxieties. The uncanny furthermore transcends the bounded pages of the novels in which these literary protagonists exist by compelling readers to

confront analogous innate anxieties that plague the human pursuit of a clearly defined identity. Essentially, the uncanny is at play on two levels here: textually with respect to the characters and interpretatively in regard to readers. For one, the characters themselves are haunted by their respective “double,” whether it be Dorian Gray’s portrait, the mirror image of himself, or Elena and Lila’s interdependent and entwined friendship. Dorian responds to the repressive societal conventions of Victorian England by adopting a decadent, hedonistic lifestyle focused on aesthetic beauty. By trading his soul for the ageless face of his picture, Dorian acquires not a mirror image of himself, but rather an uncanny double identity that resides both within himself and in the portrait. In the end, Dorian is unable to separate his original identity from his double, and his resulting anxiety leads to his downfall.

Conversely, Ferrante’s text represents the double as residing in two protagonists: Elena and Lila. Yet, theirs is no simple friendship; the two girls act simultaneously as each other’s foils, alter egos, supporters, and enemies. Lila’s uncanny presence as filtered through Elena’s narration further complicates the question of identity in this novel. The culmination of the symbiosis between the two occurs in one of the final chapters, when Lila calls Elena her “brilliant friend.” All the while, however, Elena has both implicitly and explicitly referred to Lila’s distinctive powers of intelligence as something completely out of the ordinary. This novel also presents its protagonists with a series of social constraints,

namely poverty, sexism and violence. The bleak environment in which the girls grow up contributes to their interconnectedness as they share the simple goal of survival. The anxiety of separating the original from its double is highly at play in the framing of this novel, and is particularly evidenced by Elena's compulsion to relive their years of friendship together by writing a novel. This impulse may likely also stem from Elena's displacement onto Lila of her relationship with her mother, which is evidently strained throughout her childhood and adolescence. Through her narrative voice, it becomes apparent that Elena is incapable of accepting Lila's disappearance because her identity is so closely bound up with that of her best friend. By narrating their development over the years, Elena is able to placate the anxiety of losing a part of herself along with her friend's disappearance. Essentially, the text substitutes for the narrator's attachment to her best friend.

As stated by Wilde, we as spectators are mirrored in these works of literature. More precisely though, our repressed anxieties over personal identity are reflected in the texts. Dorian Gray demonstrates how the fear of mortality and the refusal to accept natural processes of aging and decay lead to an anxiety that is potentially self-destructive. Though the descriptions of his portrait are grotesque, we are not merely repulsed by them. Instead, we sense an underlying familiarity that attracts us to a text which confronts an anxiety that most of us repress. Elena and Lila's relationship also mirrors an innate fear to which readers

can deeply relate. This is precisely the fear of self-erasure and the loss of identity at the hands of others who shape and mold our growth as individuals. When particular texts, such as Ferrante's and Wilde's, present us with remarkably identifiable protagonists, our eyes are opened to the reflection of our own identities—familiar, yet changeable, undefined and indeed, uncanny.

## Works Cited

Agamben, Giorgio. "Friendship." *Contretemps*. Translated by Joseph Falsone, vol. 5, 2004, pp. 2-7.

Bartnæs, Morten. "Freud's 'the 'Uncanny" and Deconstructive Criticism: Intellectual Uncertainty and Delicacy of Perception." *Psychoanalysis and History*, vol. 12, no. 1, 2010, pp. 29-53. EBSCO, doi: 10.3366/E1460823509000531. Accessed 18 Apr. 2015.

Clifton, Glenn. "Aging and Periodicity in The Picture of Dorian Gray and The Ambassadors: An Aesthetic Adulthood." *ELT*, vol. 59, no. 3, 2016, pp. 283-302, Project MUSE, [muse.jhu.edu/jpllnet.sfsu.edu/article/617918](http://muse.jhu.edu/jpllnet.sfsu.edu/article/617918). Accessed 23 Dec. 2016.

Deutsch, Abigail. "Fiction in Review: Elena Ferrante." *The Yale Review*, vol. 103, no. 2, 2015, pp. 158-165, Wiley Online Library, doi: 10.1111/yrev.12272. Accessed 17 Nov. 2016.

Ferrante, Elena. *L'amica geniale*. Kindle ed., Edizioni e/o, 2011.

---. "Art of Fiction No. 228." *The Paris Review*, no. 212, Spring 2015, <https://www.theparisreview.org/interviews/6370/elena-ferrante-art-of-fiction-no-228-elena-ferrante>. Accessed 17 Nov. 2016.

Fischer, Molly. "Elena Ferrante and the Force of Female Friendships." *The New Yorker*, 4 Sept. 2014, pars. 2, 7, [www.newyorker.com/books/page-turner/elena-ferrante-liking-like](http://www.newyorker.com/books/page-turner/elena-ferrante-liking-like). Accessed 13 Apr. 2017.

Freud, Sigmund. "The 'Uncanny.'" 1919, Lecture.

---. *Civilization and Its Discontents*. Translated by James Strachey, Norton, 1961,  
par. 3, [faculty.georgetown.edu/irvinem/theory/Freud-CivDis.html](http://faculty.georgetown.edu/irvinem/theory/Freud-CivDis.html).

Accessed 6 Apr. 2017.

Goldstein, Ann, translator. *My Brilliant Friend*. By Elena Ferrante. Kindle ed.,  
Europa Editions, 2012.

Hampton, Moriah. *Fallen Beauty: Aesthetics and Ethics in Decadent Literature*.  
Dissertation, State University of New York at Buffalo, 2011. UMI, 2012.

Lacan, Jacques. "The Mirror Stage as Formative of the Function of the I as  
Revealed in Psychoanalytic Experience." Trans. Alan Sheridan.

*Contemporary Literary Criticism: Literary and Cultural Studies*. Eds.

Robert Con Davis and Ronald Schleifer. Longman, 1998, pp. 404-

409, MLAIB, search-proquest

[com.jpollnet.sfsu.edu/docview/741826539?accountid=13802](http://com.jpollnet.sfsu.edu/docview/741826539?accountid=13802). Accessed 25

Nov. 2014.

Linville, Susan E. *History films, women, and Freud's Uncanny*. University of  
Texas Press, 2004.

Martin, Deborah. "Feminine Adolescence as Uncanny: Masculinity, Haunting and  
Self-Estrangement." *Forum for modern language studies*, vol. 49, no. 2,

2013, pp. 135-44. Oxford University Press,

<http://fmls.oxfordjournals.org/content/49/2/135>. Accessed 17 Nov. 2016.

- Rahimi, Sadeq. "The Ego, the Ocular, and the Uncanny: Why are Metaphors of Vision Central in Accounts of the Uncanny?" *The International journal of psycho-analysis*, vol. 94, no. 3, 2013, pp. 453-76, Wiley Online Library, doi: 10.1111/j.1745-8315.2012.00660.x. Accessed 16 Apr. 2015.
- Weber, Samuel. "The Sideshow; Or, Remarks on a Canny Moment." *MLN*, vol. 88, no. 6, 1973, pp. 1102-33, JSTOR, doi: 10.2307/2907669. Accessed 18 Apr. 2015.
- Weedman, Danielle. "Men, Monsters and Morality: Shaping Ethics through the Sublime and Uncanny." Capstone, Pacific University, 2014. commons.pacificu.edu/cashu/20/. Accessed 15 Dec. 2016.
- Wenaus, Arthur. "Monstrorum artifex: Uncanny Narrative Contexture and Narcissism in Oscar Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray*." *The Irish Journal of Gothic and Horror Studies*, vol. 13, 2014, pp. 57-77, MLA International Bibliography, irishgothichorror.wordpress.com/. Accessed 23 Dec. 2016.
- Wilde, Oscar. *The Picture of Dorian Gray*. Broadview: Ontario, 1998.
- Witt, Martha. "Elena Ferrante: My Brilliant Friend." *The Literary Review*, vol. 55, no. 4, 2012, pp. 177.