



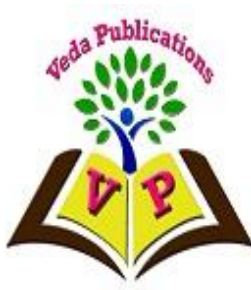
THE HORROR OF MADNESS: A PSYCHOANALYTICAL STUDY OF EDGAR ALLAN POE'S *THE FALL OF THE HOUSE OF USHER*

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ABSTRACT



This study aims to examine madness as a recurring gothic trope and analyse the characters' psychological disorders in Edgar Allan Poe's short story, *The Fall of the House of Usher* (1839). Psychoanalysis is practised to interpret the mental make-up of the characters and the causes behind their bizarre behaviours. The text is analysed using Freud's psychoanalytical theory of Id, Ego, and Superego, dream analysis, the conscious and the unconscious and the concept of 'self'. A psychoanalytic perspective on the story will help in better understanding of Poe's hidden motives behind the use of madness as a trope against the backdrop of Gothicism. It would also give the readers an insight into the narrator's perception of his 'self' projected onto the gothic house and the Ushers. This gothic tale is studied as an allegory of the narrator's anxiety manifested in his complex dreams.

Keywords: *Edgar Allan Poe, Dream Analysis, Psychoanalysis, Sigmund Freud, The Fall of the House of Usher.*

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Psychoanalysis is a broad field that encompasses the study of human thoughts, behaviour, development and personality. A psychoanalyst strives to explore the biological and social factors that impact thoughts and behaviour. (1). Freud established a relation between psychoanalysis and literature in his book *Creative Writers and Day-Dreaming* (1908) which later gave birth to psychoanalytic literary theories. It included Freud's analysis of the literary text as a "symptom of the artist" where the relationship between the author and the text was compared to the dreamers and their dreams (2).

"Psychoanalytic literary criticism is literary criticism or literary theory which, in method, concept, or form, is influenced by the tradition of psychoanalysis begun by Sigmund Freud" (3). Psychoanalytic criticism adopts the methods of "reading" employed by Freud to interpret texts and asserts that literary texts unfold the hidden motives of the author and the characters are in fact, projections of the author's own psyche (1).

Tien comments [as cited in (4)] that Freud believes that "the writer finds in his work substitutive gratification for his thwarted desires. Therefore, in order to analyse the author, one must focus on his literary work as a product of his personality. Poe's melodramatic life story made psychoanalysts and literary critics use the major aspects and events of his life in analysing his works. Psychoanalysis and literature serve to replace each other. That is to say, psychoanalysis could be intra-literary as much as literature is intra-psychoanalytic." Freud compared fantasy, dreams, texts and the work of art and made a psychoanalytic investigation into the structure of each. He defined three parts of the structure of the psyche in his "New Introductory Lectures": the Id, the Ego the Superego which are "the three realms, regions, provinces, into which we divide an individual's mental apparatus" (5). Id is the primitive part of the mind that includes all our basic instincts and biological drives. It primarily works on impulse. The ego is the realistic part of the personality that mediates between the desires of the id and the rationality of the super-ego. The super-ego functions as a moral teacher. It largely encompasses our

conscience. The Id is present since birth and knows only needs and desires. It aims at immediate gratification. Ego's job is to ensure that the id's impulses are suppressed and expressed in socially acceptable ways. The ego operates on the reality principle, which works to satisfy the id's desires in the most reasonable manner. The ego may do this by delaying gratification, compromising or any method that will avoid the negative consequences of not conforming to the norms of the society. The Superego upholds the distinction between right and wrong and continues to grow with the passage of time. The superego not only controls the id and its impulses towards societal taboos like inappropriate sex and aggression but also attempts to take the ego beyond realistic standards (6).

Edgar Allan Poe is perhaps the best author for psychoanalytical study. He entrenches the artistic status of Gothic novel through the creative means of mental horror. During his life, as well as posthumously, Poe earned a reputation for his psychological thrillers, which unfolded various shades of human psychology. Poe focused on inner conflicts which were manifested in his literary pieces. "Edgar Allan Poe is the author most responsible for making madness an integral aspect of the gothic genre. Poe seeks to explore the inner workings of the mind, and to take the reader along for the ride when those workings begin to rot and crumble." (6) Poe examines human's behaviour, thoughts, feelings, dreams, and memories in his works. The majority of his characters suffered from mental disorders and odd behaviours. The experiences with his own mental illness helped him to create masterpieces like *The Fall of the House of Usher*. In this gothic horror short story, he plays with themes like incest, madness, unidentified sickness and death. He uses traditional tropes of Gothic literature such as haunted location, fear of death and the supernatural forces to drive the characters of his stories insane. This story is a psychoanalytical tale of inner struggles and the characters seem to have a telepathic connection with each other and they themselves seem to be imaginations or manifestations rather than living human beings of flesh and bones.



“Madness is the monster that lurks inside our own minds. And in some ways, it is the most terrifying monster of all. Its intangibility means that it cannot be fought, and its irrational nature makes it nearly impossible to understand. Perhaps this is why insanity crops up as one of the most common themes in Gothic literature” (7). Madness is one of the most popular tropes used in gothic fiction and its also one of the favourite tools of Poe. It remains a dominant trope in *The Fall of the House of Usher* and it doesn't only complement the gothic background but also is also used smartly by Poe to delineate the psyche of the characters. The main character Roderick suffers from an unnamed mental disorder which is described as “a cadaverousness of complexion, an eye large, liquid and luminous beyond comparison; lips somewhat thin and very pallid” (8).

The unnamed narrator's anxiety and distorted mental derangement is reflected when he says, “What was it- I paused to think- what was it that so unnerved me in the contemplation of the House of Usher?”(8) His statement doesn't only reflect that there is something strange about the House of Usher but is also evident of his introspection into his own psyche. The narrator gives important details about himself and the surrounding location at the beginning of the story-

I know not how it was—but, with the first glimpse of the building, a sense of insufferable gloom pervaded my spirit. I say insufferable; for the feeling was unrelieved by any of that half-pleasurable, because poetic, sentiment with which the mind usually receives even the sternest natural images of the desolate or terrible. I looked upon the scene before me—upon the mere house, and the simple landscape features of the domain—upon the bleak walls—upon the vacant eye-like windows— upon a few rank sedges—and upon a few white trunks of decayed trees—with an utter depression of soul which I can compare to no earthly sensation more properly than to the after-dream of the reveller upon opium—the bitter lapse into every-day life—the hideous

dropping off of the veil. There was an iciness, a sinking, a sickening of the heart—an unredeemed dreariness of thought which no goading of the imagination could torture into aught of the sublime. What was it—I paused to think—what was it that so unnerved me in the contemplation of the House of Usher? (8).

The unnamed narrator's anxiety and distorted mental derangement is manifested when he says, “What was it- I paused to think- what was it that so unnerved me in the contemplation of the House of Usher?” (8) His statement shows that the House of Usher is a place with negative vibes and also gives the readers a chance to peep into his own psyche. The narrator is alone and has just arrived at the location, invited by his old friend Roderick Usher. He is not able to tell the cause of his strange anxiety since he cannot understand at the moment that the house is the physical manifestation of his own decaying body and mind. He is unable to interpret his dreams. He cannot come to the conclusion that his dream content has manifested into a physical form i.e., the mansion. (9) The introductory passage gives a great insight into the narrator's disturbed psyche. The narrator's discomfort explains that he and the house are in opposite realms.

The first-person narrators are often unreliable and the confession of our narrator of his experience with Opium makes his words even more unreliable. Moreover, the sentences are long and disorganized. The whole passage is more of an internal monologue rather than a clear and structured narration. (10) At more instances throughout the story, his statements are incoherent and disordered. They often turn obscure and difficult to understand-

“I was aware, however, that his very ancient family had been noted, time out of mind, for a peculiar sensibility of temperament, displaying itself, through long ages, in many works of exalted art, and manifested, of late, in repeated deeds of munificent yet unobtrusive charity, as well as in a passionate devotion to the intricacies,



perhaps even more than to the orthodox and easily recognizable beauties, of musical science" (8).

Disorganised speech is evident of mental illness. It's a major symptom of a variety of psychotic mental disorders such as schizophrenia, bipolar disorder, schizotypal personality disorder etc. The narrator also exhibits another major symptom of psychosis; hallucination. The twin sister of Roderick, Madeline is oft interpreted as the narrator's imagination. Roderick Usher describes her as his "a tenderly beloved sister, his sole companion for long years, his last and only relative on earth." (8). The character of Madeline Usher can be viewed as a product of the narrator's complex imagination or his nightmare. She appears very less often in action. Her name is not mentioned enough and her personality lacks credibility. A similar concept is displayed in the Hollywood film *Fight Club*, where the unnamed narrator sees Tyler Durden as a separate person but he turns out to be a product of the narrator's imagination(11). Also, in the Bollywood film *15 Park Avenue* where the protagonist Anu is shown to have multiple sessions with the psychologist whom she thinks to be treating her sister Meethi and not herself. (12) Split-personality disorder has often been used in literature and cinema to demonstrate the complexities of the human psyche. Madeline shows up only for short while. The narrator sees her and tells the readers, "I regarded her with an utter astonishment not unmingled with dread; and yet I found it impossible to account for such feelings. A sensation of stupor oppressed me as my eyes followed her retreating steps. When a door, at length, closed upon her" (8). Although the text does not reveal the sexual wishes and that is what gives the tale its touch of mystery. However, to make things clear, one should understand Madeline as Roderick's and the narrator's "soul companion" and "the unconscious female double" (9). Madeline seems to have a significant and maddening impact on both Roderick Usher and the narrator. Both the male protagonists develop a sexual desire for her which confirms that Madeline is the Id of the narrator. Roderick ends up having incestual sex with her even though she might just be an imagination or a spirit

risen from the dead. Madeline as the narrator's powerful Id which has the potential to overpower his ego completely and it leads to further deterioration of his already distorted personality. Meng He comments that "Roderick Usher's own deformed psyche and distorted personality are caused by his imbalanced personality. According to Freud, it's only when the three parts of personality achieve balance, can one's life be peaceful. Otherwise, it will inevitably lead to his imbalanced psyche. Usher is the best example of a distorted personality and his incest with his sister pushes the imbalance to an extreme" (13). As reported by Roderick himself, he loses interest in all social activities. His loss of interest in activities and inactivity are the major symptoms of depression.

"I shall perish," said he, "I must perish in this deplorable folly. Thus, thus, and not otherwise, shall I be lost. I dread the events of the future, not in themselves, but in their results. I shudder at the thought of any, even the most trivial, incident, which may operate upon this intolerable agitation of soul. I have, indeed, no abhorrence of danger, except in its absolute effect—in terror. In this unnerved, in this pitiable, condition I feel that the period will sooner when I must abandon life and reason together, in some struggle with the grim phantasm, Fear" (8).

These are the words of a mentally unstable person who is continuously haunted by the thoughts of death. His thanatophobia reflects in his statements. He also has other flaws in his psychological makeup, "His action was alternately vivacious and sullen. His voice varied rapidly from a tremulous indecision (when the animal spirits seemed utterly in abeyance) to that species of energetic concision" (8). His illness explains why he entombs his sister believing that she was alive, "the mockery of a faint blush upon the bosom and the face, and that suspiciously lingering smile upon the lip which is so terrible in death" (8).

"The tale has to be understood as an allegory of the narrator's irrational anxiety, which he experiences in his nocturnal nightmares. When he entered the



house and saw his early boyhood's extreme alteration, his anxiety start affects his language skill and rises to "extreme fear". This is transmitted to Roderick's "nervous affection" within the narrator's dream, which can be understood as one of the dream-thoughts whose dream-content exposes the dreamer's neurosis" (9). The narrator's distorted perception of his 'self' is well projected onto the gothic mansion he visits and also the residents. Roderick is pre-dominantly, the Ego of the narrator's personality while Madeline is the Id. We see the narrator and Roderick doubling each other and turning into each other's alter-egos.

"Poe's gothic tale takes the form of a nightmare in which the narrator's ego experiences his absolute helplessness towards the constant threat evolving from inner conflict arousing from the Id"(9). The whole narrative can thus, be read as the author's long dream where he does not wake up until the house of Ushers falls. Finally, the narrator's ego surrenders to the Id and his distorted psyche comes out in the form of madness. Roderick is understood as the schizophrenic throughout the narrative but in the end, the narrator describes himself as a madman, "Do I not distinguish that heavy and horrible beating of her heart? Madman!"—here he sprang furiously to his feet, and shrieked out his syllables, as if in the effort he were giving up his soul—"Madman! I tell you that she now stands without the door!" (8)

Freud revolutionized the study of dreams through his literary work, *The Interpretation of Dreams* (1899). He analysed the surface meaning and the unconscious meaning of the dreams. Dreams can project as thoughts, imagination, behaviour and madness alike. On reaching the house on a "dull, dark, and soundless day in the autumn of the year, when the clouds hung oppressively low in the heavens" (8), the narrator unconsciously exposes his thanatophobia to the readers. Therefore, we understand that the story does not focus on the life and times of Roderick Usher but on the narrator's mental disturbance and strange anxiety.

CONCLUSION

Poe cleverly used the trope of madness in his literary works and psychoanalysis is a powerful tool to analyse the canonical works of Poe to understand the causes behind the strange, erratic behaviour of his characters and also to explore the various shades of human psyches manifested in texts. Madness, as a dominant theme in Gothic literature, helps in mirroring the thought processes of the characters on paper and of course, complements the uncanny Gothic background. The story *The Fall on the House of the Usher* can be taken as an expanded nightmare of the unnamed narrator. A psychoanalytic perspective interprets the dream and breaks it down into the conscious and the unconscious.

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