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“Dragons are Tricky”:  
The Uncanny Dragons of Children’s Literature

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*Abstract: As early as the sixties, scholars of children's literature have noted a trend to soften and satirize the dragon for children. This disconnect with traditional dragons has been bemoaned as ruining the mythic and archetypal power of dragons. Yet there may be more potent dragons lurking in children's literature than readily apparent, due to one significant aspect of traditional Western dragon-lore: the eerie feeling or mood cast by a dragon. The original dragons of Germanic lore, from which many children's literature dragons descended, were not just large scary beasts, but they also created a distinctly unsettling atmosphere in their stories. Modern tamed and human-like children's literature dragons borrow certain uncanny qualities from the older generations of dragon-lore to become potent, if not always life-threatening characters. In specific, two traits borrowed from the original lore inspire uncanny doubling with their human counterparts: the dragons' intensely possessive gaze and their clever, manipulative speech. This article analyzes these Freudian inheritances to argue that children's literature dragons have not been entirely softened and satirized; the potential for uncanny fear embodied by the human-like behaviors of legendary Western dragons lingers in many modern children's literature dragons. This potential reveals that dragons are still strong characters and can and should be analyzed productively through a Freudian uncanny lens.*

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J.R.R. Tolkien once declared that “the dragon in legend is a potent creation of men’s imagination, richer in significance than his barrow is in gold” (“The Monsters” 16). Dragons in mythology have come to be recognized for their value as representations of ancient cultures or as worldwide archetypes. Anthropologists have found and studied dragons in nearly all surviving mythologies; medievalists have examined them in manuscripts and bestiaries. In modern literature, dragons have flourished in their newer realm of fantasy and children’s literature as one of its most pervasive mythic animals.

Yet within children's literature, scholars have noted a trend beginning even before the dragon's mass popularity in fantasy to soften and satirize the dragon for children. While this type of friendly dragon has become a well known resident of children's books, this article argues that children's literature dragons have been not been entirely softened and satirized; the potential for uncanny fear embodied by the human-like behaviors of legendary Western dragons lingers in many modern children's literature dragons.

## Fluffy Dragons

In comparison to ancient dragon lore, modern dragons for children inspire less terror and more laughter, beginning most noticeably with Kenneth Grahame's "The Reluctant Dragon" in 1898. Ruth Stein in 1968 and Margaret Blount in 1974 both comment with distaste on the increasingly cuddly, "fluffy" nature of dragons in children's literature. In a short article for *Elementary Education*, Stein expresses hope that Tolkien's Smaug would improve the literary dragon's evolution and encourage properly scary dragons. While this has since proved true in part, the bemoaned fluffy dragons remain prevalent alongside Tolkien's menacing breed. Nonetheless Blount, in a later book, stipulates that as long as dragons retain their capability to inspire awe they could be less than terrifying and still remain "real dragons" (129). She points out several stories that fail to keep the awe of dragons alive, and most of the failures revolve around dragons that generally behave like humans and sometimes retain only one dragon characteristic, usually fire-breathing, in order to inspire conflict. Jon Stott, in 1990, shows less concern over what a "real" dragon is and even praises the proliferation of fluffy dragons, including Grahame's dragon, as parodies of the outdated cultural codes represented by traditional dragon lore (222-223).

Hope Shastri's 1992 dissertation on the picture book dragon gives concrete results to support the observations of scholars like Stein, Blount, and Stott. Shastri performed a content analysis of 151 picture books produced between 1950 and 1992 in order to ascertain whether or not dragons have preserved their range of mythic capabilities in that form of children's literature. She divides picture book dragons into three categories: Household (the type that Blount accused of failure), Wildwood (untamed, living in the wild and closer to Tolkien's sort), and Imaginary (clearly pretend or a dream on the part of a child) and identifies thirty traditional dragon traits such as breathing fire, consuming humans, guarding treasure, talking, flying, and being vanquished. After applying these categories and traits to all 151 books, Shastri concludes that picture book dragons have effectively lost the majority of their original mythic qualities, save fire-breathing, and have largely become tame and meek—especially the Household dragons, out of which she finds 86% to be denatured as opposed to 34% of Wildwood and 42% of Imaginary dragons (77). Tina L. Hanlon generally agrees with Shastri's findings in her own examination of 100 picture books in 2003, but she also notes with some hope the resurgence of strong dragons in retold fairy tales. In total, the work of these scholars over the past two decades indicates that dragons in children's books are increasingly humorous and less and less fearsome, just as Stein feared when she wrote over forty years ago.

## Dragons and the Uncanny

There may be more potent dragons lurking in children's literature than these observations and studies indicate, due to one significant aspect of Western dragon-lore: the eerie feeling or mood cast by a dragon. The traits listed by Shastri focus on characteristics of the dragons themselves but do not include the emotional environment created by the dragon within the literature or with the audience. Stott acknowledges the fear inspired by traditional dragons due to their size and fierce

temper, but his analysis addresses only the physical threat of the dragons and implies that this fear is entirely lost when parodied (224). Blount comes close to recognizing this deeper psychological effect of dragons when she writes that a quality children's literature dragon should still inspire awe. Awe and fear, yes, but the original dragons of Germanic lore from which children's literature dragons descended were not just large scary beasts, but they also created a distinctly unsettling atmosphere in their stories.

This uncanny quality of these ancestral dragons derives from their unnatural similarity to the heroes who defeat them; the dragons are doubles for humanity. Joyce Tally Lionarons and Jonathan Evans, scholars of medieval dragon-lore, assert that dragons such as the famous Fáfñir were terrifying and effective characters in epics because they vied with people for the right to be "human." According to the classic definition by Freud, the uncanny double occurs when "one [person] possesses knowledge, feelings and experience in common with the other" and is also sometimes "marked by the fact that the subject identifies himself with someone else, so that he is in doubt as to which his self is, or substitutes the extraneous self for his own" (234).<sup>1</sup> Freudian psychoanalysis has been applied to dragons in fairy tales by such scholars as Bruno Bettelheim, but he posits dragons as the dangerous, untamed id or the projection of oedipal issues by the child hero (76). Bettelheim's analysis also locates dragons as an internal hero conflict, which in many ways complements to my argument here, but I focus on Freud's concept of the uncanny rather than his superego-ego-id construct to explain the way that modern dragons can still unsettle readers even when the plot does not follow the traditional human hero questing to slay a physically fearsome dragon. Modern tamed and human-like children's literature dragons borrow certain uncanny qualities from the older generations of dragon-lore to become potent, if not life or ego-threatening characters. In specific, two traits borrowed from the original lore inspire the uncanny doubling with humans: the dragons' intensely possessive gaze and their clever, manipulative speech.

The remainder of this article will further explain how the dragon's potent powers of vision and language operate as uncanny traits, how vision and language are recognized by scholars of Germanic dragon-lore, and how these traits were translated into children's literature through such landmark texts as Grahame's *The Reluctant Dragon* and J.R.R. Tolkien's Smaug in *The Hobbit* (1937). Finally, I will examine some examples of the uncanny vision and language of the dragons of modern children's literature through the middle-grade reader *How to Train Your Dragon Vol. 1* and the picture book *Hush, Little Dragon*. These books serve as purposeful case studies intended to represent recent English-language literature for the youngest to middle-grade readers. Each book was selected out of a pool of potential recent dragon books because they represent clear, but not extraordinary or unusual, examples of tamed and human-like dragons, respectively. I mean to ultimately use these texts to demonstrate that while many commonplace modern dragons have evolved away from their ancestors to good or bad effect, the visual potency and intimacy with language inherited from older dragons remain a potent, if largely invisible, means of creating uncanny dragons in children's literature. Stein and Blount protest the appearance of increasingly human dragons, but this very doubling has the potential to rescue the awe of dragons as long as they are just different and frightening enough to achieve the uncanny.

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<sup>1</sup> Admittedly, Freud dismisses fantastic tales as potential hosts for the uncanny, saying "I cannot think of any genuine fairy story which has anything uncanny about it" (246). However, many scholars before me have disregarded this qualification of the uncanny and applied it to fantasy and fairy tales alike. See Peter Straub's "American Fantastic Tales: Terror and the Uncanny from Poe to the Pulps" for an overview of the uncanny in fantastic American stories or David Rudd's "An Eye for an I: Neil Gaiman's *Coraline* and Questions of Identity" for a more specific application of Freud's uncanny to a fantasy text.

## The Uncanny Dragon, Then and Now

The dragon's eyes hold much of its power, as well as its ability to inspire uncanny fear. In Freud's concept of the uncanny, the eyes are a frequent site of fear in two ways: as a displaced castration complex if the eyes are threatened, and as the evil-eye threatening oneself (231, 240). Colloquially considered windows to the soul, the eyes are also a significant cultural location for human identity. Likewise, the dragon's powerful eyes are one of its identifying features and greatest assets in its efforts to seize human identity. When discussing the Indo-European name for the dragon, Jonathan Evans says that the Greek root "\*drk-" originally means "to see, to watch" and "\*drk-on" would mean something like "seeing one" ("As Rare" 23). Evans asserts that accordingly many Indo-European dragons are watchers and guarders responsible for keeping an eye on a treasure of some sort, and many have piercing or unnatural stares to discomfit potential attackers (23). The Greek dragon's name and identity is based on its power of sight. The "unnatural" stare that Evans mentions also creates an eerie sense of the intelligence behind the dragon's guardianship, a power and vision comparable if not superior to humanity's. The human hero is responsible for guarding the people, the dragon for guarding the treasure. Until one defeats the other, they are equally identified as powerful over-seers threatening one another's guardianship. Traditionally, when a hero faces and defeats a dragon, the slaying extinguishes the dragon's superior vision. In doing so, the hero establishes himself as the greater power and superior identity as watcher-guardian. This challenge over the hero's watcher-identity invokes the Freudian evil-eye or blindness as castration, making the dragon's threat to one's identity as watcher-guardian uncanny.

Alongside the eyes, the dragon's uncanny powers manifest in its associations with speech. As far as we know, dragons are primarily imaginary creatures that emerged from within the oral and written realms of storytelling.<sup>2</sup> In Western literature, they leapt into being as an invention of language and shortly after acquired, within stories, the ability to out-speak humans.<sup>3</sup> In creating language-capable monsters proficient with the tools of linguistic creation, poets and bards fashioned in dragons a double for themselves: the dragon as wielder of language and the raw potential for language—including the risk that language could escape human control and become dangerous. In this way dragons stole the human invention that created them and ventured uncomfortably close to humanity through the ability to speak with equal or superior eloquence. While other animals speak in legend and fairy tale, most of these creatures existed before language named them, and their words are simple and communicative. Dragons in contrast could not exist without language, and have a high language skill demonstrated through fondness for riddling talk and a tendency to use it aggressively.<sup>4</sup> Furthermore, traditional dragons are notoriously evil where regular animals are not. Deirdre Dwen Pitts writes that folklore animals "date from the time when the world was not yet man-oriented and man and animal struggled together against uncontrollable natural forces" (169). These animals are on the humans' side: "Animals are rarely the antagonists in these tales; enemies are usually undefined monsters, ogres, witches, giants, devils, demons, with only an occasional wolf" (169). Oddly missing from this list are dragons, which are also frequent enemies and shadows of humanity. The dragon is, like the uncanny, that which "ought to have remained secret and hidden but has come to light" (Freud 225). Many of the most terrifying and memorable dragons rely on

2 See Grafton Elliot Smith's *The Evolution of the Dragon*, Charles Gould's *Dragons, Unicorns, and Sea Serpents: A Classic Study of the Evidence for their Existence*, Ernest Ingersoll's *Dragons and Dragon Lore*, and David E. Jones's *An Instinct for Dragons* for an overview of the classic and updated debates on where the dragon in myth came from, whether or not it ever existed, and how it spread across the world.

3 The oldest proto-dragons were mythic characters like the Babylonian Tiamat, a goddess who could of course speak. However, this paper largely concerns Western dragons from the point when we can culturally recognize them as dragons. It is at this point that the dragon's relationship with language becomes noticeable and also problematic.

4 The sphinx and trolls, other frequently riddling creatures, are recognized as proto-dragons. See the work of Charles Gould and Ernest Ingersoll in works cited.

their use of language to inspire fear and awe due to being distinctly unwelcome doubles for humanity.

Although the dragon may imitate humanity through its roles as watcher and speaker, its physical properties keep it unfamiliar enough to be uncanny. The dragon's appearance comes down as inconsistent through European lore, but the medieval dragon is never nice-looking or aesthetically pleasing. This traditional dragon combines frightening and uncomfortable aspects taken from beasts who threaten humanity: snakes, big cats, and birds of prey.<sup>5</sup> Therefore when this undesirable anti-human claims human identity, the thought becomes inherently unsettling to humans. Having this conglomeration of everything that one finds frightening and uncomfortable nearly become the same as oneself produces the uncanny doubling effect. Furthermore, Freud suggests that the familiar unfamiliar of the uncanny is the result of repressed experiences (241); accordingly many of these old stories imply that the dragon embodies the repressed dark side of the hero.

In the medieval Germanic dragon myths, the dragon watching over a hoard becomes an uncanny double for the hero watching over the people. In *Beowulf*, the poet uses identical words to describe the roles of Beowulf and the dragon. At different times he calls them both *aglæcan*, meaning “warrior,” and only context distinguishes the hero from the dragon (Lionarons 30). The same phrase *hordweard* or “hoard-guardian” refers to both. The dragon's lair is called a *dryhtsele*, the term used for a human king's hall (30). These examples of parallel naming reveal the doubled natures of hero and dragon as well as their conflicting positions. They perform the same job, but only one can succeed. In the inevitable conflict, the two guardians are so similar they nearly cancel one another out. Both kill one another; only narrowly does Beowulf come out on top as the successful overseer. By killing the dragon, he proves an effective guardian of his people from the dragon menace, but he also performs the final viewing and therefore possession of the dragon's treasure. The two concepts are connected, as the poet shows through Beowulf's insistence upon seeing the treasure before dying. When Wiglaf brings it to him, Beowulf gazes on it and says, “I give thanks / that I behold this treasure here in front of me, / that I have been allowed to leave my people / so well endowed on the day I die” (ln 2795-2798). He believes the treasure he has won could support his people, and therefore what the dragon has been watching over has been converted to a part of Beowulf's ward. His ability to look on the treasure assures him that he has won the battle of eyes.

The language of the Germanic dragons also doubled them with humans, and in two ways: the way that the dragons were spoken about and the way that they spoke. Aside from how similar words are used in *Beowulf* to align the hero and the dragon, the Indo-European dragon-slaying myth has its own special verb formula reserved for the epic killing of dragons. In her book on medieval dragons, Lionarons points out that instead of an active verb such as “to slay,” the dragon-slaying verb is self-reflexive and roughly translates “to become slayer to” (6). The action of slaying defines the hero/slayer against the dragon/slain. The way this particular verb functions, Lionarons notes, “suggests a covert similarity between subject and object, hero and dragon” (6). The cosmic dragon-slaying myth and later the legendary hero tale, she explains, worked through one voice silencing the other—the battle is over language since the winner gets to declare himself to be the god/hero and the loser to be the dragon (8). The need for such a battle reveals the uncomfortable similarity between heroes and dragons in the tales of dragon-slayers such as Sigurd, Þiðrek, Beowulf, and Thor. Each hero ultimately defines himself as the hero; it is the narrow margin of success and uncertain hero status that creates the uncanniness.

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5 Smith uses this combination of predator traits as the foundation for his theory that dragons result from residual predator-prey instincts left over from the evolution of humanity. In his book, he details how these attributes are present in every mythological dragon in every culture across the world.

The dragons also use language to fight for the speaking, dominant role, as can be seen in the verbal battle that occurs at the death of the dragon Fáfnir. In the *Volsunga Saga* version, the hero Sigurd kills Fáfnir through a trick; the actual violence is brief. As the dragon slowly dies, it speaks (*Volsunga* 78). Lionarons claims that the conversation is riskier than the attack, for despite Fáfnir's mortal wounds, he threatens to take the winner's right as silencer through engaging the Germanic genres of the *senna*, death song, and wisdom poetry (69). The *senna* is a stylized battle of words accomplished through ritual insults and challenges meant to establish one's social place. When Fáfnir engages Sigurd in this battle, as Armann Jakobsson puts it, "readers will be prone to an eerie feeling that the dragon is somehow outwitting Sigurðr" (31). This eerie feeling results from a distinctly non-human entity fighting for the human social rank of hero, and doing well. The dragon's skill at word-play indicates that the non-human may actually be better at the human's game of language. Fáfnir nearly wins through wisdom poetry that touches on the cosmological and silences the hero. Sigurd, in his efforts to outsmart Fáfnir and find an unanswerable question, asks about the end of the world: "How namest thou the holm whereon Surt and the Æsir mix and mingle in the water of the sword?" (*Volsung* 80) Surt, the fire giant, is fated to destroy the world at Ragnarok in a battle against the Æsir. The beginning and the end of the world in Norse myth revolve around the conquering and resurgence of chaos, embodied in part by the Midgard Serpent, Jormungandr, the immense dragon that was defeated at the world's creation by Thor and will in turn defeat Thor at Ragnarok. In asking about the cosmic end, Sigurd questions the farthest reaches of wisdom and speech, being and non-being, and the cosmic battle of dragon and hero, which he is re-enacting in miniature. Fáfnir replies, in many translations: "Unshapen is that holm hight," or the island is not named (80). In the original Icelandic, he calls the island "Oskopnir" (Hunt). Translations of the "The Lay of Fafnir" from the Elder Edda often phrase the reply: "Oskopnir it is called" (174). August Hunt claims that translating the word as a mere lack of name misrepresents it. The -nir is a basic Icelandic suffix, but combined with Oskop-, meaning "umade," it could instead indicate the "island of unmaking" (Hunt). Therefore the island could be not yet made, not yet named, or the place of the final unmaking. Possibly all three at once, straining the human mind to embrace the dragon's polysemic phrasing. Fáfnir's bewildering understanding and deft verbal expression of cosmic knowledge hushes Sigurd. The dragon's next words, Lionarons claims, change from wisdom poetry to a death song—a genre reserved for dying heroes. Sigurd interrupts and steers them back into the *senna*, narrowly getting the last word and walking away with his victory and identity as the hero intact. This threatening similarity between Sigurd and Fáfnir exemplifies the speaking dragon's uncanny ability to become the supreme double and threat to humanity.

## From Victorian Satire to Modern Fantasy

Following the medieval surge of Christianity in Europe, the Germanic legends of Western dragons became inextricably tied to the Devil-dragon of Revelation and far too allegorical for use in common secular stories, according to Ruth Berman. Not until the late 1800's, with the discoveries of dinosaur remains, were dragons tenable outside of allegory (Berman 220). At that point, Berman claims, Kenneth Grahame's lighthearted, secular story "The Reluctant Dragon" in 1898 helped resurrect the dragon from its allegorical existence. Grahame's was a carefree and satirical dragon—far removed from the heavy religious matter of Revelation. Grahame's version retained only subtle traces of the dragon's menacing eyes and language and made his dragon prefer poetry or being a spectacle over fighting. Again, a human hero of the tale, the shepherd's boy, doubles the dragon in that he also writes poetry, "heaps of it" in fact, and would very much like to watch a spectacle (335). The dragon and the boy differ though, when it comes to violence. The dragon prefers grammar and chastises the boy: "Don't be *violent*, Boy, . . . Sit down and get your breath, and try to

remember that the noun governs the verb” (337 emphasis in **the** original). The boy wants a fight between the dragon and St. George, whereas the dragon wants to compose sonnets and be visually admired. Eerily, compared to the Germanic tradition, this preference implies that the dragon has won and bears the human values of peace, tolerance, and love of beauty (and good grammar) more than the humans. The dragon openly resembles humans and has more desirable human traits than the hero. Grahame’s dragon uses his lingering expertise with vision and words to find a place in society with just as much if not more status than the hero—only he accomplishes it nonviolently. St. George agrees to help the dragon create the illusion of a battle, culminating with the visual trick of a stab “in the spare place agreed upon” in the dragon’s neck-folds (347). This battle upends the dragon/hero struggle for visual dominance as the dragon and hero use it against the common people instead. The dragon then uses persuasive, eloquent language to rise in society to the point that “the Saint and the Boy, as they looked on, felt that they were only assisting at a feast of which the honour and glory were entirely the dragon’s” (348). The dragon’s language here is a joke on the *senna*, the ritual of insults and boasts to gain social standing. In the end, the reluctant dragon uses eyes and language to claim humanity in a milder, subtler way than in the Germanic lore. Grahame, in avoiding the evil associations of the Satan-dragon of Revelation, suppressed the dragon’s uncanny verbal power further below the surface. His dragon is hardly scary, but it clearly wins “the honour and glory” (348). However, the reluctant dragon’s uncanny victory does not mean that every kindly dragon carries this underlying success. Edith Nesbit’s friendly dragon in “The Last of the Dragons” (1925), for instance, is tame and prone to crying over small kindnesses. In the end, the dragon submits to being transformed into the first airplane since he is desperate to serve humanity—a far cry from Grahame’s dragon’s subtle conquest and put-down to humanity. Not all children’s literature dragons seem to take up these uncanny aspects, but Grahame’s version demonstrates that the potential is there, even in satire.

Tolkien, a scholar of Germanic literature and vocal fan of its monsters, refreshed the uncanny and traditional dragon traits in his influential fiction. Tolkien’s dragon Glaurung was modeled on Fáfñir and paved the way for scary, language-manipulating dragons in children’s literature. Evans has noted that the *Volsunga Saga* shaped Tolkien’s tale of Túrin Túrambar (“The Dragon-Lore” 24). In this tale, Glaurung catches Túrin in his gaze and holds him, speaking horrors into his mind and through his eyes. Later he holds the gaze of Túrin’s sister Nienor for days until she is stripped of her memory and identity. Túrin is “bemused by the eyes of the dragon” to the point that he “believed the words of Glaurung” to his demise (*Silmarillion* 214). The dragon’s eyes allow his words to penetrate. In Glaurung, Tolkien synthesizes the dragon’s power of sight and uncanny lingual skill. Tolkien’s later dragon Smaug, who was intended for a child audience, preserves the eeriness of the dragon’s glowing gaze but focuses on the dragon’s speech. When Bilbo approaches Smaug for the second time, the paragraph of description concludes with the terse, powerful sentence, “Then Smaug spoke” (*Hobbit* 241). Jakobsson explains that at “the moment it speaks, it becomes a character, an intelligent person who is not merely governed by his bestial instincts.” (28). Smaug’s suave power of speech makes him an eerie cross between human and beast, and increases his threat to the humanoid characters (29). Thus Smaug can be held up as an early model for the overtly (more so than Grahame’s, anyway) uncanny and dangerous dragon in children’s literature.

Tolkien is regularly recognized as a foundation of modern fantasy, and his reconstitution of the ancient eeriness of dragons is likely to have influenced many other fantasy writers who took up the dragon. Ursula K. Le Guin and Anne McCaffrey both used the dragon’s lingual skill to redefine dragons’ bond with humanity, and their versions continue to affect literary dragons. However, their sort of clearly powerful dragons dwell primarily in young adult and adult fantasy. Books intended for the youngest readers instead temper Tolkien’s potency with Grahame’s subtlety, disguising most powerful dragons. Not all children’s literature dragons unlock this potential—in fact it often

remains entirely untapped, as with Nesbit's dragon—but there are still powerful dragons created by writers who choose to or unintentionally employ the methods of uncanny doubling adapted from Germanic lore by Grahame and Tolkien.

## The Dragon in the Nursery Mirror

Within children's books reside many overlooked frightening and uncanny dragons. The middle-grade reader *How to Train Your Dragon Book 1* and the picture book *Hush, Little Dragon* present dragons that at first glance appear mocked or belittled. Yet through their subtle, uncanny vision and language, these dragons exemplify the potential for children's literature to inspire the same ancient fear of the dragon-double without being too blatantly scary.

## How to Train Your Dragon

In the first volume of Cressida Cowell's *How to Train Your Dragon* series, the dragons become uncanny through the demonic power of their eyes as well as their language-based relationship with humans. While these dragons do not guard or watch, their eyes inherit Smaug's glowering menace. The hero Hiccup recalls learning that "the gaze of a dragon is hypnotic and gives the unnerving feeling that it is sucking your soul away" (71). This "unnerving feeling" parallels the uncanny. Hypnotic or magic eyes imply that a dragon's gaze may overpower a human's. In this way dragons have the phallic power and the concept of sucking the soul threatens identity, even if it is only actualized as a feeling. Even in the illustrations (ostensibly drawn by Hiccup) the dragon's eyes are regularly more sharply drawn than the humans' relatively round ones. Since the powers of dragons in this book are relative to their size, Hiccup finds later that the massive sea dragons have such powerful vision that they can see beyond the physical world. When he asks the sea dragon how it knows all about his family and problems, the dragon simply says, "I can see things like that" (154). This vision transcends the plane of physical reality, a truly staggering power beyond humanity's capabilities even in this fantasy world. The only drawing of Hiccup's meeting with the giant sea dragon mirrors the massively frightening visual capabilities of the dragon: the dragon's eye looms behind and dwarfs Hiccup, who is smaller than the reptilian slit pupil of the sea dragon's eye. As the sole visual representation of their banter, this image encapsulates the entire terrifying encounter through the enormous size and power implied by the dragon's eye.

Language in Cowell's book superficially separates the humans from the dragons while showing them to be the same. Neither side is competing for the right to speak, but rather they are both speaking and ignoring one another; the humans win only due to size. The Viking humans of the story train the smaller species of dragons to behave like hunting dogs through yelling at them as loudly as possible. While the dragons do speak their own language, Dragonese, there is a strict law against speaking to dragons in their own language. The Vikings justify their law thus: "Dragons might get above themselves if we talk to them. Dragons are tricky and must be kept in their place" (142). Cowell overtly makes language here the differentiating point between humans and dragons and a tool for the former to subjugate the latter. Despite the law, some of the Vikings want to deny that dragons can speak at all. When the young hero Hiccup tries speaking to his tiny pet dragon Toothless, his human friend shouts, "You can't talk to it, it's an ANIMAL, for Thor's sake!" (71). As a point of similarity between humans and dragons, language is a repressed topic for the Vikings. Erasing this fabricated line makes dragons uncannily close to humanity and not qualified to remain in the category of animals. In reaction, the Vikings try to define the dragons as far from humanity.



The dragons want to be distinguished from the humans just as fervently. They claim that they are better, but they also deny their similarities to humans. The dragons' language itself, which puts them on par with humans, is just a different dialect of the Viking's language (which is English, in this universe). One silly informational page states, "dragons are the only other creatures who speak a language as complicated and sophisticated as humans" (70). This is its own joke, as Dragonese is a dialect where "Doit a wummortime" printed in a jagged font or spoken out loud with "shrill shrieks and popping noises" is the colloquial equivalent of just what it sounds like: "Let's try that again" (70). Dragonese is only as complex as the human language because it is essentially the same. The silliness of this doubling recalls the Grahame tradition, wherein the eeriness of dragons is retained under the guise of humor. Instead of praising either language, Cowell's informational page compares the stubbornness of both races behind the joke, which reveals that they're speaking the same one. The Vikings do not want to admit that the dragons have a language to speak; neither side wants to recognize that Dragonese is merely another dialect of the human language. Both sides refuse to talk to one another, drawing them into further parallel.

Even Hiccup—as progressive, unusual and creative as he is—is uncomfortable with talking to the dragons. He resists at first and later avoids proficient use of the language. He lists "jokes and riddling talk" as the last item on his list of possible ways to motivate his dragon and adds the note "only if I'm desperate" (92). Jokes and riddling talk are not just speaking Dragonese, but speaking special formulas within it that indicate fluency and clever manipulation of the words. Hiccup is clearly uncomfortable, but only successfully communicates with Toothless through jokes. His discomfort reveals that it is psychologically troubling to him to be getting so close to his dragon through its language.

When the giant sea dragon shows up, Hiccup must graduate from the less complicated realm of jokes and into full-blown riddling talk. He joins the sea dragon in philosophical pondering akin to Sigurd and Fáfñir's wisdom poetry, but about the nature of death. The dragon here verbally accomplishes the feat of putting humans and dragons, regardless of size and status, on the same level: "We are all, in a sense, supper. . . . even a murderous carnivore like myself will be a supper for worms one day" (151). Hiccup doesn't really win the battle of words to dismantle this similarity, but he does successfully avoid becoming consumed by the dragon by tiring him out with words. In his later encounter with the same giant dragon, Hiccup confronts his similarity to dragonkind more profoundly. After landing inside the giant dragon's mouth, he finds the dragon getting inside of him: "The terrible noise of the Dragon's heart beating had entered into Hiccup's chest and forced his own heart to follow the same rhythm" (188-9). Hiccup finds himself blending into the dragon and losing his identity and willpower due to the dragon's digestive powers. This is a literal rendering of the threat to the identity of the Germanic hero during the dragon battle. Just as Tolkien's Smaug invades Bilbo's mind through manipulative language about the dwarves, the sea dragon threatens to invade Hiccup's mind to merge them into one being. Beforehand, the sea dragon and Hiccup were uncanny doubles because they each are thinking, speaking beings. At the moment that Hiccup hangs within the dragon's mouth, the hero and dragon nearly move beyond to become the same creature. The uncanny is the threat of this merge, the warning to stay away. By returning intact as his own person, Hiccup conquers the dragon psychologically before it is physically defeated. He resists the transformation and escapes, having defined himself by the willpower to live as the hero and the human.

The book resolves when the same difference is established on the side of the dragons. Toothless, after his heroism in rescuing Hiccup, is the first dragon to receive a human Viking burial. Hiccup, given his recent conquest over the dragon-assimilation, does not approve of this complete blending. He has learned that dragons are different from humans in key ways and that bridging the gap is fine, but removing it is not. Because of this insight, Hiccup knows that treating Toothless as dead by human standards is inappropriate for he has not yet met dragon standards of death (a

dragon will sing at and after its own death). Toothless learns to distinguish between bridging and merging too. Toothless tells himself, "Dragons are S-S-SELFISH . . . Dragons are heartless and have no mercy," even as he flies to the rescue of Hiccup and risks his own life (192). Despite this flouting of dragon rules, he does not entirely change. The final page features an illustration wherein Toothless amends his statement "Dragons are never grateful" by scratching out the word "never" and replacing it with "hardly ever" (214). Hiccup and Toothless ultimately both acknowledge the similarity between dragons and humans, as well as its benefits, and come out as heroes because they retain the differences too. In this way the book nearly addresses the uncanny nature of dragons head on by dealing with the troublesome line between them, as is primarily demonstrated through language. The protagonist boy and dragon both learn to define themselves individually rather than purely through antagonism and fear of each other as doubles.

## Hush, Little Dragon

In *Hush, Little Dragon*, the dragons' eyes and language infuse a relatively simple picture book with the uncanny. In this book, a mother dragon sings her baby to sleep with a modified version of "Hush, Little Baby." Instead of various gifts or pets, the dragon brings her baby various medieval persons for bedtime snacks. Eyes and language figure into this story subtly through the actual form of the book. The format itself is important because picture books were the specific subjects of Shastri's dissertation and Hanlon's later study, but in this case the function of picture book also facilitates the uncanny due to the dual audience. The format itself implies a parent reading out loud while a pre-literate child listens and observes the pictures. Nodelman does a particularly thorough job of exploring the commonly recognized duality inherent in picture books and "the relationship of an implied adult narrator to an implied nonadult narratee" (444). As Nodelman notes, this relationship implies "an accompanying and paradoxical sense of a double addressee, both an implied child reader and an implied adult reader who chooses or shares the texts with the implied child; a focus on binary opposites like child and adult, home and away, good and evil, in theme and structure" (444). Therefore, for my purposes here, it is significant to note that the parent is performing the language, the pre-literate child the eyes, and picture books already encourage a binary between these two age extremes. This dual performance brings the characteristics of the dragon uncomfortably close to home by doubling not only the people with the dragons but also the parent/child with one another.

Adults and children are doubled and divided by the very practice in which they engage through picture books: literacy. John Morgenstern points out ever since children and adults were separated by the rise of schooling and the Victorian Cult of Childhood, children have been regarded by adults as another type of being that is simultaneously the same and different, innocent and barbaric (21-22). In *Hush, Little Dragon*, the parent and child readers each absorb the mother and child dragon identities, simultaneously taking on the dragon-humanity doubling and this cultural Othering between adults and children over the practice of reading.

As the performers of language, the reading parent becomes the mother dragon. Ashburn writes the book in the voice of the dragon mother. The book begins immediately with the lullaby words: "Hush, little dragon, don't make a sound" (Ashburn 1). The parent reading or singing this lullaby out loud does not read any framing words like "The mother dragon is singing," but rather immediately joins in with the mother dragon. The sing-song rhythm of the text and the well-known tune that it corresponds with encourage the parent to actually sing the words and perform as the mother dragon. The goals of the mother dragon and parents even match, as parents traditionally read picture books to children at bedtime. Not only does this performance make the parent into the mother dragon from the child listener's point of view, but it also transforms the child into a dragon

baby from the parent's point of view. Each is temporarily transformed into a dragon in the other's perspective through the performative language.

Meanwhile the child and parent each see a different book; one focuses on observing the illustrations while the other focuses on reading the words. Of course both will notice the other aspect, but their expertise is distinctly divided. Picture book criticism has shown that children are generally more attentive to the images in books than adult readers and will catch many details while the parents remain focused on the words. In a study in which children were interviewed about how they read books, Arizpe and Styles affirmed that even the older children noticed less than the young (192). They explain this division as a "learning function" on the part of the children, thus "children notice more details than adults do" (193). Children and adults' areas of expertise further divide them into the eyes and language, accordingly.

Hence, adults may read a more lighthearted book than the children, for within the visual details of this book lie the most menacing parts. For instance, one spread portrays the mother dragon facing three musketeers. The words simply sing, "If those musketeers should bolt, / Mama's gonna stop their silly revolt" (Ashburn 15). The words may refer to stopping the musketeers, but without much menace. The use of the word "silly" belittles their need to run away at all. The slightly forced use of the word "revolt" to rhyme with "bolt" implies more of a political maneuver than a dragon fight. In this way, the sing-song, rhyming style and somewhat absurd diction help dampen any potential scariness in the words.

In the picture, meanwhile, the musketeers cower against a wall as the dragon looms across the opposite page. The mother dragon is so large in comparison that she is not contained within the frame of the spread, creating a character menacing in pure size. Additionally, her position reveals an animal threat to the musketeers as she puts forward her head and bares her teeth. In the case of a dragon, this is also a threat of fire. Meanwhile, the baby dragon gleefully reaches for the terrified musketeers. No consumption is shown in the picture, but the next page features a little musketeer hat on the ground between the mother and the baby, with no owner in sight. Several pages later, one lonely musketeer stands on the top of a tower as the mother and son fly away. The book never shows the baby actually eating these people, and it would be easy to assume that they are all getting away if it weren't for these little visual details underscoring their fate. As the child watches the pictures, where the people being threatened appear terrified or angry, the parent reads light, absurd words and rhymes. Only at the end when the mother sings that the baby's "tummy is full you must be done!" (Ashburn 23) do the words affirm that the baby really has been consuming many of the people. Effectively, the child in this situation would experience being cheerfully sung to while several people die but at the same time, the child is being addressed in second person as though he or she was the baby dragon. The dragons become more familiar than the humans, and in the end this familiarity creates a question of alliance and identity. While the eyes of the dragons or even the readers are not being threatened, as in the traditional uncanny, the collective visual and verbal information which the child collects is in its own way threatening to human bodies and identities. The child is given an uncertain doubling between dragon and human that brings up the question of which the child truly is or, perhaps more importantly, wishes to be.

Ashburn's rhyming lyrics and Murphy's illustrations present the dragon as uncanny, but in a delightful fashion. The end result of this is not fear, but rather amusement. *Hush, Little Dragon* follows Grahame's tradition of keeping the menace subtle and beneath a pleasant surface. Even though the pictures imply several murders, the dragons are not terrifying. Their pleasantly rounded and curvy bodies appear cuddly, especially next to the generally angular and uncomfortable looking humans. In the spread with the musketeers, the mother dragon may be threatening them, but her teeth, horns, spikes, and other scary features are curvy in stark contrast to the musketeers' pointy tunics, mustaches, hats, and swords. The disparity comes off as funny, of course, but also creepy as it once again aligns the readers' sympathy with the dragons.

*Hush, Little Dragon* relies on form to reveal the uncanny in part due to the constraints and strengths of its genre as a picture book. The chapter book *How to Train Your Dragon Book 1* has fewer such format-based codes to manipulate, and so the uncanny occurs in the words. Through different means, the texts mask the uncanny with humor and satire of traditional dragons. The uncanny is present, a lurking dark side to dragons, but they are allowed to be funny and retain their fearsome power simultaneously.

## Conclusion

Between the lighthearted dragon-lore attitude attributed to Grahame and the identity-disturbing aspects translated by Tolkien, dragons in literature still have access to their mythic capabilities. Stein, Blount, Shastri and Hanlon put the awe-inspiring aspects of mythical dragons into opposition with the humorous qualities of many children's literature dragons, yet humor and the uncanny need not negate each other. Grahame's style of humor may be just the right protective camouflage for Tolkien-esque fearsome dragons. Using seemingly innocent traits such as eyes and language, some authors sneak in the old power of dragons, whether or not they are even aware of the traditions that they uphold. Dragons in modern children's literature can still inspire the fear of the uncanny double, the uneasy proximity of another being that could eclipse oneself, carried from their ancestral dragon-lore. While not all take advantage of this option, and plenty of empty neighbor-dragons exist in children's literature, it is important to remember that not all of those dragons may be as innocent as appearances would imply. A little riddling talk might bring out an entirely different (but eerily similar) beast.

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